

Since 2008, the Morbid Anatomy Library of Brooklyn, New York, has hosted some of the best scholars, artists, and writers working along the intersections of the history of anatomy and medicine, death and the macabre, religion and spectacle. *The Morbid Anatomy Anthology* collects some of the best of this work in twenty-eight lavishly illustrated essays.

Included are essays by Evan Michelson (star of Science Channel's hit show *Oddities*) on the catacombs of Palermo, Simon Chaplin (head of the Wellcome Library) on public displays of corpses in Georgian England, mortician Caitlin Doughty on demonic children, and Paul Koudounaris (author of *Empire of Death*) on a truck stop populated with human skulls. In addition are pieces on books bound in human skin, fin de siècle death-themed Parisian cafes, post-mortem photography, eroticized anatomical wax models, taxidermied humans and other animals, Santa Muerte, "artist of death" Frederik Ruysch, and much more.

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\$30



Morbid Anatomy Press  
MORBIDANATOMYMUSEUM.ORG  
BROOKLYN, NEW YORK



# THE MORBID ANATOMY ANTHOLOGY

edited by  
JOANNA EBENSTEIN  
and COLIN DICKEY

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*The*

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ANATOMY  
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and COLIN DICKEY



# C O N T E N T S

The Morbid Anatomy Anthology  
Edited by Joanna Ebenstein and Colin Dickey

Morbid Anatomy Press  
Brooklyn, New York  
www.morbidanatomymuseum.org

ISBN: 978-0-9893943-0-7

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First Edition

Art direction, design and production by Joanna Ebenstein, Morbid Anatomy.

Cover image: Plate from Beach, W.; *An Improved System of Midwifery: Adapted to the Reformed Practice of Medicine : Illustrated by Numerous Plates, to Which Is Annexed, a Compendium of the Treatment of Female and Infantile Diseases, with Remarks on Physiological and Moral Elevation.* New York: Scribner, 1851; Courtesy of The National Library of Medicine.

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Image on following spread: Hand-painted plate from *Compendium rarissimum totius Artis Magicae sistematissatae per celeberrimos Artis hujus Magistros...* c.1775; Courtesy of the Wellcome Library, London.



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BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

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# MEMENTO MORI

## *Reflections on the Art of the Tableau*

AMY HERZOG

I FIND MYSELF FASCINATED BY A CERTAIN TENDENCY IN STAGED tableaux such as dioramas and waxworks, one bound up in their commingling of stillness and motion. The diorama presents us with a hermetic, immobilized world; there is typically a painted background (often curved to give the illusion of boundlessness), and posed, lifeless figures (human or animal, wax or taxidermied) alongside the objects and ephemera we might imagine native to these environments. There is something profoundly fetishistic, and mildly necrophilic, at the heart of the diorama: an apparent desire to encapsulate and reanimate those items on display. This paradoxical tension between preservation and regeneration seems germane to the nineteenth-century imaginary in general, the moment at which many of the visual practices I will discuss came into being. But it is a tension that surfaces in many dioramas with a particularly powerful, and sometimes surprising, pedagogical bent.

A great deal has been written about the ways in which nineteenth-century museological practices relied upon novelty and spectacle, and the indeterminate realm between the desire to educate and the more profitable will to entertain. What I find most interesting about those displays that most fully conflate amusement



and education, however, is their reliance on a highly specific, educational mission: a directive to recognize the self through an encounter with the unknown. This moment of reflection is often compelled by a confrontation with death.

I began thinking about these questions of stillness and reanimation while doing research on Victorian postmortem photography at the George Eastman House in Rochester. The Eastman House archives hold a huge collection of memorial daguerreotypes, keepsakes that took advantage of the emerging technology of photography to capture a fleeting image of a deceased loved one that could be treasured indefinitely.

When I made my appointment to visit the collection, the archivist suggested that I wear something black. I was at first taken aback by this advice, which resonated as both strangely intimate and formal, though his reasoning was entirely practical. Daguerreotypes are captured on iodized, silver-coated copper plates. They are singular, unique images—only one is created

*Image above:  
Carl Akeley  
with a plaster  
mask impression  
taken from one  
of his gorilla  
specimens during  
an expedition to  
Africa, ca. 1921.  
Image # 311654,  
Courtesy of  
the American  
Museum of  
Natural History  
Library.*





*Hand-tinted ambrotype of an unidentified child, ca. 1860. Collection of Jack and Beverly Wilgus.*



*Image above: Southworth & Hawes, Post-mortem Daguerreotype of an unidentified girl, ca. 1850. Courtesy of George Eastman House, International Museum of Photography and Film.*

per exposure—and they are highly reflective. Black clothing facilitates the best daguerreotype-viewing experience. Because these plates can only be seen when held at an angle, one must reflect oneself, or perhaps more accurately reflect the absence of oneself, into the mirrored image encased in one's hand.

While I had been anticipating that this research project would be challenging based on the content (many of the subjects were infants and children) I was in no way prepared for the affective experience of encountering these artifacts firsthand. Many of the images were framed in tiny velvet cases. As you tip the image back and forth in search of the best viewing angle, they begin to shimmer, fragile and specter-like, on the surface of the plate.

I was struck, too, by the range of visual approaches photographers took to this challenging task. Many of the images were straightforward and unflinching in their depiction

of death. Others were almost breathtakingly beautiful; children lay in romantic repose, rosy cheeked, as if they had just drifted off to sleep. Representing perhaps the pinnacle of memorial artistry, studios like that of Southworth & Hawes engaged in acts of stunning photographic fabulation, using the deceased body to craft images of an idealized moment that might, in fact, never have existed in life.

