American Life in Poetry: Column 795

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

Karla Huston was Wisconsin’s Poet Laureate in 2017 and 2018, and lives in Appleton. She’s published several books and chapbooks and does the good work of reviewing poetry for various journals. “Lip,” this lively portrait of her father, is previously unpublished, and our column was lucky to get first dibs on it.

Lip

When my father tuned his sousaphone,
he fiddled with tubes and oil

like when he restored the Model T, his hands
working the pipes and joints. And all around him

it’s polka polka, big oom-pas, little dancing girls
on the tips of the valves while he worked his embouchure

into the proper purse of lips. Somewhere
bar lights glinted off the big bell, the name “Bob”

engraved inside the swale, hill and valley
little dancehall at the end of a corn maze,

small towns in Wisconsin, a fireman’s dance
in a cavernous hall, a wedding gig or two.

He said nothing while he adjusted the weight
on knees already bruised and aching. When

cancer took a wedge out of his lip,
he had to give them up—The Beer Barrel,

the She’s-Too-Fat, the Blue-Eyes-Cryin’-in-the-Rain
Polka, the Liechtensteiner, a schottische or two.

The music lived in his head, the tip of his tongue,
the records stacked and dusty on the floor.