The Surgeon as Priest

RICHARD SELZER

Born in 1928, Richard Selzer is both an accomplished surgeon and a writer. He earned his MD at Albany Medical College, completed an internship and residency at Yale University, and continued as a faculty member there until 1985 while also practicing medicine. His writing career began with Rituals of Surgery (1974), a collection of short stories. He went on to publish numerous essays and stories in magazines and collected his essays in Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery (1977) and Confessions of a Knife (1979). In 1990, he published Imagine a Woman, a collection of novellas, and A Mile and a Half of Ink, a journal. Selzer documented his recovery from Legionnaires' disease in Raising the Dead: A Doctor's Encounter with His Own Mortality (1994). He is the recipient of numerous honors, including an American Medical Writers Association award and a Guggenheim Fellowship. In the following essay from Mortal Lessons, Selzer reflects on the spiritual link between physicians and "healers."

In the foyer of a great medical school there hangs a painting of Vesalius. Lean, ascetic, possessed, the anatomist stands before a dissecting table upon which lies the naked body of a man. The flesh of the two is silvery. A concentration of moonlight, like a strange rain of virus, washes them. The cadaver has dignity and reserve; it is distanced by its death. Vesalius reaches for his dissecting knife. As he does so, he glances over his shoulder at a crucifix on the wall. His face wears an expression of guilt and melancholy and fear. He knows that there is something wrong, forbidden in what he is about to do, but he cannot help himself, for he is a fanatic. He is driven by a dark desire. To see, to feel, to discover is all. His is a passion, not a romance.

I understand you, Vesalius. Even now, after so many voyages within, so much exploration, I feel the same sense that one must not gaze into the body, the same irrational fear that it is an evil deed for which punishment awaits. Consider. The sight of our internal organs is denied us. To how many men is it given to look upon their own spleens, their hearts, and live? The hidden geography of the body is a Medusa's head, one glimpse of which would render blind the presumptuous eye. Still, rigid rules are broken by the smallest inadvertencies: I pause in the midst of an operation being performed under spinal anesthesia to observe the face of my patient, to speak a word or two of reassurance. I peer above the screen separating his head from his abdomen, in which I am most deeply employed. He is not asleep, but rather stares straight upward, his attention riveted, a look of terrible discovery, of wonder upon his face. Watch him. This man is violating a taboo. I follow his gaze upward, and see in the great operating lamp suspended
above his belly the reflection of his viscera. There is the liver, dark and turgid
above, there the loops of his bowel winding slow, there his blood runs extrav-
gantly. It is that which he sees and studies with so much horror and fascination.
Something primordial in him has been aroused — a fright, a longing. I feel it,
too, and quickly bend above his open body to shield it from his view. How dare he
look within the Ark! Cover his eyes! But it is too late; he has already seen; that
which no man should; he has trespassed. And I am no longer a surgeon, but a
hierophant who must do magic to ward off the punishment of the angry gods.

I feel some hesitation to invite you to come with me into the body. It seems a
reckless, defiant act. Yet there is more than dread reflected from these rosy coasts,
these restless estuaries of pearl. And it is time to share it, the way the catbird
shares the song which must be a joy to him and is a living truth to those who hear
it. So shall I make of my fingers, words; of my scalpel, a sentence; of the body of
my patient, a story.

One enters the body in surgery, as in love, as though one were an exile return-
ing at last to his hearth, daring uncharted darkness in order to reach home. Turn
sideways, if you will, and slip with me into the cleft I have made. Do not fear the
yellow meadows of fat, the red that sweats and trickles where you step. Here, give
me your hand. Lower between the beefy cliffs. Now rest a bit upon the peri-
toneum. All at once, gleaming, the membrane parts . . . and you are in.

It is the stillest place that ever was. As though suddenly you are struck deaf.
Why, when the blood sluices fierce as Niagara, when the brain teems with electric-
ity, and the numberless cells exchange their goods in ceaseless commerce — why
is it so quiet? Has some priest in charge of these rites uttered the command
"Silence"? This is no silence of the vacant stratosphere, but the awful quiet of
ruins, of rainbows, full of expectation and holy dread. Soon you shall know sur-
gery as a Mass served with Body and Blood, wherein disease is assailed as though
it were sin.

