

## The Morgue Bears Fruit

by Andrew Francis

Last summer I worked in the morgue of a medical school. Most of my time was spent skinning cadavers, as well as removing their fat. I had never seen a corpse before, and I quickly realized a dead body that lies on a table before your living one is something immensely different than the cerebral acknowledgement of an absent loved one.

High levels of formaldehyde required me to wear a full face respirator, the kind with the curved shield in front of your eyes. I wore it at first because I was worried about my health, but stopped after a week because I was frightened by the way the mask changed my relationship to the bodies. Even though I could touch them with my hands, I felt completely removed from them, the way one feels when driving a car, playing a videogame, or looking at seals in a zoo. It is surprising how much a thin sheet of plastic can do.

The passiveness of the cadaver is impressive. You don't realize how heavy and awkward the human body is until you flip one over. We can't even feel our own weight; we are always in tension, groups of muscles resisting each other. But the dead body, fully relaxed, succumbs completely to gravity. It responds indifferently to your sometimes desperate exertions, and falls dumbly, splashing you with its juices. It doesn't care if its nose gets smashed, or if its arm gets lodged under its mass. It doesn't cringe when you cut into it, and when you come back from lunch, it hasn't moved a muscle.

Despite these stark differences between my body and theirs, the cadavers before me looked almost identical to living bodies, a fact I am still unable to comprehend. It would have made more sense to me if there were a rupture where the fleeing soul broke the rib cage. But as separate as life and death are, I discovered that the threshold between them is razor thin. In my case this took on a literal significance, where all that separated my erect, active body and their prone passive bodies was a surgical scalpel. Furthermore, the intense congruence of form I found between the live body and dead one positioned me at that slim fulcrum in between. At this slash mark between life/death, I became profoundly unable to discern. A crisis precipitated, in which I found myself constantly tripping over the boundary between the two.

The dead bodies, in their utter passiveness, forced me to integrate them into my understanding of what it means to be human, introducing a new level of equality between the live body and the dead one. By shedding light on the reality of death, my experience of life was dimmed, made irresolute. When I saw the people around me, my co-workers, my mother, strangers, I found myself searching for that spark in them that set them apart from the cadavers I worked with. But the harder I looked, less certain I became. I would look at the backs of people's legs as they walked away from me, and think, "I could cut you right there, where I cut that person this morning." Working with dead people didn't turn me into a psychopath, but it did open up a potential interaction with the human form I had never considered, let alone experienced every morning. That possibility grafted itself on top of

every living person I looked at. I had always conceived of dead people as living people that weren't moving. After getting to see a real dead person, I wondered whether or not living people were just dead bodies in motion. When I looked at those around me, all I saw were dead bodies assuming poses. I couldn't figure out what actually separated them from the dead.

This problem was only resolved much later by the touch of friends. One night after work they tried to convince me to go out with them. I didn't want to, so they started playing with my face, squeezing my cheeks and flailing my arms. The touch of their warm, oily hands moving over me was rejuvenating. I knew somewhere between us, in the mutual sensation, was life.

This did not resolve my confusion though, because it went both ways. As visions of dead people invaded my interactions with the living, I found myself treating the cadavers at work as if they were alive. The fact that I had over twenty years of habituated interaction with living people made this form of confusion more severe and difficult to overcome. To put it simply, I personified. Personification is something we do. We grow up watching cartoons with angry trees, trustful dogs, and capricious monkeys. Rarely is a cigar just a cigar, or a whistle in the wind without resonance. The corpse, because it resembles a living person more than any other material object, practically begs to be personified. Yet more than any other object, the corpse reminds us of its extreme distance from the human form and the dishonesty of personification.

