

Masthead Logo

The Iowa Review

Volume 33
Issue 3 *Winter 2003-2004*

Article 15

2003

Autopsy Report

Lia Purpura

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Purpura, Lia. "Autopsy Report." *The Iowa Review* 33.3 (2003): 85-91. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.S739>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

LIA PURPURA

Autopsy Report

*"I wish I understood the beauty
in leaves falling. To whom
are we beautiful
as we go?"*

—David Ignatow

I shall begin with the chests of drowned men, bound with ropes
and diesel-slicked. Their ears sludge-filled. Their legs mud-smear-
ed. Asleep below deck when a freighter hit and the river rose inside
their tug. Their lashes white with river silt.

• • •

I shall stand beside sharp pelvic bones, his mod hip-huggers
stretched tightly between them. His ribs like steppes, ice-shelves,
sandstone. His wide-open mouth, where a last breath came out.
And there at his feet, the stuff of his death: a near-empty bottle of
red cough syrup, yellow-labeled and bagged by police.

• • •

I shall touch, while no one is looking, the perfect corn-rows, the
jacket's wet collar. Soaked black with blood, his stiffening sleeve.
And where the bullets passed neatly through, the pattern when his
shirt's uncrumpled: four or five holes like ragged stars, or a child's
cut-out snowflake.

• • •

I shall note the blue earring, a swirled, lapis ball in the old, yellow
man's ear, his underwear yellowed, his sunken face taut. The amber
and topaz half-empty fifths his landlord found and gave to police.

• • •

The twenty-year alcoholic before us, a businessman. All the prescriptions for his hypertension, bagged and unused near his black-socked, gold-toed foot. The first button open on his neat, white shirt and, I shall confirm, the requisite pen in the pocket neatly clamped in.

• • •

“Oh no” an assistant says. The gospel station’s softly on, floaty in its mild joy; it’s 7:45 on a rainy Sunday morning and so far I’m the only visitor. Turning briefly to me, he asks “What did you come here for?”

Then, “Oh no,” he says again, “no more 18 year olds,” as he stops at the first body, surveying. Soon, the doctors gather in the hall, finish their donuts, scrub, suit up, begin to read from the police reports, the facts meditative as any rote practice, marking and measuring, preparing ritual ground: *The last person to see him alive was his girlfriend. History: bipolar. Suspected: OD, heroin.* “Something too pure is killing these kids in the county” the doctor says. Of his middle class house, the report states “nice,” and “the deceased’s bedroom is cluttered and dirty.” Multiple generations at home. Bottle caps with resin in the trash. And here is a silver soup spoon, blue-black from the flame, encrusted where he cooked the stuff, its graceful stem embellished for nothing. As his body is—beautiful now, for nothing. Is olive-skinned, muscled, proportionate. No, I shall say it, *is stunning*, as it turns to marble before us.

We walk back to the first body, unmingling stories. They divide up the bodies. They take the clothes off.

What I thought before seeing it all: *never again will I know the body as I do now.*

And how, exactly, is that?

Have I thought of the body as sanctuary? A safe, closed place like the ark from which the Torah is taken and laid out on a table to be unscrolled. The two sides parted, opened like, soon I’d know, a rib cage, that a hand with a sharp-tipped pointer might lead the way over, reading toward depth.

Here's the truth: when I first saw the bodies, I laughed out loud. The laugh burst forth, I could not stop it. *Forgive me*, I thought even then, but the scene, the weird gestures looked entirely staged. Such a response is sure measure of expectations; sure proof I held other images dear: shrouds, perhaps? Veils? A pall hanging (and though I've never seen a pall, I know it is "cast over," that it shadows all that it touches). Had I assumed crisp sheets drawn up, as in surgery, to section off an operating theater around the site of death? Had somewhere an ideal been lodged: arms at sides in the position of sleep (not so bird-like, jutting, rigid); faces placid (mouths not slack, not black, empty sockets, dry shafts down, archeological, beckoning, unquiet).

