“The Tending Act”
An Interview With Richard Selzer

Mahala Yates Stripling

Richard Selzer, one of today’s best-known doctor/writers, is an animated conversationalist who talks candidly in this interview about the medical profession and his life as a writer. He discusses the need for doctors to suppress and compartmentalize feelings such as lust and revulsion “for certain ugly facts of the flesh.” Doctors are just as human and vulnerable as the rest of us, and “sometimes terrified,” he acknowledges. It was through the discipline of surgery, however, that he taught himself to be a writer. Early horror stories—natural material for a surgeon—demonstrate Selzer’s meticulous technique, even though he now considers them his juvenilia. Essays and short stories often inspired by medical case histories served as his next genres, along with memoirs of his literature-and-medicine childhood in Troy, New York. They are collected in the popular early volumes, Mortal Lessons, Letters to a Young Doctor, and Taking the World in for Repairs, now in another printing.

Since Selzer retired from surgery in 1985 to write and to lecture full-time, he has written more complicated literary non-fiction and fiction such as Imagine a Woman, Down from Troy, and Raising the Dead, an intriguing account of his twenty-three day coma and near-death experience, and a technical masterpiece. His play based on the Thomas Mann novella, The Black Swan, was performed in St. Louis in 1994. Last May “A Question of Mercy,” Selzer’s 1991 New York Times essay, was adapted by David Rabe into a play read at Lincoln Center in New York City. Selzer has written art critiques and delivered lectures, continues to write book reviews and provocative essays, and is developing his diaries, “a treasure trove of my mind,” he says, which contain some of his best work and “should surprise.”

During our discussions, Selzer talked, often humorously, about his continuing passion for writing and his cure for writer’s block, how he gets ideas for an essay or short story, and what it took for him to give up smoking. He tells us graphically what his coma was like, how his “image-maker” failed
him for about six months while convalescing, and that, after a not-so-effortless writing period during his recuperation, he has regained something different. Read *Raising the Dead*.

Selzer, 68, is a prodigiously gifted writer with a vast intellectual range, who continually integrates diverse elements into his ever-evolving dialogic language. Soon his fans can expect a ninth book containing essays, memoirs, and diary entries that should be insightful and witty, but not offensive. He is "too much of a doctor still" to intentionally cause hurt to anyone. In fact, as a speaker at medical school commencements, Selzer rises and renews his Hippocratic Oath, and, in this tradition, he must be useful and do no harm. When speaking to large groups of doctors, nurses, and other medical personnel, he may talk about *tendresse*, or touching another human being, physically or emotionally, in an effort to heal. It is this dedication and love, applied by caring medical professionals, that he calls "the tending act" (49).

**Stripling:** Dr. Selzer, your first volume of essays, *Mortal Lessons* (1974), was very popular with the public and praised by medical critics as insightful and instructive; however, some literary critics called the pieces grisly and grotesque.

**Selzer:** I suppose what some were thinking about was my seeming preoccupation with the dark, underside of the human body, what can go wrong with it and death, rather than life, disease rather than health. Perhaps there is a point there, I don’t know.

**Stripling:** When you were writing about such things as a doctor, how did your fellow doctors take it?

**Selzer:** Well, originally, when I began to write, it was an uphill battle with my colleagues. They took a dim view of the fact that I was writing, and that my subject was doctoring. In those days it was respectable for doctors to patronize the arts but not to practice them. And here I was revealing the secrets of the priesthood and in print. There was a good deal of resentment. First of all, they wondered whether they could speak freely in front of me. Perhaps I would use what they said in my writing; or, there was also a little bit of resentment because, in the act of writing, I was declaring that surgery was not enough for me. And that can be taken as rather offensive. If it’s enough for them, and it isn’t enough for me, then am I somebody better? I didn’t mean that. But that went on for about seven years. Also, my family was mystified by the fact that I was transforming myself from one thing into another. But I persisted, because I believed in myself. I honestly did. I know
it sounds egotistical, but you know Emily Dickinson knew what she was doing, too, when she wrote:

I taste a liquor never brewed,
From tankards scooped in pearl;
Not all the vats upon the Rhine
Yield such an alcohol!

