

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 528

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

A couple I know adopted three very small children from a distant country, and the children had never been constrained in any way. The airliner's seatbelts were so fearful for them that they screamed all the way back to the States. But since then their lives have been wonderfully happy. And here's a similar story, this too with a good ending, by Patrick Hicks of South Dakota.

The Strangers

After we picked you up at the Omaha airport,
we clamped you into a new car seat
and listened to you yowl
beneath the streetlights of Nebraska.

Our hotel suite was plump with toys,
ready, we hoped, to soothe you into America.
But for a solid hour you watched the door,
shrieking, *Umma*, the Korean word for mother.

Once or twice you glanced back at us
and, in this netherworld where a door home
had slammed shut forever, your terrified eyes
paced between the past and the future.

Umma, you screamed, *Umma!*
But your foster mother back in Seoul never appeared.

Your new mother and I lay on the bed,
cooing your birth name,
until, at last, you collapsed into our arms.

In time, even terror must yield to sleep.

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