This righteous disgust was new. I love the use of personification in literature. Even though I know that walls don't whisper, I never considered such constructions dishonest. In some ways, they are most honest, pointing to the incessantly poetic impulses of the human mind. But whenever I treated the cadavers as one treats a living person, I balked at myself and my error. It felt erroneous because more than any other type of object in the world, they point to the absence of life. Despite the dearth of metaphor in our lives, we don't know what it feels like to be a teapot, tree or dog. But we all, in some way, know what it means to be human. Therefore, to see a form that resembles ourselves (the only thing in which we feel alive) devoid of life, is utterly striking. And it is this shock, coming after personification like a sour aftertaste, that makes it feel so spurious.

I am not the first person to make the mistake. In the *Phaedo*, moments before Socrates is to drink the hemlock, his companion Crito asks him how he wants to be buried. Socrates replies in jest,

He thinks that I am the person he will be looking at shortly as a corpse, and so he asks how he should bury me....you must assure him that when I am dead I shall not stay, but depart and be gone. That will help Crito to bear it more easily, and keep him from being disturbed on my account when he sees my body being burned or buried, thinking that I am suffering terribly, or from saying at the funeral that he's laying out or following to the grave or burying Socrates.

At heart I agreed with Socrates' assertion; the objects before me on the table were as distant

from a living individual as a cord of wood. Despite the perennial debate of what concoction of immaterial and material things constitute the living person, the cadaver punctures any ambiguity; it is solely material. But considering how many times I confused the dead bodies with living people, I deeply empathize with Crito. Most perplexing were those corpses whose eyes were still open. Because they had been saturated with formaldehyde, there was no chance of closing them. Looking is such a fundamental part of life that it is hard to tell yourself this thing is not really staring at you. It becomes completely visual, and like the Mona Lisa or my mother staring out at me from a snapshot taken before I was born, I nonchalantly imbue the open-eyed corpse in front of me with life. But back and forth, back and forth I remember that the body in front of me looks like it is looking but has lost the capacity to see, only to instantly forget that fact and be caught in the stare of someone looking at me from the other side.

Confusion didn't just happen on the surface. The opportunity to view someone's insides brought me into what felt like a very intimate space. I experienced things with them I could never experience with anyone alive, even myself. We hold our loved ones, look them in the face, touch them in the dark. We hear their heartbeats as we lay our heads on their chests, but we never hold them in our hands. The first thing one finds underneath the skin is fat, and often, I would spend as much time removing that as I would the skin. In that time, I thought about the bodies, and imagined the dietary choices they had made over their lives. There was a literal and physical honesty to the yellow jelly that stuck to their hips. Often when I finally cut it all away, all that remained were the thinnest muscles imaginable; on the inside, everyone is a little fragile animal. Even though I couldn't experience that kind of honesty with my own body, they presented it as a poetic possibility, a contemplative space I couldn't have reached without them. I felt indebted to the cadavers the way one feels towards a friend who gives you honest but hard advice. Yet the fact persisted that this sense of communication was one-way. Even if the person would want to share that experience with me, it could only occur after they were dead, at which point, as Socrates makes clear, they couldn't care less. And because I could only experience it through the body as an object, I felt placed at an unethical distance where any sense of intimacy was a farce. My awareness of this didn't stymie my sense of affection towards the body for long. Nor did it stymie the emotions that trailed behind it. Armed with the scalpel, I felt a sense of power I didn't want to hold. I often felt like a thief stealing an experience from someone, even though they could never have it themselves.

This type of moral confusion was constant. I remember my first day being shocked that someone was doing this to a human. Not outraged, but just surprised they could bring themselves to the act of slicing into someone. When I first started, holding the scalpel, I worked slowly and delicately, as if any sudden movement would be painful, like when you tug on your friend's hair as you cut it. When my boss made jokes about the corpses' imperfections, whether they were obese or their bodies had been disfigured somehow in the morgue, I wondered, "Shouldn't the dead be respected?"