Was I awaiting some sign of passage, the strains of ceremony slapping in its wake? (There was the dime the police searched for, evidence caught in the body bag, bright and mud-smeared, I didn't point out. How meager against the royal cats, well-fed, gold-haltered, the canopic jars holding royal organs, the granaries built for the beautiful pharaohs . . . leave the dime in, I thought, that the boatman might row him across.)

Did I expect, finally, the solemnity of procession? Death gowned and dancing, scythe raised and cape blowing, leading the others, at dusk, over a mountain. In silhouette. Fully cinematic.

And now that I've admitted laughing, I shall admit this, more unexpected, still:

When the assistants opened the first body up, what stepped forth, unbidden, was calm.

It was in the assistants' manner of touching their material, their work, that delicacy. The precise, rote gestures, feeling space and resistance; adjusting the arc of a blade to the bodies' proportions; cupping and weighing, knowing the slippage, anticipating it; the pressure, the estimate, the sure, careful exchange of hand and knife, the gesture performed so efficiently it looked like habit: easy, inevitable.

The calm came to me while the skin behind the ears and across the base of the skull was cut from the bluish integument. While the scalp was folded up and over the face like a towel, like a compress draped over sore eyes. While the skull was sawed open and a quarter of it lifted away, dust flying, the assistants working without masks. It was calm that came forth while the brain was removed, while the

brain, heavy and grey and wet, was fileted with an enormous knife, one hand on top to keep it from jiggling. While the doctor found the ragged lesion in the thalamus and ruled the cause of death hypertension—not alcoholism. Calm, while the brain was slipped into a jar, and the skull refitted, the skin pulled back over to hold it all in again. I suppose they expected queasiness, fear, short, labored breath—all death’s effect. That I’d back away. That after the first, I’d have seen enough. Or the tears that followed fast, after the laughter—for the waste, the fine bones, because these were sons or fathers or would never be fathers—perhaps they expected the tears to return?

But when the bodies were opened up—how can I say this? The opening was familiar. As if I’d known before, this . . . what? language? Like a dialect spoken only in childhood, for a short time with old-world relatives, and heard again many years later, the gist of it all was sensible. And though I couldn’t reply, meanings hung on. A shapeliness of thought was apparent, all inflection and lilt and tonal suggestion.

Nothing was too intimate: not the leaves stuck to the crewman’s thigh, and higher up, caught in the leg of his underwear; the captain’s red long johns and soaked, muddy sock. Their big stomachs and how reliably strong they still looked. Not the diesel fuel slicking their faces, stinking the building, dizzying us, nor the pale, wrinkled soles of one’s foot, water-logged. Not the hair braided by some woman’s hands, her knuckles hard against his head. The quarter-sized hole in his twisted, grey sweat-sock, sock he pulled on that morning, or afternoon, or whenever he rose while he lived and dressed without a thought to dressing.

Not the dime the police found and bagged. The buckshot pock-marking his face, his young face, the buccal fat still high and rounded and thick. Nothing was unfamiliar in the too-bright room. Not the men’s nakedness, although I have never seen twelve men, naked, before me. Not the method by which the paths of bullets were measured: rods of different lengths pushed through each hole—I had to stop counting there were so many—until one came out the other side.

Not the phrase “exit wound.”

And though I’d never seen a bullet hole, of course it would be shallow as the tissue underneath swelled uselessly back together. Of course blood pooled each blue-burnt circumference. *Of course*, I remember thinking.

The purpose the work comprised, the *opening*, was familiar.

It was familiar to see the body opened.

Because in giving birth, I know the body to be opened beyond itself?

Because I have been opened, enough times now in surgery, once nearly the whole of me, and there are hundreds of stitches?