She never went downstairs and published only a few poems during her lifetime, but she knew all along what she was up to and how great she was.

**Stripling:** You have that passion.

**Selzer:** [Resolutely] And I have a passion for it, and I wasn’t going to give it up because it bothered my colleagues. Now, of course, for the last ten years or more, I have become the spokesperson for my colleagues. I visit medical centers, medical schools, and hospitals all over the country every month somewhere. Or I am speaking to large groups of doctors and nurses, and there has been a complete turnaround, because first I was accepted by the public. I wouldn’t go away; I wouldn’t disappear.

**Stripling:** Was it painful?

**Selzer:** Oh, yes, it was very painful, since I am a gregarious person, and I loved the rough-and-tumble, give-and-take world of surgery, and to be put aside and set on a shelf was disappointing to me. I felt like a pariah. I guess what I was writing was rather threatening.

**Stripling:** Because it revealed that doctors are human and vulnerable?

**Selzer:** And that they were sometimes terrified—that kind of thing.

**Stripling:** We don’t want to know that our pilot is capable of error, and we don’t want our surgeon to have shaking hands.

**Selzer:** Right. Oftentimes in my stories and in my essays the surgeon fails, doesn’t he? So I have told that as honestly and openly as I could. I was interested to read Dr. Thomas Starzl’s autobiography [*The Puzzle People: Memoirs of a Transplant Surgeon*]—in fact, I reviewed it for *The Boston Globe* [20 Sept., 1992]. Now here is the most famous surgeon in the world—he has done this whole transplantation-of-organs field from the beginning—and in his autobiography he wrote that he had never liked operating, that he hated to go to the operating room, that it was an ordeal for him every single time. He was afraid to fail. I felt a great kinship with that confession. That was the confession of the ‘90s.

**Stripling:** You also talk about doctors as being sexual beings, that they have sexual thoughts when examining a patient—a taboo thing.
Selzer: This is very difficult. One of the reasons why it takes so long to be a doctor is that one has to learn to suppress, to compartmentalize such things as lust, or sexuality, or erotic impulses, until they become taboo, unthinkable. And that takes years to do. The other thing is that there is a certain natural revulsion of people for certain ugly facts of the flesh: pus, ugly rashes, wounds, and smelly things. It is normal and natural for people to recoil at some of that and to not want to touch that stuff. It takes a long time for a nurse and a doctor to become inured, to overcome that natural revulsion, and to gaze upon that physical misery and not find it ugly, but find it frail and vulnerable, and therefore beautiful. And that is what I have tried to write about: the beauty of ugliness.

Stripling: In your memoirs [Down from Troy, 1993], you credit your father with teaching you to see a wound as a beautiful healing possibility, and maybe not even healing all the time, but as nature working.

Selzer: Yes. And he said when the lights went out you could dress a wound by the light it sheds. He had that feeling, and, before he died, he imparted that to me. That’s my heritage. That is what my legacy was—those remarks, those messages that he laid down for me—and, for the next forty years of my life, I would come upon them.

Stripling: And yet there was a time when you saw New Haven as the City of the Thousand Gallbladders.

Selzer: Well, although I loved being a surgeon—I loved my work—I had become something else: I was metamorphosing.

Stripling: Was there any certain point, any certain moment, or time or day when that happened, or was it gradual?

Selzer: It was a gradual thing. I first began to write horror stories, and they were being published in Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine. I was learning how to write, and I was simply trying hard to tell a story. It was interesting. I did that for two or three years [1971-74], before I really decided I didn’t want to write horror stories. My subject was right there before me with my work as a doctor: it was the human body.

Stripling: The case-history genre. So you were really seeing material for short stories or essays constantly. How did you keep those two heads together, the surgeon and the writer?

Selzer: Well, it was an automatic thing. Of course I was paying attention to my work as a doctor. To give you an example, though, once I was at the hospital and saw this old woman trying to put an earring in her ear. At
that moment, I knew that I had seen something terribly important. In that second that I saw, I knew that one day I would use that. I would tell about that woman, that her brave act of adornment was important. I learned something about women in that second in which I saw her trying to do that, to beautify herself against all odds. So, when I began to write my version of Thomas Mann’s *The Black Swan* two years later, I recalled that incident and used it in my short story, “The Black Swan’ Revisited.”

