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PREFACE

I am not sure when I began this book. I grew up with a phone call away from an autopsy—a “post” that is, post-mortem dissection—that took my father, a pathologist, away from the dinner table to the morgue and left me wondering what happened there and to what. What was a dead body really? He never took me with him, although I did spend hours washing him, preparing the organs he had removed from it for microscopic examination and listening to him in his study as he dictated his findings. But in my first eighteen years, I knew the dead body only through hearsay or through its detached parts.

In the summer of 1964, I finally saw one—a cadaver to be more precise. It was at the University of Cincinnati, where I was working in a biochemistry lab after my business year. My first cadaver was a first-year medical student who had failed gross anatomy and was asked to try again. He was happy enough for my company. I watched him dissect but did not get my hands on the body. In the summer of 1980, at the beginning of fifteen months on an American Council of Learned Societies fellowship that I used for study medicine, I finally had—*or rather*—worked with three others—my own cadaver. The dead body in these circumstances is a very material thing, with holes through which nerves and vessels and lymphatic pass, and connective tissues that connect, and tendons that, if pulled, will stretch muscles.

We—my tablemates and I—learned the names of hundreds of structures as we disassembled our body, our object of study. But it also had a face, at least until we started working on the fiendishly difficult anatomy of the head. I was not so blinded by the need to do well on tests that I could not think about how strange this body was—this body that now seemed to exist only in terms of its role in a team. It had been a person, a fact that did not sit well with its current condition. We were told to be respectful toward it and that what remained would be treated