

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 169

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

I remember being scared to death when, at about thirty years of age, I saw an x-ray of my skull. Seeing one's self as a skeleton, or receiving any kind of medical report, even when the news is good, can be unsettling. Suddenly, you're just another body, a clock waiting to stop. Here's a telling poem by Rick Campbell, who lives and teaches in Florida.

Heart

My heart was suspect.
Wired to an EKG,
I walked a treadmill
that measured my ebb
and flow, tracked isotopes
that ploughed my veins,
looked for a constancy
I've hardly ever found.
For a month I worried
as I climbed the stairs
to my office. The mortality
I never believed in
was here now. They
say my heart's ok,
just high cholesterol, but
I know my heart's a house
someone has broken into,
a room you come back
to and know some stranger
with bad intent has been there
and touched all that you love. You know
he can come back. It's his call,
his house now.

American Life in Poetry is made possible by The Poetry Foundation (www.poetryfoundation.org), publisher of *Poetry* magazine. It is also supported by the Department of English at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. Poem copyright © 2006 by Rick Campbell and reprinted from "Dixmont," Autumn House Press, 2008, by permission of the writer. First published in "The Florida Review," Fall, 2006. Introduction copyright © 2008 by The Poetry Foundation. The introduction's author, Ted Kooser, served as United States Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress from 2004-2006. We do not accept unsolicited manuscripts.

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