

AMERICAN LIFE IN POETRY

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

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BY TED KOOSER, U.S. POET LAUREATE

How many of us, alone at a grave or coming upon the site of some remembered event, find ourselves speaking to a friend or loved one who has died? In this poem by Karin Gottshall the speaker addresses someone's ashes as she casts them from a bridge. I like the way the ashes take on new life as they merge with the wind.

The Ashes

You were carried here by hands
and now the wind has you, gritty
as incense, dark sparkles borne

in the shape of blowing,
this great atmospheric bloom,
spinning under the bridge and expanding—

shape of wind and its pattern
of shattering. Having sloughed off
the urn's temporary shape,

there is another of you now—
tell me which to speak to:
the one you were, or are, the one who waited

in the ashes for this scattering, or the one
now added to the already haunted woods,
the woods that sigh and shift their leaves—

where your mystery billows, then breathes.

Karin Gottshall works at the Middlebury College library in Vermont. This poem first appeared in *Tar River Poetry*, Vol. 44, No. 1, Fall, 2004. Poem copyright © 2004 by Karin Gottshall. This weekly column is supported by the Poetry Foundation, The Library of Congress and the Department of English at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln.

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