

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 684

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

Ruth Stone, who died at age 96 in 2011, was one of our finest poets. I'm especially taken with "Lighter Than Air." I love it when there's an instant at which something magical appears and for me it's those ladders reaching down toward the girls. The poem is from *What Love Comes To: New and Selected Poems*, from Copper Canyon Press.

Lighter Than Air

The fat girl next door would give us a nickel
to walk to the old man's store
and get her an ice-cream cone,
vanilla, of course, the only flavor then.
On Powotan Avenue, Aunt Harriet and I would take
turns licking it all the way back.
It was hot that summer and we longed
to go to Virginia Beach and put our toes in the tide.
It rained every day and the James River swelled
up to our doorsteps.
Aunt Harriet and I wore tight rubber bathing caps
and long saggy bathing suits. How skinny we were.
She was nine and I was six. The lightning flashed
and we hid in the closet; the thunder crashed.
We had straight, bobbed hair and bangs.
Once a dirigible moved above the tops of the trees,
with little ladders dangling down, and we waved.

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