

Cadavers:

Dissected bodies provide real-life experience

"Cadavers — people usually overestimate what their reaction to them will be," says anatomy lab supervisor Don Dunbar.

"They walk in with their minds racing and expect to throw up when they make that first transition from textbook to three-D. But once they get through the door they're okay."

Poet, artist and philosopher have been fascinated with the harmony and complexity of the human body through the centuries, but their works are largely abstract. In anatomy lab students sink their hands in and explore flesh and entrails of what was

The main reason is that they have little resemblance to a living person or even a funeral corpse. Flesh and organs are drab brown, their texture variously described by teacher and student as resembling dried beef or overcooked spaghetti. They are skinned, scalped, and split open to expose the internal body for observation.

Most students say they have less emotional reaction to these dissected bodies than to those intact.

"It freaks people out when the cadaver is fresh and undissected," says Dunbar, especially if it has much body hair or if the cadaver was a young person.

The University stores its cadavers under lock and key in an inner room of Science Annex II. "The place is basically a dungeon," says Dr. Edna Wooten, anatomy professor. "Before we got it painted it wasn't even conducive to the cadavers, much less for the living persons who had to work there."

Wooten buys cadavers from the University Medical School in Portland after they age three to six months.

In the preservation process, cadavers are suspended horizontally by neck and feet in a walk-in cooler. They are blown up under pressure with preserving chemicals and "look like 500-pound dumbos," says Wooten.

When they return to natural size they are spray-coated with plastic and placed in racks to be stored indefinitely. The plastic reduces mold potential and keeps the body from drying out.

With the better preservation system the price for a cadaver has

climbed to \$450. The older ones like "Rosey" (she has a rose tattooed on her right shoulder) and "Blondie" (a blonde) were purchased for less than half that price a few years back.

Paying this preparation fee isn't a legal transfer of body ownership. The University must return all body parts for final cremation when they have finished with it, usually in four or five years, says Wooten.

"We don't let the students get away with a finger or a toe," says the professor, and by the same token Wooten herself isn't permitted to keep so much as a knee joint for class demonstration.

At the first of the meticulous one-year process of dissecting the last acquired cadaver, a middle-aged or older woman, Wooten noticed evidence of a hysterectomy and mastectomy. "If we get in there and find she doesn't have a gall bladder or uterus I'm going to ask for some money back," she says facetiously.

"This isn't the first time one of the cadavers has surprised us," says one lab supervisor. "Actually, the textbook just gives you what's normal. We sometimes find a completely unusual placement or some other abnormality."

Fred Rankin has been doing instructive dissection for 20 years or more, says lab supervisor Judy Vannister, and he still gets surprised. We'll be in lab and all of a sudden he'll stop and say "Well hell fire, look at that." Once we ran across a cadaver with all its organs reversed. What should have been left was on the right and vice versa."

It used to be that unclaimed skid-row bodies were primarily

used in medical schools, says Wooten. Now it's becoming more popular to donate one's body to science, and with more civil rights laws on the books it's getting more difficult to get unclaimed bodies released by the state.

The University is one of the few schools where undergraduates can work with actual human structures. More than one of them said that reading alone can't prepare someone for the vagaries of anatomy and that labwork with cadavers provides knowledge in a comprehensive way the text can't offer.

"I studied the book for a long time," says Vannister, "and then when I actually looked at one (a cadaver) it all came together — I felt enlightened. Vannister studies anatomy to learn the biological mechanic of motion so she can apply them to her first love — dance."

She and others don't consider Wooten's classes just a curiosity. As one student puts it, "trying to analyze and understand the human body is one hell of a lot of work."

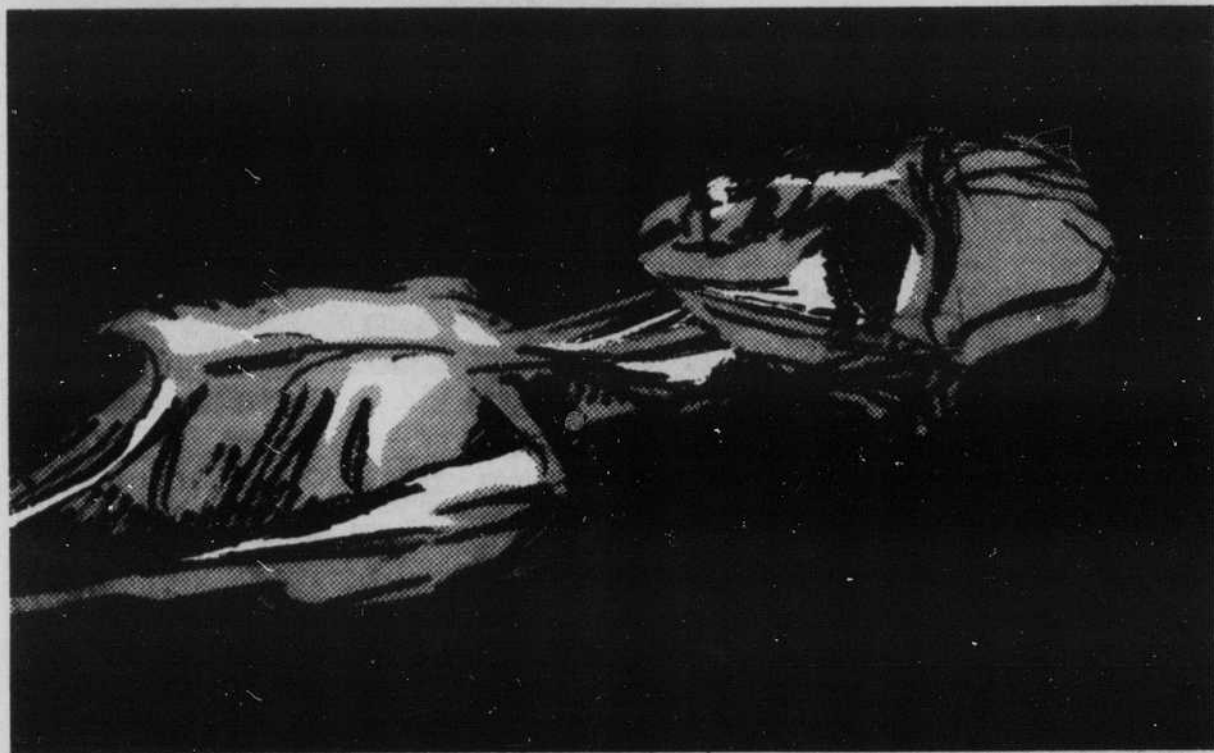
By TOM WOLFE
Of the Emerald

once a living person, and ignore the strong peppermint-smell of the preservatives. Formaldehyde is no longer used.

While grad students hunch near the body, working closely like seamstresses, first-timers often exercise the caution of a safe-cracker.

"The first time I came in I thought, 'Well, so that's what the inside of a body looks like,'" says sophomore Julie Ford. "Next time I started imagining, 'Gee, this used to be a living person. He used to swallow right down here,'" (she traces the path with her hand). Then, I caught a glimpse of the face and thought I was going to faint."

To most people, though, the cadavers aren't the terrifying embodiment of death one may expect.



Drawing by Steve Sandstrom

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