

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 love poems that take pains to observe people at their tasks, and here's a fine one by Christopher Todd Matthews, who lives in Virginia.

Window Washer

One hand slops suds on, one
hustles them down like a blind.
Brusque noon glare, filtered thus,
loosens and glows. For five or
six minutes he owns the place,
dismal coffee bar, and us, its
huddled underemployed. A blade,
black line against the topmost glass,

begins, slices off the outer lather,
flings it away, works inward,
corrals the frothy middle, and carves,
with quick cuts, the stuff down,
not looking for anything, beneath
or inside. Homes to the last,
cleans its edges, grooms it for
the end, then shaves it off

and flings it away. Which is
splendid, and merciless. And all
in the wrist. Then, he looks at us.
We makers of filth, we splashers
and spitters. We sitters and watchers.
Who like to see him work.
Who love it when he leaves
and gives it back: our grim hideout,
half spoiled by clarity.

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