

# AMERICAN LIFE IN POETRY

A FREE COLUMN FOR NEWSPAPERS BY TED KOOSER, THE POET LAUREATE OF THE UNITED STATES

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## **American Life in Poetry: Column 005**

BY TED KOOSER, U.S. POET LAUREATE

Though many of us were taught that poems have hidden meanings that must be discovered and pried out like the meat from walnuts, a poem is not a puzzle, but an experience. Here David Baker makes a gift to us through his deft description of an ordinary scene. Reading, we accept the experience of a poem and make it a part of our lives, just as we would take in the look of a mountain we passed on a trip. The poet's use of the words "we" and "neighbors" subtly underline the fact that all of us are members of the human community, much alike, facing the changing seasons together.

### **Neighbors in October**

All afternoon his tractor pulls a flat wagon  
with bales to the barn, then back to the waiting

chopped field. It trails a feather of smoke.  
Down the block we bend with the season:

shoes to polish for a big game,  
storm windows to batten or patch.

And how like a field is the whole sky now  
that the maples have shed their leaves, too.

It makes us believers -- stationed in groups,  
leaning on rakes, looking into space. We rub blisters

over billows of leaf smoke. Or stand alone,  
bagging gold for the cold days to come.

David Baker's next book, "Midwest Eclogue," is forthcoming this fall from W. W. Norton. "Neighbors in October" is reprinted from "The Truth about Small Towns," University of Arkansas Press, 1998. This weekly column is supported by The Poetry Foundation, The Library of Congress, and the Department of English at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln.

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This column does not accept unsolicited poetry.