

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 716

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

Tod Marshall, Washington's State Poet for 2016-2018, with the help of that state's humanities and arts programs, put together a fine anthology of Washington poetry, *WA129: Poets of Washington*, and here's just one of many poems I liked. Sally Green lives on Waldron Island. Her first collection of poems is *Full Immersion* from Expedition Press. Showing someone how to do something is, I think, a fine and noble part of living.

Shank

for Cora

Though she lives in a world of Velcro, snaps and zippers, I'm showing my granddaughter how to sew on a button. She's nine, same age I was watching my mother pick my favorite one, shaped like a flower a child might draw, color of sunshine. Her homemaker hands held everything together, needle and red thread lickety-splitting up, over, down, up again attaching the blossom to grass-green cloth: *Colors no bee could pass by*. Now, before the last tug of thread through the button my granddaughter brought me, I point out the pinch of space—width of a scissor-blade—between it and the fabric, a shaft of stitches with a half-dozen twists of thread around it before tying off. *Shank*, I tell her, same as Mother named it. It strengthens the bond between button and garment, less friction than ready-mades, fasteners that loosen too soon. *Like love*, my mother said. *Close, but not too close*. A snip of thread and my granddaughter's ready to go, fluorescent-pink button back on the nose of her dog-faced school bag, the shank fixing us together in this world my mother could trust only so long as everything was done right, only when she didn't forget to check I was *buttoned up proper*, buttoned up tight.

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