

My First Patient

Category: Tough Choices

written by Marc Hem Lee | October 16, 2018

We stood there for a moment of silence and trepidation. I was grateful that I wasn't the one who had to make the first cut. To do that would mean presiding over this person's transition from former human to current specimen. I am still unsure whether that sensitivity refers to myself or to the cadaver. Do we perform these dissections to study someone else, or are we studying ourselves?

Eventually, once our cadaver had been opened up, he lay on the table, baring it all in a different way. Earlier in the week, as I'd summoned my resolve to perform this task, I remember writing, "Do we chase death by this process, or do we drive it away, armed with our weapons of mass dissection?" I did not yet have the opportunity to walk around and visit the other cadavers, but I could see the neighboring groups laboring away to clear the fat so the muscle was visible.

Our professor worked at triple our speed, and she wasn't even using a scalpel. Her layers were almost perfect and more than adequately cleaned. I felt a mix of impressions—I aspired to be that adept at this process, but I also didn't know if I should have that kind of ambition. Someone at another table stressed the importance of getting through the whole checklist before the lab ended. It made me wonder if our cadavers were now parts with no summation.

I took up the scalpel and the hemostat. I knew, though, that once I set to work, I would not want to be distracted. As I removed each layer, what fell away was not connective tissue and fat, but the world; the more I worked, the more the room, at least in my mind, fell silent. I remember one of my group members commenting that I had a steady hand, as I cut the trapezius in half.

I was surprised that, so soon, it was time to close our cadaver and keep him moist for the next iteration of this encounter. Cleaned and covered, separated from our probing curiosity by a towel and a white plastic sheet. Later, I lamented that we had not named him. Maybe, collectively, we did not see the need.

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