

# 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 190

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Occupational hazards, well, you have to find yourself in the occupation to know about those. Here Minnie Bruce Pratt of Alabama gives us an inside look at a kind of work we all have benefited from but may never have thought much about.

### Cutting Hair

She pays attention to the hair, not her fingers, and cuts herself once or twice a day. Doesn't notice anymore, just if the blood starts flowing. Says, Excuse me, to the customer and walks away for a band-aid. Same spot on the middle finger over and over, raised like a callus. Also the nicks where she snips between her fingers, the torn webbing. Also spider veins on her legs now, so ugly, though she sits in a chair for half of each cut, rolls around from side to side. At night in the winter she sleeps in white cotton gloves, Neosporin on the cuts, vitamin E, then heavy lotion. All night, for weeks, her white hands lie clothed like those of a young girl going to her first party. Sleeping alone, she opens and closes her long scissors and the hair falls under her hands. It's a good living, kind of like an undertaker, the people keep coming, and the hair, shoulder length, French twist, braids. Someone has to cut it. At the end she whisks and talcums my neck. Only then can I bend and see my hair, how it covers the floor, curls and clippings of brown and silver, how it shines like a field of scythed hay beneath my feet.

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