Touch the great artery. Feel it bound like a deer in the might of its lightness,
and know the thunderless boil of the blood. Lean for a bit against this bone. It is
the only memento you will leave to the earth. Its tacitness is everlasting. In the
hush of the tissue wait with me for the shaft of pronouncement. Press your ear
against his body, the way you did as a child holding a seashell and heard faintly
the half-remembered, longed-for sea. Now strain to listen past the silence. In the
canals, cilia paddle quiet as an Iroquois canoe. Somewhere nearby a white whip-
slide of tendon bows across a joint. Fire burns here but does not crackle. Again,
listen. Now there is sound — small splashings, tunneled currents of air, slow
gaseous bubbles ascend through dark, unlit lakes. Across the diaphragm and into
the chest . . . here at last it is all noise; the whisper of the lungs, the lubdup, lubdup
of the garrulous heart.

But it is good you do not hear the machinery of your marrow lest it madden
like the buzzing of a thousand coppery bees. It is frightening to lie with your ear
in the pillow, and hear the beating of your heart. Not that it beats . . . but that it
might stop, even as you listen. For anything that moves must come to rest, no
rhythm is endless but must one day lurch... then halt. Not that it is a disservice to a man to be made mindful of his death, but... at three o'clock in the morning it is less than philosophy. It is Fantasy, replete with dreadful images forming in the smoke of alabaster crematoria. It is then that one thinks of the bristlecone pines, and envies them for having lasted. It is their slowness, I think. Slow down, heart, and drub on.

What is to one man a coincidence is to another a miracle. It was one or the other of these that I saw last spring. While the rest of nature was in flux, Joe Riker remained obstinate through the change of seasons. "No operation," said Joe. "I don't want no operation."

Joe Riker is a short-order cook in a diner where I sometimes drink coffee. Each week for six months he had paid a visit to my office, carrying his affliction like a pet mouse under his hat. Every Thursday at four o'clock he would sit on my examining table, lift the fedora from his head, and bend forward to show me the hole. Joe Riker's hole was as big as his mouth. You could have dropped a plum in it. Gouged from the tonsured top of his head was a mucky puddle whose meaty heaped edge rose above the normal scalp about it. There was no mistaking the announcement from this rampart.

The cancer had chewed through Joe's scalp, munched his skull, then opened the membranes underneath — the dura mater, the pia mater, the arachnoid — until it had laid bare this short-order cook's brain, pink and gray, and pulsating so that with each beat a little pool of cerebral fluid quivered. Now and then a drop would manage the rim to run across his balding head, and Joe would reach one burry hand up to wipe it away, with the heel of his thumb, the way such a man would wipe away a tear.

I would gaze then upon Joe Riker and marvel. How dignified he was, as though that tumor, gnawing him, denuding his very brain, had given him a grace that a lifetime of good health had not bestowed.

"Joe," I say, "let's get rid of it. Cut out the bad part, put in a metal plate, and you're cured." And I wait.

"No operation," says Joe. I try again.

"What do you mean, 'no operation'? You're going to get meningitis. Any day now. And die. That thing is going to get to your brain."

I think of it devouring the man's dreams and memories. I wonder what they are. The surgeon knows all the parts of the brain, but he does not know his patient's dreams and memories. And for a moment I am tempted... to take the man's head in my hands, hold it to my ear, and listen. But his dreams are none of my business. It is his flesh that matters.

"No operation," says Joe.

"You give me a headache," I say. And we smile, not because the joke is funny anymore, but because we've got something between us, like a secret.

