

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 520

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

With this column American Life in Poetry celebrates its tenth anniversary. Thanks to all of you for supporting us, week in and week out!

When I was a boy, I was advised that if a wasp landed on me I wasn't to move until it flew away. I did as I was told and got stung. Here Karen J. Weyant, who lives in Pennsylvania, takes a similar risk.

Yellowjackets

When my father held his Bic lighter
to the nests in back of the garage,
the gray paper pulp sparked

then blackened. Ashes fell,
coating crawling ivy and clover.
A few yellowjackets fled,

one or two swirled, flying
into the sweaty face of my father,
but most too stunned,

their usual side-to-side swag
of a dance, flailing in the smoke.
When one landed on my arm, I stiffened.

His wings settled into a still gauze,
body coiled in yellow bands,
the same shade as buttercups we held

to our skin, cupping sunlight near our chins.
Every step, careful, quivering, as if neither
of us knew who was supposed to sting.

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