

# AMERICAN LIFE IN POETRY

A FREE COLUMN FOR NEWSPAPERS BY TED KOOSER, POET LAUREATE OF THE UNITED STATES, 2004-2006  
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## American Life in Poetry: Column 254

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

What might my late parents have thought, I wonder, to know that there would one day be an occupation known as Tooth Painter? Here's a partial job description by Lucille Lang Day of Oakland, California.

### Tooth Painter

He was tall, lean, serious  
about his profession,  
said it disturbed him  
to see mismatched teeth.  
Squinting, he asked me  
to turn toward the light  
as he held an unglazed crown  
by my upper incisors.  
With a small brush he applied  
yellow, gray, pink, violet  
and green from a palette of glazes,  
then fired it at sixteen hundred  
degrees. We went outside  
to check the final color,  
and he was pleased. Today  
the dentist put it in my mouth,  
and no one could ever guess  
my secret: there's no one quite  
like me, and I can prove it  
by the unique shade of  
the ivory sculptures attached  
to bony sockets in my jaw.  
A gallery opens when I smile.  
Even the forgery gleams.

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