"Same time next week?" Joe asks. I wash out the wound with peroxide, and apply a dressing. He lowers the fedora over it.
“Yes,” I say, “same time.” And the next week he comes again.
There came the week when Joe Riker did not show up; nor did he the week after that, nor for a whole month. I drive over to his diner. He is behind the counter, shuffling back and forth between the grill and the sink. He is wearing the fedora. He sets a cup of coffee in front of me.
“I want to see your hole,” I say.
“Which one?” he asks, and winks.
“Never mind that,” I say. “I want to see it.” I am all business.
“Not here,” says Joe. He looks around, checking the counter, as though I have made an indecent suggestion.
“My office at four o’clock,” I say.
“Yeah,” says Joe, and turns away.
He is late. Everyone else has gone for the day. Joe is beginning to make me angry. At last he arrives.
“Take off your hat,” I say, and he knows by my voice that I am not happy. He does, though, raise it straight up with both hands the way he always does, and I see . . . that the wound has healed. Where once there had been a bitten-out excavation, moist and shaggy, there is now a fragile bridge of shiny new skin.
“What happened?” I manage.
“You mean that?” He points to the top of his head. “Oh well,” he says, “the wife’s sister, she went to France, and brought me a bottle of water from Lourdes. I’ve been washing it out with that for a month.”
“Holy water?” I say.
“Yeah,” says Joe. “Holy water.”
I see Joe now and then at the diner. He looks like anything but a fleshy garden of miracles. Rather, he has taken on a terrible ordinariness — Eden after the Fall, and minus its most beautiful creatures. There is a certain slovenliness, a dishevelment of the tissues. Did the disease ennoble him; and now that it is gone, is he somehow diminished? Perhaps I am wrong. Perhaps the only change is just the sly wink with which he greets me, as though to signal that we have shared something furtive. Could such a man, I think as I sip my coffee, could such a man have felt the brush of wings? How often it seems that the glory leaves as soon as the wound is healed. But then it is only saints who bloom in martyrdom, becoming less and less the flesh that pains, more and more ghost-colored weightlessness.
It was many years between my first sight of the living human brain and Joe Riker’s windowing. I had thought then, long ago: Could this one-pound loaf of sourdough be the pelting brain? This, along whose busy circuitry run Reason and Madness in perpetual race — a race that most often ends in a tie? But the look deceives. What seems a fattish snail drowsing in its shell, in fact lives in quickness, where all is dart and stir and rapids of electricity.
Once again to the operating room . . .
wiped from the knife. Mostly it is done with cautery, burning the margins of the piece to be removed, coagulating with the fine electric current these blood vessels that course everywhere. First a spot is burned, then another alongside the first, and the cut is made between. One does not stitch — one cannot sew custard. Blood is blotted with little squares of absorbent gauze. These are called patties. Through each of these a long black thread has been sewn, lest a blood-soaked patty slip into some remote fissure, or flatten against a gyrus like a starfish against a coral reef, and go unnoticed come time to close the incision. A patty abandoned brainside does not benefit the health, or improve the climate of the intelligence. Like the bodies of slain warriors, they must be retrieved from the field, and carried home, so they do not bloat and mortify, poisoning forever the plain upon which the battle was fought. One pulls them out by their black thread and counts them.

Listen to the neurosurgeon: “Patty, buzz, suck, cut,” he says. Then “Suck, cut, patty, buzz.” It is as simple as a nursery rhyme.

The surgeon knows the landscape of the brain, yet does not know how a thought is made. Man has grown envious of this mystery. He would master and subdue it electronically. He would construct a computer to rival or surpass the brain. He would harness Europa’s bull to a plow. There are men who implant electrodes into the brain, that part where anger is kept — the rage center, they call it. They press a button, and a furious bull halts in mid-charge, and lopes amiably to nuzzle his matador. Anger has turned to sweet compliance. Others sever whole tracts of brain cells with their knives, to mollify the insane. Here is surgery grown violent as rape. These men cannot know the brain. They have not the heart for it.

I last saw the brain in the emergency room. I wiped it from the shoulder of a young girl to make her smashed body more presentable to her father. Now I stand with him by the stretcher. We are arm in arm, like brothers. All at once there is that terrible silence of discovery. I glance at him, follow his gaze and see that there is more brain upon her shoulder, newly slipped from the cracked skull. He bends forward a bit. He must make certain. It is her brain! I watch the knowledge expand upon his face, so like hers. I, too, stare at the fragment flung wetly, now drying beneath the bright lights of the emergency room, its cargo of thoughts evaporating from it, mingling for this little time with his, with mine, before dispersing in the air.

