

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

It's not uncommon for people to turn their eyes away from those who bear the scars of misfortune. Here's a poem about that by Ned Balbo, who lives and teaches in Maryland.

Fire Victim

Once, boarding the train to New York City,
The aisle crowded and all seats filled, I glimpsed
An open space—more pushing, stuck in place—
And then saw why: a man, face peeled away,
Sewn back in haste, skin grafts that smeared like wax
Spattered and frozen, one eye flesh-filled, smooth,
One cold eye toward the window. Cramped, shoved hard,
I, too, passed up the seat, the place, and fought on
Through to the next car, and the next, but now
I wonder why the fire that could have killed him
Spared him, burns scarred over; if a *life*
Is what he calls this space through which he moves,
Dark space we dared not enter, and what fire
Burns in him when he sees us move away.

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