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The Poet

Written by Michael Connelly

Published by Orion

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MICHAEL CONNELLY

The Poet



An Orion paperback

First published in Great Britain in 1996
by Orion
This paperback edition published in 2005
by Orion Books Ltd,
Orion House, 5 Upper St Martin's Lane,
London WC2H 9EA

An Hachette UK company

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Reissued 2009

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-40918-1693-6

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

The Orion Publishing Group's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

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I

Death is my beat. I make my living from it. I forge my professional reputation on it. I treat it with the passion and precision of an undertaker – somber and sympathetic about it when I'm with the bereaved, a skilled craftsman with it when I'm alone. I've always thought the secret of dealing with death was to keep it at arm's length. That's the rule. Don't let it breathe in your face.

But my rule didn't protect me. When the two detectives came for me and told me about Sean, a cold numbness quickly enveloped me. It was like I was on the other side of the aquarium window. I moved as if underwater – back and forth, back and forth – and looked out at the rest of the world through the glass. From the backseat of their car I could see my eyes in the rearview mirror, flashing each time we passed beneath a streetlight. I recognized the thousand-yard stare I had seen in the eyes of fresh widows I had interviewed over the years.

I knew only one of the two detectives. Harold Wexler. I had met him a few months earlier when I stopped into the Pints Of for a drink with Sean. They worked CAPs together on the Denver PD. I remember Sean called him Wex. Cops always use nicknames for each other. Wexler's is Wex, Sean's, Mac. It's some kind of tribal bonding thing. Some of the names aren't complimentary but the cops don't complain. I know one down in Colorado Springs named Scoto whom most other cops call Scroto. Some even go all the way and call him Scrotum, but my guess is that you have to be a close friend to get away with that.

Wexler was built like a small bull, powerful but squat. A

voice slowly cured over the years by cigarette smoke and whiskey. A hatchet face that always seemed red the times I saw him. I remember he drank Jim Beam over ice. I'm always interested in what cops drink. It tells a lot about them. When they're taking it straight like that, I always think that maybe they've seen too many things too many times that most people never see even once. Sean was drinking Lite beer that night, but he was young. Even though he was the supe of the CAPs unit, he was at least ten years younger than Wexler. Maybe in ten years he would have been taking his medicine cold and straight like Wexler. But now I'll never know.

I spent most of the drive out from Denver thinking about that night at the Pints Of. Not that anything important had happened. It was just drinks with my brother at the cop bar. And it was the last good time between us, before Theresa Lofton came up. That memory put me back in the aquarium.

But during the moments that reality was able to punch through the glass and into my heart, I was seized by a feeling of failure and grief. It was the first real tearing of the soul I had experienced in my thirty-four years. That included the death of my sister. I was too young then to properly grieve for Sarah or even to understand the pain of a life unfulfilled. I grieved now because I had not even known Sean was so close to the edge. He was Lite beer while all the other cops I knew were whiskey on the rocks.

Of course, I also recognized how self-pitying this kind of grief was. The truth was that for a long time we hadn't listened much to each other. We had taken different paths. And each time I acknowledged this truth the cycle of my grief would begin again.

My brother once told me the theory of the limit. He said every homicide cop had a limit but the limit was unknown until it was reached. He was talking about dead bodies. Sean believed that there were just so many that a cop could look at. It was a different number for every person. Some hit it early.

Some put in twenty in homicide and never got close. But there was a number. And when it came up, that was it. You transferred to records, you turned in your badge, you did something. Because you just couldn't look at another one. And if you did, if you exceeded your limit, well, then you were in trouble. You might end up sucking down a bullet. That's what Sean said.

I realized that the other one, Ray St. Louis, had said something to me.

He turned around in his seat to look back at me. He was much larger than Wexler. Even in the dim light of the car I could make out the rough texture of his pockmarked face. I didn't know him but I'd heard him referred to by other cops and I knew they called him Big Dog. I had thought that he and Wexler made the perfect Mutt and Jeff team when I first saw them waiting for me in the lobby at the *Rocky*. It was like they had stepped out of a late-night movie. Long, dark overcoats, hats. The whole scene should have been in black and white.