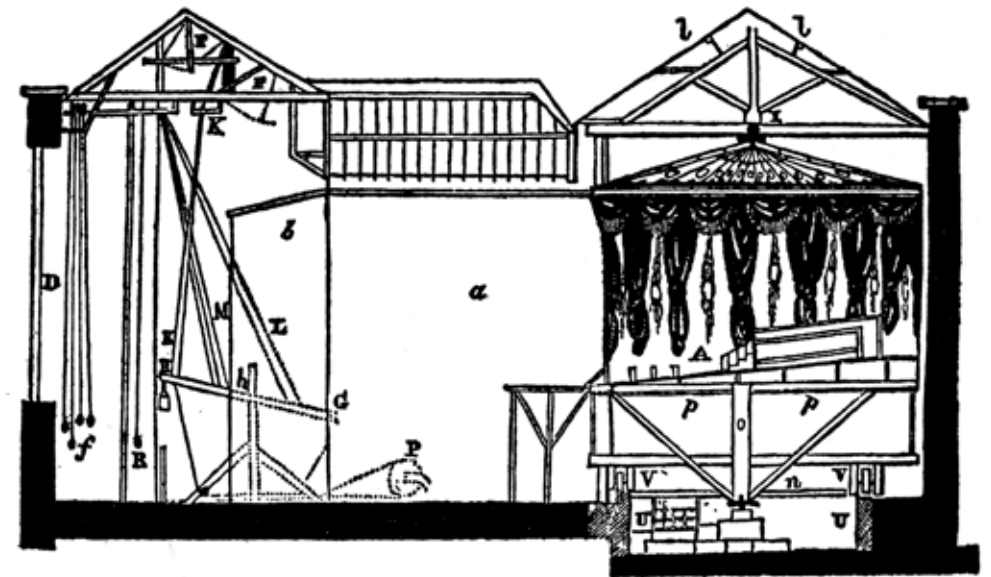
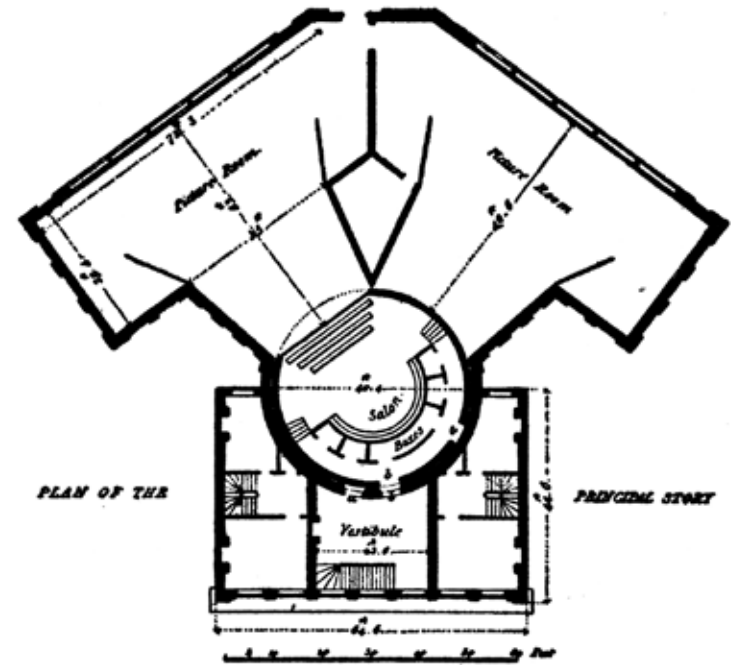
Viewing box after box of these images, I found a complementary affinity between the more “successful,” well-produced images, and those that were more awkward, morbid, or ugly. Both types of images attempt to frame for the viewer a talisman that will help them to cope with their loss, and, simultaneously, to confront their own mortality. The French critic Jules Janin wrote about his first encounter with a daguerreotype in 1839:

Dans ce miroir magique, la nature se reflète dans toute sa vérité naïve et un peu triste. (In this magic mirror, nature is reflected in all its truth, naïve and a bit sad.)<sup>1</sup>

If there is a “truth” caught in the daguerreotype’s magic mirror, it arises from the unresolved contradictions of its captured moments. In the postmortem photograph, we find the comfort of familiarity (intimate objects, fabrics, the interiors of a home, the face of a beloved) at the same time we are confronted by difference and the unknown (the inaccessibility of a lost moment caught on a silver surface, that same face rendered gaunt and strange). The looking glass of the image offers just a glimpse of this intangible, uncanny, parallel world.

The link between memorial photography and the diorama might appear oblique at first glance, yet the phenomena share a certain objective: to freeze, and to reanimate, a fragment of space and time.

<sup>1</sup> Jules Janin, “M. Daguerre,” *L’Artiste* 3 (2nd series), no. 11 (14 July 1839), 181–2. As quoted in R.D. Wood, *The Arrival of the Daguerreotype in New York* (New York: American Photographic Historical Society, 1994).



Ground plan of the Louis Daguerre Diorama building, London, by A. Pugin and J. Morgan, 1823.

Louis Daguerre, who invented the daguerreotype in partnership with J.N. Niépce, also coined the term “diorama” to refer to the immensely popular entertainment format he developed and promoted prior to the premier of his photographic experiments. In a venture with architectural painter Charles Marie Bouton, Daguerre’s dioramas involved large, darkened theaters in which audiences viewed a proscenium from a rotating platform. Viewers would watch landscapes painted onto a series of layered scrims; dramatic lighting effects would create the illusion of changing times of day or seasons, sometimes with accompanying sounds and real objects. Daguerre and Bouton’s diorama premiered in Paris in 1822 to great critical and commercial acclaim, spawning several international, and later traveling, venues. Popular scenes included cathedrals, alpine villages, ruins, tombs, and, in 1833, a moonlit view of the murdered bodies of the Countess of Hartzfeld and her servant lying near their still-lit fire in the Black Forest.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Helmut and Alison Gernsheim, L.J.M. Daguerre: The History of the Diorama and the Daguerreotype, Second ed. (New York: Dover, 1968), 32.

The term diorama, however, is more often associated with groupings of figures and objects within a stylized, scaled environment, displayed in a lit chamber, encased in glass. As Alison Griffiths has convincingly argued, museum habitat and life-group dioramas draw from the naturalistic painting styles used in panoramas or Daguerre-style moving dioramas, the staging of tableaux vivant and waxworks, and the ethnographic displays featured at the Crystal Palace in London.<sup>3</sup> These techniques were deployed in combination with the more modern, commercial display aesthetics of department stores, world’s fairs, and advertising. Certainly the museum diorama’s lineage extends to the seventeenth-century cabinet of curiosities, those treasure troves of objects and collected novelties, although the habitat display marks a significant departure from earlier groupings based on typology.

<sup>3</sup> Alison Griffiths, Wondrous Difference: Cinema, Anthropology, and Turn-of-the-Century Visual Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 3-45.

