

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 326

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

I am especially fond of what we might call landscape poems, describing places, scenes. Here April Lindner, who lives in Philadelphia, paints a scene we might come upon on the back side of any great American city.

Our Lady of Perpetual Help

The burnt church up the street yawns to the sky,
its empty windows edged in soot, its portals
boarded up and slathered with graffiti,
oily layers, urgent but illegible.
All that can be plundered has been, all
but the carapace—the hollow bell tower,
the fieldstone box that once served as a nave.
The tidy row of homes that line this block
have tended lawns and scalloped bathtub shrines.
Each front porch holds a chair where no one sits.
Those who live here triple lock their doors
day and night. Some mornings they step out
to find a smoking car stripped to its skeleton
abandoned at the curb. Most afternoons
the street is still but for a mourning dove
and gangs of pigeons picking through the grass.
Our Lady of Perpetual Help is gray,
a dead incisor in a wary smile.
A crevice in her wall allows a glimpse
into the chancel, where a sodden mattress
and dirty blanket indicate that someone
finds this place a sanctuary still,
takes his rest here, held and held apart
from passers by, their cruelties and their kindnesses,
watched over by the night's blind congregation,
by the blank eyes of a concrete saint.

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 ©2010 by "Able Muse Review" and April Lindner, whose most recent novel is "Jane," Poppy, 2010. Poem reprinted from "Able Muse Anthology," Able Muse Press, 2010, by permission of the publisher. Introduction copyright ©2011 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

This column does not accept unsolicited poetry.