

AMERICAN LIFE IN POETRY

A FREE COLUMN FOR NEWSPAPERS BY TED KOOSER, POET LAUREATE OF THE UNITED STATES, 2004-2006
AMERICAN LIFE IN POETRY © 2006 THE POETRY FOUNDATION WEBSITE: WWW.AMERICANLIFEINPOETRY.ORG CONTACT: ALP@POETRYFOUNDATION.ORG

American Life in Poetry: Column 714

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

Clemens Starck of Oregon has fifty years' experience working with his hands, as a merchant seaman and then a carpenter, and he knows work and working people. Here's a typical poem, from his collected poetry, *Cathedrals & Parking Lots*, from Empty Bowl Press.

The Girl from Panama

I'm talking with Mike over coffee.
His wife recently left him. He's lonely.
We're both carpenters, a couple of old guys in baseball caps
plying the trade.
We can frame a wall and hang a door, we can
read a set of blueprints.
But when it comes to women . . .

I'm thinking about my mother, who is 91
and very frail. I'm thinking
about my wife, my daughters, my granddaughter,
my sister, old girlfriends, my ex-wife,
and the girl from Panama
in the reading room of the New Orleans public library
forty-five years ago
who slipped a note to me across the table, asking:
"Are you a philosophy?"

Rain splatters against the storefront
of the coffee shop. Mike and I are silent
for a long time
before going back to work.

American Life in Poetry is made possible by The Poetry Foundation (www.poetryfoundation.org), publisher of *Poetry* magazine. It is also supported by the Department of English at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. Poem copyright ©2019 by Clemens Starck, "The Girl from Panama," from *Cathedrals & Parking Lots: Collected Poems*, (Empty Bowl Press, 2019). Poem reprinted by permission of Clemens Starck and the publisher. Introduction copyright ©2019 by The Poetry Foundation. The introduction's author, Ted Kooser, served as United States Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress from 2004-2006. We do not accept unsolicited manuscripts.

Contact: alp@poetryfoundation.org
This column does not accept unsolicited poetry.