

AMERICAN LIFE IN POETRY

A FREE COLUMN FOR NEWSPAPERS BY TED KOOSER, THE POET LAUREATE OF THE UNITED STATES

AMERICAN LIFE IN POETRY © 2005 THE POETRY FOUNDATION WEBSITE: WWW.AMERICANLIFEINPOETRY.ORG CONTACT: ALP@POETRYFOUNDATION.ORG

American Life in Poetry: Column 069

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

This marvelous poem by the California poet Marsha Truman Cooper perfectly captures the world of ironing, complete with its intimacy. At the end, doing a job to perfection, pressing the perfect edge, establishes a reassuring order to an otherwise mundane and slightly tawdry world.

Ironing After Midnight

Your mother called it
“*doing the pressing*,”
and you know now
how right she was.
There is something urgent here.
Not even the hiss
under each button
or the yellow business
ground in at the neck
can make one instant
of this work seem unimportant.
You’ve been taught
to turn the pocket corners
and pick out the dark lint
that collects there.
You’re tempted to leave it,
but the old lessons
go deeper than habits.
Everyone else is asleep.
The odor of sweat rises
when you do
under the armpits,
the owner’s particular smell
you can never quite wash out.
You’ll stay up.
You’ll have your way,
the final stroke
and sharpness
down the long sleeves,
a truly permanent edge.

Reprinted from “River Styx,” No. 32, 1990, by permission of the author whose most recent book is “Substantial Holdings,” Pudding House Publications, 2002. Poem copyright © 1990 by Marsha Truman Cooper. This weekly column is supported by The Poetry Foundation, The Library of Congress, and the Department of English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. We do not accept unsolicited poetry.

American Life in Poetry ©2005 The Poetry Foundation

Contact: alp@poetryfoundation.org
This column does not accept unsolicited poetry.