

## SYMPTOMS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

### Symptoms of Consciousness

In this series of short essays, stories, poems, and personal observations, Robert A. Burton, neurologist and writer, uses both fiction and nonfiction to explore many paradoxes and contradictions inherent in scientific inquiry. A novelist as well as author of *On Being Certain* and *A Skeptic's Guide to the Mind*, Burton brings story to science and science to story.

## Double Talk

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The freshly minted neurologist  
Watched himself  
Assess the unconscious young woman.

A week ago,  
Before the burst aneurysm,  
She had been wife, daughter, and sister.  
Now she was Do Not Resuscitate,  
He informed the family  
Huddled at the ICU bedside.

Terrified by the randomness of catastrophe,  
The observer warned the doctor  
To tone down his brusqueness,  
Allow hope to fade into acceptance.

In the bony grip of high drama,  
The doctor was out of earshot,  
Offering statistics and condolences,  
Platitudes and Kleenex,  
And quiet time in the family room.

Let them see that you care.  
Be what they will want to remember.  
The observer pleaded,  
But was drowned out by the  
Roar of ritual.

The observer acknowledged a bitter truth:  
As the neurologist's narrator,  
He was a kibitzer,  
Not a player.

If asked,  
He would readily forego  
His self-righteous asides  
For the opportunity  
To grip the respirator tubing,  
Feel the power.

Purpose and meaning are rare moments.  
If they demand tone-deafness to self-deceit,  
So be it.

The doctor made preparations.  
The observer retreated.  
To the far corner of the neurologist's mind.  
Together they disconnected the patient.