On the east coast of the Argolid, in the northern part of the Peloponnesus, lies Epidaurus. O bury my heart there, in that place I have never seen, but that I love as a farmer loves his home soil. In a valley nearby, in the fourth century B.C., there was built the temple of Asclepius, the god of medicine. To a great open colonnaded room, the abaton, came the sick from all over Greece. Here they lay down on pallets. As night fell, the priests, bearing fire for the lamps, walked among them, commanding them to sleep. They were told to dream of the god, and that he would come to them in their sleep in the form of a serpent, and that he would heal them. In the morning they arose cured. . . .
Walk the length of the abaton; the sick are in their places, each upon his pallet. Here is one that cannot sleep. See how his breath rises and falls against some burden that presses upon it. At last, he dozes, only to awaken minutes later, unrefreshed. It is toward dawn. The night lamps flicker low, casting snaky patterns across the colonnade. Already the chattering swallows swoop in and our among the pillars. All at once the fitful eyes of the man cease their roving, for he sees between the candle-lamp and the wall the shadow of an upraised serpent, a great yellow snake with topaz eyes. It slides closer. It is arched and godlike. It bends above him, swaying, the tongue and the lamplight flickering as one. Exultant, he raises himself upon one arm, and with the other, reaches out for the touch that heals.

On the bulletin board in the front hall of the hospital where I work, there appeared an announcement. "Yeshi Dhonden," it read, "will make rounds at six o'clock on the morning of June 10." The particulars were then given, followed by a notation: "Yeshi Dhonden is Personal Physician to the Dalai Lama." I am not so leathery a skeptic that I would knowingly ignore an emissary from the gods. Not only might such sangfroid be inimical to one's earthly well-being, it could take care of eternity as well. Thus, on the morning of June 10, I join the clutch of whitecoats waiting in the small conference room adjacent to the ward selected for the rounds. The air in the room is heavy with ill-concealed dubiety and suspicion of bamboozlement. At precisely six o'clock, he materializes, a short, golden, barrelly man dressed in a sleeveless robe of saffron and maroon. His scalp is shaven, and the only visible hair is a scanty black line above each hooded eye.

He bows in greeting while his young interpreter makes the introduction. Yeshi Dhonden, we are told, will examine a patient selected by a member of the staff. The diagnosis is as unknown to Yeshi Dhonden as it is to us. The examination of the patient will take place in our presence, after which we will reconvene in the conference room where Yeshi Dhonden will discuss the case. We are further informed that for the past two hours Yeshi Dhonden has purified himself by bathing, fasting, and prayer. I, having breakfasted well, performed only the most desultory of ablutions, and given no thought at all to my soul, glance furtively at my fellows. Suddenly, we seem a soiled, uncouth lot.

The patient had been awakened early and told that she was to be examined by a foreign doctor, and had been asked to produce a fresh specimen of urine, so when we enter her room, the woman shows no surprise. She has long ago taken on that mixture of compliance and resignation that is the facies of chronic illness. This was to be but another in an endless series of tests and examinations. Yeshi Dhonden steps to the bedside while the rest stand apart, watching. For a long time he gazes at the woman, favoring no part of her body with his eyes, but seeming to fix his glance at a place just above her supine form. I, too, study her. No physical sign nor obvious symptom gives a clue to the nature of her disease.

At last he takes her hand, raising it in both of his own. Now he bends over the bed in a kind of crouching stance, his head drawn down into the collar of his
robe. His eyes are closed as he feels for her pulse. In a moment he has found the spot, and for the next half hour he remains thus, suspended above the patient like some exotic golden bird with folded wings, holding the pulse of the woman beneath his fingers, cradling her hand in his. All the power of the man seems to have been drawn down into this one purpose. It is palpation of the pulse raised to the state of ritual. From the foot of the bed, where I stand, it is as though he and the patient have entered a special place of isolation, of apartness, about which a vacancy hovers, and across which no violation is possible. After a moment the woman rests back upon her pillow. From time to time, she raises her head to look at the strange figure above her, then sinks back once more. I cannot see their hands joined in a correspondence that is exclusive, intimate, his fingertips receiving the voice of her sick body through the rhythm and throb she offers at her wrist. All at once I am envious — not of him, not of Yeshi Dhonden for his gift of beauty and holiness, but of her. I want to be held like that, touched so, received. And I know that I, who have palpated a hundred thousand pulses, have not felt a single one.

