

# 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 228

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

I don't often mention literary forms, but of this lovely poem by Cecilia Woloch I want to suggest that the form, a villanelle, which uses a pattern of repetition, adds to the enchantment I feel in reading it. It has a kind of layering, like memory itself. Woloch lives and teaches in southern California.

### My Mother's Pillow

My mother sleeps with the Bible open on her pillow;  
she reads herself to sleep and wakens startled.  
She listens for her heart: each breath is shallow.

For years her hands were quick with thread and needle.  
She used to sew all night when we were little;  
now she sleeps with the Bible on her pillow

and believes that Jesus understands her sorrow:  
her children grown, their father frail and brittle;  
she stitches in her heart, her breathing shallow.

Once she *even slept fast*, rushed tomorrow,  
mornings full of sunlight, sons and daughters.  
Now she sleeps alone with the Bible on her pillow

and wakes alone and feels the house is hollow,  
though my father in his blue room stirs and mutters;  
she listens to him breathe: each breath is shallow.

I flutter down the darkened hallway, shadow  
between their dreams, my mother and my father,  
asleep in rooms I pass, my breathing shallow.  
I leave the Bible open on her pillow.

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