Shipwreck

*And the Devil bubbled below the keel: "It's human, but is it Art?"*
– Rudyard Kipling

Katrin lies in front of me face-down and covered in plastic. A Chinese man in his twenties moves back the film to expose her hand and carves a little slit down her thumb. Moving quickly, he peels the skin back with tweezers and a scalpel, and I can see the thick flesh at the heel of the palm. A thin layer of fat as yellow as the fruit of a mango sits on a membrane above the muscle, and with a quick cut and pull it cleaves cleanly away. He flicks the globule of fat into a little metal bowl. Within a few minutes, the hand is skinned enough that I can see a strip of ligament running from a fingertip to the wrist. She might have been a typist – the ligament is thick and developed, as if she relied on it. She might have been a writer. A journalist. A pianist.

Katrin is destined to be a part of Body Worlds – a set of exhibitions traveling through Europe and Asia, for which human corpses are made into mummies called “plastinates.” Unlike the mummies of Egypt, however, these plastinates are perfectly preserved. Through a complicated process, the fluids in the body are replaced with a polymer. Thus, a body can look much as it did upon death, hypothetically for thousands of years. Standing in the dissection hall in northeast China, watching Katrin’s hand being flayed, I notice the fingerprints peel off the pads of each finger in quick slips. Dr. Gunther von Hagens, a German anatomist, invented plastination in 1979 and immediately began taking volunteers – people willing to have their bodies plastinated after death.
Katrin was one such volunteer. The worker holds up a fingerprint for me, transparent by the light of the window. Here in Dalian, Plastination City processes hundreds of bodies each year.

A few weeks ago, my brother emailed me from London with a picture of his new girlfriend and a hyperlink: www.bodyworlds.com. He was heading to China to write an article for Science Magazine, and wondered if I wouldn’t like to come along as a “poet in residence.” (He’s always concocting ways for me to tag along – if I weren’t busy finishing grad school, in a few months I’d be on a ship in the Indian Ocean trying to harpoon a sperm whale. Ya-hey, Ahab.) Having never been to Asia, and curious about China’s frenzied pursuit of capitalism in the “new economic zone” of Dalian, I immediately agreed to go. I didn’t check the link he’d sent me for another week. That’s when I saw a child’s head made entirely of plastinated veins.

They’d pumped resins through the circulatory system of the young body and then dipped the whole thing in acid – only the blood vessels were left. It looks like a faint red cloud of a child. A whisper and hush. I immediately checked out a copy of Grey’s Anatomy and snagged a plane ticket on the cheap. When you go scuba diving, you fall into the water head-first and backwards. I think this was something like that.

A worker slides a scalpel under the lip of Katrin’s thumbnail and pulls.

Body Worlds is “anatomical art” – a tradition started in the middle ages when artists such as Andreas Vesalius and Michelangelo explored the aesthetic of anatomy. Dead bodies were depicted as partially flayed nudes, gracefully presenting their own organs. This tradition has long since fallen out of fashion, and anatomy has been relegated to anatomical museums, featuring jars of floating organs or virtual reality tours of body systems. Now, as if walking out of history, von Hagens has taken the
Renaissance nudes and brought them to life. But his nudes actually are nudes – every body on display was once a living, breathing individual. This has shocked the people coming to the London exhibition. Unlike the Renaissance audience, accustomed to plagues, public hangings and vivisections, we rarely encounter death in person.

Dr. von Hagens is away in South Korea at a new exhibition in Seoul. So, armed with a notepad, a translator, and Christine – the very press-shy manager of Plastination City, a tall blonde northern German with somewhat menacing teeth – I find myself here in the dissection hallway around mid-morning, and embark on a journey in which I will see more dead bodies than I have ever seen in my life. My brother is off pursuing photos. I tuck my stomach into a tight little corner and order it to keep quiet.

The Body Worlds website keeps a running tally: before I left California, the wait to get into the London exhibit (in a warehouse on the outskirts of town) was around 2 hours. To date, over 13.5 million people have gone through the doors. But why are we coming? What do we want from Katrin? All she has to offer is muscle and teeth, the white hair of nerves, the swollen sack of the heart – the shipwreck of her body. Yet there’s no lack of interest in her. Thousands of people have walked through row after row of corpses in a peculiar hush, like a procession in a church. To try and find out why we keep coming to these exhibitions, I need to know just what kind of art this is. If these were simple nudes, I wouldn’t need to come halfway across the planet. The nude is familiar territory, with a pedigree going back thousands of years written in stone and patina. But these are not simulacra. Can a dead human body be a piece of art “about” the human body?

