

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 723

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Caitlin Doyle, who lives in Ohio, writes haunting, memorable poetry about the familiar and the strange. Her poetry is a fine example of what I call strategic artistry, as if her words have been carefully held back until they burst into light at just the right moment. This sonnet, in which a young girl awakens to a world of new discoveries, originally appeared in *The New Criterion*.

Cradle Thief

"A cradle thief," my mother called the man
we'd see in shops, cafes, parks, even church,
with "that poor girl" beside him. Hand in hand,
they'd walk as if they didn't feel the scorch
of people's stares. The day we saw him press
his lips to hers, my mother blocked my eyes
as if his mouth (I longed for my first kiss)
against her mouth was smothering her cries.
All week, I ran a fever that wouldn't break.
"A cradle thief"—a voice I only half
knew as my own surprised me in the dark,
my sick-bed wet with shivers. "A cradle thief,"
I said again, as if the words could will
my window broken, footprint on the sill.

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