**Stripling:** Did that particular woman have cervical cancer?

**Selzer:** No. It was just the gesture that I found transcendent over the vicissitudes of the flesh. She was brave, courageous. She was a woman.

**Stripling:** She was vain. Even in perhaps that last moment of her life, she was vain.

**Selzer:** Yes. I wanted to honor that.

**Stripling:** You have been working on a play based on your short story, “The Black Swan’ Revisited.” How did that feel to see it enacted at Williamstown, to hear your words?

**Selzer:** It was a great treat for me. First of all, having written every word I ever wrote alone, suddenly I was working in committee, as it were, with actors and directors. It was luxurious [tasting the word]. I felt, oh gee, I’m not completely responsible for it. And an actor would say, “I can’t say that line—it is not human speech.” And then I would have to go and rewrite it, you see, so that it would be human speech.

**Stripling:** Was that painful?

**Selzer:** No. I loved it. I loved the friendliness of it.

**Stripling:** You do like people a lot?

**Selzer:** I do. Well, you know a surgeon works on a team, and I love that—although I don’t complain about my solitary days, which you might think is madness. But, given a chance, I would always like to work with somebody else, I have discovered.

**Stripling:** Rosalie, your protagonist in “The Black Swan’ Revisited,” is a unique person.

**Selzer:** Well, she’s a strong character, isn’t she? In writing Rosalie’s story and in writing the “Imagine a Woman” story, I tried as hard as I could to become those two characters. I remember that Flaubert said that he did the same thing. He became Madame Bovary for the seven years that he was writing that book. Someone asked him, “Who is Madame Bovary?” And he said, “Mme. Bovary, C’est moi.” And I understood that he had to do that. In
order to tell a story, he had to become this woman, and in a sense, on a much
smaller scale (I don’t mean to sound immodest), I was Rosalie Von Tummler
for the period of time that I wrote. It took me eight months to write that story.
It takes me so long to write anything. I became that woman also in “Imagine
a Woman.” I had to! I had to try and wonder what it felt like to sit in a window
and comb your hair in the moonlight to relieve your pain, to brush it out—to
brush the pain away.

**Stripling:** Do the people around you sense that you are becoming a
different person?

**Selzer:** No. It’s just in my imagination. It’s all secret. It’s all inside.

**Stripling:** It’s all solitary?

**Selzer:** It’s all solitary. Of course it all comes out. I speak into tape
recorders [addressing interviewer in the instant situation].

**Stripling:** And tell your secrets?

**Selzer:** And tell my secrets. And then to publish my diaries, which is
a paradox, because first you tell it all of your secrets, and then you publish it.
What’s the point of that? [Expressing delight in the irony].

**Stripling:** There are no secrets left?

**Selzer:** No. Ah . . . well, maybe. [Laughter]

**Stripling:** Are you going to write about them?

**Selzer:** No. There are certain things. . . . First of all, I decided when
I began to think about these diaries seriously, that I would not write anything
that would hurt anybody. That I couldn’t do!

**Stripling:** Doesn’t that restrict you?

**Selzer:** Yes it does! But I will not write about . . . I am too much of
a doctor still to cause pain just for my own purposes. I can’t do it. And, also,
I am entitled to wear a fig leaf, in a way, about certain parts of my life because
scholars, like you, will get to find out a thousand facts about a writer’s life, but
those facts will not show you how the prose was made. For that, you’ll have
to look at the book to find out, and, although it may be interesting to read the
biography of Ernest Hemingway, or whomever, I don’t think that reading that
biography will tell you how the prose was made. That’s a mystery. It’s a
mystery to me! I can’t explain how I write these things.

**Stripling:** As a surgeon you went layer into layer opening up the
cavity of a body, going inside. As a writer you are adding layer upon layer
oftentimes in your metaphors. Does that feel entirely different?

