

# 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 151

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

Thirty, forty years ago, there were lots of hitchhikers, college students, bent old men and old women, and none of them seemed fearful of being out there on the highways at the mercy of strangers. All that's changed, and nobody wants to get in a car with a stranger. Here Steven Huff of New York tells us about a memorable ride.

### Safe

You used to be able to flag a ride in this country.  
Impossible now—everyone is afraid  
of strangers. Well, there was fear then too,  
and it was mutual: drivers versus hitchhikers.  
And we rode without seat belts,  
insurance or beliefs. People  
would see me far ahead on a hill like a seedling,  
watch me grow in the windshield  
and not know they were going to stop until  
they got right up to me. Maybe they wanted  
company or thought I'd give them  
some excitement. It was the age  
of impulse, of lonesome knee jerks. An old woman  
stopped, blew smoke in my face  
and after I was already in her car she asked me  
if I wanted a ride. I'm telling you.  
Late one night a construction boss pulled over.  
One of his crew had been hit  
by the mob, he said as he drove, distraught  
and needing to talk to someone.  
We rode around for a long time.  
He said, *I never wore a gun to a funeral before,  
but they've gotta be after me too.*  
Then he looked at me and patted the bulge  
in his coat. *Don't worry, he said, you're safe.*

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Contact: alp@poetryfoundation.org

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