AMERICAN LIFE IN POETRY

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American Life in Poetry: Column 155

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

The American poet Elizabeth Bishop often wrote of how places—both familiar and foreign—looked, how they seemed. Here Marianne Boruch of Indiana begins her poem in this way, too, in a space familiar to us all but made new—made strange—by close observation.

Hospital

It seems so--
I don't know. It seems
as if the end of the world
has never happened in here.
No smoke, no
dizzy flaring except
those candles you can light
in the chapel for a quarter.
They last maybe an hour
before burning out.
And in this room
where we wait, I see
them pass, the surgical folk--
nurses, doctors, the guy who hangs up
the blood drop--ready for lunch,
their scrubs still starched into wrinkles,
a cheerful green or pale blue,
and the end of a joke, something
about a man who thought he could be--
what? I lose it
in their brief laughter.

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