

# FAVORITE

## TED KOOSER

Poet, Pulitzer Prize winner for poetry (2005) and U.S. Poet Laureate (2004–06)



*August Night at Russell's Corners, 1940*  
**GEORGE AULT (1891–1948)**  
 Oil on canvas, 18 x 24 in.  
 Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha  
 Museum purchase, 1955.189

The poet Ted Kooser has written about rummaging through Mary Cassatt's box of pastels "in which a rainbow lay dusty and broken." And when he describes the sharpshooter poised for duty in one of Winslow Homer's Civil War paintings, Kooser relates that "Some part of art is the art of waiting."

But despite the fact that this Nebraskan, who served as America's poet laureate for two consecutive terms, visits his favorite painting every other month or so when he makes the drive to Omaha's Joslyn Art Museum, he has yet to write about it, though there are many references to such structures in his verse. "I always stop at George Ault's *August Night at Russell's Corners*," he says. "It's my anchor at the museum. I've never written about it, but I have written many poems about isolated farm buildings similar to the structures shown here." As if directly referencing the painting, a line from Kooser's "Abandoned Farmhouse" reads, "It was lonely here, says the narrow country road." And in "A Winter Morning" he writes of how "A farmhouse window far back from the highway/speaks to the darkness in a small, sure voice." So taken is Kooser with the painting that he convinced his publisher, Copper Canyon Press, to use it on the cover of one of his books, *Delights & Shadows*.

George Ault (1891–1948) lived and worked for much of his life in Woodstock,



New York, where he depicted, among other subjects, a remote and seemingly undistinguished intersection known as Russell's Corners. He painted that locale, defined by a barn, outbuildings, telephone wires, a street pole, in five paintings, the final one of which is Kooser's favorite. "It's a realistic portrait of an isolated intersection, weakly illuminated by a single street light," says Kooser. "The painting is to me about the value and attraction of mystery. We viewers are called upon to supply the imagery that isn't present."

What is present, or mostly so, is a large bright street light, almost at center, amid the blackness of night. The blazing light emits enough illumination to cast shadows on the sides of the rural, vernacular buildings, onto the empty roadway, and along the taut telephone wires. "The painting is as much about the lamp as it is about what surrounds it," says Kooser. "Wallace Stevens has that wonderful poem,

'A Jar in Tennessee,' in which by setting a jar down everything seems suddenly to surround it. This lamp does just that." In a 2011 retrospective of Ault's works at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the guest curator, Alexander Nemerov, noted that this street light has an uncanny resemblance to the starburst in Sassetta's 15th-century *The Journey of the Magi*. And, indeed, Ault's multi-spoked light replicates that glowing, radiating source — something both cosmic and manmade.

"I've lived in Nebraska for 50 years, and I think I must have seen this painting first in the 1960s," recalls Kooser. "I remember trying some painting of my own that was influenced by it. Those paintings disappeared years ago, and that's all to the good! They looked like paintings of someone who was trying to paint like George Ault."

No one paints words, though, as vividly as Kooser. His language cannot be copied.