

Room for a view

The anatomy museum

When we started anatomy classes the maples were turning red and a cool wind seeped into the anatomy building and swayed the orangutan skeleton by the front blackboard in the lab. We bowed to it when we entered. “Good morning, Ezekiel. What’s new?” Ezekiel stared at us through his naked eye sockets. Like other skeletons he smelled of dry bones, but we didn’t mind.

Dry bones smelled clean and good.

It was the formaldehyde we hated. The smell came from the museum of bottled arms, legs and heads that stayed still for decades in clear fluid. The liquid mummified and magnified them, making them appear too large, as if they had grown at night and become trapped in their bottles. In one large jar was a cross-section of a man’s head, neck and torso, showing his skull, brain, spinal cord and chest. There were jars of hands, feet, male and female genitalia, abdominal viscera, hearts and lungs. In a small jar was a fetus and umbilical cord, curled upon itself, floating in space, its eyes unawakened.

If you missed a dissection in the anatomy lab you came to the museum. You opened *Grant’s Atlas* and compared drawings with the reality of death. You memorized nerves, muscles, bones, vessels and organs, closing your eyes until you saw each part in your mind.

Soon *Grant’s Atlas* smelled of the anatomy lab, its pages stained by formaldehyde oozing from dissected bodies like tears.

Every few weeks we had a “bell-ringer” test. We lined up single file in our lab coats and moved in procession from one specimen to the next every 60 seconds. We had to know the specimens cold.

Arteries looked like nerves. You were not certain if you were staring at a section of liver or kidney; eventually you forgot a fossa, a foramen or an organ.

“Was that the duodenum?”

“No,” your lab-mate said. “Jejunum.”

“Really? And what lung lobe did you say?”

“Not lung. Pancreas.”

The line moved in one direction; there was no turning around like Orpheus for a second look. You studied anatomy until it became part of yourself.

Sometimes you did so much cramming at night that you dreamt of cadavers. You floated above the brachial plexus or traced bile as it moved into Vater’s ampulla. You became a clot in the brain and thought you were about to die.

By October, we had developed a close relationship with Max. We stood two on each side, like pallbearers, except we were not burying him but dissecting his flesh. Max was 45. He had been dead two years. When he got dry, we sprinkled formaldehyde on him to ease our dissection. According to Eugene, the lab technician, Max had been a teacher.

Month by month we dissected Max. Month by month Max grew smaller. We put pieces of him in a bag. On Fridays Eugene collected the bags from each cadaver.

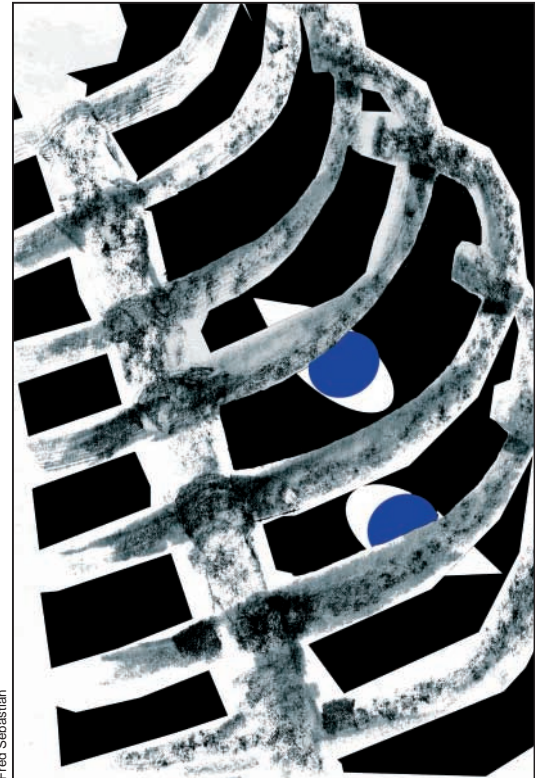
“Don’t laugh,” Eugene said. “Respect the dead.”

We tried to show respect. But Death was cruel and we were young. We joked about Max.

By November, we had serious illnesses. The more we knew, the more we worried. Headache, rashes, indigestion, pain, falling in and out of love, any symptom had us reading our textbooks.

How did Max die? What was the meaning of his life?

All we knew was that awful smell. It burned our eyes and lingered on our hands. It lived in lab coats. It peeled



skin. It went into food. It drifted from the anatomy museum into the hallway and out the doors into the quadrangle.