With waxworks, habitat dioramas, and staged, historical displays gaining currency in dime museums and on midways, the newly established natural history museums of the late nineteenth century strove to differentiate their displays from the “hokum” peddled by less reputable purveyors. The museum diorama designers actively sought to achieve greater scientific accuracy while at the same time educating, and elevating, their urban audiences. In the introduction to *Windows on Nature: The Great Habitat Dioramas of the American Museum of Natural History*, Steven Christopher Quinn writes:

It should be noted that, in 1868, one year before the founding of the American Museum... P.T. Barnum’s entertaining American Museum in New York was completely destroyed in a fire. Barnum’s museum, though it contained what was considered one of the finest natural history collections of its time, was anything but educational. New York was ready for a true museum of natural science without the show business and what Barnum called “humbug.”<sup>4</sup>

To be certain, there is an educational component to the habitat dioramas, and an overarching mission at scientific museums that is distinct from that of the dime museum. Institutions like the American Museum of Natural History have successfully mobilized their dioramas to draw attention to issues of preservation and to generate research funding. But if the educational diorama is a fusion of art and science, as Quinn and others have argued, I’d like to suggest that this combination of approaches brings them closer to the modus operandi of all staged tableaux, including those of the “humbug” museum, than they might like to imagine.

A brief survey of minor examples from within and without the museum proper might shed light on the organizing logic of the diorama in general. The most stolidly instructive displays,

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Christopher Quinn, *Windows on Nature: The Great Habitat Dioramas of the American Museum of Natural History* (New York: American Museum of Natural History/Abrams, 2006), 10.



*Image above: Model illustrating fly-borne diseases in screened and unscreened tenements. Photograph Kay C. Lenskjold, 1917. Image #36329. Courtesy of the American Museum of Natural History Library.*

paradoxically, tend to highlight their ideological machinations most overtly. A 1917 diorama from the American Museum of American History, for example, was designed to educate audiences about the health benefits of window screens in urban environments. Yet the staging of the cross section of a tenement building clearly enacts a broader commentary about hygiene and class that has nothing to do with scientific data regarding the health risks posed by flies (following the logic of this rendering, the use of window screens allow one to hang picture frames with more precision). The decision to depict the need for health services via a scaled, doctor figure casts an ominous and paternalistic aura over the work, one that registers on an emotional rather than a rational register.

From the unabashed realm of entertainment, the dioramas featured in Lillie Santangelo's *World in Wax Musée* in Coney Island (in operation from 1926 through the mid-1980s) titillated audiences with effigies of important political figures and reenactments of freak births. Yet the Musée's most lurid and gripping dioramas restaged brutal murders and sex crimes as they unfolded. Santangelo described these displays as driven by a moral, educational mission:



A wax show teaches the good things in life and also teaches that crime doesn't pay. What makes a person bad? What makes a clock tick, bad or good?<sup>5</sup>

Yet the lessons gleaned from the displays themselves are far more ambiguous. I'm particularly haunted by the image of Julio Ramirez Perez, captured in wax in the midst of strangling Mrs. Vera Lotito in 1948. Despite the passion of the crime, Perez's motionless figure seems lost in thought, his furrowed brow reflected in the mirror that forces him to contemplate his own countenance, as we contemplate him, suspended for all eternity.

In short, regardless of venue or point of origin, nearly all dioramas suggest an organizing moral or lesson. Yet these lessons are not necessarily what draw us to them, and they don't adequately describe what we learn, or what we remember.

Perhaps there is something about the mode of address of the diorama that warrants further consideration. Unlike peep-shows, stereoscopes, or other single-viewer, nineteenth-century attractions, dioramas and tableaux are visible to multiple audience members. Nevertheless, these displays seem to encourage the perception of an intimate, singular experience. Like immersive spectacles such as the Daguerre diorama or the panorama, the staged diorama works to interpolate the spectator into a world

*Image above: Depiction of the 1948 murder of Mrs. Vera Lotito by Julio Ramirez Perez, Lillie Beatrice Santangelo's *World of Wax Musée*. Photograph Costa Mantis, 1981. Courtesy of the Coney Island Museum.*

<sup>5</sup> Lillie Santangelo, unpublished interview with Dick Zigun, 1981. Coney Island Museum Archive.

that feels crafted just for them. We are encouraged to linger, to indulge in our appreciation of each carefully crafted detail. As with the daguerreotype, we are highly aware of the diorama as a unique, auratic object. It is a public staging of a private, revelatory encounter.

Donna Haraway describes the Akeley Hall of African Mammals at the American Museum of Natural History in similar terms:

One begins in the threatening chaos of the industrial city, part of a horde, but here one will come to belong, to find substance. No matter how many people crowd the great hall, the experience is of individual communion with nature. This is... the moment of origin where nature and culture, private and public, profane and sacred meet—a moment of incarnation in the encounter of man and animal.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Donna Haraway, "Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908–1936," in *Social Text* 11 (Winter 1984–85), 23.

For Haraway, this encounter is enabled by the careful staging of each tableaux and the narratives they put into motion. But there is one element over all others, she argues, that holds human viewers transfixed: the gaze of at least one animal in each display is positioned to capture and hold that of the viewer through the glass. It is a meeting of looks that could never take place in nature:

This is a spiritual vision made possible only by their death and literal representation. Only then could the essence of their life be present. Only then could the hygiene of nature cure the sick vision of civilized man. Taxidermy fulfills the fatal desire to represent, to be whole; it is a politics of reproduction.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

The art of taxidermy, like that of photography, is a prophylactic against death and decay. Each format stakes a claim in science,



objectivity, and truth, forged via technology, colonialism, and the engines of capital. Each imagines a narrative, and each hails its viewers after the moment of capture has passed. Each is subject to the vision and fabrications of their creators, as well as to the accidental artifacts embalmed within their frames. And each is structured around the coincidence of multiple gazes: subject, viewer, artist. The resonances, and dissonances, between frozen and mobile looks creates a palpable tension, one in which the contemporary viewer is forced, however imperfectly, to see an image of herself reflected back.

There is an inevitable intrusion of anthropomorphism in the habitat dioramas. The idyllic family scenes in which groups of

*Image above: Mountain Goats, Bernard Family Hall of North American Mammals. Image #46. Courtesy of the American Museum of Natural History Library.*



*Katherine Barry reading to children at story hour. Photograph Edward Laurence Bailey, 1944.  
Image #298163. Courtesy of the American Museum of Natural History Library.*



animals graze in fields unmarked by human intervention are undermined when one recalls that the real scenes that might have inspired these displays were disrupted by the violent act of gathering the “specimens” that comprise these artificially assembled herds. As we become implicated in the politically and ethically fraught relay of projection and reflection at work here, the boundaries of the framed world are revealed as porous, reality as staged, and our own constructed worlds as both fragile and alien.

Indeed, taxidermied dioramas delve deep into the guts of the subjects they stage, but they often tell us less about the bodies that comprise them than those who labored in their creation. Habitat diorama creators historically obtained their raw materials by going into the field to “collect specimens”—i.e.