I look down at death for answers. One worker begins stripping the skin from Katrin’s calf. It feels a little like staring down from a great precipice – a dizziness and
exhilaration and the simultaneous desire to jump and to run back to the car. As the shinbone hovers behind fat and membranes, as a caterpillar shows through its chrysalis, I scramble back to what I know about art. Artists have used parts of the body in their work before – urine and blood, for instance. Spit. Artists have used animal bones in their art, even. But no one’s taken an entire human body and turned it into raw material.

It’s been said that every work of art has a subject. One might say that Picasso’s Guernica is about the horror of war, or that Monet’s Jardin de Giverny is about the beauty of peace. Even Duchamp’s ubiquitous urinal had a subject – the piece was about Art and Intent. Watching the skin gradually peeling off Katrin’s extremities like the skin of a fruit, I know that the subject of these pieces must have something to do with the body. But I’m not sure that the subject of a sculpture can be itself. Michelangelo’s David certainly isn’t “about” marble. So it seems unlikely that the subject of von Hagens’ cadavers is the nude. If these are indeed artworks, what is their subject? When asked, Dr. von Hagens has answered mysteriously, “the body is the ship of the soul.”

A man scrapes tissue off his gloved finger on the side of the metal table. The workers joke with one another in Chinese. I know they’re joking because they’re laughing. I don’t speak a whiff of Chinese. I don’t ask my translator because people should be allowed to go about their business without always explaining it to the American. This feels suspiciously like reading Pound’s Cantos.

When asked about the aim of his exhibitions, Dr. von Hagens has said humans “reveal their individuality not only through the visible exterior, but also through the interior of their bodies as each one is distinctly different. Position, size, shape and structure of skeleton, muscles, nerves and organs determine our face within.” But then, in these exhibitions, he purposefully changes the position and structure of these bodies to
reveal something – we normally can’t see organs through a wall of muscle, so he cuts a window in the muscle. There are buckets of spare organs across the room – is the “face within” still the same face without its nose? Eyes? What if the face were rearranged like a Picasso? And what of this face belongs to the conscious individual that once resided in the body – the “ship” that carries us? His metaphors feel slippy. I’ve come to Dalian, a port town on the north rim of the Yellow Sea, to find out what happens when a human body becomes a work of art, and what that art could possibly be about.

While we stand around Katrin’s corpse, Christine begins rattling off the four steps of plastination. “First, the bodies are dissected to remove the skin and fatty layers.” The metal bowls positioned around the table are filling with yellow fat. I notice one worker has a bowl perched in the hollow below Katrin’s pubic bone. The fat wobbles with each addition. “After dissection, the bodies are further defatted in acetone. Once the body is done in defatting, they are impregnated with polymer.” The bowl in Katrin’s crotch leans worriedly to the left. “For the final step, the bodies are positioned in various gestures, and given a gas cure to harden the polymer.” The worker moves the bowl down between Katrin’s knees. I look back up at Christine. “The tour will follow these steps, in order, so that you will see bodies at each stage of the process.” She smiles, looking for recognition.

I tuck my notepad into my jacket. “Yes. That sounds lovely.”

Plastination City is composed of two drab concrete buildings and two bunkers high up on a hill in Dalian’s new technology park. The tour begins in the dissection hall. At the far end, two men insert mung beans into the cracks of human skulls, which they will water until the skull cracks along its natural fissures. Winter light filters in through the blinds. Stretching back in double rows from the skulls, there are over a dozen tables
like the one Katrin is on. Around each table, two or three workers hunch over tendons and ligaments, each carving according to Dr. von Hagens’ vision. It reminds me of descriptions I’ve read of Warhol’s factory. Except, of course, this artist is a scientist and a millionaire. That’s a bit different. And his “materials” were once living, breathing, conscious people.

A girl in her 20’s is cutting the fat from Katrin’s Achilles tendon in short, clever strokes, palms as small as a pocket mirror. Through the film, I can see her ear, delicately molded, like seeing an iris in a freezer bag. Her hair is gone. In my pocket, I finger my comb.

Moving to another table bearing a heavyset man with a butterflied thigh, I ask our translator if there is one set process to these dissections, or if it differs from body to body.

