Anatomical poems

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The birth of an Anatomical Venus

"[The] Anatomical Venus ... was conceived as a means of teaching human anatomy ... this life-sized, dissectible wax woman ... can be disassembled into seven anatomically correct layers." — The Anatomical Venus by Joanna Ebenstein, 2016

First, death:
hundreds of bodies for one slashed beauty.
An artist renders the molds,
shapes the heart, the lungs, the spleen.
Fingers impress the clay.

Then, approval — a plaster cast,
now choose the virgin wax
and colour the pale marrow
with toxic pigments.
Pour the wax into the molds.

Stuff her hollows with wood,
rag, or wire; varnish the hair to her head.
Insert the eyelashes,
glaze her body for a reflective edge.
Dress — or don't.

Recline her on a plush cushion and arrange
a pose, a delicate hand to preserve
her false modesty. Remove
her breastplate, open to the public
but only men of study.

Adorn her with pearls;
from the sea, she will rise.

Anatomical angel

After L'Ange anatomique by Jacques-Fabien Gautier d'Agoty, 1746.

Your back is flayed open
but you zip up your dress
to hold in the skin.

What can you do
but keep moving?

Doctors prick you with needles
and peel open your skin.
One finger moves your muscles aside
and pokes a rib, the other plays
percussion on your spine.

You wake in the morning
and feel the ghosts of pain.
Tendons snap as you stretch.

When you open your eyes,
they bend over you again
and ask you to twist to the side.

Each time meant to be the last —
you're back —
they hold their needles aloft
and begin to sew.

Autopsy

I have been opened and emptied,
sliced from collarbone to breastbone,
sawed through the sternum,
scraped from the inside out.

My heart has been weighed and measured;
someone has sliced around my scalp
just below the hairline and peeled
my skull to the bone.

My eyes watch from their sockets
but my hands lie useless on the table,
and my tongue is leaden in my mouth.

They've sawed open my skull,
and I watch them poke at my brain.

Even if I knew what was wrong,
they wouldn't discover it.

The lady anatomist

For Anna Morandi Manzolini

The Lady Anatomist is not here
for your gaze; she is here to teach:
she dips her scalpel, bears down on the saw.

*Here, let me pull back the skin
to better display the brain.*

She can unmake your body, and remake it entirely,
or as part of the whole: here you are
as an ear, an eye, a hand.

She looks on death, and takes her measurements,
lifts her forceps, makes her notes. She heats
the wax, colours it, and molds it to her specifications.

She will not lie on this table to be taken
by feminine rapture; she will not settle
for one string of pearls when she could
have the whole colon.

She gave her child new life, and guided her husband
to his grave. She will not take your false titles;
she is no mother, no doctor, no saint.

She will not be shamed for her work, or praised.
She alone touches the cadaver.

She carries her death

For Anna Morandi Manzolini

She carries her death into the cold room
and lays it on the table next to today's
cadaver.

Today's work is the hand, from the forearm
to wrist, to joint, to knuckle, to finger, to nail.

Her scalpel focuses her eye, her hand,
their hand; her fingers move, their fingers
live.

This hand is scraped to the bone,
these bones are the mold,
this wax is the skin,
this string is the vein.

But this wax carries another's fingerprints,
a false blush, the nails indicate the scrape
of tiny tools. Each detail impeccable.

This hand moves through space,
its joints flex and finger the air.

Once this hand held a child's hand;
once this hand held a dying woman's hand;
once this hand held an apple, and poised it
to bite.

This hand is her hand, but it is not her hand
today.

This hand picks up her death from the table
and carries it home.

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These poems have been peer reviewed.