

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 565

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

This column is more than ten years old and I've finally gotten around to trying a little origami! Here's a poem about that, and about a good deal more than that, by Vanessa Stauffer, who teaches writing at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan.

Lessons

To crease a sheet of paper is to change
its memory, says the origami
master: what was a field of snow
folded into flake. A crane, erect,
structured from surface. A tree
emerges from a leaf—each form undone

reveals the seams, pressed
with ruler's edge. Some figures take
hundreds to be shaped, crossed
& doubled over, the sheet bound
to its making—a web of scars
that maps a body out of space,

how I fashion memory: idling
at an intersection next to Jack Yates High,
an hour past the bell, I saw a girl
fold herself in half to slip beneath
the busted chain-link, books thrust
ahead, splayed on asphalt broiling

in Houston sun. What memory
will she retain? Her cindered palms,
the scraped shin? Braids brushing
the dirt? The white kite of her homework
taking flight? Finding herself
locked out, or being made

to break herself in.

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