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

"You can't go home again," said Thomas Wolfe, and you can't put your hand in the same river twice. Change is relentless. But we can still, in memory, go back to where we were. This poem is by P. Ivan Young, who lives in Omaha. It was first published in *The Cortland Review*. His most recent book is *Smell of Salt, Ghost of Rain*, from Brick House Books.

Visiting the Neighborhood

The entrance at the back of the complex
led onto a road, where an upended couch
tilted into a ditch and a washing machine
gleamed avocado beneath pine needles.

From the end, you turned left and left again,
then cut a trail to find the cul-de-sac
of bright brick houses. We'd walk as far
as we dared before a man pushing a mower

might stop to ask, "whadda you boys need?"
That was a question we could never answer.
I loved the name of the place, White Hall,
imagined that each interior was a stretch

or marble perfect wall adorned by smiling
photos of the family. Our own halls
were brailled with nail holes of former
tenants, the spackled rounds of fists.

But doesn't longing clarify the body?
The boys I left behind: Tommy, wearing
the World War II trenching tool;
Danny, whose father, so much older

than the other parents, died in his recliner
one sunny afternoon while watching baseball;
Duke, who stole his mother's car and crashed
into a wall. Boys who knew when you were posing,

waiting for someone to say, "smile." Boys

who, on those latch-key days, held themselves
in narrow passages when no one
was there to show them what to do.

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