

Life and Death at a Human Decomposition Facility

Transcript

Felix Poon: So what are the booties for? Why do I need them?

Carter Unger: They're to cover your shoes.

Felix Poon: So I don't track flesh into my hotel room tonight. Is that the idea?

Carter Unger: I mean, if you're into that?

Nick Passalacqua: Yeah. So it's basically to protect your feet from getting gross more than anything, you know, you don't want to spread bio hazardous materials anywhere.

[MUX IN]

Nate Hegyi: I'm Nate.

Felix Poon: I'm Felix.

Nate Hegyi: And this is outside in. Now a few months ago, Felix you came to a team meeting...and you proposed to fly to North Carolina, and take a tour of a very special facility... where researchers study something that is.... I mean what adjectives would you use here, Felix?

Felix Poon: Umm, definitely morbid. Some would say gross, but I feel that's a little disrespectful.

Nate Hegyi: Yeah it's a little bit gross but like, also, natural.

Felix Poon: Just something...natural, but also very few of us like ever see, up close and personal

Nate Hegyi: So obviously, we said yes, we sent Felix to North Carolina. Where he put on some protective booties...

Felix Poon: So these kind of look like shower caps that I'm putting on my feet.

Nate Hegyi: And walked inside this fenced off enclosure...

Felix Poon: And lying on the ground

Felix Poon: Oh

Felix Poon: are about 20 dead...rotting...human bodies.

Felix Poon: Oh, it smells.

Felix Poon: This is a place where people study... human decomposition

<<NUTGRAF>>

Nate : Human decomposition is the stuff of murder mysteries and horror movies. I mean it scares us. A lot of people would rather not think about it. And yet, death is a natural process. It sustains and gives life to other beings like birds, flies, and microbes.

Felix Poon: And you know we're always saying that our show is about the natural world and how we use it. But what about a show about how the natural world uses us?

Lucinda: Some small animal comes and takes a bite of the side and the whole body collapses like a balloon...

Today on Outside/In, I take a tour of a human decomposition facility, also known as a body farm, to see what insights the people working here have about death.

Nate Hegyi: So should we. Should we have a content warning for this?

Felix Poon: Yeah. I don't want to say skip this episode if it makes you feel uncomfortable, because when I stepped in there, I was definitely uncomfortable. But I am going to be describing what I saw in there. So this episode may not be for everybody.

Mackenzie: The first time I saw a fresh donor... it was very weird for me...

<<FIRST HALF>>

Felix Poon: so first, Nate, have you ever heard of a body farm?

Nate Hegyi: Yes, I have heard of body farms, but honestly, like CSI probably, or maybe like reading on Wikipedia. But I don't know much about them.

Felix Poon: Yeah. So the first modern body farm, also known as a human decomposition facility - was established by a forensic anthropologist named Dr. Bill Bass. Bass is in his 90s now, and he's been called to testify in murder cases as early as the 1950s. He's examined all sorts of human remains to estimate their age, sex, and height. But that work is based mostly off looking at skeletons - Bass knew a lot less about how human bodies decompose, and there's a particular case in 1977 that he got really wrong.

Nate Hegyi: What did he get wrong?

Felix Poon: So there was this case in Tennessee where authorities dug up this headless corpse that looked pretty fresh. Bass was quoted by newspapers as saying the victim had been dead two months to a year tops. But authorities later realized that this was actually the body of a lieutenant colonel, William Shy, killed in 1864 in the Civil War.

Nate Hegyi: Wait, what? That is so off

Felix Poon: Yeah. This mistake came back to haunt Bass, like in the courtroom. Attorneys would cross-examine him and be like, Didn't you once get the time since death wrong by a whopping 112 years?

Nate Hegyi: Well this does go to show that at the end of the day, even the experts are just giving educated guesses.

Felix Poon: And thankfully in this case they figured it out . But can you imagine if they didn't? They might've ended up wrongfully convicting someone of murder, and they would've justified it from Bass's testimony.

Nate Hegyi: Ooof, yeah.

So anyway, Bass realizes he has a LOT to learn about human decomposition. So he establishes the University of Tennessee Anthropological Research Facility in 1980. It's the first modern place dedicated to studying how human bodies decompose.

