

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

Cecilia Woloch teaches in California, and when she's not with her students she's off to the Carpathian Mountains of Poland, to help with the farm work. But somehow she resisted her wanderlust just long enough to make this telling snapshot of her father at work.

The Pick

I watched him swinging the pick in the sun,
breaking the concrete steps into chunks of rock,
and the rocks into dust,
and the dust into earth again.
I must have sat for a very long time on the split rail fence,
just watching him.
My father's body glistened with sweat,
his arms flew like dark wings over his head.
He was turning the backyard into terraces,
breaking the hill into two flat plains.
I took for granted the power of him,
though it frightened me, too.
I watched as he swung the pick into the air
and brought it down hard
and changed the shape of the world,
and changed the shape of the world again.

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