At last Yeshi Dhonden straightens, gently places the woman's hand upon the bed, and steps back. The interpreter produces a small wooden bowl and two sticks. Yeshi Dhonden pours a small portion of the urine specimen into the bowl, and proceeds to whip the liquid with the two sticks. This he does for several minutes until a foam is raised. Then, bowing above the bowl, he inhales the odor three times. He sets down the bowl and turns to leave. All this while, he has not uttered a single word. As he nears the door, the woman raises her head and calls out to him in a voice at once urgent and serene. "Thank you, doctor," she says, and touches with her other hand the place he had held on her wrist, as though to recapture something that had visited there. Yeshi Dhonden turns back for a moment to gaze at her, then steps into the corridor. Rounds are at an end.

We are seated once more in the conference room. Yeshi Dhonden speaks now for the first time, in soft Tibetan sounds that I have never heard before. He has barely begun when the young interpreter begins to translate, the two voices continuing in tandem — a bilingual fugue, the one chasing the other. It is like the chanting of monks. He speaks of winds coursing through the body of the woman, currents that break against barriers, eddying. These vortices are in her blood, he says. The last spendings of an imperfect heart. Between the chambers of her heart, long, long before she was born, a wind had come and blown open a deep gate that must never be opened. Through it charge the full waters of her river, as the mountain stream cascades in the springtime, battering, knocking loose the land, and flooding her breath. Thus he speaks, and is silent.

"May we now have the diagnosis?" a professor asks.

The host of these rounds, the man who knows, answers.

"Congenital heart disease," he says. "Interventricular septal defect, with resultant heart failure."

A gateway in the heart, I think. That must not be opened. Through it charge the full waters that flood her breath. So! Here then is the doctor listening to the
sounds of the body to which the rest of us are deaf. He is more than doctor. He is priest.

I know . . . I know . . . the doctor to the gods is pure knowledge, pure healing. The doctor to man stumbles, must often wound; his patient must die, as must he.

Now and then it happens, as I make my own rounds, that I hear the sounds of his voice, like an ancient Buddhist prayer, its meaning long since forgotten, only the music remaining. Then a jubilation possesses me, and I feel myself touched by something divine.

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Exploring the Text

1. Do you agree with Richard Selzer’s metaphor that the job of being a surgeon is tantamount to a religious calling? Why or why not?
2. Why does Selzer open the essay by invoking Vesalius, a sixteenth-century Belgian physician whose seven-volume work, On the Structure of the Human Body, is credited with laying the foundation for modern anatomical science? If you did not have that biographical information, would the allusion still work rhetorically?
3. What does Selzer mean when he states, “And I am no longer a surgeon, but a hierophant who must do magic to ward off the punishment of the angry gods” (para. 2)? Is this as a literal statement or hyperbole?
4. What is your response to the metaphor in paragraph 5: “Soon you shall know surgery as a Mass served with Body and Blood, wherein disease is assailed as though it were sin”? What suggestions does Selzer make by creating that metaphor?
5. What is Selzer’s purpose in telling the story of Joe Riker (paras. 8–34)? Why does he present this example through elements of fiction, including dialogue and description?
6. What is Selzer’s original attitude toward Yeshi Dhonden (para. 42)? Does it change? If so, how? Cite specific passages.
7. Selzer is known for fusing subjective poetic images with precise technical details. Identify two or three passages that illustrate this fusion, and discuss the impact of bringing together two different types of descriptions.
8. This essay is divided into five sections. How do they work together so that the whole is greater than the sum of its five parts? Pay particular attention to the short (two-paragraph) fourth section; what effect would eliminating it have? How would you describe the overall organization of this essay?
9. Critics have called this essay risky for two reasons. First, some readers object to visualizing the medical details that Selzer describes. Second, some see his framing surgery as religious ritual to be exaggeration. How valid do you find these two criticisms in view of what you see as Selzer’s purpose in this essay?