

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 757

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

All of us know people who wouldn't wear an article of clothing that had ever before been touched, let alone worn, by somebody else, and others who could care less. As I write this column I'm wearing a favorite thrift shop sweater, so . . . This poem first appeared in *Minnesota Review*. Emily Rose Cole is from Pennsylvania, and her most recent chapbook is *Love and a Loaded Gun* from Minerva Rising Press.

What Makes a Pearl

When she died, I took my mother's socks,
those fuzzy polka-dotted ones she'd worn

in hospice. I wore them all through winter.

Maybe that's creepy. But is it really so different
from the necklace she willed to me,

that single pearl clinging to its strand of silver?

The necklace isn't creepy. Every day for a year
I hung it over my heart, even in the shower,

even when it felt heavy as a beggar's first coin.

I want to say that having these things was like having a scar
but worse. In winter, socks are as inevitable as scars,

except there's more choice in it: when I was cold,
I chose which socks, and whose.

But I'm wrong. These tokens I harvested
from her deathbed are more like the pearl,

or rather, what makes a pearl:

that piece of sand, the irritant that the nacre
builds itself around, that tiny, everyday object

that, little by little, learns to glow.

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