“According to what Gunter wants, they will dissect the body, usually taking off the skin and fatty layer, and bringing out details of the musculature or skeleton according to what will be the focus of the masterpiece.” Behind us, a man in his early 30’s is trimming the fat from Katrin’s left thigh, which flies pointedly into a little metal bowl set aside for scraps. I make it a point not to stand near the bowls.

After a few minutes walking among the bodies and buckets of extra organs, the tour moves to the Dehydration room. Once she has been trimmed for up to eight weeks in Dissection, Katrin will be moved here. The bodies are stored in pure acetone in large metal vats. A window looks out on a wintering hill, where scrub clings hopelessly to dust and gravel. The smell of acetone is overpowering when the lid opens, like a tub of nail polish remover.
The translator helps another worker open a vat of human parts. I see lungs, brains, various organs, and strangely, a single pair of feet sunk in a clear stringent pool. The worker standing next to me delicately holds his nose.

He closes the vat, and my tour moves to the Defatting room across the hall. The stench is overpowering. It’s not a rotting smell, as there is no decomposition here. The room has to be at ambient temperature so that the acetone can dissolve the remaining fats from the flesh. Katrin will stay in one of these vats for a month or so. She’ll need to be turned frequently, so the defatting is even. A man floats face-down in the vat, his heels in a rigid angle. I know in a few hours they will turn him, his nose grazing the surface of the liquid. The windows from this room look out on an industrial park. The tour shuffles quickly on.

As we walk, I scribble into my notebook. Nothing about the process thus far seems particularly artful. It may take a lot of skill, but nothing beyond creative anatomy. I think of one of the more famous plastinates from the exhibitions: a man holding his own skin. On the skin (which looks like a sad, wrinkled balloon) one can see the calluses on the soles of his feet. His arm is raised, and his face looks curiously proud. Anatomical displays are not supposed to have an expression. And why should they? Science has no need for gesture. The standard anatomical museum keeps death in a safe white room – their only purpose is education. But we all know we have calluses on our feet. Works of art usually serve a further purpose – they illuminate some aspect of the human experience.

Dr. von Hagens has been roundly criticized by British ethicists and anatomists alike. Some call him the “Disney of Death.” (And here I am in Epcot Center.) Strangely, despite a creeping nausea, I find myself on von Hagens side – thus far I’ve
seen very little that’s controversial. Yes, burial and cremation and ritual and, all in all, we’ve found a very neat scaffolding for death – but there’s also medicine and poetic license, and there’s nothing wrong with donating one’s body willfully, right? My driver’s license says I’m donating my organs – even my eyes (myopic as they are, hazel, with that yellow ring around the pupil).

There are large freezers in the hallway as we make our way to the stairs. I’m guessing they’re not full of pies.

We arrive upstairs at the Plastination room, where Katrin will go immediately after her defatting. After the stench of acetone, I feel a little flimsy, sort of stretched out. I lean against another silicone-filled vat for support. There is a body lying face-up on an operating table, covered in saran wrap and some kind of goo the color of pepto bismol. A steady drip from the table hits the grated floor and oozes through the spaces. Three men and one woman hold long syringes, injecting liquid silicone into the muscles. Two feet point toward me, their skin removed, and I can see the thick strap of muscle that runs under the bones, up the heel to the ankle. The muscle has strings of viscous pink connecting it to the table, and I can’t help but think of the feet of dancers, incredibly strong but hopelessly mangled. My toes sweat in their winter socks.

My translator goes into some technical details about the vat I’m leaning on. I move aside and hop from one foot to another. Two men with plastic gloves assist Christine, while the translator moves what looks like a timer. I ask her what it’s for. “Impregnation. This one’s done cooking in about 20 hours.”

A plate glass window separates the contents of the vat from open air. The inside is kept under vacuum so the silicon boils cold. A fat bubble pops near my arm. It strikes
me as odd that a wooden 2x4 floats on the surface. Before I can ask, the translator tells me it’s weighing down the body.

I suddenly realize there is a corpse hidden within this liquid. It’s been stewing under there for weeks, while the acetone bubbles away from the flesh and the silicone seeps in. The liquid is candy pink, like cheap bubblegum, pepto bismol. Pokémon pink. Katrin will boil in this vat for two to three months.

I’m feeling light-headed and swimmy. I can see the precipice stretching before me, and pebbles below my feet. From far away, a voice says, “After Plastination, the bodies are moved to Positioning. Shall we go there now?”

