

AMERICAN LIFE IN POETRY

A FREE COLUMN FOR NEWSPAPERS BY TED KOOSER, POET LAUREATE OF THE UNITED STATES, 2004-2006
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BY TED KOOSER, U.S. POET LAUREATE, 2004-2006

I'd guess you've heard it said that the reason we laugh when somebody slips on a banana peel is that we're happy that it didn't happen to us. That kind of happiness may be shameful, but many of us have known it. In the following poem, the California poet, Jackson Wheeler, tells us of a similar experience.

How Good Fortune Surprises Us

I was hauling freight
out of the Carolinas
up to the Cumberland Plateau
when, in Tennessee, I saw
from the freeway, at 2 am
a house ablaze.

Water from the firehoses arced
into luminescent rainbows.

The only sound, the dull roar of my truck
passing. I found myself strangely happy.
It was misfortune on that cold night
falling on someone's house,
but not mine
not mine.

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