

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 658

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

Marge Piercy is a distinguished poet who lives in Massachusetts. Her most recent book is *Made in Detroit: Poems* (Knopf, 2015). I share with her the memory of coal furnaces and clinkers, which when I was a boy we carried out in buckets and used to surface the neighborhood alleys. There's no other sound like clinkers crunching underfoot. This poem is from the literary journal, *Third Wednesday*.

The Air Smelled Dirty

Everyone burned coal in our neighborhood,
soft coal they called it from the mountains
of western Pennsylvania where my father
grew up and fled as soon as he could, where
my Welsh cousins dug it down in the dark.

The furnace it fed stood in the dank
basement, its many arms upraised
like Godzilla or some other monster.
It was my job to pull out clinkers
and carry them to the alley bin.

Mornings were chilly, frost on windows
etching magic landscapes. I liked
to stand over the hot air registers
the warmth blowing up my skirts.
But the basement scared me at night.

The fire glowed like a red eye through
the furnace door and the clinkers fell
loud and the shadows came at me as
mice scampered. The washing machine
was tame but the furnace was always hungry.

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