

# 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 116

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

It's the oldest kind of story: somebody ventures deep into the woods and comes back with a tale. Here Roy Jacobstein returns to America to relate his experience on a safari to the place believed by archaeologists to be the original site of human life. And against this ancient backdrop he closes with a suggestion of the brevity of our lives.

### Safari, Rift Valley

Minutes ago those quick cleft hoofs  
lifted the dik-dik's speckled frame.  
Now the cheetah dips her delicate head  
to the still-pulsating guts. Our Rover's  
so close we need no zoom to fix the green  
shot of her eyes, the matted red mess  
of her face. You come here, recall a father  
hale in his ordinary life, not his last bed,  
not the long tasteless slide of tapioca.  
This is the Great Rift, where it all began,  
here where the warthogs and hartebeest  
feed in the scrub, giraffes splay to drink,  
and our rank diesel exhaust darkens the air  
for only a few moments before vanishing.

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