**Selzer:** It does a little bit. But they both do seem to aspire toward the
same end. Peeling back, peeling away, the way the surgeon does to get to the
truth, and the writer by using metaphor and simile, and all the tricks and stunts of language is also trying to come to the truth, although it's an entirely different technique.

Stripling: You bring so much research into your work. You are reading constantly, apparently. Do you look at your work as a research project?

Selzer: No, I don't. It's a spontaneous urge to write. I never thought that I did any research. That's interesting. [Musing]. I read a lot. I read hundreds of books a year. I never think of that as research. I'm surprised. I suppose it is research in a way, but I never have thought of it in that way.

Stripling: Is that why you are working in the library, because if something occurs to you, you want to . . .

Selzer: I go and look it up. Yes, that's right.

Stripling: So, it's your playground.

Selzer: Yes, it is. I go to the dictionary half a dozen times a day to look up a word. I'm writing an essay now—it's going to be a talk on "The Body as Sacred Space." I'm going to give it in Chattanooga, Tennessee, next month [February 1993]. I was trying to find a word which best characterizes what a doctor or a nurse must develop toward the sick, and I couldn't find a word in English that sounded right. Oh, there's empathy, but that's not what I mean either. And so I picked a French word, tendresse, which is not quite tenderness, but it [tendresse] is a willingness to dispense with revulsion.

Stripling: Does that word imply touching?

Selzer: Touching. Yes, of course it does. It's tendresse. [Rolls the word]. It's closer to the word compassion, but it's a more beautiful word.

Stripling: Sort of a laying on of the hands.

Selzer: Yes. And it's an attitude, really. Tendresse. Yes, touching. It has that aspect that the other two words, empathy and compassion, don't have. It's also a more beautifully sounding word, and, as you probably know, the sounds are very important to me. So I try to fashion these sentences so that, read aloud, they will sound beautiful. They will reverberate.

Stripling: You are helping to develop that kind of doctor or medical personnel who isn't afraid of touching or feeling the pain, perhaps, of a patient?

Selzer: Uh-huh. But let me say this, though. I didn't start out to do that. That is not my purpose in writing. I have no agenda. I am simply an artist. I would wish for a generation of doctors who had tendresse as their primary impulse, but I'm not out to change them or to make that happen. I
simply write because I want to make art. Now, if these students and doctors and nurses look at my work, and it does affect them—which I think it does because they write to me and say so—that is wonderful for me, but it is not why I write. It has nothing to do with it [softly]. I’m happy when that happens, but I didn’t sit down to write “Toenails” in order to convert doctors or medical students. Although I was in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in a medical school, and a woman came up to me after my talk—she was a third-year medical student, a woman about forty—and she said, “You know I became a doctor because of you; I studied medicine because of you.” And I said, “How come?” She said, “I read ‘Toenails,’ and I wanted to do that, too.” That made me feel great!

**Stripling:** So you really are instructing . . .

**Selzer:** In a way, but not intentionally.

**Stripling:** That’s not your purpose.

**Selzer:** It’s not my purpose. My purpose is to write stories and essays and memoirs, and then they can have a life of their own.

**Stripling:** They’re born, and you can leave them?

**Selzer:** I can leave them.

**Stripling:** I’ve noticed that you’re not smoking.

**Selzer:** I don’t smoke anymore. I suppose you know that I was sick, and I almost died. It is simply a fluke that we are here together talking, because in 1991, the last day of March, I had just come back from a long speaking tour all over North America. I had been in Nova Scotia and Hawaii, and everywhere else, and came back, and I wasn’t home a couple of hours when I collapsed and fell into coma. And I was in coma for twenty-three days—as in the Psalm of that number. I walked in the valley of the shadow of death. I was on a respirator, unconscious for that time, and they didn’t expect me to survive. I had Legionnaire’s Disease, although this was not known at the time. The diagnosis was made by exclusion.

**Stripling:** Is that a massive bacterial infection?

**Selzer:** Yes, it is. And the *bacteria Legionella pneumophila* (a lung-loving Legionella bacteria) thrives in the duct systems of air-conditioned hotels and planes. It’s called Legionella because it was first noticed at an American Legion convention in the city of Philadelphia where one hotel was infected and many, many people died.

