

matter-of-factly. Then you were naked before us. Is "naked" the right term? "Look at the hands," the professor said, taking hold of you. "They remind me of my father. This kind of thing affects me, even after 18 years in anatomy." He paused to scan our eyes. "How are you doing? Is everyone okay?" He glanced down at your hand again.

"And of course the face is difficult, too," he continued. "We look at each other, at our faces, to know each other." He looked at us as we all looked at one another. The woman on the other side of you seemed drawn. "And then in this lab we take a saw and cut the head right down the middle so that we can see the pituitary gland, which is right about here," he said, pointing, and paused again. "What helps me is knowing that this is what they wanted, to advance scientific research. We might not be directly advancing knowledge here but indirectly we are, and this is what reassures me."

A tear meandered down my cheek. I held back the torrent that could have followed.

More details about procedure and then a final suggestion: to avoid the slim chance of meeting someone we might know on a gurney, we should inform the lab if someone we know has recently died. No, I thought, I wouldn't want to work on someone I knew living, but I left wanting to know more of you. Why can't I know your name, your occupation, where you lived, your history? Couldn't I honour you more directly if I could better imagine your life? It seemed to me that the law was designed to protect us from our consciences, from the horror of our acts.

Now, I'm not so sure. Today we meet again for our first real lab. We open up your chest, identify structures on your lungs — the lobes, surfaces and fissures. We hold the lung back to look at where it attaches to the central part of the thorax. Then we make the first cut. A fellow student seizes the knife with determination. We pull your lung out and examine it closely. We identify the arteries, veins and airways running into your lungs, then go on to find important nerves and work with your heart.

The mood is light. We joke, smile and enthusiastically go about our business.

It is exhilarating and utterly transfixing. Did you ever experience this? It's like seeing a beautiful house after a lifetime of blueprints. Your body, our bodies, come alive before my eyes. The pretty pictures in the textbooks are transformed into three dimensions; my imagination is altered, my vision wider.

The rest of your body is covered and we don't look at your hands or face. Perhaps we can't bear to. Perhaps our work requires a different, narrower focus, one that is difficult to maintain when we imagine your life.

When we are finished I wrap you up again as if tucking you into bed. I felt tenderly toward you. Did you feel betrayed by your body at the end? I won't ever know.

Thank you. You are teaching me so much.

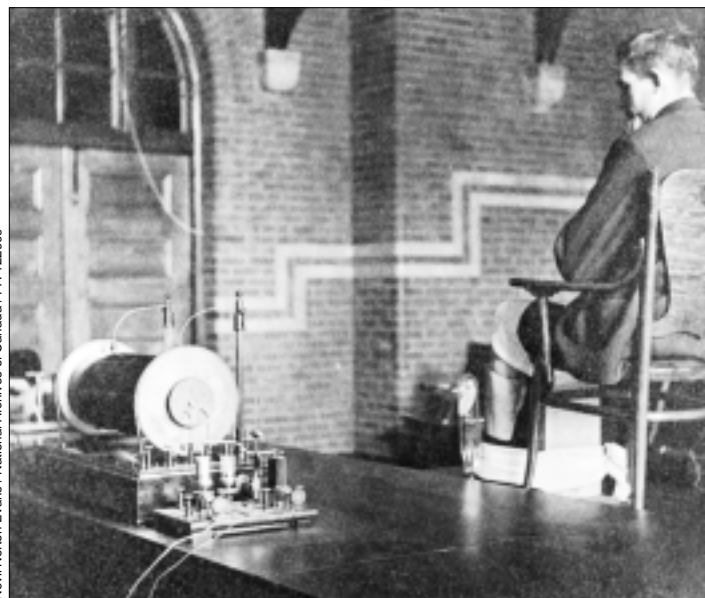
Kate Lazier
Class of 2003
Dalhousie Medical School
Dalhousie University, Halifax

Clara's cataract

Wise
old woman
waiting alone
in my waiting room.
Dignity dragged down by
molten, swollen spine and time.
Your faded threadbare white
bowed over the shiny new walker.
Little old lady, who would recognize you?
I help you crawl up my examining table.
"Don't get old," you always whisper.
But as I look into your watery eye
my halogen light is bent by
your cataract,
a wall of
mirror.

Maureen Rappaport
Family physician
Montreal, Que.

One thousand words



Professor John Cox demonstrating radiography of bullet in calf of leg, Macdonald Physics Building, McGill University, Montreal, Feb. 7, 1896.