

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 708

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

This column originates from the University of Nebraska in Lincoln, and a half-hour's drive south there's a creek with flat stones on its floor where wagons passed down and over the muddy bottom, up the other bank, and on west to Oregon. Here's a poem about that great migration, by Kim Lozano, a poet from St. Louis.

The Ruts

Most have been plowed up or paved over
but you can still find them, tracks cut
 deep into the earth by prairie schooners
crossing that great green ocean, pitching
 waves of pasture out where there's nothing
else to do but live. Concealing their detritus—
 a piece of sun-bleached buffalo skull, a button
from a cavalry soldier's coat—the ruts wind
 their way beneath leafy suburban streets, lie
buried under a Phillips 66 and the corner
 of a Pizza Hut where a couple sits slumped
in their booth. Yet here and there, like a fish
 head breaking the surface of the water, they
emerge in a school teacher's back yard or a
 farmer's field, evidence of wagons packed
with hardtack and hard money, thousands of
 draft animals tended by traders with blistered
feet, their journey both bleak and romantic.
 That's the kind of proof I like, a scar I can put
my hand to, history that will dust my fingers
 with a little bit of suffering, a little bit of bone.

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