American Life in Poetry: Column 636

BY TED KOOSER, U.S. POET LAUREATE, 2004-2006

We're taught to never speak ill of the dead. Well, then, what do we do? Perhaps we forgive. Here's a lovely poem by Sarah White, who lives in New York. It's from her book from Deerbrook Editions, Wars Don't Happen Anymore.

Nothing But Good . . .

I will not speak ill of Jack Flick.
I will rarely look
at the scar he made on my cheek
one summer at the lake.

I won't speak ill of Jack whose freckles
and gangly legs are gone.
So is the drained face I saw when he saw
what he'd done with a sharp rock
nonchalantly skipped.

I will speak well, for it was somewhat
sweet to lie on the dock while Jack
and his friends bent down
and wiped my face with a sandy towel.
I will speak well of them,
for most are gone
and the wound proved small.

I will speak well, for the rock
missed my eye. I can hardly find
the scar. Jack went into the air
corps, fought in one of the wars,
retired, and lived less than a year
before his tender heart gave out.

I will speak well of Jack.

American Life in Poetry is made possible by The Poetry Foundation (www.poetryfoundation.org), publisher of Poetry magazine. It is also supported by the Department of English at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. Poem copyright ©2015 by Sarah White, “Nothing But Good . . .,” from Wars Don't Happen Anymore (Deerbrook Editions, 2015). Poem reprinted by permission of Sarah White and the