

AMERICAN LIFE IN POETRY

A FREE COLUMN FOR NEWSPAPERS BY TED KOOSER, THE POET LAUREATE OF THE UNITED STATES

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BY TED KOOSER, U.S. POET LAUREATE

In this poem by western New Yorker Judith Slater, we're delivered to a location infamous for brewing American stories—a bar. Like the stories of John Henry, Paul Bunyan, or the crane operator in this poem, tales of work can be extraordinary, heroic and, if they are sad, sometimes leavened by a little light.

In The Black Rock Tavern

The large man in the Budweiser tee
with serpents twining on his arms
has leukemia. It doesn't seem right
but they've told him he won't die for years
if he sticks with the treatment.
He's talking about his years in the foundry,

running a crane on an overhead track in the mill.
Eight hours a day moving ingots into rollers.
Sometimes without a break
because of the bother of getting down.
Never had an accident.
Never hurt anyone. He had that much control.

His problem is that electricity
arced through his body and accumulated.
When he got down at the end of a shift
he could squeeze a forty-watt light bulb
between thumb and finger and make it flare.
All the guys came around to see that.

Judith Slater is a clinical psychologist and her poem first appeared in "Prairie Schooner," Vol 78, No. 3, Fall 2004 by permission of the University of Nebraska Press with the permission of the author. Poem copyright © 2004 by The University of Nebraska Press. This weekly column is supported by The Poetry Foundation, The Library of Congress, and the Department of English at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln.

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