And then the second facility opens in 2007 at Western Carolina University, in North Carolina, and it's where I got to touch my first ever human bone.

Felix Poon: Can I touch one of these?

Nick Passalacqua: Yeah, for sure.

So this is Nick Passalacqua, he's the director of the Forensic Anthropology program, and he's showing me the University's skeleton collection.s.

Felix Poon: I don't know if I've ever touched a human bone before. I'm very nervous when I pick each one. I'm just. I'm surprised you're even letting me do this. But they're all pretty light.

Nick Passalacqua: You know, these are all from our donors. And so the vast majority of our donors are elderly. You know, some of these donors may have had osteoporosis, for example. And so their bones are going to probably feel lighter because they've gone through that degrading process biologically over time.

Nate Hegyi: did he say donors?

Felix Poon: Yeah. I mean they gotta get their bodies from somewhere right? So, you can pre-register to have your body donated here after you die.

[MUX IN]

Nick Passalacqua: So these are all willed body donors. They've all been processed. And now they're all, you know, essentially in curation here.

Nate Hegyi: What does this room look like?

Felix Poon: So the collection is like a library, but instead of stacks of books, it's stacks of boxes on shelves. There's one disassembled skeleton in each box.

Nate Hegyi: And these are like clean, totally clean skeletons right?

Felix Poon: Yeah, when they say they're processed they mean all the soft tissue's been removed.

Nate Hegyi: Right. But they had to come from somewhere, they didn't always look that way.

Felix Poon: They come from somewhere, they come from the place that is next on my tour that Nick brings me.

Nick Passalacqua: hello

Felix Poon: It's nice to meet you in person

Becca George: It's nice to meet you too.

Felix Poon: the processing lab.

Becca George: So we just had a shift finish up, so they just essentially cleaned the tools and clean the surface areas of their stuff, so the next shift isn't walking into a complete disaster.

Felix Poon: This is Dr. Rebecca George, who goes by Becca. Becca's the facility curator, and she manages the student volunteers. So we're in this lab now. It's this windowless room with fluorescent lighting. And I see a tray of bones on a stainless steel table, I think they're mostly rib bones, thigh bones, some pieces of back bone

Felix Poon: Yeah. So? So where do these bones did they just come from? The decomposition Facility.

Becca George: Yes. This one is kind of in a rough spot. It had been like really wet and gross and moldy. So this one's actually been out there since 2020. One of the last ones that we have out there from that year.

Nate Hegyi: So, wait the bones are moldy? Or like, do they have moldy skin on them?

Felix Poon: No there's not anything really left on the bone, it's pretty bare bone, But these bones are wet, they're dark brown, almost black in some spots. And there's just teeny bits of like, white stuff on it. It looks almost like plaque.

Nate Hegyi: Huh.

Felix Poon: Yeah so as Becca and I talk, a few students are coming in and sitting down around the stainless steel table, which is an autopsy table. Each of them has a bone they're working on and they're methodically scraping and picking at that white plaque-like stuff with dental picks and tweezers, and they're gently brushing it with toothbrushes and they're just having casual conversation while they're at it:

Kadri Greene: I went to my dorm after going to the body farm, and I just sniffed my mouthwash just to get the smell away.

Felix Poon: Did it work?

Kadri Greene: Yes it did.

Victoria Deal: I usually use Vick's Vaporub. It's very strong.

Kadri Greene: Yeah

Nate Hegyi: Felix, this is not what I think about as your typical college work study. Like, what makes a person want to study dead bodies when they grow up?

Felix Poon: Yeah, totally. No, I had that question too, and I asked them

Victoria Deal: There's this one show Bones, that kind of introduces people.

Carlee Green: But I never watched Bones, that one wasn't mine.

Felix Poon: Which one was it for you?

Carlee Green: My two were CSI and NCIS, those were the ones I watched.

[MUX IN]

Nate Hegyi: Bones. I knew it, I knew it. I knew it had to be something like CSI or Bones. Yeah, right.

Felix Poon: Like, yeah, totally. Yeah, in fact, there's a term for this, and it's called the CSI Effect.