*Above image:  
Akeley African  
Hall. Photograph  
A.J. Rota, R.  
Sisson, and L.  
Boltin, 1962.  
Image #328663.  
Courtesy of  
the American  
Museum of  
Natural History  
Library.*

kill live animals, bring them back to the museum setting, and reinfuse their corpses with artificial life. As with the memorial photographs, a fascination with the materiality of death often coexists with a visual denial that the death ever occurred. This duality extends not only to the body depicted, but also to those of the producer and viewer. Carl Akeley's mountain gorilla diorama manifests this paradox directly, as the scene recreated marks the spot of Akeley's own grave on Mount Mikeno, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The habitat diorama and the memorial photograph serve as graphic incarnations of *memento mori*, driven by the same moral reminder: remember you must die.

The dioramas created for nineteenth-century natural history museums are housed within stately monuments to Western narratives of technological mastery and cultural superiority. Here the mission to educate and to direct the undisciplined gaze of the spectator often butts up against the pure sensuality of the display, and the distracted state of the audience as they meander through the galleries. Anthropologist Franz Boas, mindful of this danger, advised that ethnographic displays at the American Museum of Natural History avoid the "ghastly impression" left by attempts at complete realism: "since there is a line of demarcation between nature and plastic art, it is better to draw a line consciously than to try to hide it."<sup>8</sup> While Boas's motivation is surely quite different from my own, I find myself similarly drawn to those tableaux that most overtly celebrate their craft, or perhaps more accurately, those that flaunt their seams. What seems most useful to me in these circumstances is that the dioramas serve to highlight, rather than to resolve, the inherently fragmented and contradictory inclinations of their viewers.

Again, as with the postmortem daguerreotypes, I find a productive correspondence between "successful" and "failed"

<sup>8</sup>As quoted in Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference*, 24.



artistic tableaux. The awkward drape of fur stretched across a poorly crafted armature, the decrepit snout of a deer head as it hangs, neglected, on its mount—these sad siblings of the carefully tended museum display remind us of the fragility of preserved corporeal remains. Taxidermists such as Walter Potter seemed to relish drawing a firm line of demarcation between nature and art. The spectacular anthropomorphism of Potter's scenes is staggering, both for its whimsy and its utter excessiveness. *The Rabbits' Village School*, for example, features forty-eight juvenile rabbits at their various lessons in a one-room schoolhouse, peeking at each other's slates or reciting verse. There is an element of perversity and exploitation at work here, yet in its self-acknowledgement as pure human fabrication, the anthropomorphic diorama may be more honest than the righteous rationalizations of scientifically legitimized displays.

Image above:  
Walter Potter's  
The Rabbit's  
Village School.  
Courtesy of  
Eroll Fuller.

Perhaps no artist has pushed the plastic potentials of the staged diorama further than Marcel Duchamp in his final work *Étant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau / 2° le gaz d'éclairage...*. Created in secret from 1946 to 1966, *Étant donnés* is viewed through a pair of peepholes bored in a rough wooden door. Peering inside, the viewer looks through a gaping hole in a brick wall to see a nude female form, reclining with her legs splayed on a bed of twigs, her head obscured from view, holding an illuminated gas lamp in her raised hand. The back wall of the tableau features a meticulously rendered landscape of hills and trees and what appears to be a flowing waterfall. The flickering of the gas lamp and the simulated water act as counterpoint to the motionless body. The skin of the female figure was crafted using animal skin parchment stretched over a substructure of putty, lead strips and various bracing elements (metal tubing, wood, steel-wire screen).<sup>9</sup> The effect of Duchamp's laborious process is strikingly fleshy, although the shape of the form itself is unnerving. The proportions and angles feel off-kilter, and the exposed, hairless genitals that comprise the focal point of the piece are grotesquely, ambiguously formed.

<sup>9</sup> Melissa S. Meighan, "A Technical Discussion of the Figure in Marcel Duchamp's *Étant donnés*" in Michael R. Taylor, Marcel Duchamp: *Étant donnés* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2009), 247.

*Étant donnés* is inscrutable. It is a scene that begs for a narrative, yet refuses to supply one. The body on display titillates, transfixes, and disturbs; it readily exposes its most hidden recesses, but tells us nothing of its identity or status. Even questions of gender, ironically, are vexingly uncertain, given the indefinite sculpting of the form. Is this a figure in repose? A victim of a crime? The lines between life and death, wholeness and dismemberment are indeterminate. Of even greater complexity is the perspectival structure of the tableau, which contains a room within a room, and a posed figure who returns our gaze not with the glassy eyes of the upholstered beast (to channel Haraway), but with her centrally positioned genitalia, the organizing locus of the

work. As Jean-François Lyotard famously suggested about this composition,

In this type of organization, the viewpoint and the vanishing point are symmetrical. Thus if it is true that the latter is the vulva, this is the specular image of the peeping eyes; such that: when these think they're seeing the vulva, they see themselves. *Con celui qui voit. He who sees is a cunt.*<sup>10</sup>

It is a taunt that simultaneously foregrounds and inverts the whole history of Western visual culture.

Perhaps it is an already familiar truism that we see only ourselves reflected in the world of the diorama. We create the museum to erect monuments to ourselves. We flock to the midway and the movie theater to replay our primal collective anxieties. What I'd like to suggest is that we have much to learn from those tableaux that unsettle, disturb, and expose the operations of these viewing machines. We ought to pay attention to the uncanny dissonances of the failed or awkward waxwork, of the decayed or idiosyncratic habitat display. We should trace the resonances between these marginal incarnations and the strange, but often unquestioned aesthetics of our collective cultural mythology. It is here, in the space between past and present, margin and periphery, that we can begin to excavate the visual mechanics of our old master narratives, and, perhaps, to imagine for ourselves newly transformative miniature worlds.

<sup>10</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *Les TRANS-formateurs DUCHAMP* (Paris: Galilée, 1977), 137-38, as quoted in Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 172. Silverman notes that "con" ("cunt") is also used as a chiding term for men in a manner roughly equivalent to "prick" in English, making Lyotard's phrasing sympathetically ambiguous. See also Taylor, Marcel Duchamp: *Étant donnés*, 192.



# NAPLES

## *In the Court of Miracles*

CHIARA AMBROSIO

*The city stirs, volatile land ruled by myth and the elements.*

IF NAPLES WERE A PERSON, IT WOULD LOOK DESTITUTE: A WEATHERED old man, resting under a creased cloak of stony rags, stretching its awkward limbs between the mountain and the sea, a shiny brooch, worn with pride and curiously out of place, pinned to its torn and dirty rags.

