

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, 2004-2006

In many American poems, the poet makes a personal appearance and offers us a revealing monologue from center stage, but there are lots of fine poems in which the poet, a stranger in a strange place, observes the lives of others from a distance and imagines her way into them. This poem by Lita Hooper is a good example of this kind of writing.

Love Worn

In a tavern on the Southside of Chicago
a man sits with his wife. From their corner booth
each stares at strangers just beyond the other's shoulder,
nodding to the songs of their youth. Tonight they will not fight.

Thirty years of marriage sits between them
like a bomb. The woman shifts
then rubs her right wrist as the man recalls the day
when they sat on the porch of her parents' home.

Even then he could feel the absence of something
desired or planned. There was the smell
of a freshly tarred driveway, the slow heat,
him offering his future to folks he did not know.

And there was the blooming magnolia tree in the distance—
its oversized petals like those on the woman's dress,
making her belly even larger, her hands
disappearing into the folds.

When the last neighbor or friend leaves their booth
he stares at her hands, which are now closer to his,
remembers that there had always been some joy. Leaning
closer, he believes he can see their daughter in her eyes.

From "Gathering Ground: A Reader Celebrating Cave Canem's First Decade," University of Michigan Press, 2006, by permission of the author. Poem copyright © 2006 by Lita Hooper, whose most recent book is "The Art of Work: The Art and Life of Haki Madhubuti," Third World Press, 2006. This weekly column is supported by The Poetry Foundation, The Library of Congress, and the Department of English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. We do not accept unsolicited poetry.

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