Nate Hegyi: It's like Jurassic Park when everybody watched Jurassic Park and they got excited about becoming a paleontologist. It's like it sounds like the same thing.

Felix Poon: Yean, And., Becca, the facility curator, says the CSI effect is what got HER into forensic anthropology, and she says it's what got a lot of women into it as well. Two of the main CSI investigators in the original series were women.

Felix Poon: And, these days about 80% of forensics science students are women, up from about 64% when CSI first came out in 2000.

Nate Hegyi: That's really interesting.

Felix Poon: Although I SHOULD say... the methods in these shows are NOT accurate portrayals of real life.

Nate Hegyi: I'm going to be honest, that definitely doesn't surprise me.

Felix Poon: Yeah. So the lab students tell me that in the shows, the forensic experts, they just take like a quick look at a dead body at a crime scene, and they're like, okay, this person was a five foot six female in her mid-forties, you know?

Nate Hegyi: Right? Yeah. Oh, absolutely. Yeah.

Felix Poon: But in real life, they're just estimates - and it's a much more involved process – bringing the body into the lab, removing all the soft tissue from the body

[MUX OUT]

which, by the way, that sometimes involves boiling the remains in crock pots, you know, like slow cookers

Nate Hegyi: Oh, man. You just made me, like, not want to ever make bone broth again, because that's how I make bone broth.

Felix Poon: I mean, what else is better at that than crockpots? How else do you get fall off the bone consistency, Nate?

Nate Hegyi: Oh, thank you for that. Felix. There goes, like, any appetite I've ever had for ribs.

Felix Poon: Thank you. Well, yeah, it's a bit of a process, but I don't get the sense from these students that they're disappointed with real life forensic anthropology being different from the shows. If anything, they appreciate the slow, methodical nature of the work.

Carlee Green: It's almost calming.

Felix Poon: This is Carlee Green.

Carlee Green: Because it's just something like, you don't have to use your brain. You can just sit here and just work on cleaning off a bone and then you're done.

Victoria Deal: Dr. George is always talking about how it's just kind of like mind numbing.

Felix Poon: This is Victoria Deal.

Victoria Deal: It's kind of something a lot of us need during the week, you know, like we're still being productive, but we're not having to, you know, you know, overanalyze things and, you know, read articles.

Felix Poon: Apparently more students tend to sign up for this work closer to finals as a way to de-stress.

Nate Hegyi: Oh yeah! It's like when I get really stressed out and I clean my apartment, or I like organize my record collection or something like that and...

Felix Poon: Cleaning things.

Nate Hegyi: Cleaning things. Exactly.

Felix Poon: Cleaning things is a very meditative experience.

Nate Hegyi: And it's cool because they just, they seem so comfortable doing this.

Felix Poon: Yeah. Working with Bones doesn't seem too difficult for students, but when it comes to corpses that are either fresh or actively decomposing, that's when it can be difficult.

Carter Unger: Um, my name is Carter Unger, I am a forensic anthropology and criminal justice double major at...

Felix Poon: So Carter Unger knew she wanted to do forensics by the time she was a sophomore in high school But even when she got here

Carter Unger: I was so nervous up to the point of going there, like I felt sick because I was going to be disappointed in myself if I couldn't handle it. But then I did go. I was it was very overwhelming because it became real overwhelming.

Felix Poon: In what way? Like like you were feeling something.

Carter Unger: It was a bit of emotional just because I hadn't been exposed to that circumstance before. I've never been in one of those situations. And I remember talking about it with you after, I believe, and I was just like, Did that actually happen?

Felix Poon: Carter's talking to her friend Maggie Klemm here, who's a semester ahead of her.

Carter Unger: I don't know. We were on my bed and I started talking about it. And whenever I talk about like how I'm feeling, I start crying. And you usually laugh at me.

Felix Poon: You laughed at her?

Maggie Klemm: Yeah, I laughed. But she knew that that was my way of comforting her.

[MUX IN]

Carter Unger: I had questioned whether I could work in forensic anthropology, like... Can I handle this? Can I be around deceased individuals and do that as my job? And it was just very surreal, not in like a disgusting sense, just an A. This is a human being that eventually in forensic and criminal justice contexts will need my help.

