

The Art of Medicine
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Choosing the Operation:
In appreciation of "Monet Refuses the Operation," a poem by Lisel Mueller*

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[footnotes]

*From the collection *Second Language* (Louisiana State University Press, 1986).

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[TEXT]

Cataract surgery
under local anesthesia
means you get to watch
while they do surgery
on your eye

So you can see
(although not too well
because you're almost blind)
as the sharp implements approach
then make contact
and the surgeon says
"Incision made" or "Lens removed"

It's just like on TV
You (the patient) lie politely and quietly
while the surgeon cuts and sews
Elevator music plays in the background
Everybody else
seems to like it

They chat
about someone's baby shower
whether the weather will be nice enough
to go to Mexico this weekend
and the new movie
that's just come out

You've seen that movie!
You could join in

say something clever
like how you couldn't really see
the point of a movie
that focused so single-mindedly
on the absurdity of the human condition

But then you think
Wait! This is an operation
This is *surgery!*
Somebody should be paying attention
Somebody should be *really* concentrating
So you decide this is what *you* will do—
this will be *your* role
And you become absolutely focused
You don't even bother
to tell the surgical team
that the leading man is about to get divorced
from his third wife
even though he only got married last year

It all goes pretty well
except for the moment when the surgeon says
"It's stuck"
And you wonder "What's stuck?"
And one of the nurses asks
"What do you do when it's stuck?"
And everyone goes to the other end
of the operating table
to discuss this interesting question
so even though you're still concentrating
really hard
you can't hear the answer

But afterward
ah, *afterward* you have a new silicon lens
and you feel good, powerful, *bionic*
The world looks crisper, brighter,
somehow more hopeful
And you decide to go see that movie again
because maybe, seen with new eyes,
it will make more sense.