

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

One of the many challenges in life is in knowing where you're supposed to sit. I slid into the wrong pew at a funeral forty years ago and still smart from the hard looks I got. Here's a church pew poem by Bruce Pemberton, who lives in Palouse, Washington. It's from the literary journal *Third Wednesday*.

Autumn 2017

There's coffee and pie
with a widow from the church.
Why do you sit
in the back pew? she asks.
I'm close enough, I say.
Can I sit back there with you?
I've always sat there, I tell her,
with my same two friends,
and their clicking oxygen pumps.
One sat next to me for years,
called herself my church girlfriend,
who *metastasized*, telling me she was
tired of waiting to die.
Now, there's just my 88-year-old friend,
his pump echoing in the sanctuary,
and there's that empty
space between us.
I'd like to invite the widow to sit there,
but I miss my dead friend's laugh,
her loving stories about her husband,
and how we were always
glad to see one another.
I tell the widow all this.
What if I just sat there? she asks.
It's a free country, I tell her,
and she smiles.

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