**Stripling:** Do you know where you got it?
Selzer: No! I never could find out. I was on so many air-conditioned airplanes and in many air-conditioned hotels, and I was an isolated case, which most of them are now. Still, half of the people die of it.

Stripling: You all of a sudden went into coma?

Selzer: Yes, I fell. I was upstairs in my room. My wife, Janet, and I had gone upstairs. I felt fine. I was glad to be home. We had gone out to dinner, and, when we got back, I went upstairs to my room. All of a sudden everything grew wobbly, and I fell. Janet heard the thud and came running. Minutes later I was in coma, and, when I woke up, it was twenty-three days later. I thought that I was in Texas because that was the last place I had been. I thought, “Oh well, I’m in Texas.” Then Janet walked into the room, and I said “What are you doing here, in Texas?” Then she said, “This isn’t Texas. This is the Intensive Care Unit of Yale-New Haven Hospital.” And that’s when I found out I was sick. During my long convalescence, which was about a year, I began to think about this experience of coma, and I decided I would try to recapture it. But coma, you know, is like a deep well, when you gaze into it all you see is your reflection. You can’t remember anything. But the longer I sat at my desk out in the garden getting well, I began to remember certain sensations that I had during that time when I was in coma.

Stripling: So you weren’t completely unconscious?

Selzer: Well, the coma must have lifted and fallen—it wasn’t always quite so deep maybe. So I remember the sensation of wanting to sit up, and being unable to, or to turn over and feeling as if I were on an upper berth of a pullman car in a train that was traveling across prairies at night. It was black outside, and I couldn’t sit up or turn over. And I would look out the window, and it was always night—always dark—and then, suddenly, I would see something white, or lighter, such as a herd of white-faced black cattle, or a forest of birch trees. And then it would be gone—or something streaming by, like fish. And so all of these little remembrances that came to me afterward, I used them to reconstruct this period of my life which was coma.

Stripling: Twenty-three lost days.

Selzer: Twenty-three lost days.

Stripling: But were these images dreams?

Selzer: No. Well, I don’t know what they were, but I recaptured them. It was as though I lowered the bucket into the well and pulled these few little things out. And then I decided that I would tell this story, and I felt myself to
be in a unique position to do it because I was a doctor. I had taken care of hundreds of people in coma in an intensive care unit. I knew precisely what happened every minute of the day to a person in an intensive care unit. And then I had experienced it myself physically, but not cerebrally (to make an adverb). That’s an awful adverb—don’t say I made that one up. [Playfully].

Stripling: Oh, you make up words all the time.
Selzer: Yeah, I know I do... But, at any rate, in order to tell a story, I adopted a certain literary device: I divided myself in two. I was the unconscious man lying in the bed, and I was also that same man hovering, alert, in the room, and observing everything and able to speak for the man in the bed. It’s a kind of schizophrenic device.

Stripling: But the person who is doing the talking...?
Selzer: The narrator is the man—he’s telling the story, you see, because there has to be a narrator.

Stripling: Was that man a doctor?
Selzer: Well, it is assumed that he is a doctor because he knows everything.

Stripling: He’s making medical observations?
Selzer: Yes, he’s making medical observations, and he comments. But also he says, if you really want to know what the unconscious man wants to do, he’d really like to give himself a hug. He speaks for the man, and he tells the reader what the man is thinking, what he wants, what he’s observing.

Stripling: Fascinating.
Selzer: He describes his descent into coma. But, then, that’s only part of it, because afterward I woke up from that period of coma, and then there was an equally long period of insanity. Some people might think I’m crazy, but I’ve never been actually crazy—except for the madness of art.

Stripling: Were you depressed?
Selzer: No, I wasn’t depressed at all. I was elated. I was fine. I have never been depressed for a single minute in my entire life.

Stripling: How fortunate.
Selzer: Yes, I feel fortunate about that. But that is an act of will. I reject depression, although I have had reason to be depressed. But I don’t do it because it serves no purpose, and I want to get on with things.

