

# AMERICAN LIFE IN POETRY

A FREE COLUMN FOR NEWSPAPERS BY TED KOOSER, POET LAUREATE OF THE UNITED STATES, 2004-2006  
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## American Life in Poetry: Column 167

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

Among young people, tattoos are all the rage and, someday, dermatologists will grow rich as kings removing them from a lot of middle-aged people who have grown embarrassed by their colorful skins. I really like this poem by Sharmila Voorakkara of Ohio.

### For the Tattooed Man

Because she broke your heart, *Shannon's* a badge--  
a seven-letter skidmark that scars up  
across your chest, a flare of indelible script.  
Between *Death or Glory*, and *Mama*, she rages,  
scales the trellis of your rib cage;  
her red hair swings down to bracket your ankles, whip  
up the braid of your backbone, cuff your wrists. She keeps  
you sleepless with her afterimage,

and each pinned and martyred limb aches for more.  
Her memory wraps you like a vise.  
How simple the pain that trails and graces  
the length of your body. How it fans, blazes,  
writes itself over in the blood's tightening sighs,  
bruises into wisdom you have no name for.

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