

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

Who hasn't wished he or she could talk to a carnival worker and find out what their lives are like? Everybody, perhaps, but the carnival workers. Here's a poem by Mark Kraushaar of Wisconsin that captures one of those lives.

The Ring Toss Lady Breaks a Five

It's all of it rigged, she says,
Bust-one-wins, Hi-striker, even the Dozer.
It's like you think you'll score that giant panda
for the wife except you can't, or not
without you drop another twenty
and then—what?—then you win
a thumb-sized monkey or a little comb.
She hands me five ones and then stands.
She's worked the whole of the midway,
she says, funnel cake to corn-dogs.
She's worked every game
plus half the rides, Crazy Koaster,
Avalanche, Wing-Ding, Tilt-a-Whirl
and if there's somebody sick she'll do
a kiddy ride too, Li'l Choo-choo, maybe
the Tea Cup.
There's a collapsing soft sigh
and she sits, opens the paper, turns a page
and as if she were the one assigned to face forwards,
as if it were her job to intuit the world
and interpret the news,
Anymore, she says, it's out of our hands,
it's all we can do—it's not up to you.
You see that bald bronco tearing
tickets at the carousel?
We worked the Bottle-drop
and now he's mine: he's no genius
but he loves me and he's mine.
Things happen, she says, you
can't take them back.

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