Felix Poon: Carter used to have this recurring nightmare. It was of an autopsied corpse . their torso was cut wide open with what's called a Y cut.

Carter Unger: It was that over and over and over again.

Felix Poon: But how did you feel? Like...

Carter Unger: Like I did not like sleeping for a little bit, but I eventually just I kept telling myself, this is normal, this is life, this is not disgusting. This is not gross. This is a human being that is in front of me that has donated their body to science. And it clicked and I was like, I can find I can do this.

[MUX SWELL AND OUT]

Nate Hegyi: Okay so coming up, Felix goes out to see the 'decomposition" part of the "decomposition facility", and fair warning, this is the more graphic part of the episode.

But first I want to remind folks out there that we have a free newsletter, So if you want to see some pictures from Felix's trip to the decomposition facility (don't worry, we won't include anything too graphic) you can sign up, for free, at [outsideinradio dot org](http://outsideinradio.org). We'll be right back.

<<MIDROLL BREAK>>

Nate Hegyi: Welcome back to Outside/In I'm Nate

Felix Poon: I'm Felix. Now before we go see the decomposing bodies, Nate I'm wondering...have you ever seen a dead body?

Nate Hegyi: Yeah. I have a previous girlfriend. Her her her brother passed away ten years ago and we saw his his body. And it was a really powerful experience in the sense that that whole family was really goofy and they dealt with. The death in like a morbidly goofy way that made

sense for that family. They loved him so much. And I just remember them putting cigarettes into his nose where he was. And like, it was funny because he was a funny guy and it was just like

Felix Poon: and that's like something he would have done in. In when he was alive.

Nate Hegyi: Absolutely Yeah. Yeah, exactly.

[MUX IN]

And he didn't look like he was sleeping, by the way. He looked definitely dead. What about you, Felix? Had you ever seen a dead body, before?

Felix Poon: Yeah. I mean, I have seen loved ones in the wake. You know. My my experience, though, with the wakes, though, is that they do try to you know, they put the makeup on, they embalm.

Felix Poon: Right? They tape their eyes shut, is what I understand.

Nate Hegyi: To create an illusion is that they're sleeping, right?

Felix Poon: Right, which I feel like is the opposite thing these students are doing. You know, they're seeing death and not creating any illusions about it. They're looking at it straight on. And not just looking at it, they're touching it, and smelling it. They're basically just getting used to seeing death and dead bodies as. Dead bodies as what they are, dead bodies

Nate Hegyi: as actual dead bodies.

Felix Poon: Yeah

[FOOTSTEPS]

Felix Poon: So I'm walking up a gravel road

So at this point, I'm walking with Nick Passalacqua, the director of the forensic anthropology program, and we're going to the enclosure of decomposing bodies, which is like half a mile off campus. It's a beautiful day, sunny, warm.

And after I get my shoe booties on to protect my shoes, we walk up to this big fenced off area .

Nick Passalacqua: this is double fenced. So we have a tall wooden privacy fence surrounded by a chain link fence with razor wire at the top. ...we're doing everything we can to kind of ensure, you know, privacy and protection of our donors that are on the surface.

Felix Poon: Inside, , it's mostly exposed soil with some weeds here and there. And on the surface are about 20 donors. They're spaced out roughly in a grid, most of them are lying on their backs. Some of them are on their sides. A lot of them are splayed out in like starfish patterns, most have their jaws wide open.

Nate Hegyi: Are they... wearing... clothes?

Felix Poon: No clothes. Just, bare, rotting flesh that's like yellow, red, black, brown There are flies, everywhere, and the smell just hits me

Felix Poon: How would I describe this smell

Katie Zejdlik: Cloying...sweet

Felix Poon: I'm not gonna lie...I almost feel like throwing up

Nate Hegyi: I would not blame you for throwing up. But like beyond how you're feeling physically, I mean, how are you feeling emotionally?

Felix Poon: You know, that's an interesting question. Like, I almost feel like a child again. Like I just need my mom or dad to be here to tell me that it's okay.