Despite these moral quandries, a part of me was insatiably curious bringing me into a moral conflict with one coworker one in particular. I wanted to look in every bay, bucket, and

closet; for her though, if she didn't have to do it for her job, then she didn't want to see it. It's strange how even the people who traffic in the dead, she was studying forensics, step in between different relations to them. Even though I fulfilled my job according to their instruction, my co-workers couldn't understand that I was doing it purely out of curiosity. It seemed the only way such work could be justified if it was performed through a very narrow set of professional intentions. They treated me with the same morbid skepticism that my friends did when I told them what I did. I found it hard to believe that even though they performed the same tasks as I did, and possibly experienced some of the same things, that they then would step out of the moral space held behind the closed doors of the morgue.

One experience in particular elucidated this to me. There was a skinny body of an old woman. Both her eyes, lined with mascara, were open. Black, dried blood cracked out of the corner of her mouth. I had already seen a few women with a mastectomy, but never implants; this woman had both. Her implant was so large, so taut compared to the rest of her body. It rose triumphantly like a burial mound. One fathoms the perversion of breast implants when you see them on a dead person. The body has given in, depressed and sagging in the absence of life. But this lone breast remains obstinate, unaware that the party is over. To see it next to the register of cancer, a missing breast made it even more disturbing. And then those eyes, "looking" but not watching you react. I kept touching the breast, and my coworker scolded me, "Stop touching that breast!" She misread my perplexion for some perverse arousal.

I felt rudely awoken, as if someone had just interrupted an unpleasant but profound dream. But what bothered me most about it, was this call to arms of morality. "It is immoral to touch that dead woman's breast as if it were an erotic object. I must protect this defenseless woman from this despicable man," her reproach suggested. But I thought to myself, "We are ripping people's skin off them, so that students can cut them up. While I understand the value of anatomical study, I'm sure it is fundamentally repulsive to a lot of people. It seems when you start doing that to dead people, all morality is thrown out the window."

And often times, in my own experience, it was. Because the human body post mortem is inarguably material, it is freed from the responsibility that we feel we must treat things that house "souls." When I experienced them this way, the bodies were beautiful. I had never understood the phrase Rest in Peace before I worked with the bodies. They weren't resting as if in a deep sleep, but at rest in the way you speak of a mass in physics class. There was no more potential inside them yet to be manifest. All that was left for it was to be drawn down passively to the belly of the earth. They were utterly still, and in that pose, serene. As someone constantly caught in frenetic movement, with an endless supply of paths to take before me, that possibility for my physical form relieved me. The naked human body, with its naked human face devoid of judgment and emptied of emotions—things we hold to be "natural" in humans—liberated my experience of the human form.

While I often felt this way, I hid it from my co-workers and friends. At some level, I didn't trust my curious engagement with them and wondered if I was just another artist indulging himself from a detached aesthetic viewpoint, the object of which was irrelevant. I realize now

though, that the freshness with which the corpses allowed me to experience the human form could only have been grasped through such physical intimacy. Once I watched my boss cut a body on a large bandsaw. First he cut across the chest. It shocked me, not because it was gruesome, but because it looked exactly like a bust. I almost burst out laughing. When you see a bust portrait you don't stop to wonder where the artist hid the rest of the body; rather you focus on the face and its expressions. As if it were in a dark room with one spotlight, your interest in the rest of the body recedes into darkness. More than this though, seeing it made me realize how material the body was. It was literally like wood, and could be cut by the same machine. At work I had seen many cross sections of the human body in books. But to actually see the body being crossected, to realize that the strange silhouettes in anatomy texts have tangible corollaries was revelatory.

These experiences of confusion and liberation could not be separated. They blended into one another, tripped over each other's feet. They couldn't be held onto forever either. Often times the corpses became as devoid of inspiration as they were of breath. They became a specimen, a unit of labor yet to be completed. Over the course of the two months I worked there, I tried as hard as I could to keep my awareness of the phenomenal experience at the front of my mind, but it inevitably faded, and the thing before me amounted to no more than an ear of corn yet to be husked.