

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 715

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

Alaska Quarterly Review put out a special double issue late in 2017 to celebrate its 35th year, a very long tenure for a literary magazine. Among the many fine works I found there was this touching portrait of his mother by Michael Mark, who lives in California.

Estelle

Even when they danced, Dad couldn't keep her
in his arms. She'd spin off, leave him to fade

back into the circle of others, clapping, hooting.
Days when the pond would freeze, mothers took

their children's hands and worried them around
in slow circles. Mom raced in uncharitable loops

past me and my brother like we weren't hers.
Same way she didn't see my report card Fs as Fs.

She'd take the matching color pen and glide
the ballpoint so it looked like the B was always there.

You could ask how she convinced the butcher
his scale was wrong, how she'd roll her cart away

with three-eighths of a pound of corned beef, paying
for only a quarter – fat trimmed, the way dad liked,

but she'd skim that question like she did all surfaces,
even air. Now she's given her own memory the slip.

Doctors say there's no reaching her.

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