

AMERICAN LIFE IN POETRY

A FREE COLUMN FOR NEWSPAPERS BY TED KOOSER, POET LAUREATE OF THE UNITED STATES, 2004-2006
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Our sense of smell is the one sense most likely to transport us through time. A sniff of fried fish on a breeze and I can wind up in my grandmother's kitchen sixty years ago, getting ready to eat bluegills. Michael Walsh, a Minnesotan, builds this fine poem about his parents around the odor of cattle that they carry with them, even into this moment.

Barn Clothes

Same size, my parents stained and tore
alike in the barn, their brown hair

ripe as cow after twelve hours of gutters.
At supper they spoke in jokey moos.

Sure, showers could dampen that reek
down to a whiff under fingernails, behind ears,

but no wash could wring the animal from their clothes:
one pair, two pair, husband, wife, reversible.

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