

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 699

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

Carol V. Davis lives in California, and once was an artist-in-residence at the Homestead Monument in Nebraska, where I met her. The following poem, her fourth to be published in this column, is from her 2017 book from Truman State University Press, *Because I Cannot Leave This Body*. I'm a sucker for poems about customs.

Covering the Mirrors

After a funeral, they were covered with black cloth,
some draped with shawls like a scalloped valance.
Leftover sewing scraps, wool, linen, synthetic,
anything to shroud the odd-shaped mirrors,
though sometimes a corner was exposed like a woman
whose ankle peeks forbidden from under a long skirt.

A mourner must shun vanity during *shiva*, focusing inward
but as a child I wondered if this were to avoid ghosts,
for don't the dead take their time leaving?
I'm of a generation where grandparents disappeared,
great aunts with European accents,
rarely an explanation provided to us children.

My mother died too young.
With a baby in arms I couldn't bear to fling
that dark cloth over the glass.
After all she had come back from the dead so often,
even the doctors could not explain it.
Each time I looked in a mirror my mother gazed back.
I could never tell if she were trying to tell me something
or to take the baby with her.

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