Just like the volcano at the foot of which it lies, its myriad eyes and manifold paths appear veiled in slumber under the nursing warmth of a midday sun. But its entrails are molten, and what courses through its damp body of brick and moss is ebullient and wild, as irreverent and incongruous as its adorned rags.

The narrow streets that unravel like an intricate web of veins and arteries from its tangled heart cut through the debris of different epochs with the same casual familiarity of fingers stretching from the palm of a hand. They all lead toward impossible directions—not only across, but more often upward and downward, transcending matter and decency, facilitating journeys that are more appropriate for nighttime and dreaming along unpaved trails where only spirits are expected to venture, and apparitions. All along these crepuscular paths, without fanfare, the living will defiantly step across those





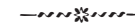
*All photos by  
Joanna Ebenstein,  
taken in Naples,  
2012–2013.*

thresholds that are impassable elsewhere, and with great ease travel between life and death, through time and space, spinning at each step and with supreme confidence all the disparate fragments of a secular collective memory into a cacophonous, often humorous tale of hope, memory, freedom and subversion.

Naples occupies a distinctive psycho-geographical position, framed by natural, historical and literary thresholds (the sea, the volcano, the crater lake Avernus, mythical gateway to Hades, the ruins of Pompeii and Herculaneum, ravaged by the great eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79, and the entrance to the Cumaean Sibyl's cave, to mention but a few) and rising above a specular, labyrinthine "other" city that stretches beneath a large portion of the historic center—one that has grown to represent a physical manifestation of a complex and troubled collective unconscious.

Any coherent, rational attempt to understand and synthesize a life that might grow and sustain itself on such mercurial

terrain is literally undermined by the shape and consistency of the soil, of the landscape and of the city itself, that by its very persistence and survival subverts and challenges all facile pre-conceptions or rules of reason. To understand such a place and its many inscrutable moods, one must embrace paradox and contradiction fully, entering an uninhibited and spirited stage where life resembles theater.



*Everywhere in Naples life and death are inextricably bound.*

The torrential noise that spills out of its perpetually open windows decorates an overwhelming silence that erupts from the mountain as a sinister premonition of its dormant fire, a heavy shadow never far from the minds of those who move and shout raucously through the bustling streets.

The volcanic soil within which its foundations are laid is fertile and rich, and it yields fruit and flowers whose colors and scents lace the stench of indigence that emanates from the towers of rubbish bags abandoned to rot like grotesque totems watered by neglect, rattling and swaying in the suffocating heat amidst buildings of exceptional grace.

All around it, a landscape of ravishing beauty crowns with gold a head that is neither hallowed nor pure, but still worthy of all honors that may be bestowed upon it. Mount Vesuvius sits calmly while its guts rumble menacingly, and although no sound is heard, everyone can feel its sinister, subterranean pulse vibrating the ground beneath their feet day and night, relentless and near. On its flank, temporary shelters once carved out of the naked rock have swelled into small towns where people awake and count their blessings as they open their eyes each



morning, while the mountain yawns with an acrid, sulphuric breath, an invisible *memento mori* that is etched in the landscape and carried on the breeze. Light washes the slumber from the limbs and hearts, and life creaks into motion, at once defiant and respectful of that constant promise of inexorable death.



Under this sword of Damocles, of imminent and inevitable loss, the relationship that has developed between Neapolitans and their faith is a peculiarly pragmatic one, born out of a sense of urgency and a unique understanding of personal freedom and responsibility. A devotional caution towards the mysteries of everyday life and death is intertwined with a spirit of





insubordination that allows them to transgress all boundaries and stare without fear or hesitation into the very eye of that paradox that the simple fact of being alive poses to all. They are ruled by impermanence and, just like the quickened earth on which they are delivered, their existences are transitory, volatile and unpredictable; here the veil that separates myth from reality, dream from wake, is permeable, malleable, and so is any material possession, social structure, individual heritage, or any understanding of collective past, present or future.

Prayers are the only currency available to all, without distinction of provenance, class or status, with which graces and miracles can be sought, through which survival may be beseeched or granted, both the momentary survival of the body and the eternal one of the soul.

The sooty, sweaty streets of the historic center overflow with commerce, gossip and crime, life and death in all their conflicting and discordant aspects. The open doors that line the streets lead to the bassi (lows), so-called tiny, crammed interiors



where lives are played out publicly even in the intimate privacy of grief and desperation. Behind the goods laid out for sale one will always glean the familiar shape of a bed, a cooker, and a shrine to the dear departed: a faded photograph surrounded by votive candles and fresh flowers, damp with whispered prayers, kisses and tears.

Thus the space between the living and the dead shrinks to that between two sides of a very narrow threshold, and to cross it is never a taboo. In the numerous niches carved out of stone walls and dotted around the city, the painted faces of the saints rest amiably next to those of the victims of organized crime (the Camorra), staring out of creased and faded photographs and surrounded by a hoard of nameless, faceless figurines, wrapped in flames, their arms extended pleadingly above their heads; these are lovingly referred to as the *aneme perse* (lost souls), *aneme poverelle* (poor souls), *aneme pezzentelle* (beggar souls), the souls that belong to those equally nameless, faceless mul-

titudes of dead whose unclaimed bones have accumulated in the hidden bowels of the city since the great plagues of the seventeenth century, and for whom nobody could pray, whom nobody remembered.

They are the souls who are condemned to purgatory, that liminal waiting room of suffering that can only be transcended with the intervention of the living, who may offer the souls a mass, a thought or a prayer to help them rise a little closer to the refrigerio, the refreshing, cool air of heaven. That they should be placed next to those other lost souls, the victims of the Camorra (in itself a veritable plague that has ravaged the city for decades and is still gathering numberless dead today) is a testament to the complex role that faith holds within the unique, often impenetrable (and equally as complex) cultural and social landscape of the city.

Like the city itself, faith in Naples is multifaceted and seemingly incongruous, almost absurd, although when considered from a more humanistic perspective it reveals a great deal more sense than any other organized religion might, drawing close to its natural, pagan identity. Like in most places in Italy, the Catholic religion reached the unruly southern regions as an infrastructure imposed at the time of the Holy Roman Empire to reign in and supervise a wealth of diverse and insular local cults, mostly inherited from the Greeks, through which all matters of life and death had been interpreted and understood thus far. The natural belief in a transcendence in the matters of the earth, nature and its gods, amongst people whose lives were ruled so unabatedly by the weather, the seasons, and a primal, often brutal, but always fundamental relationship with their environment, was slowly displaced and reframed through the lens of an organized religion that appropriated the language and lexicon of these cults. In the process, though, this cultural legacy

was stripped of any individual meaning, reinstated instead as a supervised, cleansed and hierarchical system—based on a single, unified story—that sought to rule over the subconscious of each community (in a way similar to how politics attempts to rule and reconcile often widely diverse social and economical matters and interactions).