I try to locate the voice. I stare at Christine’s teeth. I thumb the pages of my notebook and say, “Yes. Yes. That would be lovely.”

I step on my own foot to snap out of it. I button up my jacket as we walk out of the room, and I hope Christine hadn’t noticed that I nearly fainted. But she must get a lot of that. We go down the stairs and move outside and cross over to Bunker 2. When Katrin is taken here, she will be carried on a gurney by two workers over a gravel driveway in the springtime China air, covered in plastic and secured with a strap. I pull my scarf more tightly around my neck, gulping for oxygen just south of Siberia. The sky is an improbable blue.

We hurry through the cold into Bunker 2, and the door closes with a little click behind us. I desperately hope this room will provide me with answers. So far, all I’ve seen is death and how to stop decay. I still haven’t seen a hint of art. I peek around Christine’s shoulder and survey the premises. To my left, three workers are planting colored flags in a cross-section of body, sliced (I’m told) by a giant saw through either side of the man’s nose down through his feet – about 2 inches of a man, length-wise. The
workers mumble to each other in Chinese. They look strangely like heads of state muttering over the division of colonies – a red flag for the pancreas, France gets Congo. A blue-pinned flag through a testicle, South Africa. I scan over to my right. Although I’m beginning to become desensitized to the macabre, I’m startled to find a camel dominating the room.

The beast is huge, and it stands on a platform which further dwarfs the anatomists working in the bunker. It’s been sliced two times in precise increments through the head and neck, such that the eyes are on slabs of camel head separated from the center slab, which has the nose, parts of the tongue, and sinuses. Much as Michelangelo showed a diagram of the human body in movement – the famous sketch where the man, located in a sphere, has multiple arms shown in different positions – what they’ve done is taken these three slabs and fanned them out vertically. The effect is to see the far inside of the head at the top, at a standard elevation. Then, the middle slab dips a bit down from the other, and finally, the near slab, with its lips and eyelashes, is all the way down towards the ground, as if it were grazing on desert scrub. In this way, I can see the physical movement, like snapshots, of a camel grazing, while also seeing the mechanisms that make it possible – the incisors, the throat, the tongue, the massive nose and sinus cavities, the striated muscle of the neck. It’s highly educational, but I am also made to feel as if the camel is alive and I just happened to have X-Ray vision. They’ve added black marbles behind the eyelids, which reflect the lashes and our faces in a convex mirror. Wildflowers have been stuffed into its open stomach. Clearly, this isn’t the work of purists or simple anatomists. This room is a workshop for artists.

As I move closer the near slice of the camel’s head, watching my own face distort in the glass eye, I feel less than certain that I’m seeing the “face within” Dr. von Hagens
described. “I would reach the limit of good taste,” Dr. von Hagens once admitted, "if I carved a vase from a lung, filled it with water and placed a daisy in it. Or if I fashioned a carnival mask from a stomach.” And yet here, with this camel before me (whose stomach had the side wall punched out and serves as a vase for dried wildflowers) I realize the line between good taste and bad taste blur, as do the lines between Science and Art. Sure, the camel might eat wildflowers (there’s a shortage in the Sahara, but camels certainly would eat them if the opportunity presented itself). But the flowers are artfully arranged – as one might find in a vase. While von Hagens argues that using the body tissue as one might use clay would be inexcusable, these pieces aren’t representative of how the body actually appears under the skin – it’s how the body appears according to Dr. von Hagens’ imagination coupled with a good deal of intent. If we have a face within, this German does make it a bit of a carnival. Maybe this camel wouldn’t be out of place in New Orleans.

As we drift between clusters of activity, the translator describes the final step in plastination. When Katrin arrives, she will be assigned a small group of workers, who will “position” her as Dr. von Hagens has ordered. They will move her bones, trim her muscle (pulling strings out, if need be, to emphasize striation) and give her face expression. All this will work to choreograph her final gesture. Depending on the complexity of the work, she could be here anywhere from three months to a year or more. Little string after little string. Like choreography. Like practicing for piano recitals. But only one performance, and only one piece left to perform. Forever.

The bunker is massive, with at least two dozen workers hovering around stations scattered throughout the room. Many pieces are strung from wires hung from mobile frames which suspend the body and give it form. For instance, behind the camel sits
“The Philosopher,” his arms hovering over a table of invisible work, wires hooked into his shoulders to determine the posture. The flesh has been cut away from his back, revealing nerves of the spinal structure. A baby camel stands in the far right corner. To my left, workers flick excess material into silver bowls from a corpse on a metal gurney. (I again avoid the bowls.)

