

AMERICAN LIFE IN POETRY

A FREE COLUMN FOR NEWSPAPERS BY TED KOOSER, POET LAUREATE OF THE UNITED STATES, 2004-2006
AMERICAN LIFE IN POETRY © 2006 THE POETRY FOUNDATION WEBSITE: WWW.AMERICANLIFEINPOETRY.ORG CONTACT: ALP@POETRYFOUNDATION.ORG

American Life in Poetry: Column 161

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

I may be a little sappy, but I think that almost everyone is doing the best he or she can, despite all sorts of obstacles. This poem by Jonathan Holden introduces us to a young car salesman, who is trying hard, perhaps too hard. Holden is the past poet laureate of Kansas and poet in residence at Kansas State University in Manhattan.

Car Showroom

Day after day, along with his placid
automobiles, that well-groomed
sallow young man had been waiting for
me, as in the cheerful, unchanging
weather of a billboard—pacing
the tiles, patting his tie, knotting, un-
knotting the façade of his smile
while staring out the window.
He was so bad at the job
he reminded me of myself
the summer I failed
at selling *Time* and *Life* in New Jersey.
Even though I was a boy
I could feel someone else's voice
crawl out of my mouth,
spoiling every word,
like this cowed, polite kid in his tie
and badge that said *Greg*,
saying *Ma'am* to my wife, calling
me *Sir*, retailing the air with such piety
I had to find anything out the window.
Maybe the rain. It was gray
and as honestly wet as ever. Something
we could both believe.

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 ©1985 by Jonathan Holden, whose most recent book of poetry is "Knowing: New & Selected Poems," University of Arkansas Press, 2000. Reprinted from "The Names of the Rapids," The University of Massachusetts Press, 1985, by permission of the author. First printed in "Black Warrior Review." Introduction copyright © 2007 by The Poetry Foundation. The introduction's author, Ted Kooser, served as United States Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress from 2004-2006. We do not accept unsolicited manuscripts.

American Life in Poetry ©2006 The Poetry Foundation
Contact: alp@poetryfoundation.org

This column does not accept unsolicited poetry.