

# 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 737

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

How many of our mothers set aside what they wanted to do with their lives and chose instead to make good lives for us? This poem is from Faith Shearin's sixth book, *Darwin's Daughter*, published in 2017 by Stephen F. Austin State University Press. Shearin, of West Virginia, has become one of this column's favorite poets.

### My Mother's Van

Even now it idles outside the houses  
where we failed to get better at piano lessons,  
visits the parking lot of the ballet school

where my sister and I stood awkwardly  
at the back. My mother's van was orange  
with a door we slid open to reveal  
beheaded plastic dragons and bunches

of black, half-eaten bananas; it was where  
her sketchbooks tarried among  
abandoned coffee cups and

science projects. She meant to go places  
in it: camp in its back seat  
and cook on its stove while

painting the coast of Nova Scotia,  
or capturing the cold beauty of the Blue Ridge  
mountains at dawn. Instead, she waited  
behind its wheel while we scraped violins,

made digestive sounds  
with trumpets, danced badly at recitals  
where grandmothers recorded us

with unsteady cameras. Sometimes, now,  
I look out a window and believe I see it,  
see her, waiting for me beside a curb,

under a tree, and I think I could open the door,

clear off a seat, look at the drawing in her lap,  
which she began, but never seemed to finish.

American Life in Poetry is made possible by The Poetry Foundation ([www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org)), publisher of *Poetry* magazine. It is also supported by the Department of English at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. Poem copyright ©2018 by Faith Shearin, "My Mother's Van," from *Darwin's Daughter*, (Stephen F. Austin State University Press, 2018). Poem reprinted by permission of Faith Shearin 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.

American Life in Poetry ©2006 The Poetry Foundation  
Contact: [alp@poetryfoundation.org](mailto:alp@poetryfoundation.org)  
This column does not accept unsolicited poetry.