

# 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 119

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

I'm especially attracted to poems that describe places I might not otherwise visit, in the manner of good travel writing. I'm a dedicated stay-at-home and much prefer to read something fascinating about a place than visit it myself. Here the Hawaii poet, Joseph Stanton, describes a tree that few of us have seen but all of us have eaten from.

### Banana Trees

They are tall herbs, really, not trees,  
though they can shoot up thirty feet  
if all goes well for them. Cut in cross

section they look like gigantic onions,  
multi-layered mysteries with ghostly hearts.  
Their leaves are made to be broken by the wind,

if wind there be, but the crosswise tears  
they are built to expect do them no harm.  
Around the steady staff of the leafstalk

the broken fronds flap in the breeze  
like brief forgotten flags, but these  
tattered, green, photosynthetic machines

know how to grasp with their broken fingers  
the gold coins of light that give open air  
its shine. In hot, dry weather the fingers

fold down to touch on each side--  
a kind of prayer to clasp what damp they can  
against the too much light.

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