

AMERICAN LIFE IN POETRY

A FREE COLUMN FOR NEWSPAPERS BY TED KOOSER, POET LAUREATE OF THE UNITED STATES, 2004-2006
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BY TED KOOSER, U.S. POET LAUREATE, 2004-2006

There's lots of literature about the loss of innocence, because we all share in that loss and literature is about what we share. Here's a poem by Alexandra Teague, a San Franciscan, in which a child's awakening to the alphabet coincides with another awakening: the unsettling knowledge that all of us don't see things in the same way.

Language Lessons

The carpet in the kindergarten room
was alphabet blocks; all of us fidgeting
on bright, primary letters. On the shelf
sat that week's inflatable sound. The *th*
was shaped like a tooth. We sang
about brushing up and down, practiced
exhaling while touching our tongues
to our teeth. Next week, a puffy U
like an upside-down umbrella; the rest
of the alphabet deflated. Some days,
we saw parents through the windows
to the hallway sky. *Look, a fat lady,*
a boy beside me giggled. Until then
I'd only known my mother as beautiful.

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