In the 19th and early 20th century, a culture of secrecy surrounded human dissection in medical education. Students could be expelled for divulging the source or the identities of “subjects,” while anatomy professors, demonstrators, and janitors were to guard the dissection room’s secrets—which makes it all the more striking how often medical students documented and commemorated this rite of passage. At the same time that student dissectors were admonished to shield the secrets of the dissection room, they frequently invited in the eye of the camera to pose with “their” cadavers. For nearly the next half century, through the 1920s, the dissection photo would become one of the most archetypal and ubiquitous forms of medical student portraiture before 1930, yet it vanished almost completely after 1950.

These photographs were made in a surprising variety of forms: class portraits, cartes de visite and postcards, and staged dark humor scenes. Complete with illuminating essays by two experts on the subject, Dissection features 138 extraordinary, rare historic photographs of the unseen world of the rite of passage into the mysteries of medicine.