

AMERICAN LIFE IN POETRY

A FREE COLUMN FOR NEWSPAPERS BY TED KOOSER, POET LAUREATE OF THE UNITED STATES, 2004-2006
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BY TED KOOSER, U.S. POET LAUREATE, 2004-2006

The American poet, Ezra Pound, once described the faces of people in a rail station as petals on a wet black bough. That was roughly seventy-five years ago. Here Barry Goldenson of New York offers a look at a contemporary subway station. Not petals, but people all the same.

Subway

The station platform, clean and broad, his stage
for push-ups, sit-ups, hamstring stretch,
as he laid aside his back pack, from which
his necessities bulged, as he bulged
through jeans torn at butt, knee and thigh,
in deep palaver with himself—sigh,
chatter, groan. Deranged but common.
We sat at a careful distance to spy
on his performance, beside a woman
in her thirties, dressed as in her teens—
this is L.A.—singing to herself.
How composed, complete and sane
she seemed. A book by the Dalai Lama
in her hands, her face where pain and wrong
were etched, here becalmed, with faint chirps
leaking from the headphones of her walkman.
Not talking. Singing, lost in song.

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