When you left anatomy class, you washed your hands with soap to make sure the smell was gone. There was no sense in washing lab coats, though. We hung them in lockers in the anatomy basement. They stiffened like cadavers.

Eugene prepared the cadavers in the basement of the anatomy building. There was always a fresh supply of bodies willed to Science. A black hearse came to the back of the anatomy museum and new bodies were loaded into basement vats. Eugene invited us downstairs to see him do the embalming. He was old and bent and talked to Ezekiel and the cadavers for company. His skin was pale, his teeth grey, his eyes red from the formaldehyde.

“This one died in a car accident. See? This other lady had a weak heart. This lug, here, he played football for

Queen's and drank himself to death. This guy had an aneurysm."

Eugene had biographies for the specimens. He knew them all but was against giving his body to Science. He wanted a cemetery burial.

On the wall of the students' lounge were black and white photographs of former students. They huddled in their lab coats and smiled over half-naked cadavers lying under sheets. You never saw such big smiles. In their outstretched hands were scalpels, mallets, retractors and body parts. The oldest photos dated from before World War I.

Everyone looked terribly happy, except the cadavers.

After World War II, Eugene began to appear in the pictures.

"You do a wonderful job," we said.

"I keep them looking good," Eugene said. "Moist."

"It's a lost art. Like the old Egyptians."

Near the end of that year we sat with

Eugene on the front stoop of the anatomy building. The air was warm, and our dissection was over. We said farewell to Max and shook Ezekiel's hand for good luck. Outside the anatomy museum the maples had thick leaves, the campus was fragrant with blossoms, and it was hard to concentrate on exams. Eugene told us how he had put the specimens into bottles years ago.

"It takes ages to make a museum," he said.

Anatomy was on the east campus and Arts on the west. In May, we saw Arts students sleeping on the grass, playing baseball and tennis, or kissing on the lower campus. After a while we took our books and went back to the anatomy museum.

It was a fine place to study. It had the wonderful stillness of death.

Ronald Ruskin
Psychiatrist
Toronto, Ont.

Haircut

Throughout my adult life,
my barber,
a quiet gentleman,
has trimmed my hair
in a cyclic rhythm
much like the tide
or the phases of the moon.

I took him for granted.

He told me yesterday
that he was old and sick —
had cut my hair
for the last time.

We both had tears
in our eyes.

Robert C. Dickson
Family Physician
Hamilton, Ont.

Lifeworks

Western spirits

The Group of Seven in Western Canada, a travelling exhibition organized by the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, challenges a widely held and erroneous view that Canada's most celebrated painters focused their work almost exclusively on central Canada. The sheer scope, quality and range of this ambitious, first-class exhibition testify to their extensive involvement west of Ontario.

Glenbow curator Catharine Mastin has amassed the largest collection ever of paintings done by the Group about the West and in the West. The result is an impressive and compellingly fresh look at the Group of Seven.* The show is effectively organized both regionally

and thematically. The large opening section is devoted to the Rockies, featuring mainly landscapes by Lawren Harris, J.E.H. Macdonald and Arthur Lismer. The West Coast is represented by Frederick Varley, and the Prairies by Lionel Lemoine FitzGerald and A.Y. Jackson (including his most famous painting of rolling foothills, *Alberta Rhythm*, 1947). The exhibition concludes with a major section devoted to the abstractions of Harris and FitzGerald.†

It is fascinating to compare the approaches of the different artists in the the Group of Seven, whose identities and personal styles tend to be fused



Thomas Moore Photography, Toronto

Arthur Lismer, 1928. Cathedral Mountain, oil on canvas, 122.0 cm × 142.5 cm. Collection of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts; gift of Sidney Dawes, 1959.

*The Group of Seven was an artist's collective formed in 1920 and dissolved in 1932. The original seven members were Lawren Harris, A.Y. Jackson, Arthur Lismer, J.E.H. Macdonald, Franklin Carmichael and Franz Johnston (who showed only with the group's first exhibition). A.J. Casson joined in 1926, Edwin Holgate in 1931 and Lionel Lemoine FitzGerald in 1932. Tom Thomson died before the group was formed.

†Casson and Carmichael never went to the West. One small segment of the exhibition presents the depictions of Northwest First Nations by A.Y. Jackson and Edwin Holgate, who worked closely with ethnographer Marius Barbeau in the Skeena River project in 1926.