Stripling: The man in the coma—you awoke elated?
Selzer: I awoke. I was fine. But then I didn’t know that I was having hallucinations, but I was. And that I was having terrors.
"The Tending Act"

Stripling: You’re talking about after you woke up?
Selzer: Yes. And my doctor explained later to me about the long period of dislocation, when I was kept alive artificially on the respirator.
Stripling: What actually happens? You’re all hooked up.
Selzer: Kept alive. I was a piece of machinery.
Stripling: Did the bodily functions, some of them, stop?
Selzer: I guess they all go on. Yes, they all went on. Only cerebration stopped. But the kidneys worked and everything else worked. The liver worked, and the heart never stopped. So I was a preparation that they had made.
Stripling: But once you awoke, you still had to recover from your inactivity, I suppose.
Selzer: It wasn’t so much inactivity. Oh, well, the year-long convalescence of course when I was so weak . . .
Stripling: That’s when you started penning the account in your journal titled “Lazarus,” later to be called Raising the Dead. Great title. Do you name all of your short stories and books and essays?
Selzer: Uh-huh. Do you like the names?
Stripling: Yes. Very much.
Selzer: Now, titles. I name all of my own pieces because the names are very important to me.
Stripling: When do they come to you? After it’s finished?
Selzer: Any time. Raising the Dead came to me long after I had finished the piece, and I knew at once that it was the right title for that book. But I called it every other darn thing up ‘til then.
Selzer: I wanted “Whither Thou Goest” to have the biblical aroma of Ruth and Naomi, that my character Hannah was following her husband—his heart. When it was first published in Redbook Magazine, the editor changed the title from “Whither Thou Goest” to “Follow Your Heart,” which I didn’t like. You see I had a vision of this piece that, as you remember, this woman was in a state of bafflement. She did not know if she was a widow or not. She was a simple woman whose faith had been shaken by this. Her idea of the resurrection of the flesh, you see, as a Christian, was shaken. Who gets the organs, then, on the day of judgment? The donor or recipient? She couldn’t figure this out, and how could she be a widow if half of her husband was alive
and functioning in the State of Texas. This was what I wanted to portray. And when she went to find her husband’s heart—it was a quest for her—she was trying to save her life. She had to find out who she was. She thought that if she could just listen to her husband’s heart one more time, she would be healed.

Stripling: Then she would let go?

Selzer: Yes. This act which would be thought of as bizarre by most people, I tried to make it sound very reasonable. Then I cast the meeting between the recipient of the heart and the woman in a very erotic manner. I wanted that. That was a literary device. I wanted the reader to expect that there was an undercurrent of sexuality here, when, in fact, at the end, there wasn’t. Because, when he said to her, “Hannah, would you want to come back again?,” she said to him, “No. I don’t think there will be any need.” Then she leaves and steps back out into her life. She’s healed. She has found out how to heal herself. You see, the thing about that story, I read a little article in the newspaper about a young man in Texas who was driving with his wife in their truck, and he stopped to fix a flat tire for some old lady in a car, and a bandit stepped out of nowhere and shot him right here [points to his head]. He was brain dead, and his organs were transplanted into seven people in the State of Texas. That’s what I read in the newspaper. And I thought to myself, gee whiz, this is a fable of our time. It could not have been written twenty years ago. It is a story of our time. I’m going to write it. And, so, I thought what point of view should I take? Should I write it from the point of view of the doctor who transplanted the organ? Should I write it from the point of view of the dead man in a kind of dream-like state—I’m here now, you’re there now kind of thing? I didn’t quite know how to do it, and, then, it occurred to me that I wanted to write it from the point of view of the young wife, and that her situation was the most compelling. So I decided to tell it from her point of view.

Stripling: But you went through that whole process before.

Selzer: Before. Yes, you’re right. I did. And I figured out how I wanted to tell this story. How she rejected the cornea—I can’t relate to corneas; the liver—that’s too hard to get to; but a heart—the heart can be listened to. You can hear a heart. And so she chooses the heart, and she deviously finds out where it is, you see. And so she goes on this heroic quest—I admired her very much. It was her state of bafflement and determination to clear her life in order to go on that inspired me.
Stripling: Another favorite piece of mine is your essay, “Smoking.” Since you started smoking at the age of twelve, was it difficult to give it up?

