

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 070

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

As a man I'll never gain the wisdom Sharon Olds expresses in this poem about motherhood, but one of the reasons poetry is essential is that it can take us so far into someone else's experience that we feel it's our own.

My Son the Man

Suddenly his shoulders get a lot wider,
the way Houdini would expand his body
while people were putting him in chains. It seems
no time since I would help him to put on his sleeper,
guide his calves into the gold interior,
zip him up and toss him up and
catch his weight. I cannot imagine him
no longer a child, and I know I must get ready,
get over my fear of men now my son
is going to be one. This was not
what I had in mind when he pressed up through me like a
sealed trunk through the ice of the Hudson,
snapped the padlock, unsnaked the chains,
and appeared in my arms. Now he looks at me
the way Houdini studied a box
to learn the way out, then smiled and let himself be manacled.

"My Son the Man" from THE WELLSPRING by Sharon Olds. Copyright © 1996 by Sharon Olds. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc. 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.