

# 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 100

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

Here the Maine poet, Wesley McNair, offers us a vivid description of a man who has lived beyond himself. I'd guess you won't easily forget this sad old man in his apron with his tray of cheese.

### The One I Think of Now

At the end of my stepfather's life  
when his anger was gone,  
and the saplings of his failed  
nursery had grown into trees,  
my newly feminist mother had him  
in the kitchen to pay for all  
those years he only did the carving.  
"You know where that is,"  
she would say as he looked  
for a knife to cut the cheese  
and a tray to serve it with,  
his apron wide as a dress  
above his workboots, confused  
as a girl. He is the one I think of now,  
lifting the tray for my family,  
the guests, until at last he comes  
to me. And I, no less confused,  
look down from his hurt eyes as if  
there were nothing between us  
except an arrangement of cheese,  
and not this bafflement, these  
almost tender hands that once  
swung hammers and drove machines  
and insisted that I learn to be a man.

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