



UNDER A SHROUD: Wits medical students at the cadaver dedication ceremony, held each year in honour of those who have donated their bodies to science

We tend to forget what's under the skin. We're interacting with one another all the time, passing each other in the street, loving some, making love to others — that actual wanting of someone else's body, the desire for it. Bodies with skin and nails and eyes and hair. We are defined by this skin, by having this renewable sheath that covers everything that goes on inside us and makes us recognisable as human.

Then suddenly the strange surprise when we see a model of the skeleton or page through a book showing our muscles and organs. As formed beings, we work and sleep and laugh and run and cry and have memories, we're structured and featured, but all the while we're also these biological entities, processing and metabolising, decaying. All the secret administrations of our inner-body, this autonomous thing that we carry with us forever, concealed from the very owner's view.

This morning I'm in a room with about 40 dead bodies. They're covered with white plastic sheets but even if you didn't know they were bodies because of that unmistakable gradient from head to toe, the way you've seen your lover or your child asleep beneath a duvet.

There are several fans in the room, spinning at full pelt. This is to cover the smell of formaldehyde and other chemicals that get used to stop a dead body doing what it wants to do. But the fans aren't really helping. It's a strong smell, but it's not terrible. If anything it's kind of clean. It's what the smell actually means that brings on a little coldness, a sprinkle of nausea.

This is called a dissection hall.

The way of all flesh

At the start of each academic year, the School of Anatomical Sciences at Wits University holds a ceremony to honour those who have given their bodies to science.

Oliver Roberts attends and feels the stillness

Photograph: **Raymond Preston**

Dissection. Dissect. Something about the double-esses is like an incision, s for slice, ect for the weight of flesh, then di. On the walls are artsy anatomical diagrams, probably to try and ease the anxiety, to remind you that you're here because bodies are interesting. There's a drawing of a skeleton at some sort of podium, his bony hand resting on another skull, pondering. Row upon row upon row of fluorescent tubes on the ceiling, buzzing. There really are a lot of fans. On tables. Bolted to the wall.

The bodies lie on metal beds (or

Today is probably the biggest lesson they'll have. Your teacher is dead

tables?) that are slightly aslant and have a drain by the feet and a bucket beneath because embalming can't get every drop of fluid out.

Today is just one day for me. I get to wear a lab coat and pretend I'm some kind of professor because I'm too old to be a student so people are looking at me like I must be part of the faculty.

Today is just one day for me. But for the second-year medical students starting to stream in now, it's a year, it's the rest of their lives. Collectively they're known as ANAT2020 — anatomy, class of 2020 at the School of Anatomical Sciences at the University of the Witwatersrand. Today they're going to take the Anatomy creed and sign the Anatomy Register before they commence dissection.

They cover the faces of the dead with a sheet for the first couple of weeks until the students get used to the idea of the body actually belonging to a human.

The students keep coming in. Today is probably the biggest lesson they'll ever have. Your teacher is dead, that's what. For a whole year this person right here, with their ever-so-slightly plastic edge and half-open eyes, is going to be lecturing you. You don't want to look at the face for the first few weeks.

The first students that come in head straight for the walls. They stand with their backs pressed against the walls to create as much distance as possible from the bodies. The later you are, the greater your chance of having to actually sit right near one of the bodies, sense its mass and gravity.

Everyone is trying to make conversation. Stuff about what happened at some pub on the weekend or how so-and-so was seen kissing so-and-so in the halls or where is he or she, no she must have dropped out. People are giggling even, possibly at a nervous quip but probably at nothing. Anything to cover up what's in front of them because what do you say in a room full of dead bodies? You don't talk about it. I mean, the dead here, they're already invisible.

They've got to do this. A ceremony for those who have not only

'Think about their beauty and the fact that they were created so perfectly'

died — that's one thing — but have agreed — requested — to be embalmed and placed on a metal slab with a bucket underneath so that they can be opened up and examined, have things extracted from them, all the in-built perfection of their fibres and nerves divided and scrutinised. For a whole year they'll lie here, in this room, covered then

uncovered, complete then incomplete. At night the fans will stop and all those tubes of light will be switched off and they'll all of them lie in the dark, uncontrollably static, strangers sharing one another's deaths in the quiet.

At the end of the year the families get the ashes. This morning, people keep saying, "It's just a shell. It's just a shell." Also, "The smell's not as bad as I thought." All those slopes beneath the white plastic sheets. Head-to-toe. Toe-to-head.

Then we rise. Silence for the procession of the med faculty as it enters the room. Silence for the first time and now you can't avoid it. Total silence for two minutes.

"Without these bodies, without these cadavers that we are honouring today, your studies of medicine and anatomy would not be possible." Professor Maryna Steyn, head of the School of Anatomical Sciences, is speaking. "Please take time to think about the body in front of you and all the bodies in this hall. Think about their beauty and the fact that they were created so perfectly. Never forget that these individuals were once living, breathing individuals; that last year, by the time you were probably writing your mid-year exams, many of them would still have been walking the streets, sharing loves and laughter, sharing lives with their families and having loved ones that will miss them dearly."

The cadaver is their first patient. They must be covered when they're not being worked on. Most of the people in this room are not even 20 years old. When you're 20 you think you can't die.

Steyn tells the students it's an opportunity to explore their own humanness. Then the students stand and collectively read The Student's Creed.

"I stand humbly before the bodily remains of those who will enable us to complete our journey of learning and exploration," it goes, "and solemnly declare that I will at all times respect their dignity and value their contribution to my professional development."

So many voices that the air vibrates a little, a final touch of movement in the stillness unending.

• For information on body donation go to www.anatomysa.co.za or <http://www.wits.ac.za/anatomicalsciences/become-a-body-donor/>

SULA IZINYEMBEZI
Sibongile Khumalo

THE first time I heard Sibongile Khumalo perform live, I was scoffing a French polony sandwich and washing it down with Oros. It was one of those dreadful days when "growing up in a musical family" wasn't a catch-phrase answer in an interview. It was on this hot day somewhere in the then Transvaal



ONE TRACK, MINED

at a choral competition. At that age I thought such competitions were a dreadful way to spend one's weekend. I still do.

Needless to say, I was not in the most receptive of moods when Khumalo appeared for a showcase performance. Through no fault of her own, it has taken a tremendous amount of time for me not to associate her music with soggy sandwiches, boiled eggs and chocolate éclairs.

I am glad that I persisted. *Sula Izinyembezi* on Khumalo's latest album offers both consolation and a reward for my efforts.

To this day, my mother has not completely forgiven me for not being able to sing. It would be nice if, on her next album, Khumalo could address this issue on my behalf and for all of those who grew up in choral music families but have to lip-synch at family gatherings. — *Setumo-Thebe Mohlomi*