In a city like Naples, where the role of dreams and the subconscious, with all its complexities and contradictions, overrules that of reason, this has precipitated a rift within systems of belief and the rituals and manifestations of faith itself. Above ground is the theater where the “official” ritual plays out, the one connected to the saints and performed in consecrated spaces and under the supervision of the Catholic Church. Naples wears its congregation’s faith proudly on the walls of its many churches; the Chiesa del Gesu’ on *Spaccanapoli*, the street that is the neuralgic center of the old quarter, is drowned in countless *ex votos*, silver familiars in the shape of hands, feet, eyes, lungs, bellies, and any other part of the body, or signifier of life, that might be the object of the saint’s benevolence and for which he is being thanked.

Each saint has a name, an identity and a past that is distinct and unique and is irrevocably removed from the condition of the nameless crowds. There is an obvious, unbridgeable gap that separates the living from the hallowed, inviolable space occupied by the saints, whose extraordinary and pious conduct in life has granted them such veneration after death. The gilded altars, the holy light falling in rays from the stained windows, the marble effigies resplendent in their size and polish—all are a world away from the poor, the criminals, the orphans, the loud-mouthed widows, the legions of flawed and unremarkable individuals who shuffle daily through the aisles, falling on their knees in prayer or crowding the confessionals to unburden themselves of their sins, sins that one can almost taste in the



air and that no saint could ever have known first hand. These confessions are reserved for the priest, himself a reluctant member of the crowd, and surely not a stranger to sin.

Neapolitans approach the saints directly only at times of great need, imploring them for a specific miracle or grace that might help the individual through an exceptionally difficult circumstance, one that only a saint could have the power to affect, like grave illnesses, accidents or natural disasters. The saints, when welcomed into the homes, are guests of honor and are referred to with a reverence that keeps them apart from the people for whom they intercede. They inhabit the lofty heights of heaven, and only their benevolent gaze crosses the distance to descend benignly on the lives of those who pray to them.



Underground, in the *ipogei*, the dark and musty rooms below the earth, buried underneath the splendor of sainthood, another, unofficial ritual unravels. This hollow city is where Neapolitans gather to pray for the souls of purgatory, those very same crowds of abandoned souls whose toil after death mirrors so closely their everyday suffering. It is believed that this cult, although with some variations in form, has been kept alive since its inception in the 1600s, following the great plagues of that century. Hundreds of thousands of bodies were buried with great haste in communal graves beneath the city, without ceremony and with no time or resources to keep track of names and burial locations.

The bones, and in particular the skulls of these *male morti* (badly dead), lovingly referred to as *capuzzelle* (little heads), became the silent and reluctant inhabitants of the underground and, once rediscovered, the pivot of this very peculiar cult. As





Stefano De Matteis explains,

The skull is a symbolic synthesis of the idea of death, or it represents a memento mori, a reminder of that crossing that nobody can avoid. But within this cult, the two elements—both the presence, and the passing—are unified and placed in a physical space that is separated from the world of the living, an edge-land. In such places there appears to be a particular understanding of liminality: this edge-land is inhabited by those who don't belong to life anymore, whose remains we can see and touch, but who are not considered to be properly “dead” due to their inhabiting a space of passage, of transition, Purgatory—that third space between life and death: this



becomes a place for waiting and hoping, very similar to life itself. It is in this very same place that social actors establish a system of communication aimed to create a dialogue with the otherworld, taking as their starting point an equivalence of liminal positions: that of the souls damned to Purgatory, and of the devout, damned to the margins of society.<sup>1</sup>

The first encounter between the living and the dead happens in a dream, where a lost soul manifests itself to the devotee for the very first time and shares with them his story and the circumstances of his death. Following this first encounter, the devotee will be guided through the underground tunnels of one of the three epicenters of this cult—the Cimitero delle Fontanelle in the old historic Sanità quarter, Santa Maria del Purgatorio in Arco, or San Pietro in Aram—until the specific skull is found amidst the piles of bones; once located, the skull will be cleaned, polished, and placed on a small white pillow, and offerings will be brought to it.

<sup>1</sup> Stefano De Matteis, *Antropologia delle anime in pena* (Argo, 1993).



Unlike with the saints, there is a direct equivalence between these souls (once lost, now found and reunited with their name and history) and the poor people who pray for them: their circumstances, although on opposite sides of the ultimate threshold, are very similar, and the contract established between them through prayers and offerings is one of mutual succor. The devotees will offer prayers to grant the soul (and through a single soul, the nameless multitudes of purgatory) a swift crossing into heaven, while the soul will in turn look over the living and their families and grant them a normal, untroubled journey through life, following the natural steps of existence that may be considered as given but that for many are a luxury: growing into adulthood, marrying, having a child, occasionally winning a lottery—all humble milestones that shape and embroider a person's life and allow them to become a part of the mystifying order of the universe, vast and unknowable.

Once the first graces are received, the devotee will build a structure, often a simple marble, stone or tin cabinet in the shape of a small house (not unlike the *bassi*, where the living reside), in which the skull will be placed. This marks an official adoption: the soul has now become a recognized member of the family and will intercede for them until the time comes for it to finally pass on. From then onwards a relationship flourishes between the living and the dead, who will keep meeting and conversing in dreams, and grow accustomed to one another, exchanging interactions that echo those between the living, until the obvious distinction between them becomes but a small detail in a rather more important and fulfilling picture.



Naples is, by its very nature and appearance, an accurate representation of purgatory on earth, both geographically and metaphorically, and this hidden cult (outlawed for a short portion of the twenty-first century by the Catholic Church that feared the repercussions of what they deemed to be just a superstition, but otherwise accepted as a fundamental aspect of Neapolitan culture) fosters a strange kind of empathy amongst its conflicting and divided classes. Its poor are an idiosyncratic court of miracles that shares the same condition as that of the souls of purgatory, condemned to a marginal life of suffering and hardship as they wait to transition to a better state (the *refrigerio* of a happy death). Alongside the spiritual help that they seek from these souls, they often rely on the tangible help of the wealthy or of local charities to survive their daily lives. Against the backdrop of the city, they are the actors that play the part of the lost souls, and are identified with them to such an extent that they cannot be denied the help they need, as that would also mean denying that the souls be freed from their suffering.

Everyone in Naples is familiar with the catastrophic consequences of refusing the requests of the dead. It is a strange contract that has been honored for centuries and that contributes to a non-hierarchical structure of both society and belief that invests Naples with its peculiar and mythical intensity.

