

AMERICAN LIFE IN POETRY

A FREE COLUMN FOR NEWSPAPERS BY TED KOOSER, THE POET LAUREATE OF THE UNITED STATES

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American Life in Poetry: Column 003

BY TED KOOSER, U.S. POET LAUREATE

A poem need not go on at great length to accomplish the work of conveying something meaningful to its readers. In the following poem by the late Marnie Walsh, just a few words, written as if they'd been recorded in exactly the manner in which they'd been spoken, tell us not only about the missing woman in the red high heels, but a little something about the speaker as well.

Bessie Dreaming Bear

Rosebud, So. Dak., 1960

we all went to town one day
went to a store
bought you new shoes
red high heels

ain't seen you since.

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This column does not accept unsolicited poetry.

Discussion Questions for “Bessie Dreaming Bear” by Marnie Walsh



1. Bessie’s last name, Dreaming Bear, is typical of Native American names, which often refer to elements in nature or attribute special traits to the person. What do you think is the significance of Bessie Dreaming Bear’s name?
2. Who do you think went to town?
3. What do you think the relationship of the poet to Bessie is?
4. Why do you think Bessie got shoes instead of a dress or hat?
5. Why do you think the shoes are red, and with high heels?
6. Where do you think Bessie is now? How long do you think she’s been gone? How do you think her life is different from the poet’s?
7. How do you think the poet feels about Bessie? Explain.
8. Who do you identify with more—the poet or Bessie? Why?
9. If your shoes could take you anywhere, where would you go?

Poetry Writing Activity

Prewriting

Tell students they are going to write poems about their own shoes. Before they write their poems, they need to do some warm-up thinking and brainstorming about the topic. Ask students the following questions, or write them on the blackboard. Encourage students to write notes about the answers to the questions or any other ideas that occur to them.

1. How many pairs of shoes do you have?
2. If you have more than one pair, which is your favorite?
3. Close your eyes and imagine looking at your shoes.
 - What color are they?
 - How do they fit you? Are they comfortable or too tight or too big?
 - Describe their shape and any fasteners.
 - What are they made of?
 - Think of any other adjectives that describe your shoes.
4. What sound do your shoes make when you walk across different surfaces?
5. Do you look at your shoes when you’re walking? Sitting?
6. What else do you wear when you wear the shoes?
7. When do you wear your shoes?
8. When do you take off your shoes?

Writing

Ask students to use the ideas they have generated to write a poem about their shoes. (Tips on writing poetry appear elsewhere in this issue.) Remind them to give their poems titles.

Post-writing

Ask students to read their poems aloud, perhaps in small groups to give everyone a chance to read.