

Care inside

Ruth Elwood Martin MD MPH FCFP

As physicians, we are invited to bear witness to our patients' lives. About 2 decades ago, I started sessional work in the health care clinic of a women's correctional centre. The complex health profiles of incarcerated women, and their traumatic life stories, made the work both deeply rewarding and unsettling. I started journaling and writing poetry because I discovered that writing helped me to process the stories and traumas that the women shared with me. By writing poems, I found that I was giving voice to the moment of the clinical encounter, but I felt that I was viewing the moment through a different lens, as if compelled by an iridescent painting. I had not read the poems for many years, and re-reading them stirred up vivid memories of the clinical encounters that prompted my writing. Perhaps what we do in such settings is attend, bear witness, affirm, and allow healing to happen. Engaging with reflective writing, and the art of poetry, better prepared me as a physician to listen, to understand, and to learn from the women who shared their lives with me.

Dr Martin is Clinical Professor in the School of Population and Public Health at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. She is engaged in prison health teaching and research, including participatory health research with men and women with incarceration experience. For more on **Dr Martin's** story, see the Cover Story on **page 146**.

Schizophrenia in prison

pounce after crawling,
cat-walker postures her whim:
heavy steel slams shut

ebony cascade,
lush hair veiling haunted eyes:
laughter; pause; wail, scream

concrete walls encase:
a silver castle rises,
dancing from those eyes

cat in the castle
shuns all winter's red capsules:
beckons injection

Recovery

Scars
white sinewy
tram-lines, criss-crossing
lumpy and gnarled

Ugly
arms: I can't look at
them. Wasted
years, all gone, my
children shamed.

missed
veins, abscesses open
oozing, gaping;
pain, tearing her apart

marred for
life, scarred for
life, never able to
forget.