Then, when everything was lifted out—the mass of organs held in the arms, a cornucopia of dripping fruits hoisted to the hanging scale—there was the spine. I could look straight through the empty body, and there, as if buried in wet, red earth, there was the white length of spine. Shields of ribs were sawed out and saved to fix back into place. There were the yellow layers of fat, yellow as a cartoon sun, as sweet cream butter, laid thinly on some, in slabs on others. There was the ice-blue casing of large intestines, the small sloshing stomach, transparent, to be drained. The bladder, hidden, but pulled into view for my sake and cupped in hand like a water balloon. Cracks and snappings. The whisking and shushing of knives over skin, a sound like tearing silk. The snipping. The measuring jars filled with cubed liver. The intercostal blood vessel pulled out like a basted hem. The perforating branches of the internal thoracic artery leaving little holes behind in the muscle like a child's lace-up board. The mitral valves sealing like the lids of ice cream cups. And heavy in the doctor's hand, the spleen, shining, as if pulled from a river.

How easily the body opens.

How with difficulty does the mouth in awe, in praise. For there are words I cannot say.

If looking, though, is a practice, a form of attention paid, which is, for many, the essence of prayer, it is the sole practice I had available to me as a child. By seeing I called to things, and in turn, things called me, applied me to their sight and we became each as treasure, startling to one another, and rare. Among my parents' art, their work, I moved in fields of color and gesture, cut parts built to make up wholes: mannequins' heads adorned with beads, plaster food, so real, so hard, the mashed potatoes hurt, painted sandwiches of sponge grew stiff and scratched. Waxed fibers with feathers twisted into vessels. Lips and mouths and necks of clay were spun and pulled into being in air. With the play of distance, with hues close up, paintings roughened with weaves, softened with water,

oil, turpentine, greens, fleshs, families of shapes until—better than the bodies of clouds, these forms stayed put—forms spoke, bent toward, nodded so that they came to happen again and again, and I played among them in their sight. And what went on between us was ineffable, untold and this was *the silent part of my life as a child*.

I never thought to say, or call this “God,” which even then sounded like shorthand, a refusal to be speechless in the face of occurrences, shapes, gestures happening daily, and daily reconstituting sight. “God,” the very attitude of the word—for the lives of words were also palpable to me—seemed pushy. Impatient. Quantifiable. A call to jettison the issue, the only issue as I understood it: the unknowable certainty of being alive, of being a body untethered from origin, untethered from end, but also so terribly *here*.

And *here*—for we went out to see often—was, I remember once, of enormous, black, elegaic shapes closed in between black gashes or bars, and in the same day, *here* was also the curved, colored shapes, airborne, hung from wire, like, ah! muted, lobed organs, so that *here* could be at once mourning and gestures of ease.

I went home and showered, showered and scrubbed in hottest water and threw away the old shoes I’d worn. Later that day, at the grocery store among the other shoppers, I saw all the scalps turned over faces, everyone’s face made raw and meat-like, the sleek curves of skulls and bony plates exposed. I saw where to draw the knife down the chest to make the Y that would reveal.

I’d seen how easily we open, our skin not at all the boundary we’re convinced of as we bump into each other, excuse ourselves. I’d seen how small a thing gone wrong need be: one sip, just one too many, mere ounces of water in the lungs too much. And the woman in front of me on the check-out line, the pale tendons in her neck, the fibers of muscle wrapping bone below her wool collar, her kidneys backed against my cart—how her spleen, so unexpectedly high in the body, was marked precisely by the orange flower on her sweater. And after seeing the assistants gather the organs up in their arms and arrange them on the aluminum table, after seeing such an abundance in there—here, too, was abundance: pyramids of lemons, red-netted sacks of oranges and papery onions, bananas fitting

curve to curve, the dusty skins of grapes, translucent greens, dark roses, heavy purples.

Then, stepping out into the street with my bags, everything fresh and washed in the cold March rain, there was that scent hanging in the air—a fine film of it lingered, and I knew it to be the milky blueness I saw, just hours ago, cut free and swaying, barest breath and tether. That scrim, an opacity, clung to everyone, though they kept walking to cars, lifting and buckling children in. Packing their trunks, returning their carts. Yes, everything looked as it always had—bright and pearly, lush and arterial after the rain.

NOTE

the silent part of my life as a child is from Virginia Woolf's essay, "Moments of Being."