About five feet from the adult camel, two men sit hunched over one of Dr. von Hagens’ sculptures. From the ceiling, a single arm dangles from two wires, severed at the shoulder, pointing downward with a yellow fingernail. Our translator introduces one of the men as Zhou Shouli, the most senior worker in Plastination City. She tells me he can speak authoritatively on just about anything that occurs in Positioning.

Zhou Shouli is working on an “exploded elbow.” Like any devoted nerd, his eyes light up when I show genuine interest in his work. He draws me in closer and shows how they pulled the bones of the joint apart in order to demonstrate the particular muscles that hold the structure together. It’s rather like being shown the parts of an engine – here’s a cam, here’s a shaft. When I ask what the overall purpose is, however, he points towards a trunk of nerves that moves from the shoulder down through the elbow, fanning out into smaller nerves once it reaches the wrist. The nerves (which look like tangled white hair) have been pulled away from the hand and drape gently over the side of the ring finger. Marriage of muscle and electrical patterns. I catch myself pointing at my own forearm as I talk to Shouli, demonstrating the line of nerves from the wrist to the elbow. I picture the skin folding back away from my finger, like Katrin’s hand back in Dissection, exposing the bones and veins and wet muscle. I start to get dizzy again, and try to ignore it.
The gesture of the hand Shouli is working on is much like Adam’s on the ceiling of the Sistine chapel. Three fingers are curled very gently away, and the extended finger isn’t rigid, but rather moves in a gentler arc towards the polished concrete floor. A muted reflection in the tile points back upwards. This isn’t the natural repose of a hand, so I have to presume it was “positioned” this way. Another mark of the artist.

I ask him which piece is his favorite, and he smiles and thinks for a moment. He says his favorite work is called “Standing Beauty” and consists of a pregnant woman standing with one hand in front of her belly and another sweeping to the side. The stomach has been cut away, exposing the layers of the abdomen and the fetus within the womb. He says it is as if she were “asking someone to protect her child.” It isn’t the most complicated piece, as one might expect an anatomist to choose. It isn’t particularly instructive, or at least no more instructive than the other pregnant body in exhibition, which is shown in a reclining position – “Reclining Beauty” – and was criticized for seeming sexualized. Rather, he says that he loves “Standing Beauty” simply “because of the gesture.”

On a hunch, I ask him if he loves the piece because of the art of it. He gets excited and says rapidly, “Yes. The art. The gesture. It is more subtle than the other, but it is more artful.” He calls the work a “masterpiece.”

Despite the simplicity of her posture, he’d worked on “Standing Beauty” for 18 months. More complicated plastinates can take much longer. There’s no prescribed gestation period. Like any artwork, it’s done when it’s done.

We let him get back to his work, which looks intensive. We walk casually through the room, looking over the shoulders of the workers, trying not to get in the way. We pass The Philosopher, the camel and many, many others, all attentively serviced by
the workers. One woman wipes more silicon on a forearm – it’s imperative that the bodies stay wet until they are cured.

My attention is drawn to the back of the room, where a large chalkboard announces something important-looking in Chinese. My translator says it’s mostly announcements for the company. Like posting boards in universities, its edges are aflurry with fliers. On the chalkboard itself are two free-form sketches of human figures done in the style of Picasso. The faces are a geometry of lines, the arms are mismatched lengths, the feet aren’t discernible. I wonder if they know Picasso would often say that his portraits were attempting to portray “how the model really looks.” I wonder if they find themselves, in the heavy hours of the workshop, thinking that they are making portraits of individuals using the bodies they’ve left behind. If Katrin were to become The Philosopher, would she be a portrait of how she must have looked when she engaged in logic? Sitting at the table, then, notes strewn in front of her, a dichotomy of nerves. Writing a treatise on the metaphysics of magnets. The pull and repel. Desire.

Near the chalkboard there is a worker pulling strings of muscle from a female pelvis. He gestures to us to come closer, and then points at the muscles wrapped around her hips. He says something to the translator, and smiles broadly.

She laughs and says to me, “He says she was very strong.”

“Who?”

“The woman. He says she must have been very strong.”

I’m baffled. The body is only the pelvis, lopped off above the hips and below mid-thigh. She? She was very strong? Even headless, without even a portion of a face or a mummified brain, does this piece make its sculptor wonder about the individual?