The cult of the dead weaves a strong and unbreakable line of continuity between different times and fragmented, traumatized histories, placing the multitudes of abandoned dead at the beginning of a collective past, inviting them back, through the ritual of naming and adopting, to inhabit a present that is shared by the living, inherently granting them the possibility of doing the same when their turn comes to join the otherworld. The multitudes of skulls are the tangible manifestation of a shared destiny, and people from all classes and backgrounds are

sensitive to their plight: they remind the city of its traumatized heart (plagues are those events that not even saints can avoid, and that are bound to repeat themselves through history), a heart that nevertheless pumps nervously and defiantly through layers of sediment, both physical and temporal, committed to the perpetuation of an existence that is cherished and jealously escorted along its entropic drive towards the otherworld.



# THE WITHERING CROWD

EVAN MICHELSON

DEATH HAS TRADITIONALLY BEEN THE FIRST STEP IN THE PROCESS of decay but in Palermo, Italy, a combination of casual mummification and formal attire has imposed an unusual kind of stasis. Here the bodies of the dead are put on display and the result is a singular, eerie, beautiful, grimly whimsical gathering to which no one else will ever be invited. I recently visited this place as a clear-eyed researcher, an obsessed pilgrim and a curious chronicler; I did not expect to mourn.

This journey was of particular importance to me; I have been preoccupied with the historical preservation and display of the human corpus for as long as I can remember. As a child I had family stationed in Europe, where I was a frequent visitor to many of the great churches and cathedrals of Christendom—always diving into crypts and traipsing through cemeteries and graveyards, a dedicated lurker in any place that is quiet, old, and intended for solemn remembrance. I believe it was in Italy, in some poorly-lit side chapel, that I encountered my first sacred reliquaries, and those bits of human skin, bone, hair and teeth that make up a first-degree relic. I was instantly and fatally smitten by the tiny, exquisitely cut and polished rock crystal portholes, the gleaming silver and golden vessels which contained those incongruously humble, brownish-grey, dry bones.





The course of my life would return to this aesthetic again and again. Indeed, I have been an antiques dealer for a few decades now, and I regularly buy, sell, collect and swoon over preserved remains (both human and animal) under glass; eventually the time came to write a book on the subject, and I finally found an opportunity to visit the ultimate gathering of the dead: the famed Capuchin catacombs of Palermo.

The Palermo catacombs have been a tourist attraction since at least the nineteenth century. Over the course of my career I have collected a few of these tokens of morbid tourism: some framed, early photos, stereoviews, and tiny souvenir postcards that fit into the palm of your hand. My mental image of the

catacombs had always been of the place as it exists in these old photographs, where the beautifully dressed bodies are lined up behind piles of messily stacked, ornate wooden coffins, skulls sprinkled whimsically (and somewhat haphazardly) about. In my mind's eye the catacombs were frozen in time, the living visitors consisting of ladies in fine linen dresses and gentlemen in frock coats carefully picking their way through the crowded maze of sloughing bodies while holding delicate lace handkerchiefs and quoting the latest poetic stanzas on the passing of the body and the immortality of the soul. The catacombs have always been, to me, a sepia-tinged, nineteenth-century place of informal intimacy and dust: a place of eternal stasis.

Of course, such is not at all the case. When I finally made it to Palermo (after so many years of dreamy anticipation) I was both surprised and taken aback by the modern lighting and the tasteful, raised-glass floor. There are now protective barriers and fences up in front of the bodies, and those teetering stacks of ornate, rotting coffins have long since been sensibly packed away. Although a certain amount of dust is unavoidable, the place seemed so very clean. Here, at my primary (and perhaps overly anticipated) place of deathly pilgrimage I felt an initial flutter of disappointment, my dramatic notions of time travel and dank exploration shot down by some very reasonable modern precautions. Such is often the case when we encounter people, places or things with which we've become infatuated from afar—reality can seldom hold a flaming torch to the vivid chambers of the imagination.

And yet, and yet—it was when I started inspecting the mummies, so beautifully dressed and hung (rather unceremoniously) by wire on hooks on the whitewashed walls that time began to slow down a bit, then slowly reverse; I found myself entering another world—their world. I was able to pick out familiar

*Image left:  
Photograph  
of Capuchin  
Catacombs, circa  
1900; collection  
of the author.*

corpses: There were the very unseeing, grimacing faces that I had been staring at in antique photos for so many years, and they were still wearing their familiar clothes—the melancholy gentlemen in their sturdy woolen suits (with their still neatly folded pocket squares), the screaming clerics in their rough muslins, the grinning ladies in their fine linens and delicate, ruffled silks. It didn't take long before I began to feel more at home, and the true power of the place started to seep in.

The history of the catacombs is fairly straightforward: The Capuchin friars first came to Sicily in the early sixteenth century, where they settled in the outskirts of Palermo, amidst the beautiful hillsides of Sicily. Here the friars buried their dead near the Church of Santa Maria della Pace in a then-customary mass pit (burial inside a church then being forbidden by the order). In the course of a late-century exhumation of one of these mass burials it was discovered that a great majority of the corpses had been naturally mummified. The friars considered this a sign of divine intervention and they moved the miraculous mummies indoors, to take their place in a specially constructed room behind the main altar. What was seen as miraculous was (at least in this case) entirely natural: this region of Sicily lies in the shadow of Mount Etna, and the soil in the area is rich in tuff (compressed volcanic rock), a very porous substance that soaks up moisture like a sponge. The volcanic soil is a perfect vehicle of desiccation, which explains why so many of the deceased friars came out of the ground looking very much like they did going in.

At some point the Capuchin brothers decided to aid the natural process by mummifying the bodies themselves using a very simple process of evisceration, drying and chemical exposure. The friars built special preparation cells (some still visible along the catacomb corridors) where the bodies of the



deceased were opened and the inner organs removed; the corpses were then left on a drainage surface and sealed in for a period of roughly one year. At the end of that time the cells were opened and many of the dried-out bodies were then dipped in vinegar before being put on display for all eternity. On occasion a body was treated with lime (as was often the case during a plague outbreak or other instance of mass infection), and some of the best-preserved, nineteenth-century mummies show evidence of lime preservation. Yet other bodies were injected with mercury and arsenic, popular nineteenth-century preservatives (and highly toxic poisons). If a body had not mummified after one year in the sealed room, the friars would remove the rotted soft tissues and replace them with straw or some other stuffing, and so it is that many of the bodies on display resemble large dolls or taxidermy mounts (indeed, one of

*This photo and all following in this essay were taken by Joanna Ebenstein, and are included here courtesy of the Order of the Capuchin Friars, Palermo.*



the Palermo preparers was a taxidermist). The ultimate result of these various methods of mummification are bodies in wildly differing states of preservation.

