

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 298

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

At any given moment, there must be 100,000 of us trying to fit in, and finding it next to impossible. Here's a wonderful portrayal of that difficulty, by Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz, who lives in Astoria, New York.

At the Office Holiday Party

I can now confirm that I am not just fatter
than everyone I work with, but I'm also fatter
than all their spouses. Even the heavily bearded
bear in accounting has a little otter-like boyfriend.

When my co-workers brightly introduce me
as "the funny one in the office," their spouses
give them a look which translates to, *Well, duh*,
then they both wait for me to say something funny.

A gaggle of models comes shrieking into the bar
to further punctuate why I sometimes hate living
in this city. They glitter, a shiny gang of scissors.
I don't know how to look like I'm not struggling.

Sometimes on the subway back to Queens,
I can tell who's staying on past the Lexington stop
because I have bought their shoes before at Payless.
They are shoes that fool absolutely no one.

Everyone wore their special holiday party outfits.
It wasn't until I arrived at the bar that I realized
my special holiday party outfit was exactly the same
as the outfits worn by the restaurant's busboys.

While I'm standing in line for the bathroom,
another patron asks if I'm there to clean it.

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