“How can you tell?”
He draws a line in the air with his finger above the muscles. It seems the musculature is more developed than in the average woman. They can also tell her age, just by the pelvis. Anatomists are magicians with mirrors and saws. How old is Katrin, I wonder? Thirty? Twenty? Forty-five? I’m self-conscious of the calendar between my hips. Does it know when I will die?

If the skin hadn’t been removed, then Body Worlds would be a kind of Madame Toussard’s wax museum in the flesh. But there’s no way to recognize these individuals. According to von Hagens’ wishes, all records of the individual are destroyed before display. So can any connection remain between the audience and the people who once occupied these grotesque forms?

I feel like I’m about to crack the code. If bodies truly are “the ship of the soul” as Dr. von Hagens says, then what happens to the ship once the passenger has left? Wouldn’t we find evidence of the passage? If a body is a ship, then wouldn’t we find some remnants of the individual in the depths of its ballasts? Or, if nothing else, wouldn’t we desire to know where it’s been, the line of its journey? Some mark of salt on its skin? And if lost, we came upon a ship that seems pointed towards our destination, wouldn’t we at least look through the wreckage for its log and compass?

When Katrin is finally done being positioned, she will be given a gas cure. This will solidify the resins in her body, and make a permanence of her final gesture. As the camel is such a large piece, it’s being left in Positioning to continue drying. So it isn’t done. Wanting to see a recently finished product, I ask if they have any here in Dalian. The translator rushes off with a doctor, looking excited. She opens a metal drawer, in a cabinet I hadn’t noticed before, and withdraws a large, wrapped package. She promptly unwraps it, and holds it up for me to look at.
The translator smiles, and says blithely, “Smoker’s lungs.”

I’m floored. The lungs are perfectly shaped, like folded wings drawn by a cubist. But what draws me to them is their color. They look something like freshly mined ore – thin ribbons of green and black metallic run across their surface in chaotic patterns, like iron veins will run in rock. Working up my courage, I brush the left lung. It feels like rigid Styrofoam. I ask the translator if they’ve added color anywhere in the process.

“No, this is the color. Tar deposits.”

I’ve already seen pictures of smokers’ lungs. They used them to scare kids away from smoking. But these lungs, plastinated, are both gorgeous and ominous. They have their own message. They’re not telling me “don’t smoke or you’ll regret it.” Instead, when I’m holding these pieces, I imagine the lung filling and filling with smoke. I imagine the smoke coloring the tissue with metals and tar. I imagine the mouth inhaling the smoke, and the mouth turning to speak to an unknown listener. I hear coughing and laughter. As I turn the lung over in my hands, I listen to a message spoken in an unfamiliar language – a language made of breathing and blood and finality. And finally, what’s most unexpected, and sends my stomach reeling, is that the message isn’t von Hagens’. I’m hearing ghosts.

As I hand over the lung and walk back out into the shocking cold, I come to a decision. This story is not von Hagens’, or China’s, or even mine. It belongs to these bodies. These pieces are portraits, of a kind, in that they carry remnants of the individual that once lived inside of them. Whatever Dr. von Hagens’ intentions, they are a kind of monument – the way a shipwreck, once discovered by divers, is a testament to both its cargo and its journey into the sea. And when the audience comes diving, we’re looking for something. The reason everyone’s so quiet in the exhibitions is not simply out of
respect. What saves Body Worlds from being a carnival of the grotesque — a
Disneyworld of Death — is our intention. We are coming for answers — what is this
living? What dying? We want answers from the flesh. When we come to the Body
Worlds exhibitions, we are listening for the dead.

In a room in Dalian, a body I named Katrin lies on a metal table, her feet pointed
towards the window, her hands skinless and cupped. She can’t tell me where she came
from. She can’t tell me about the boat she took there, carrying hundreds of other donated
bodies in metal vats from Germany, through the Mediterranean, past Egypt, down a canal
into the Bitter Lakes and finally the widening bay. She can’t lift her finger to trace a map
on a piece of paper. If I were to ask her, she would simply stare at the faint red glow of
the back of her eyelids, her neck in a delicate arc, her lips stuck together in the blue rose
of nothing. Below her toe, where under the nail a cube of sand lies stranded, a worker
uses a scalpel to ease the skin back and down. I look past her body, out the window to an
industrial park, and down towards the sea — but that ship is gone.