By the turn of the seventeenth century so many friars had died and been preserved that more room was needed, and underground corridors and chapels were created to house all the mummies; this is when the Palermo catacombs that we know today really began to take shape. Eventually wealthy patrons (apparently impressed with the spectacle) requested that their remains be preserved and displayed alongside the ever-growing ranks of dead friars and by the late eighteenth century the catacombs and the surrounding cemetery had become a popular place of burial and preservation. The wealthiest patrons were interred underneath marble and majolica slabs in the floor, but other socially elevated citizens chose to be mummified

and displayed in the underground corridors and chapels; the rest of the populace had to make do with anonymous burial in mass graves. So it was that the Capuchin catacombs of Palermo became a surreal, underground city of the well-dressed dead, a place where high society continued the social parade and announced its privileges, even after all earthly life had ceased.

By the mid-nineteenth century modern sanitary awareness signaled the end of the friar's mummification process, and by the beginning of the twentieth century relatively few bodies were interred. The miraculously preserved little Rosalia Lombardo (skillfully injected with paraffin) was given a special dispensation and placed in the catacombs in 1920. She is the most perfectly preserved body laid to rest there, and she was the very last.



In death we all look very much alike: the greater the decay, the less individual we are. This rather obvious fact was never more viscerally evident to me than when I encountered the Palermo mummies wearing their eternal Sunday best (right down to the fine shoes, slippers and elegant, leather gloves). The effect of all this sartorial splendor is grimly fascinating and strangely intimate. These bodies, as they slowly slough their withered skins, make a mockery of such social niceties as kid gloves and cravats; the effect is the very essence of the uncanny. These splendidly dressed corpses walk that unsettling line between living and dead, animate and inanimate, real and unreal. They display undeniably distinct personalities, their post-mortem body language a grotesque parody of life. Long after the muscles stiffen, the skin continues to shrink, harden and slough away, giving rise to hideous and comical expressions that



mirror the entire range of living emotion. Everywhere in this underground complex one encounters expressions of pain, fear, laughter, agony, surprise, resignation and sadness. The hanging bodies, obeying the call of gravity, slump and lean in intimate ways, and strangers in life are locked into decades of apparent conversation, whispering into one another's ear or lending a comforting shoulder.

The friars would occasionally redistribute the bodies, organizing them into categories according to profession, age, sex or class. There are what appear to be family groups, but most of the identifying records were destroyed in a fire long ago, and the true relation between the various slumping corpses is largely a mystery. Some of the bodies are placed together in chapels, the most eerie and devastating of which is undoubtedly the children's room; I had never seen old images of this particular cell, and it came as something of a surprise. Here the corpses of young children are hung very much like the adults outside, and the little slumping bodies in their niches highly resemble skeletonized dolls, the delicate cotton bonnets resting on bare skulls. Perhaps it is the fact that young children are so often in frenetic motion that the stasis in this room felt even more unnatural than the stately quiet of the corridors of the adult dead. The newborn babies, mummified and naked as they came into the world lie woodenly in their cradles in a brutal display of the madness of a parent's grief. One little boy in a particularly jaunty hat stands at attention in his Sunday best, inviting uneasy smiles as he welcomes decades of curious strangers. In this room, more than anywhere else, the grieving is still palpable, and the existential emptiness gapes wide.

It was in a disused work area at the back of one of the corridors that I fell utterly into the spell of the place. This room was set aside as a restoration area, a place where the bodies could







be maintained and restored to counter decades of damage from pollution, flooding, fires and the bombings of World War II. It was in this room that the catacombs finally looked and felt like those old sepia images hanging on my wall: Here were the stacks of ornate little coffins; there were no modern barriers of any kind. The mummies of small children were lying in boxes and plastic crates, waiting patiently for caregivers; in this state they looked even more like dolls—genuine examples of human taxidermy. Many of the bodies are stuffed with straw and cotton batting, which is now leaking and protruding out of various cracks and orifices. The babies' heads are mounted separately on wooden rods that run up through the small stuffed bodies, looking very much like the specimens of stuffed Victorian birds that I spend so much time restoring back home. I so wanted to put a few of them back together, but I touched nothing.

It was perfectly quiet, and I was alone, and I began to really take in the tiny, telling details: the fading of the fabrics, the

settling of the skin on bone, the mothing of wool, the worming of dried flesh, the shattering of silk. One woman in particular caught my attention: She was lying on a lower shelf, and her dress (a dusty blue fabric with a yellowing machine-lace overlay) looked to date from about the 1870s. I was struck by the pattern of the lace—it was so like a dress that I had brought with me for the trip. I began to wonder who picked out this particular outfit; did this woman know she was dying, and choose to be laid out in this dress forever? Was the choice made by a grieving husband or fiancée? Her parents? Did she die slowly of a wasting disease? Perhaps it was sudden, or the result of an accident or even foul play. As I leaned closer still, I had a sudden, intense sensation of her *presence*. Unlike graveyards with their stone monuments or columbiums with their plaques and flowers, the dead here speak for themselves. Unlike ossuaries, where the bones are anonymous and speak to a more abstract notion of eternity, these skeletons and mummies are as specific as can be. I found myself involuntarily speaking to her: “What a lovely dress you’re wearing,” I said, and I felt an entirely unexpected stinging of tears.

It occurred to me suddenly that all of these people were laid to rest here when the place was still active. The other denizens would have been far fresher, and their clothing would not have been the fascinating stuff of museums but common, everyday wear. Anyone choosing to be displayed here could see that the process was highly imperfect, that one’s body would continue to age in unexpected (and sometimes alarming) ways, and yet the choice was still made to join this somewhat ghastly spectacle. In the nearly 150 years since the woman in blue was interred here, Western attitudes towards death have changed utterly; something like this simply could not happen again. These catacombs are in part a holdover from earlier, pagan



times, when ancestor worship required the talismanic presence of the actual ancestor. They are also a crowning example of a certain kind of Christian materiality that sees preservation and the cessation of decay as evidence of God’s grace. All these mummies are secular incorruptibles who have been lifted from the earthly corruption of sin and set into a more celestial sphere beyond mortality. These bodies reside here in a state of highly improbable grace (bought and paid for in life), to be the stuff of dreams and nightmares for as long as their mortal remains can cohere. They are a paean to the uniquely human desire to transcend nature, move beyond the boundaries of our physical world, and become one with the angels.