

Forensic Reflections Through Poetry

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One of my sons, a writer, urged me to broaden my audience and turn my forensic experiences into fiction instead of writing yet another book on forensic psychiatry. I gave it a try, but my arthritic thumbs protested. Poetry with its economy of words and motion then became the obvious medium. I had never written any poetry until a few years ago, and found it very gratifying. The endless play with words and quick resolutions, in contrast to the elephantine gestations of books, appealed to me.

My work as an examiner for the Maine State Forensic Service involves a lot of driving to far-flung courthouses. The trip to Aroostook County was 10 hours round trip, but provided a window of opportunity for observations and reflections. Writing poetry has become a means of processing some of the vicarious traumas I encounter in my work and allows me to view them from many perspectives. It has also helped me deal with personal losses and those I encounter in the course of my work as a Hospice volunteer at Maine State Prison and in the community. I hope this sampling of forensic poetry may inspire the muse in readers of the *Journal*.

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Reflections

Flames

Randall Roop went up in flames
Amid the charred and twisted metal
Of the trailer he called home as his
Junked cars bore witness to his fate

Four volunteer firemen delayed by
Winter storm struggle to bend their
Hoses stiffened by arctic air and ice
But arrive too late to alter his fate

Randall Roop lies in a palace of ice
His humble home transformed into
Fantastic apparitions such as he
Might have seen while on a toot

Tongues of fire leap to the sky
As if to warm the sweep of night
While Randall Roop grows cold
His coffee brandy at his side.

Papillon

An errant Monarch butterfly
Alights with grace on a
Plum colored coneflower,
In this not quite barren yard

Indifferent to their crimes, he gratefully
accepts the fruit of inmates' labors
A yard is a yard, as long as
You are a butterfly

As quickly as he alighted, he is gone
Having touched persons less
Fortunate with hope and
The promise of freedom.

The Glove Compartment

The police search through
Looking for clues of
Who she was and
How she got there

An old lottery ticket
With numbers she picked,
A purple schrunchy with a few
Red hairs that still cling

One small bottle of cheap perfume,
One unpaid parking ticket,
Thirteen cents in change and a
Pack of Menthol Lights

A greasy napkin from
Dunkin' Donuts with
Directions to Amy's house
Scrawled upon it

A broken fortune cookie
With hatched fortune beside it
Offering assurance that
"You will soon be famous"

Such is the detritus of
Her short life as
She lies dead in her car,
The victim of a homicide.

Sunday Hospice Vigil

I sit as a stranger in
The house of a man of God
He has left to tend his flock
Trusting me with his dying wife

His tidy house speaks of a life
Well ordered and caring
With God's word hanging
From each and every wall

Yet, I am unsettled by the
Fifties' décor, knickknacks of old
And death-defying plastic flowers
At standoff with the passage of time

But it is the absence of any print,
Other than spiritual books or Bible,
That startles and causes me to realize that
Some men live by God's word alone

Christmas cards lay still unopened
And stillness is repeatedly broken
By the chiming of a clock, as death
Hovers like an early morning fog.

Aroostook County Unfolding

Dense fog enfolds me as
I head south on U.S. Route One
Following on blind faith
The distant lights of a truck
While scanning shoulders
For early morning moose

By Presque Isle, bathroom and
Kitchen lights signal that dawn
Is on its way and the harvest beckons
Soon, I can make out roadside stands
With pumpkins, new potatoes,
Yukon Gold and a few stray chickens

Pickups and tractors punctuate the
Vast, rolling fields and Full
Gospel churches keep these
Families from straying too far
A sign for Bert's Salvage suggests
That more than souls get saved up here

The landscape shifts to young pine and
Tamarack then Houlton's strip malls as
I turn onto the beginning of Interstate 95
A color guard of deciduous trees still
Muted by fog is my constant companion for
The next two hours on this barren highway

Flocks of crows hop from road kill
To safety with alacrity and agility
As I disrupt their early morning
Routine, the avian equivalent of
Morning coffee, donuts and
The latest gossip at Tim Hortons

The vistas are few and the promised view of
Mt. Katahdin is not to be seen today. I am
Left reviewing yesterday's trial in Caribou
And the weight carried by the judge who must
Sift through days of testimony and decide the
Fate of a man charged with killing his father.