

Reflections on seven months with a cadaver

I
It should not have been surprising,
when the Second Years claimed the white-smocked
white-tiled lab was comparable to heaven,
to not find God in residence.
It's an afterlife to be expected of a scientific community:
rows of dead persons caught in clanging metal caskets,
ordered numerically and at ambient temperature.

II
In this striving for anatomical correctness
there are certain rules of conduct
that function superficially to ensure respect for the dead,
and fundamentally to prevent satisfaction
of the morbid curiosity of those on the other side
of the buzzered white-buttoned door.

No picture-taking in the lab.
This is no place for red-eye,
can't risk the overexposure,
the material is too graphic for photographs.
The only respectable black-and-white glossy
is a radiograph.

No body parts to leave the lab.
Stray bits of fascia are excusable;
as for a more substantial souvenir,
the formalin reek is virtually tangible.

No person to enter the lab without a coat.
Such modesty applies also to cadavers,
draped in shrouding sheets.

III
The scalpel blades are wrapped in red foil.
Like Christmas, crumpled red wrappings
scattered in a white lab.
Shiny bits of cheer packaged to appeal to the consumer.

IV
There are five of us at Table 26,
and after hasty introductions we eye our charge.
Only his back is exposed,
and it's disarmingly familiar.
He needs a name
we need a name
someone suggests Willy
and there are six of us at Table 26.

V
Working to expose the extensors
we are caught unawares by a Band-Aid,

plastic and practical. We reroute our cuts,
a road accommodating a memorial.
A tattoo extends blue fingers to wander in the skin creases.
It seems crucial to decipher it,
but, Carl or Carla, we disagree.

We discover the cause of death
peeling the shell of caked blood from the heart.
Ruptured ventricular wall.
One little rip.
Easy, like God just
poked one deft finger through it one morning.

Pudendal nerve, from the Greek *to be ashamed*.
But this is mere practicality:

We've got him strung up in knots,
strapped down with string, braced with boards,
but he is noncompliant.

We haul him to the edge,
the possibility of him tipping off the table
hilarious and horrible;
prop apart his knees to find the pudendal,
follow its course from infrapiriformal foramen
through the urogenital diaphragm —

But one of us has clearly
taken a turn for the worse,
For at the end of it all
the dorsal nerve is
quite definitely
ventral.

VI
We are not the only
ones under examination in the lab final.
Station to station with the chime of the bell,
we are models of scientific detachment:
observe record observe record
Station 57 is draped except for the left foot.
Observe: muscle origin — medial and lateral calcaneus
insertion — tendon flexor digitorum longus
Record: quadratus plantae
Observe: I recognize this foot.
Off the record: I touch him, and the bell tolls.

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