

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 077

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

Li-Young Lee, who lives in Chicago, evokes by the use of carefully chosen images a culture, a time of day, and the understanding of love through the quiet observation of gesture.

Early in the Morning

While the long grain is softening
in the water, gurgling
over a low stove flame, before
the salted Winter Vegetable is sliced
for breakfast, before the birds,
my mother glides an ivory comb
through her hair, heavy
and black as calligrapher's ink.

She sits at the foot of the bed.
My father watches, listens for
the music of comb
against hair.

My mother combs,
pulls her hair back
tight, rolls it
around two fingers, pins it
in a bun to the back of her head.
For half a hundred years she has done this.
My father likes to see it like this.
He says it is kempt.

But I know
it is because of the way
my mother's hair falls
when he pulls the pins out.
Easily, like the curtains
when they untie them in the evening.

Reprinted from "Rose," BOA Editions, Ltd., 1986, by permission of the publisher, www.boaeditors.org.
Copyright © 1986 Li-Young Lee, whose most recent book of poetry is "Book of My Nights," BOA Editions, Ltd., 2001. 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.