Head is a Terrible Thing to Waste

Practicing surgery on the dead

The human head is of the same approximate size and weight as a roaster

chicken. I have never before had occasion to make the comparison, for

never before today have I seen a

head in a roasting pan. But here are forty

of them, one per pan, resting faceup on what looks to be a small pet

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food

bowl. The heads are for plastic surgeons, two per head, to practice on. I'm

observing a facial anatomy and face

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lift refresher course, spon

sored by a

southern university medical center and led by a half

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dozen of America's

most sought

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after face

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lifters.

The heads have been put in roasting pans

—

which are of the disposable

aluminum variety

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for the same reason chickens are put in roasting

pans:

to catch the drippings. Surgery, even surgery upon the dead, is a

tidy, orderly affair. Forty folding utility tables have been draped in

lavender plastic cloths, and a roasting pan is centered on each. Skin

hooks and retractors are set out with the pleasin

g precision of restaurant

cutlery. The whole thing has the look of a catered reception. I mention to

the young woman whose job it was to set up the seminar this morning

that the lavender gives the room a cheery sort of Easter

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party feeling. Her

name is The

resa. She replies that lavender was chosen because it's a

soothing color.

It surprises me to hear that men and women who spend their days

pruning eyelids and vacuuming fat would require anything in the way of

soothing, but severed heads can be upsetting even to professionals.

Especially fresh ones ("fresh" here meaning unembalmed). The forty

heads are from people who have died in the past few days and, as such,

still look very much the way they looked while tho

se people were alive.

(Embalming hardens tissues, making the structures less pliable and the

surgery experience less reflective of an actual operation.)

For the moment, you can't see the faces. They've been draped with white

cloths, pending the arrival of

the surgeons. When you first enter the

room, you see only the tops of the heads, which are shaved down to

stubble. You could be looking at rows of old men reclining in barber

chairs with hot towels on their faces. The situation only starts to become

dire w

hen you make your way down the rows. Now you see stumps, and

the stumps are not covered. They are bloody and rough. I was picturing

something cleanly sliced, like the edge of a deli ham. I look at the heads,

and then I look at the lavender tablecloths. Hor

rify me, soothe me,

horrify me.

They are also very short, these stumps. If it were my job to cut the heads

off bodies, I would leave the neck and cap the gore somehow. These

heads appear to have been lopped off just below the chin, as though the

cadaver ha

d been wearing a turtleneck and the decapitator hadn't wished

to damage the fabric. I find myself wondering whose handiwork this is.

"Theresa?" She is distributing dissection guides to the tables, humming

quietly as she works.

"Mm?"

"Who cuts off the heads

?"

Theresa answers that the heads are sawed off in the room across the hall,

by a woman named Yvonne. I wonder out loud whether this particular

aspect of Yvonne's job bothers her. Likewise Theresa. It was Theresa who

brought the heads in and set them up on

their little stands. I ask her

about this.

"What I do is, I think of them as wax."

Theresa is practicing a time

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honored coping method: objectification. For

those who must deal with human corpses regularly, it is easier (and, I

suppose, more accurate) to t

hink of them as objects, not people. For most

physicians, objectification is mastered their first year of medical school, in

the gross anatomy lab, or "gross lab," as it is casually and somewhat aptly

known. To help depersonalize the human form that studen

ts will be

expected to sink knives into and eviscerate, anatomy lab personnel often

swathe the cadavers in gauze and encourage students to unwrap as they

go, part by part.

The problem with cadavers is that they look so much like people. It's the

reason mos

t of us prefer a pork chop to a slice of whole suckling pig. It's

the reason we say "pork" and "beef" instead of "pig" and "cow." Dissection

and surgical instruction, like meat

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eating, require a carefully maintained

set of illusions and denial. Physicians

and anatomy students must learn

to think of cadavers as wholly unrelated to the people they once were.

"Dissection," writes historian Ruth Richardson in

Death, Dissection, and the

Destitute

, "

requires in its practitioners the effective suspension or

suppression of many normal physical and emotional responses to the

wilful mutilation of the body of another human being."

Heads

—

or more to the point, faces

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are especially unsettling. At the

Universi

ty of California, San Francisco, in whose medical school anatomy

lab I would soon spend an afternoon, the head and hands are often left

wrapped until their dissection comes up on the syllabus. "So it's not so

intense," one student would later tell me. "Bec

ause that's what you see of

a person."

The surgeons are beginning to gather in the hallway outside the lab,

filling out paperwork and chatting volubly. I go out to watch them. Or to

not watch the heads, I'm not sure which. No one pays much attention to

me,

except for a small, dark

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haired woman, who stands off to the side,

staring at me. She doesn't look as if she wants to be my friend. I decide to

think of her as wax. I talk with the surgeons, most of whom seem to think

I'm part of the setup staff.

I grew up in a small house in Etna, New Hampshire. My dad was 65 when I was born. My neighbors taught me how to drive a Skidoo and shoot a rifle, though I never made much use of these skills. I graduated from Wesleyan in 1981, and drove out to San Francisco with some friends. I spent a few years working as a freelance copy editor before landing a half-time PR job at the SF Zoo. My office was in a trailer next to Gorilla World. On the days when I wasn't taking calls about elephant wart removal surgery or denying rumors that the cheetahs had been sucked dry by fleas, I wrote freelance articles for the local newspaper's Sunday magazine. Eventually, my editors there moved on to bigger things and took me along with them.

My first book, [Stiff](http://maryroach.net/stiff.html), was an offshoot of a column I wrote for Salon.com. It was sort of a reported humor column, wherein I covered things like vaginal weight-lifting and amputee bowling leagues and the question of how much food it takes to burst a human stomach.

I have no hobbies. I mostly just work on my books and hang out with my family and friends. I enjoy bird-watching--though the hours don't agree with me--backpacking, thrift stores, overseas supermarkets, Scrabble, mangoes, and that late-night "Animal Planet" show about horrific animals such as the parasitic worm that attaches itself to fishes' eyeballs but makes up for it by leading the fish around.