

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 475

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

Those of us who live on the arid Great Plains love to hear rain on the roof. Not hail, but rain. William Jolliff, a poet from Oregon, where it rains all the time, has done a fine job here of capturing that sound.

Rain on a Barn South of Tawas

It may be as close as an old man in Michigan
comes to the sound of the sea. Call it thunder
if you want, but it's not thunder, not at all.
It's more like the rush of semis on a freeway

somewhere between Bay City and Flint,
the road a son will take when he learns,
sometime around the last taste of a strap,
that the life he was born to is nothing

at all like a life he'd ever bother to live.
There's an anger in it, a tin-edged constancy
that has no rhythm, quite, something more
like white noise that still won't let you sleep.

Think of some man, needing to get a crop in,
but the fields are sop, so he's trying to find
something to fix, something to keep his hands
working, something to weld, something to pound,

something to wrap his calloused palms around
that might do less damage than a lead-rope
knotted and tossed over the limb of a tree.
If you ever decide to lose your years

by working this land, you might think again,
about the barn you build, or roofing it with tin.

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