

120/80

by Emily Silverman '09

David Rome Prize, Fall 2008

A body is meant to be mysterious, but I can't tell if the vividness of the blood amplifies this mystery or reduces it.

-Bhanu Kapil

A body is a collection of cells. A fleshy assemblage of tissues, tubes and wires, developed for efficiency. We have been selected for. The ultimate machine.

I have seen it. In clothes, walking briskly down the sidewalk. Horizontal, motionless and dreaming. Pale and evacuated, placed carefully in a coffin. Warm, naked and moving. Split and sutured.

And on display in an exhibition.

Bodies: The Exhibition. Skinned cadavers, the water molecules in each tissue replaced by a silicone polymer.

Eternal preservation, so that we may learn and examine the structure of each figure. They are posed in playful positions - instructing an orchestra, playing basketball - and even without the skin you can detect the slant of their eyes. Once a sad prisoner, now a standing object whose exposed calf muscle is being prodded by the fat finger of a curious six - year - old.

Come to see the bodies. No, my mother says, turning a bit green. You go ahead alone.

Every human spent about half an hour as
a single cell.

There is one thing you should know before you enter the OR. You do not repeat anything you see or hear. That schedule in your back pocket? If it falls out in the lobby, you pay 10,000 dollars. When John Jones gets his asshole removed this afternoon, he doesn't want the whole world to know about it. Do you understand?

There is a large, round, silver button on the wall. I pound it with my fist and the doors open automatically, one swinging towards me, the other swinging away.

Doctor Burns has long, capable fingers and the firm body of a swimmer. She moves hastily, a cup of tea in each hand, sometimes setting them down and forgetting where she left them. She uses the stairs (never the elevator) and chastises people a little too harshly for being overweight. When I have a question about a case, she draws diagrams on the back of the patient's chart to help me understand. She prefers a 10 - blade to a 7 - blade, and sings cheerfully along to Journey while she operates.

Do not touch anything blue. Graze a tray of instruments with your elbow and it's contaminated. Unusable. I stand over Doctor Burns' shoulder, arms stiff at my sides, combating dizziness as she pulls a baby's stomach out of its body through a hole in its navel. She holds the tiny organ between two fingers, a glossy, yellow pouch embroidered with red and blue vessels. She then instructs the resident to make a fine incision in the outer layer, no more than three cells thick.

Scalpel is poised and shaking.

How can I be sure it's only three cells thick?

Dr. Burns' eyes smile behind her surgical mask. Ah, the art of surgery. You just have to know .

The speed with which desensitization sets in is astonishing. I no longer flinch at a flash of pink. Humming along to *Don't Stop Believing*, I am a wandering mind.

My first task: to hold the basin when the doctor drains fluid from a patient's chest. It feels warm, about 98.6 degrees.

A fifteen year old girl's act of utter desperation: Two infected gashes in her abdomen stapled shut by an amateur in Puerto Rico. Morphine courses through her veins. Her head is a balloon.

We need to open this up.

Doctor Burns unzips the wounds with her 10 - blade and the girl cries out, thrashing.

Hold her knees, please.

She reaches into her, rummages around. I think these wounds are connected. Yes. My fingers are touching.

She pulls something small and black out from the girl's body. A loose stitch, the cause of the infection. We don't respond well to foreign bodies.

The slits are cleaned and sealed. Doctor Burns checks the clock and pulls off her purple latex gloves with a loud snap. Let's eat.

Doctor's lounge. Plush couches. The grinding of coffee. Lots of bagels. Words flutter in the air, words that end in "atoma" and "inosis." They share stories of medicine because they are the only people who can understand each other.

Once I had a guy come into the ER with a carrot up his ass. He claimed he tripped and landed on it.

That's nothing. Last year, I found a sprouting potato in a woman's vagina.

A fibroadenoma is a type of benign breast tumor commonly found in young women. Removing these tumors is a delicate process because they must be pulled out carefully from a curved incision around the areola. That way, there will be no visible scar.

Doctor Burns' hand has disappeared into the voluptuous breast of her patient. She is guiding the tumor out with the tip of her finger.

The OR door slides open.

Good morning, Doctor! What are you doing today?

Digging for gold in a fat girl's titty.

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Stop, my mother says. For the love of God, please stop.

Today you get to see the robot.

It's a steel monster suspended from the ceiling, holding an instrument in each of its four crooked arms. No whirring sounds. It moves and works quietly, hovering above the patient like a heavenly spider. The Wizard sits ten feet away with his head in a box. He is wandering past the bladder and onto the boulevard of the vas deferens. In each hand he holds a control, jabbing at the buttons furiously like a teenager with a video game. Zapping away all the bad guys. But this time, he only has one life.

A skinny fourteen year old boy is admitted with appendicitis. He is put under general anesthesia and placed on the operating table, but when the nurse removes his hospital gown, she pauses.

The boy's pubes are completely shaved off.

Doctor Burns shakes her head. Is this what the boys are doing these days? I've got news for you, kid. That ~~does~~*not* make it look any bigger.

A nurse chimes in. Maybe he is having oral sex? There is a moment of silence as the surgical team studies the boy's pimply face and pale, gangly body.

Well good for him, Doctor Burns says, tapping the boy's knee playfully as the nurse begins to prep and drape the body.

Ding Ding. Doctors to the CCU.

When there are two dings over the loudspeaker, you know it's something bad.

We jog up two flights of stairs, our footsteps echoing loudly. When we reach the room, several people are already standing outside, peeking in curiously, for there is nothing more magnetic than disaster.

Inside is a collage of voices.

Pump. The sound of ribs breaking.

Pump. Pump. Pump.

Head is propped back, mouth is forced open, tube is inserted, and stylette is pulled out. All in three seconds .

Pump. Pump. Pump.

A dark monitor with jumbled lines and a sinister question mark beeps loudly.

Hyperawareness. Vertigo.

Doctor Burns pulls me out of the room before I can watch someone die for the first time.

Last night I dreamt I had a yellow tumor wrapped around my heart. It grew slowly, feeding on the highways of my bloodstream. It infected me with words. Hepatocellular carcinoma. Necrotizing fasciitis. Polyostotic fibrous dysplasia. Hypertonic nephrophilic blastocellulitis. But wait - that last one doesn't even exist.

I am flying away from the smells and from the beeping. Away from the clipboards and the Harvard diplomas and the tubes and the needles. But before I can turn the corner and fly out the door I am swept sideways by a force I cannot explain. I close my eyes before disappearing headfirst into the slender hole of the MRI machine, the waters in my body spinning as I try to escape the contraption's magnetic grip.

By the time you turn 70, your heart will have beat some
two - and - a - half billion times.

On my last day, my car is in the shop so Doctor Burns offers to give me a ride home. For some reason, this makes me more nervous than observing any surgery.

Among the dark shapes of the parking lot we find her sleek, red two - seater. Do you mind if I put the top down? She hands me a baseball cap, puts one on herself.

As we sail down the highway, I lift my face to the wind and imagine Doctor Burns shopping at the supermarket . I think about the people who pass her in the aisles, the bank tellers who count her money. The mechanic who treats her like a dumb broad.

They have absolutely no idea . I wonder if someday I could be who she is. I wonder if I could ever be a healer.

She switches gears, and we turn a corner. As my body presses against the side of the car, I feel a brief twinge of pain in my lower right side and suspect appendicitis.