

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 168

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

So often, reading a poem can in itself feel like a thing overheard. Here, Mary-Sherman Willis of Virginia describes the feeling of being stilled by conversation, in this case barely audible and nearly indecipherable.

The Laughter of Women

From over the wall I could hear the laughter of women
in a foreign tongue, in the sun-rinsed air of the city.
They sat (so I thought) perfumed in their hats and their silks,

in chairs on the grass amid flowers glowing and swaying.
One spoke and the others rang like bells, oh so witty,
like bells till the sound filled up the garden and lifted

like bubbles spilling over the bricks that enclosed them,
their happiness holding them, even if just for the moment.
Although I did not understand a word they were saying,

their sound surrounded me, fell on my shoulders and hair,
and burst on my cheeks like kisses, and continued to fall,
holding me there where I stood on the sidewalk listening.

As I could not move, I had to hear them grow silent,
and adjust myself to the clouds and the cooling air.
The mumble of thunder rumbled out of the wall
and the smacking of drops as the rain fell everywhere.

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