Carnal Knowledge (Dannie Abse)

1
You, student, whistling those elusive bits of Schubert when phut, phut, phut, throbbed the sky of London. Listen: the servo-engine cut and the silence was not the desired silence between the two movements of music. Then Finale, the Aldwych echo of crunch and the urgent ambulances loaded with the fresh dead. You, young, whistled again, entered King’s, climbed the stone-murky steps to the high and brilliant Dissecting Room where nameless others, naked on the slabs, reeled in disgraceful silences—twenty amazing sculptures waiting to be vandalised.

2
You, corpse, I pried into your bloodless meat without the morbid curiosity of Veslius, did not care that the great Galen was wrong, Avicenna mistaken, that they had described the approximate structure of pigs and monkeys rather than the human body. With scalpel I dug deep into your stale formaldehyde unaware of Pope Boniface’s decree but, as instructed, violated you—the reek of you in my eyes, my nostrils, clothes, in the kisses of my girlfriends. You, anonymous. Who were you, Mister? Your thin mouth could not reply, ‘Absent, sir,’ or utter with inquisitionary rage. Your neck exposed, muscles, nerves, vessels, a mere coloured plate in some Anatomy Book; your right hand, too, dissected, never belonged it seemed to someone once shockingly alive, never held surely, another hand in greeting or tenderness, never clenched a fist in anger, never took up a pen to sign an authentic name. You, dead man, Thing, each day, each week, each month, you slowly decreasing Thing visibly losing Divine proportions, you residue, mere trunk of a man’s body, you, X, legless, armless, headless Thing that I dissected so casually. Then went downstairs to drink wartime coffee.
When the hospital priest, Father Jerome, remarked, ‘The Devil made the lower parts of a man’s body, God the upper,’
I said, ‘Father, it’s the other way round.’
So, the Anatomy Course over, Jerome, thanatologist, did not invite me
To the Special Service for the Twenty Dead, did not say to me, ‘Come for the relatives’ sake.’
(Surprise, surprise, that they had relatives those lifeless-size, innominate creatures.)
Other students accepted, joined in the fake chanting, organ solemnity, cobwebbed theatre.
And that’s all it would have been, a ceremony propitious and routine, an obligation forgotten soon enough had not the strict priest with premeditated rage called out the Register of the Twenty Dead—each non-cephalic carcass gloatingly identified with a local habitation and a name till one by one, made culpable, the students cried.
I did not learn the name of my intimate, the twentieth sculpture, the one next to the door. No matter. Now all these years later I know those twenty sculptures were but one, the same one duplicated. You. I hear not Father Jerome but St. Jerome cry, ‘No, John will be John, Mary will be Mary,’ as if the dead would have ears to hear the Register on Judgement Day. Look, on gravestones many names. There should be one only. Yours. No, not even one since you have no name. In the newspapers’ memorial columns many names. A joke. On the canvases of masterpieces the same figure always in disguise. Yours. Even in the portraits of the old anchorite fingering a dry skull are you half concealed lest onlookers should turn away blinded. In certain music, too, with its sound of loss, in that Schubert Quintet, for instance, you are there in the Adagio, playing the third cello that cannot be heard. You are there and there and there, nameless, and here I am older by far and nearer, perplexed, trying to recall what you looked like before I dissected your face— you, threat, molesting presence, and I in a white coat your enemy, in a purple one, your nuncio, writing this while a winter twig, not you, scrapes, scrapes the windowpane. Soon I shall climb the stairs. Gratefully, I shall wind up the usual clock at bedtime (the steam vanishing from the bathroom mirror) with my hand, my living hand.

**Discussion Questions**
1) Do you believe the medical student’s refusal to acknowledge the fact that the cadaver he is working with was once a human being is part of a cognitive defence mechanism? What sort of defence mechanisms do you have in place to deal with the triumphs and tragedies of medicine?
2) Who is the narrator addressing in the fourth section of the poem?