'You hear me, Jack. We'll break it to her. That's our job, but we'd just like you to be there to sort of help us out, maybe stay with her if it gets rough. You know, if she needs to be with somebody. Okay?'

'Okay.'

'Good, Jack.'

We were going to Sean's house. Not the apartment he split with four other cops in Denver so in accordance with city regs he was a Denver resident. His house in Boulder where his wife, Riley, would answer our knock. I knew nobody was going to be breaking anything to her. She'd know what the news was the moment she opened the door and saw the three of us standing there without Sean. Any cop's wife would know. They spend their lives dreading and preparing for that day. Every time there's a knock on the door they expect it to be death's messengers standing there when they open it. This time it would be.

'You know, she's going to know,' I told them.

'Probably,' Wexler said. 'They always do.'

I realized they were counting on Riley knowing the score as soon as she opened the door. It would make their job easier.

I dropped my chin to my chest and brought my fingers up beneath my glasses to pinch the bridge of my nose. I realized I had become a character in one of my own stories – exhibiting the details of grief and loss I worked so hard to get so I could make a thirty-inch newspaper story seem meaningful. Now I was one of the details in this story.

A sense of shame descended on me as I thought of all the calls I had made to a widow or parent of a dead child. Or brother of a suicide. Yes, I had even made those. I don't think there was any kind of death that I hadn't written about, that hadn't brought me around as the intruder into somebody's pain.

How do you feel? Trusty words for a reporter. Always the first question. If not so direct, then carefully camouflaged in words meant to impart sympathy and understanding – feelings I didn't actually have. I carried a reminder of this callousness. A thin white scar running along my left cheek just above the line of my beard. It was from the diamond engagement ring of a woman whose fiancé had been killed in an avalanche near Breckenridge. I asked her the old standby and she responded with a backhand across my face. At the time I was new to the job and thought I had been wronged. Now I wear the scar like a badge.

'You better pull over,' I said. 'I'm going to be sick.'

Wexler jerked the car into the freeway's breakdown lane. We skidded a little on the black ice but then he got control. Before the car had completely stopped I tried desperately to open the door but the handle wouldn't work. It was a detective car, I realized, and the passengers who most often rode in the back were suspects and prisoners. The back doors had security locks controlled from the front.

'The door,' I managed to strangle out.

The car finally jerked to a stop as Wexler disengaged the security lock. I opened the door, leaned out and vomited into

the dirty slush. Three great heaves from the gut. For a half a minute I didn't move, waiting for more, but that was it. I was empty. I thought about the backseat of the car. For prisoners and suspects. And I guessed that I was both now. Suspect as a brother. A prisoner of my own pride. The sentence, of course, would now be life.

Those thoughts quickly slipped away with the relief the physical exorcism brought. I gingerly stepped out of the car and walked to the edge of the asphalt where the light from the passing cars reflected in moving rainbows on the petroleum-exhaust glaze on the February snow. It looked as if we had stopped alongside a grazing meadow but I didn't know where. I hadn't been paying attention to how far along to Boulder we were. I took off my gloves and glasses and put them in the pockets of my coat. Then I reached down and dug beneath the spoiled surface to where the snow was white and pure. I took up two handfuls of the cold, clean powder and pressed it to my face, rubbing my skin until it stung.

'You okay?' St. Louis asked.

He had come up behind me with his stupid question. It was up there with *How do you feel?* I ignored it.

'Let's go,' I said.

We got back in and Wexler wordlessly pulled the car back onto the freeway. I saw a sign for the Broomfield exit and knew we were about halfway there. Growing up in Boulder, I had made the thirty-mile run between there and Denver a thousand times but the stretch seemed like alien territory to me now.

For the first time I thought of my parents and how they would deal with this. Stoicly, I decided. They handled everything that way. They never discussed it. They moved on. They'd done it with Sarah. Now they'd do it with Sean.

'Why'd he do it?' I asked after a few minutes.