Selzer: Yes. I knew, of course, intellectually that it was wrong for me to smoke, but I also knew that it was an integral part—and I know that people wouldn’t understand this today—it was an integral part of my character, of my personality. Smoking was tied in with my writing, and I was very much afraid that if I stopped smoking, I would never be able to write another word. The images which came to me in the smoke that curled up to the ceiling as I gazed—they would organize in it—images which were important to me. And I thought—I can’t give it up. If I give up smoking, I give up my life. And that is a very strange thing to hear today, because it is just exactly the opposite of the way we think now. If I give up smoking, I give up my life. If I keep on smoking, I give up my life, is what we think now.

Stripling: But the rhythms of your smoking—with every puff, you were puffing out a metaphor?

Selzer: Yes. I thought it was part of the creative process. I think it was, but I only managed to give it up when I died. It took dying and being reborn to give it up. That’s what loosened the talons from my flesh finally. Dying. [Selzer’s “death,” dramatic resuscitation, coma, and recuperation are reinvented in *Raising the Dead*.]

Stripling: And then you found that the metaphors still came?

Selzer: Yes. Well, not for a year.

Stripling: It must have been very hard.

Selzer: It was very hard. All during my convalescence I didn’t know if I would write another word. My image-maker wasn’t working, and I remember about four, five, six months into my convalescence, my doctor called me up one night and said, “I just finished reading one of your books. You made me cry.” And I said, “Well, you made me cry plenty of times, too.” And he said, “Are you writing anything?” And I said, “No, I can’t write anymore.” And he said, “Why not?” I said, “You know, the long periods of oxygen deprivation to the brain.” “Where did you get that!,” he said. “You just made all of that up. You’re just taking the easy road out.” I said, “No. I know what happened to me a little bit.” And he said, “Oh come now. That’s stupid. Just try writing.” And I did try. Little by little, it has come back. Now, whether it has come back to the feverish degree that existed when I wrote “Smoking” and all my previous writing, I really don’t know yet. I think maybe there is something a little bit not there. There is a certain word, *ballon*,
in ballet, when the dancer makes a leap up. It’s the lift that he or she has and then seems to pause at the apex for a second, seems to hang in the air before descending—and that lift and pause is called ballon. When I was writing at the top of my form before my illness, I had ballon. I could leap and then descend. I don’t know whether I have that anymore. Only time will tell. I think I probably lost something in that experience—that illness. But what I have regained is something different—it’s a different kind of writing, which you will see when you read Raising the Dead and other pieces.

Stripling: You are still writing great literature. You just feel that the lift, the effort, is different?

Selzer: It doesn’t seem to me quite so effortless. It’s as though the ballet dancer has gotten cold and arthritic, and he can’t quite make it up in the air the way he did before. I have that feeling.

Stripling: But you still don’t know yet what will happen.

Selzer: I don’t know. In a way I’m still recuperating, and I’m thinking that my diaries, that whoever in the end takes hold of these diaries and puts them in order and publishes them . . . And I increasingly think it will not be I who does that, because I’m still writing them. I think it has to be someone who will take them when they are not being added to every day. That will be a posthumous effort on someone’s part, if they are thought worthy. I personally think there may—just may be—my best work in these diaries. I have a feeling that my best work is there.

Stripling: That’s an awesome thought to think of all those words that are unpublished.

Selzer: My diaries are a treasure trove of my mind. That I know. If my published work is considered worthy, this will be too, and it will surprise.

Stripling: Are you writing less now?

Selzer: No. I write every day.

Stripling: The volume isn’t any less than before?

Selzer: No. There isn’t any more, but there isn’t any less. I write every day. Oh, there are days when I tear it up and throw it away. That is not good.

Stripling: You actually do? You rip a page from your diary?

Selzer: Yes. And throw it away. But, darn it, that might happen for two days, but I don’t get worried about it because the third day is there.

Stripling: Apparently that takes experience as a writer?

