

The Beauties of a Body

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The heart is still beating when I open up the body cavity. It's much smaller than I expected, this pulsating organ that controls the ebb and flow of internal tides, the red sea that rushes through the veins and arteries, eventually trickling down to those minute tributaries we call capillaries. But then again, it is a mouse that lies on the dissection table, not a human with its fist-sized heart, but this tiny creature possessing a heart the size of my fingernail.

I always felt the need to apologize to the mice during those first few weeks working in the lab. I'd slide the tip of a syringe's needle just beneath their skin, quietly murmuring "sorry"s and hoping that they'd feel nothing more after the barbiturate began its plodding dance through their systems, lulling them into a dense slumber, a slumber from which they wouldn't awaken.

I never felt the need to apologize for the work we were doing, only to the creatures unlucky enough to be assisting us in our endeavors. Because in my eyes, the work we did was necessary. We were creating an immunotherapy for atherosclerosis, a disease of the arteries, and we needed to see their miniscule vessels, their small hearts, to determine if the therapy was successful. In some ways, the work was even beautiful. Some might find that strange, that I found beauty in the body cavity of a mouse. Sometimes I even find it a bit odd that the sight of a gallbladder peeking out from beneath the lobes of a liver so intrigued me. I would marvel at the winding labyrinth of intestinal tubes and tracts, so perfectly packed and placed in the crater of the abdomen. The fact that there were nerves and tendons and bone and muscle all meshing together, working together, to perpetuate the life I analyzed under the antiseptic fluorescence of lab lights never ceased to amaze me. Their harmony was beautiful. And so, life was beautiful.

Labs seem to have a stigma attached to them, of having a sort of sordid sterility in which people huddle over microscopes and slides, indifferent observers merely taking note of life. I speak to the contrary. It wasn't until I was in that lab, seeing the heart throb, seeing life unfold before my eyes and my scalpel, that I was able to appreciate the beauty that lay in the far-off obscurities of even a single body.