Wexler and St. Louis said nothing.

'I'm his brother. We're twins, for Christ's sake.'

'You're also a reporter,' St. Louis said. 'We picked you up because we want Riley to be with family if she needs it. You're the only –'

'My brother fucking killed himself!'

I said it too loud. It had a quality of hysteria to it that I knew never worked with cops. You start yelling and they have a way of shutting down, going cold. I continued in a subdued voice.

'I think I am entitled to know what happened and why. I'm not writing a fucking story. Jesus, you guys are . . .'

I shook my head and didn't finish. If I tried I thought I would lose it again. I gazed out the window and could see the lights of Boulder coming up. So many more than when I was a kid.

'We don't know why,' Wexler finally said after a half minute. 'Okay? All I can say is that it happens. Sometimes cops get tired of all the shit that comes down the pipe. Mac might've gotten tired, that's all. Who knows? But they're working on it. And when they know, I'll know. And I'll tell you. That's a promise.'

'Who's working it?'

'The park services turned it over to our department. SIU is handling it.'

'What do you mean Special Investigations? They don't handle cop suicides.'

'Normally, they don't. We do. CAPs. But this time it's just that they're not going to let us investigate our own. Conflict of interest, you know.'

CAPs, I thought. Crimes Against Persons. Homicide, assault, rape, suicide. I wondered who would be listed in the reports as the person against whom this crime had been committed. Riley? Me? My parents? My brother?

'It was because of Theresa Lofton, wasn't it?' I asked, though it wasn't really a question. I didn't feel I needed their confirmation or denial. I was just saying out loud what I believed to be the obvious.

'We don't know, Jack,' St. Louis said. 'Let's leave it at that for now.'

The death of Theresa Lofton was the kind of murder that gave people pause. Not just in Denver, but everywhere. It made anybody who heard or read about it stop for at least a moment to consider the violent images it conjured in the mind, the twist it caused in the gut.

Most homicides are little murders. That's what we call them in the newspaper business. Their effect on others is limited, their grasp on the imagination is short-lived. They get a few paragraphs on the inside pages. Buried in the paper the way the victims are buried in the ground.

But when an attractive college student is found in two pieces in a theretofore peaceful place like Washington Park, there usually isn't enough space in the paper for all the inches of copy it will generate. Theresa Lofton's was no little murder. It was a magnet that pulled at reporters from across the country. Theresa Lofton was the girl in two pieces. That was the catchy thing about this one. And so they descended on Denver from places like New York and Chicago and Los Angeles, television, tabloid and newspaper reporters alike. For a week, they stayed at hotels with good room service, roamed the city and the University of Denver campus, asked meaningless questions and got meaningless answers. Some staked out the day care center where Lofton had worked part-time or went up to Butte, where she had come from. Wherever they went they learned the same thing, that Theresa Lofton fit that most exclusive media image of all, the All-American Girl.

The Theresa Lofton murder was inevitably compared to the Black Dahlia case of fifty years ago in Los Angeles. In that case, a not so All-American Girl was found severed at the midriff in an empty lot. A tabloid television show dubbed Theresa Lofton the White Dahlia, playing on the fact that she had been found on a snow-covered field near Denver's Lake Grasmere.

And so the story fed on itself. It burned as hot as a trash-can fire for almost two weeks. But nobody was arrested and there were other crimes, other fires for the national media to warm itself by. Updates on the Lofton case dropped back into the inside pages of the Colorado papers. They became briefs

for the digest pages. And Theresa Lofton finally took her spot among the little murders. She was buried.

All the while, the police in general, and my brother in particular, remained virtually mute, refusing even to confirm the detail that the victim had been found in two parts. That report had come only by accident from a photographer at the *Rocky* named Iggy Gomez. He had been in the park looking for wild art – the feature photos that fill the pages on a slow news day – when he happened upon the crime scene ahead of any other reporters or photographers. The cops had made the callouts to the coroner's and crime scene offices by landline since they knew the *Rocky* and the *Post* monitored their radio frequencies. Gomez took shots of two stretchers being used to remove two body bags. He called the city desk and said the cops were working a two-bagger and from the looks of the size of the bags the victims were probably children.