Felix: it's just like this very visceral feeling, and I. Yeah, I guess I reach out for the closest proxy.

Felix Poon: Can you walk in here with me? Of course. So right away, there's a few bodies right here in front of us.

Felix Poon: I'm actually just at a loss for words at this point.

Felix Poon: I mean, this one here on the left looks...um...I mean their mouth is wide open and we have lots of insects and flies surrounding the body. What stage of decomposition?

Nick Passalacqua: It's pretty late stage decomposition.

So I just start asking Nick questions, like any questions to fill the silence while I just regain composure.

Nate Hegyi: Right.

Felix Poon: And eventually, once I regain composure, I kind of notice there's this group of three students in there. So I go up to them and see what they're doing.

Mackenzie Gascon: So we are one of the two photo teams that comes out...um to the farm. We're all student volunteers.

Felix Poon: This is Mackenzie Gaskin. Mackenzie and the other two students were just very matter of fact, going around taking photos of the bodies and jotting notes on a clipboard.

Mackenzie Gascon: It was definitely not like this the first time all of us had been out here, I just remember staring, standing there, and I couldn't look away because it was like, I can't imagine that this this man had just been alive, like, not even a week ago. And now he is laying in front of us and he's dead.

So...when you're out here three, two or three times a week, you kind of get used to everything. Some stuff still trips us up. Like we don't like the sound of the bugs, but there's nothing you can do about that. Or sometimes the smell is really bad. But honestly, it's like... by treating it so matter of factly, I kind of see it as respecting their wishes because they chose to be donated here. And so by respecting that and just doing our jobs correctly, we are able to honor them like the best that we can while they're out here. What's the number? Reagan.

Reagan Baechle: 2036

[snap snap]

Reagan Baechle: Um...

Felix Poon: And then there's another student who's is changing out the batteries on the wildlife cameras that are pointed at the corpses, which take photos any time there's motion detected. And later, Becca, the facility curator, actually shows me photos of scavenger activity. And I see vultures pecking and tearing holes into fresh corpses, possums biting away toes and entire feet. And then there are the flies and maggots. Basically, flies will lay their eggs on a decomposing body where the maggots that hatch will have something to eat. And maggots can't eat tissue itself. They can only consume liquids.

Nick Passalacqua: And so they lay their eggs on open orifices, particularly the eyes, nose, mouth, ears and genitals.

Felix Poon: And when maggots colonize a body, they can really colonize that body.

Nick Passalacqua: You can really see like the whole body kind of pulsing sometimes depending on how many maggots are in there, what they refer to as a maggot mass. And that maggot mass can actually produce a lot of heat itself because you have all these bodies wiggling over each other and consuming stuff. Yeah. I mean, there's like it's a particularly gross thing, I think. And there's studies where people like entomologists will, you know, insert long thermometers and take the temperature of those maggot masses and it'll be much higher than the ambient temperature around the body. And so, like in winter, right when it's cold and you wouldn't think that maggots could be active if they were active first before it started getting really cold. They can kind of keep their own body temperatures up through this maggot mass process and continue to be active when otherwise they should kind of be inactive because of the weather.

Nate Hegyi: Wow that is so interesting, like, this is a prime example of nature literally using us.

Felix Poon: Yeah, totally. There's also another thing that happens where birds will come and take away leftover hair to use to create their nests.

Nate Hegyi: Really? That's wild.

Felix Poon: So flies, maggots and vultures are all pretty standard scavengers. And they're all part of what entomologist Sybil Bucheli calls Outside In decomposition.

Felix Poon: And then there's inside out decomposition, where you have your own digestive enzymes that consume your flesh. And then there's microbial activity that consumes you in a process that's called putrefaction.

Nick Passalacqua: Putrefaction, this microbial bacterial proliferation that's resulted in bloat. And then the bloat collapsed. And that's why you kind of see it looking kind of deflated and wrinkly.

Felix Poon: So putrefaction also causes skin discoloration, and it happens in an uneven pattern that's called marbling.

Nick Passalacqua: where they're going to have certain areas that are darker colored and lighter colored. And maybe they're going to have some browns and some blues or whatever else. And they might be, you know, in different places at different times throughout the decomposition process. So that's kind of what's being represented there.

