

Anatomy class goes to the morgue

It was near the end of the spring semester, 1988. I was in the intermediate /advanced Anatomy class taught by classical expert Thomas Marsh, who promised us a field trip to study actual cadavers for a change from purely learning body parts from his excellent chalkboard drawings. Those were always clearly informative, but now being advanced we should be ready for the real thing.

I was dedicated to the class 100 percent, drawing, scoring high on the naming quizzes, and focused on my final project ; an anatomical figure painting. So I was looking forward to this field trip, sketchbook ready.

We were to meet in the morning at UCSF up the hill from Golden Gate Park on Parnassus. It was a pleasant morning to ride the bicycle across town to the Inner Sunset. I made it an early start to stop at Heidi's Bakery, my favorite German bakery at 9th & Irving (long gone, where a Starbucks sadly now takes its place.) Specialising in true German baked goods, like what I fell for when I was in Germany — strudels, and my favourite style of Rye bread; *Vollkornbrot!* They made it authentically. The best I'd had since being overseas. The staff enjoyed my attempts to speak German whenever I went in. I stocked up with three loaves, some for family in the East bay. . And this bread is dense — it heavily filled my backpack all the way.

Onwards up the hill to the medical centre of UCSF to meet class, arriving early to enjoy the beautiful views from up there. Fantastic really.

Met class at the designated place and time, and up we went in

the elevators to the morgue — our teacher and around a dozen of us students.

There was a waiting time for the medic to be ready. The sound up there is oddly compressed, where speech didn't seem to project through the air very strongly. An isolated environment. Strange.

When the medic finally led us in, I felt like my mind roved into the room in slow motion, like a boat slowly coasting to shore after the motor was turned off.

The setup was theatrical to me — beds arranged randomly, each with elbow lamps angled over brown rubber sheets covering corpses. The medic leading us to one table, starting to tell us that this is a severed section of an arm. I could barely hear his voice in that strange room. Eager to see, craning my neck, catching a glimpse of what merely looked like something in a Swedish Christmas stew.

I then recall briefly staggering back by a step, followed by a deep dark sleep, with a dream that class was looking down at me from above, as if through a fisheye lens — and soundless.

Until suddenly waking, bolting my head up to see my classmates looking down at me, steadied with the teachers help — this is no dream! Embarrassed and flustered, it felt as if I was out for several hours — it was only for a minute. I passed out! The first complete faint of my adult life.

Everyone was concerned if I was okay, especially Thomas. Undamaged fortunately. I had fallen backwards and luckily didn't hit my head on anything. Can you guess what cushioned the blow?

German rye bread! I was still wearing a backpack filled with German Vollkornbrot!

Ha! Relief and humour, as the blood returned to my stunned brain.

I am gently escorted out by our kindly instructor, who wants to make sure that I am completely recovered. He gets a soda for me and we sit outside in the fresh ocean air for around 15 minutes. I was fine. Shaken but intact. We shared a laugh about the bread save, and he thinks it might have been formaldehyde that affected me after a bike ride. But I knew better — I'm a freaked out wimp around the medical world. Tracing back to childhood trauma, having white-outs each time they drew blood at the doctors office for rheumatoid arthritis tests. I had not been in a hospital for several years before then.

After a few bites of Rye bread that saved me, I was on my usual way. Bummed to have missed the cadaver lessons, but I realised a bigger lesson from the experience ... about the fine line between being conscious and devoid of consciousness. That short minute could have been days spent in a coma. Timeless, like black holes in the sky. This forced me to shudder with a new contemplation of mortality setting in, which is importantly real.

I grabbed a lunch which was wise, slowly making my way back to the Academy, where news went around that I fainted in the morgue! It turns out to be a relatively rare occasion, with only one or two other students previously ever passing out. So I felt a little humiliated, lightened by sharing the bread story! Wish I remember who it was who was there, later reporting "Dean, you fell down like a tree!" and that when I came to, I looked pissed off! I could imagine why — it was a stark awakening.

The painting I was working on for the final Anatomy class project was formed before the morgue incident, yet relates somehow. The piece titled "Vulnerable Man" is based on fear of physical destruction that went through my overly imaginative young mind — particularly when operating dangerous power tools on construction jobs I'd been doing. What if I slipped into a spinning table saw blade? Or if a drill in the gut? Chemicals burning off skin? Or in a momentary lapse of reason placed the nail gun to my head and pulled the trigger!

Shuddering horrors resulted, forcing me to pause working to recollect the nerves of sanity enough to carry on. Brian and I would discuss these flights of vivid fears as helpful safety mechanisms, that help us to be extra cautious — because the dangers *are* very real! We were unpleasantly occasionally reminded whenever accidentally hitting a thumb with a hammer! Brian taped a newspaper cartoon inside the van that said something like "Bob discovers that 98% of his nerve endings are located under his thumbnail." depicting a builder writhing in agony, holding a hammer in one hand, and a swollen thumb on the other!

Yep.

Before seeming to digress, the fainting experience added to those fears, making the painting of the skinless figure all more viscerally poignant. It's a rather horrific figure, staggering ultra vulnerably in darkness, yet dissolving into the light. Thomas Marsh gave it an A, congratulating me for making a "complete work of art" while some of the students called it "Dean's nuclear holocaust victim."

I still have it in storage. Unfortunately since it's painted on masonite, it's too heavy for the scale.

The moral of my morgue experience, other than becoming more aware of some of the nature of consciousness, is: if in doubt about visiting a medical facility, first stock up from your friendly neighbourhood German bakery.

~ ~ Dean Gustafson, March 2021



Vulnerable Man
42 x 34, oil on wood panel, 1988