Later, a cop shop reporter for the *Rocky* named Van Jackson got a source in the coroner's office to confirm the grim fact that a victim had come into the morgue in two parts. The next morning's story in the *Rocky* served as the siren call to the media across the country.

My brother and his CAPs team worked as if they felt no obligation to talk to the public at all. Each day, the Denver Police Department media office put out a scant few lines in a press release, announcing that the investigation was continuing and that there had been no arrests. When cornered, the brass vowed that the case would not be investigated in the media, though that in itself was a laughable statement. Left with little information from authorities, the media did what it always does in such cases. It investigated the case on its own, numbing the reading and television-watching public with assorted details about the victim's life that actually had nothing to do with anything.

Still, almost nothing leaked from the department and little was known outside headquarters on Delaware Street; and after a couple of weeks the media onslaught was over, strangled by the lack of its lifeblood, information.

*

I didn't write about Theresa Lofton. But I wanted to. It wasn't the kind of story that comes along often in this place and any reporter would have wanted a piece of it. But at first, Van Jackson worked it with Laura Fitzgibbons, the university beat reporter. I had to bide my time. I knew that as long as the cops didn't clear it, I'd get my shot at it. So when Jackson asked me in the early days of the case if I could get anything from my brother, even off the record, I told him I would try, but I didn't try. I wanted the story and I wasn't going to help Jackson stay on it by feeding him from my source.

In late January, when the case was a month old and had dropped out of the news, I made my move. And my mistake.

One morning I went in to see Greg Glenn, the city editor, and told him I'd like to do a take out on the Lofton case. That was my specialty, my beat. Long takes on the notable murders of the Rocky Mountain Empire. To use a newspaper cliché, my expertise was going behind the headlines to bring you the real story. So I went to Glenn and reminded him I had an in. It was my brother's case, I said, and he'd only talk to me about it. Glenn didn't hesitate to consider the time and effort Jackson had already put on the story. I knew that he wouldn't. All he cared about was getting a story the *Post* didn't have. I walked out of the office with the assignment.

My mistake was that I told Glenn I had the in before I had talked to my brother. The next day I walked the two blocks from the *Rocky* to the cop shop and met him for lunch in the cafeteria. I told him about my assignment. Sean told me to turn around.

'Go back, Jack. I can't help you.'

'What are you talking about? It's your case.'

'It's my case but I'm not cooperating with you or anybody else who wants to write about it. I've given the basic details, that's all I'm required to do, that's where it stays.'

He looked off across the cafeteria. He had an annoying habit of not looking at you when you disagreed with him. When we were little, I would jump on him when he did it and punch him on the back. I couldn't do that anymore, though many times I wanted to.

'Sean, this is a good story. You have –'

'I don't have to do anything and I don't give a shit what kind of story it is. This one is bad, Jack. Okay? I can't stop thinking about it. And I'm not going to help you sell newspapers with it.'

'C'mon, man, I'm a writer. Look at me. I don't care if it sells papers or not. The story is the thing. I don't give a shit about the paper. You know how I feel about that.'

He finally turned back to me.

'Now you know how I feel about this case,' he said.

I was silent a moment and took out a cigarette. I was down to maybe half a pack a day back then and could have skipped it but I knew it bothered him. So I smoked when I wanted to work on him.

'This isn't a smoking section, Jack.'

'Then turn me in. At least you'll be arresting *somebody*.'

'Why are you such an asshole when you don't get what you want?'

'Why are you? You aren't going to clear it, are you? That's what this is all about. You don't want me digging around and writing about your failure. You're giving up.'

'Jack, don't try the below-the-belt shit. You know it's never worked.'

He was right. It never had.

'Then what? You just want to keep this little horror story for yourself? That it?'

'Yeah, something like that. You could say that.'

In the car with Wexler and St. Louis I sat with my arms crossed. It was comforting. Almost as if I were holding myself together. The more I thought about my brother the more the whole thing made no sense to me. I knew the Lofton case had weighed on him but not to the point that he'd want to take his own life. Not Sean.

