American Life in Poetry
Roxane Beth Johnson's elegy to her father is striking for the tender and intimate details that constitute the memory of him, especially his shirts, which become almost talismans for her to explore ideas of mortality and life: “first slick with water, last a bowl of ash.” In the end, this beautiful sonnet, “In His Lover's House, A Father Rises”, is an ode to persistent memory as an antidote to the existential void of death.

In His Lover’s House, A Father Rises

By Roxane Beth Johnson

The end’s always there at the beginning
Dad said, quoting a prophet who knew then
what we’d come to—beings held in two hands
first slick with water, last a bowl of ash.
As a girl, I ironed his shirts, seams stained
from sweat, hot-washed in bleach turned yellow, and grass
scent of clean white rose under the iron’s
scald and steam I used to press his shirts out.
How fitting in the end a heap were found
in his lover’s house, the last I heard
of him who told me always that the grass
and ants were ancestors come back to see
if we’d crush them, then forget them again—
like dust their lives so small compared to ours.
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 ©2020 by Roxane Beth Johnson, "In His Lover's House, A Father Rises" from Harvard Review, 45, June 10, 2020. Poem reprinted by permission of the author and the publisher. Introduction copyright ©2022 by The Poetry Foundation. The introduction's author, Kwame Dawes, is George W. Holmes Professor of English and Glenna Luschei Editor of Prairie Schooner at the University of Nebraska.

American Life in Poetry ©2022 The Poetry Foundation
Contact: alp@poetryfoundation.org
This column does not accept unsolicited poetry.