

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 662

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

Many of us at some hour have struggled with organized religion, maybe all night, like Jacob wrestling the angel. Here's a fine poem by Fleda Brown, from her book *No Need of Sympathy*. She is the former poet laureate of Delaware and now lives in Michigan. Her new and selected poems, *The Woods Are On Fire*, is forthcoming from the University of Nebraska Press.

God, God

We dressed for church. I had a white hat
and white gloves when I was fifteen, no joke.
You had to do that to show God you cared.

God's eyes were stained glass, and his voice
was pipe organ. He was immortal, invisible,
while my panty-hose itched and my atheist

father chewed his tongue and threatened to run
out the door but didn't for my mother's sake,
and she swallowed her fate, this marriage,

like a communion cracker, and my brain-
damaged brother lurched around the church
nursery, and my sweeter sister watched me

with huge brown eyes to see what I'd do next.
My God, why did I turn my eyes upward when
we were all there, then, in the flesh? I am so

sorry about God, sorry we fastened that word
to the sky. God's not even legal in Hebrew.
If you get the vowel caught between the two

consonants of your lips, it can carry you
dangerously up like a balloon over what you'd
give anything to be in the middle of, now.

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