Nate Hegyi: I can't believe they call it marbling because now I'm never going to look at a steak the same way.

Felix Poon: Yeah. You know, all these food and human decomposition crossover is actually those three students in the lab. When I was talking to them, yeah, they had talked about sometimes how they'd be eating something and then something they're eating or smelling like triggered a body farm memory, a memory from the facility. And they would just like do a double take, stop eating, and be like, whoa, no, I can't.

Nate Hegyi: This is why I'm so happy. We have all star producers like you to go to the body farm so that I don't have to.

Felix Poon: I think you'd be okay Nate.

So after this inside out decomposition, this putrefaction, the body starts to mummify.

Nick Passalacqua: This person is much more dried out, right? Like all the tissue looks very dry, very mummified.

Nick Passalacqua: The skeleton is here, but it's just under kind of like a shroud of of desiccated, dried, mummified tissue.

Felix Poon: Sometimes a body will skip putrefaction if it saponifies first and becomes a wax mummy. This is when a body becomes set in a cast of fat tissue because there isn't enough oxygen and the environment is really damp, like in the mud at the bottom of a lake, or in a sealed and damp casket.

But this isn't too common. Most bodies are eaten by scavengers and go through putrefaction, and then eventually it'll be mostly the skeleton that's left. This is called skeletonization, which is where all of the bodies in this enclosure are headed.

[MUX SWELL]

Nate Hegyi: So Felix, talking to these students, seeing the bodies... did it change the way you look at death at all?

Felix Poon: ... I would say that it broke down this wall between life and death for me, like the two don't feel as separate anymore.

Nate Hegyi: How so?

Felix Poon: Well here's one example. Like, not too long after my reporting trip, I had a dentist appointment. And, I just had this thought while the hygienist was cleaning my teeth, she's using the same dental picks and tools that those students were using in the processing lab. And it's like, you are cleaning my skeleton right now, like the exposed part of my skeleton.

Nate Hegyi: That is one way to look at it, yeah.

Felix Poon: so like death in this case is like not that far from life I felt like.

But on the other hand, life is not so far from death.

Felix Poon: the donor that's right in front of us here, he's still got his facial hair, you know, and it almost looks like the position he's in. He's like yelling out to, like catch the bus or something.

Nick Passalacqua: Yeah. He's doing something.

Felix Poon: He's like, I'm trying to imagine him, like, alive. I feel like because he's not that far from having been alive, but in actuality, he's quite dead. And he has he has flies kind of flying in and out of his mouth and is flying in and out of his eye socket.

Felix Poon: And Nate, this man wasn't the only one in there who had traces of their life still left on them. Like there was a woman whose arms and hands were like nearly mummified, but her nails were painted this beautiful pattern of like, this cosmic purple and gold glittering stars. It really struck me because, I mean it's cliché to say that life is fleeting. But, somehow seeing

these perfectly painted nails, on this person's rotting body that's slowly turning to dust? I really felt it viscerally – that like, nothing in this life lasts. I just felt kind of sad.

[MUX]

Felix Poon: And, it got me wondering, who were these people before they died? What were the lives they lived? And we'll never know. That's because their identities are kept in confidentiality by the facility.

But I did get to talk to someone else, a woman named Lucinda Denton.

Felix Poon: I'm curious. How old are you?

Lucinda Denton: Ha! 85. [laughter] You're never supposed to ask a woman her weight or her age. But that's okay. I don't mind.

Felix Poon: Lucinda was born in 1937

Lucinda Denton: in Rocky Mount, North Carolina.

Felix Poon: And when Lucinda dies, she'll be laid to rest in Knoxville, at the University of Tennessee Anthropological Research Facility.

Lucinda Denton: I am an official body farm future resident.[laughter]

Felix Poon: Lucinda told me about her life growing up, and when she was a child, there was the polio epidemic.

Lucinda: so we were isolated. Children were isolated during the summer.

Lucinda: And I liked to catch insects, particularly lightning bugs and June bugs, and put a string on a June bugs leg and let it fly.

