

Anatomy Lesson  
First Place Poetry 2003

You think you have seen death before,  
how the dead look so dead when they're dead,  
but pulling back the stainless cover,  
you are unready for that form as gray  
and cold as a late November day,  
wet, with limp brown stems of day-lilies,  
like lifeless hair hanging over unhearing ears  
into the silver trough.

Perhaps it would be easy to begin to view  
yourself as a doctor here, in a Rembrandt pose,  
bending over unbeckoning fingers,  
but the smell of formaldehyde  
is overwhelming, and you feel  
you are only pretending, violating  
the only part of this person  
still left on earth.

And where does all this fat come from?  
Globules stick to your instruments  
and stain your atlas with greasy smudges, so  
although you take care to wear your apron,  
you find one of the yellow bastards  
on your sock as you cross your legs  
hours later, after lunch in the cafeteria.  
Is that your respect for the dead?

Or does it come years later, after you  
have filled a couple of graveyards  
with corpses in silent decomposure?  
Their spirits visit you in quiet times,  
as you sit alone in your car, waiting,  
or awaken, sweating, just after three.  
The hairs on your neck arise, tingling,  
as the dead tell you things, and you listen.

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