'Did he use his gun?'

Wexler looked at me in the mirror. Studied me, I thought. I wondered if he knew what had come between my brother and me.

'Yes.'

It hit me then. I just didn't see it. All the times that we'd had together coming to that. I didn't care about the Lofton case. What they were saying couldn't be.

'Not Sean.'

St. Louis turned around to look at me.

'What's that?'

'He wouldn't have done it, that's all.'

'Look, Jack, he –'

'He didn't get tired of the shit coming down the pipe. He loved it. You ask Riley. You ask anybody on the – Wex, you knew him the best and you know it's bullshit. He loved the hunt. That's what he called it. He wouldn't have traded it for anything. He probably could have been the assistant fucking chief by now but he didn't want it. He wanted to work homicides. He stayed in CAPs.'

Wexler didn't reply. We were in Boulder now, on Baseline heading toward Cascade. I was falling through the silence of the car. The impact of what they were telling me Sean had done was settling on me and leaving me as cold and dirty as the snow back on the side of the freeway.

'What about a note or something?' I said. 'What –'

'There was a note. We think it was a note.'

I noticed St. Louis glance over at Wexler and give him a look that said, you're saying too much.

'What? What did it say?'

There was a long silence, then Wexler ignored St. Louis.

'Out of space,' he said. 'Out of time.'

'"Out of space. Out of time." Just like that?'

'Just like that. That's all it said.'

The smile on Riley's face lasted maybe three seconds. Then it was instantly replaced by a look of horror out of that painting by Munch. The brain is an amazing computer. Three seconds to look at three faces at your door and to know your husband isn't coming home. IBM could never match that. Her mouth formed into a horrible black hole from which an unintelligible sound came, then the inevitable useless word: 'No!'

'Riley,' Wexler tried. 'Let's sit down a minute.'

'No, oh God, no!'

'Riley . . .'

She retreated from the door, moving like a cornered animal, first darting one way and then the opposite, as if maybe she thought she could change things if she could elude us. She went around the corner into the living room. When we followed we found her collapsed on the middle of the couch in an almost catatonic state, not too dissimilar from my own. The tears were just starting to come to her eyes. Wexler sat next to her on the couch. Big Dog and I stood by, silent as cowards.

'Is he dead?' she asked, knowing the answer but realizing she had to get it over with.

Wexler nodded.

'How?'

Wexler looked down and hesitated a moment. He looked over at me and then back at Riley.

'He did it himself, Riley. I'm sorry.'

She didn't believe it, just as I hadn't. But Wexler had a way of telling the story and after a while she stopped protesting. That was when she looked at me for the first time, tears rolling. Her face had an imploring look, as if she were asking me if we were sharing the same nightmare and couldn't I do something about it. Couldn't I wake her up? Couldn't I tell these two characters from a black and white how wrong they were? I went to the couch, sat next to her and hugged her. That's what I was there for. I'd seen this scene often enough to know what I was supposed to do.

'I'll stay,' I whispered. 'As long as you like.'

She didn't answer. She turned from my arms to Wexler.

'Where did it happen?'

'Estes Park. By the lake.'

'No, he wouldn't go – what was he doing up there?'

'He got a call. Somebody said they might have some information about one of his cases. He was going up to meet them

for coffee at the Stanley. Then after he ... he drove out to the lake. We don't know why he went there. He was found in his car by a ranger who heard the shot.'

'What case?' I asked.

'Look, Jack, I don't want to get into –'

'What case?' I yelled, this time not caring about the inflection of my voice. 'It was Lofton, wasn't it?'

Wexler gave one short nod and St. Louis walked away shaking his head.

'Who was he meeting?'

'That's it, Jack. We're not going to get into that with you.'

'I'm his brother. This is his wife.'

'It's all under investigation but if you're looking for doubts, there aren't any. We were up there. He killed himself. He used his own gun, he left a note and we got GSR on his hands. I wish he didn't do it. But he did.'