[MUX]

Lucinda knows what decomposition entails. She's seen it in documentaries. Once, when she was still a science teacher, Lucinda even took a tour of a science lab where she saw cat remains being devoured by maggots.

Lucinda Denton: there's all of these tables in this nasty, damp, smelly room. But I was fascinated. You know, I don't find it repulsive or I mean, it's what happens. It's recycling.

Felix Poon: Recycling. That's what Lucinda wants to happen to her body after she dies. She thinks caskets and tombstones are wasteful. And She's never liked the idea of being buried in a cemetery anyway with a tombstone. Not since she was a kid and every Sunday, her family visited her grandfather's grave.

Lucinda Denton: And I was given a bucket of water and a toothbrush to clean the bird poop off of the tombstone while they trimmed the grass around the tombstone, whatever. So I just have always had a bad connotation to graveyards and tombstones.

Felix Poon: some day, it'll be Lucinda's time. She says it'll be when she's at least 95. Maybe because she's promised her son that they'll go skydiving together on her 95th birthday.

But when the time comes for her, she imagines that she'll know it's time, and that she'll have told her children.

Lucinda Denton: The body has just worn out. The heart has worn out, the kidneys have worn out, and it's time to go. And I told them that I loved them and that we've had a good life. And I take my last breath.

Felix Poon: And then there she is, at the body farm.

Lucinda Denton: I'm propped up under a tree and it's summertime. And inside my body, all of the germs and bacteria and everything is saying, okay, baby, now is the time to go to work. We got to get rid of this person.

[MUX CHANGE]

the flies come and lay their little eggs so that little babies can have lots of food on the skin. And then the birds. Hey, we got new babies in the nest. Let's go have some fresh eyeball.

And then the body starts becoming bloated from all of this, and then some small animal comes and takes a big bite out of the side and the whole body collapses like a balloon.

And do you remember? You probably don't remember, but when I was a child, you would sing a little song. When you are dead it is said your body turns a slimy green and pus flows out like thick whipped cream.

So the body goes through the decomposition process. That once was me, and all of that goes into the soil and the earth and is recycled back into the tree, and the leaves. Evaporation of the water molecules go up and make the clouds and you go floating away in the cloud.

And the earth continues, even though Lucinda is no longer there.

[MUX out]

[THEME in and under]

Nate Hegyi: If you want to learn more about the decomposition facility at Western Carolina University, we'll put a link to their website in the show notes.

We'll also link to articles about how the field of forensics is changing the way they look at gender and race when they do sex estimations and ancestry estimations.

And if you want to see pictures from Felix's trip to the decomposition facility. We'll post those at our website outside in radio dot org and we'll be sure to separate out the more graphic images if you'd prefer not to look at those.

<<CREDITS>>

Nate Hegyi: Outside In was produced this week by Felix Poon and edited by Taylor Quimby with help from Justine Paradise, Jessica Hunt, Rebecca Lavoie and me Nate Hegyi.

Rebecca Lavoie is our executive producer.

Felix Poon: Thanks to Fawn Fitter for talking to me about registering to become a donor to the UT Knoxville Body Farm. You can read her NY Times article about becoming a donor, a link to that is in the show notes.

Thank you to Dr. Katie Zejdlik for describing the decomp smell as sweet and cloying, and Jimmy Holt for his recording help with Lucinda.

And a special thanks to all of the students who spoke to me on this episode. Carter Unger, Maggie Klemm, Carlee Green, Victoria Deal, Kadri Greene, Mackenzie Gascon, Reagan Baechle, and Leigh Irwin.

Nate Hegyi: Music in this episode came from Blue Dot Sessions, DEX 1200, and Silver Maple.

Our theme music is by break master cylinder.

Nate Hegyi: Outside in is a production of New Hampshire Public Radio.

<<AFTER CREDITS>>

Kadri Greene: I have a question for y'all. Will y'all be like, eating, and something will like, trigger the smell, and almost...

Carlee Green: Yes.

Victoria Deal: Yes.

Kadri Greene: Yeah, okay! Okay. Decomp smells nothing like peanut butter. I was eating peanut butter, and for some reason it triggered the smell, and I had to pause.