Maybe a young writer would get really frustrated by not having things flow immediately.
Selzer: But I have my way of combating writer’s block.
Stripling: There is such a thing as writer’s block?
Selzer: I think there is. What I do is turn off the lights and light a candle and put it on the desk, and all at once the universe shrinks down to just you and the sheet of paper and your pen and that flickering, haunting, mysterious light—and that kind of focuses the imagination. And so, that helps me.
Stripling: So you are sitting at your desk, and you can see the paper, and your pen, and the light, and that’s all?
Selzer: Uh-huh. And I am transformed. Lighting a candle and turning off the light is an act of transformation for me. I am no longer who I was in electric light. I am set free to a different . . . and that’s maybe a game, I don’t know. Maybe I’m fooling myself.
Stripling: But, if you believe in it, and it works.
Selzer: It works, you see.
Stripling: Every time?
Selzer: No, not every time. I don’t have that much writer’s block.
Stripling: And then it comes to you. It’s discipline.
Selzer: Yes, the discipline of surgery. You have to transfer it. I was really lucky because surgery is such a discipline. You have to keep going at it. You can’t just walk away and let things take care of themselves until tomorrow. No! You can’t do that, no matter what’s bothering you. So I was able when I became a writer to transfer that discipline over into the writing, so that I know it doesn’t matter how I feel or what I think, I have to write.
Stripling: When you are holding your pen and the ink flows, maybe just like blood used to flow from the scalpel, does it feel at all the same? Do you ever imagine that you are . . .
Selzer: No, I don’t consciously. The metaphor is there, but I don’t think that I am shedding blood on the page. I can’t remember who said it, “Writing is easy. All you have to do is cut an artery and let the blood flow out of the pen.”
Stripling: You have said that Eudora Welty “is a dream” and that Angela Carter is very entertaining and talented, and a favorite English writer. Are there other contemporary writers whom you admire?
Selzer: I do. You see, though, I don’t read a lot of contemporary writers, so I don’t know what is au courant—you know, the common man. I feel as a writer Patrick White, the Australian novelist who is now dead, is a
writer I admire very, very much. I studied his work when I was teaching myself to write. So Patrick White is a contemporary novelist now dead whom I admire very much. Now, I don’t often read Cheever or Updike or Gore Vidal. I don’t like Gore Vidal’s work anyway. I’m sort of in awe of Updike because of his wordsmith business, but his mind does not interest me. He does not take the high road. I really try to. I don’t think anybody could really be offended by what I have written. But, in the end, I just don’t think of myself as a person of this decade. My influences are from the past. I am writing as a person of my time, but really with one ear cocked on the panpipes of the past.

**Stripling:** Well said. Many contemporary authors bring things down to a common denominator.

**Selzer:** Yes. Pander to the popular taste. I don’t do that.

**Stripling:** No, but you really do like the common man. You use the common man often in your work.

**Selzer:** Yes, I do, as the subject of my work, and I treat the common man in exalted language and from an exalted point of view, I think.

**Stripling:** With respect.

**Selzer:** Yes.

**Stripling:** Fame doesn’t seem to matter to you all that much?

**Selzer:** It doesn’t matter to me at all. I have no ambitions for fame. I just want to earn enough money for my family to live comfortably.

**Stripling:** You wouldn’t care at all if you weren’t on a stamp in thirty years? Like Faulkner?

**Selzer:** [laughs] No. I’d like to be on the sticky side of the stamp and face down. No, I don’t have any ambitions like that at all. I find that amusing when people are jockeying for fame. Once in the middle of this book tour for *Mortal Lessons*, I was going from one city to another—I can’t remember which ones—and I got on the plane and sat down and strapped myself into my seat. And a man got on the plane and sat down in the seat next to me and strapped himself in. He reached into his briefcase and took out—Be still my heart!—*Mortal Lessons*. I thought to myself, “Wow, this is working. The whole country is reading my book.” And I thought, “Gee, I’m just going to sit right here and watch, and in a little while I’ll say, “‘Excuse me sir, I am the author of that book.’” Well, before I could ever get to that, he was sound asleep with a little trickle of saliva running down the corner of his mouth.
Stripling: How disappointing.
Selzer: I thought, "What a nerve. I'll jab him and wake him up—make him go on." But the doctor in me took over, and I thought, "I'll give him a good nap."

Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, Texas

Notes

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Works Cited