

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

Until about a hundred years ago, the worth of a poem was measured by how noble and elevated was its subject and its manner of delivery, but with the appearance of modernism all hell broke loose and suddenly there were all sorts of subjects one had license to write about. Here's an example of a fine contemporary poem with a richly detailed subject that no doubt wouldn't have seen the light of day in the 1880s or '90s. It's by Sally Van Doren, who lives in New York, from her 2017 book from Louisiana State University Press, entitled *Promise*.

Housewife as Poet

I have scrawled audible lifelines along the edges
of the lint trap, dropping the ball of towel fuzz
in the blue bin lined with a thirteen-gallon bag.
My sons' wardrobes lounge on their bedroom floors,
then sidle down to the basement, where I look
forward to the warmth of their waistbands
when I pluck them from the dryer.
Sometimes I wonder why my husband
worries about debt and I wish he wouldn't.
Sometimes I wonder how high the alfalfa
will grow. Sometimes I wonder if the dog
will throw up in the night. Like my mother,
I'm learning not to tamper with anger.
It appears as reliably as the washing machine
thumps and threatens to lurch across the floor
away from the electrical outlet. Nothing's worth
getting worked up about, except for death.
And when I think of the people I have lost,
I wish them back into their button-down shirts,
their raspberry tights.

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