

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

Most of us will never touch a Klansman's robe, or want to touch one. Rachel Richardson, who lives in North Carolina, here touches one for us, so that none of us will ever have to.

Relic

The first time I touched it,
cloth fell under my fingers,
the frail white folds
softened, demure. No burn,

no combustion at the touch of skin.
It sat, silent, like any other contents
of any other box: photographs
of the dead, heirloom jewels.

Exposed to thin windowlight it is
exactly as in movies:
a long gown, and where a chest
must have breathed, a red cross

crossed over. The crown, I know,
waits underneath, the hood with eyes
carefully stitched open, arch cap
like a bishop's, surging to its point.

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