

## **Anatomy Lessons**

From youth he opened graves  
to investigate rotten  
elbows:

Frederick woke one morning  
not knowing how many children he had.

Ate a breakfast of cakes  
thinly dressed  
with imported cinnamon.

Read the morning paper, perhaps.

*The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Frederick Ruysch, 1670—*

I find this painting in a book.

*Father opened the baby*  
Rachel whispers  
to no one.

Gentlemen in wigs gesture  
courteously to the placenta.

From *Practical Observations in Surgery and Midwifery*:

Observation XI:

*A dead Fetus  
the umbilical Cord of which  
I found wonderfully contorted*

*in the same Manner as we see in common  
Pack-thread*

*after twisting it well—*

A library of the body,

Frederick's Curious Wonder  
for Peter the Great:

teeth in boxed rows,  
bark books  
with compartments  
for formula.

Talc, white wax, and cinnabar  
embalm

a child's caterpillar ear curled in jar  
with black-peppered white corn alcohol.

Pale sediment  
settles the vessel.

Rachel paints her father's library:

insects bled and dabbed, animals flayed  
and glossy.

She assists the anatomist

not least  
with the lid

of a jarred fetus,  
scaffolded by wire

at the head,  
hands floating  
and arranged  
as if shrugging.

On the lid, Rachel places this seahorse

in a drift of shells and plants.

It stands  
on curled tail

while the fetus drowns  
eternally.

Frederick's Lost Diorama, Drawing I.I:

Miscarriage as coral,

running into  
and through the face.

Bladder stones  
moved into mountains.

Coniferous veins culled,

hard-boiled  
lungs filled with

bushes and grass.

Baby skulls on balance-wire with

delicate brain tissue for their  
handkerchiefs.

Scrubbed intestines snake

around the pelvis  
for sin—

*Ah, bitter fate!*

A child plays violin  
with a dried artery.

I am skeptical of this anatomist's  
magic.

This flesh-fascination,  
mine.

Observation XCIII:

*The imaginary, or true  
Motion of the Womb—*

*—After introducing my  
Hand into the Uterus, I found that  
It was not a Fetus, but the Womb Itself*

*with So great a motion  
to ascend up into the Throat—*



He trained and examined  
the midwives;

plucked the miscarried embryos,

dragged and split the corpses  
of executed criminals

and babies found  
in the harbor.

Rachel, what of my impulse  
to make you hero?

Your luscious oils petaled  
in their soft decay—

I recognize from afar  
my favorite painting

by its splay of flowered limbs,  
the way they reach both  
up and out, down,

always down,

and browning, too.

Observation XLIV:

*A Little Girl playing  
With an Amber Bead  
large as A Horse-Bean...*

*at fourteen Years of Age she finally discharged it  
it was covered over with a Sort of Stony Crust—*

Anatomy as a kind of play

—as Lost Diorama, Drawing I.II

writ: *No head,*  
*however strong*  
*escapes cruel death*

near the skull of a newborn baby  
in a box.

The bones of a three-year-old boy  
soothe a dead parrot  
—*time flies!*

With feeling,  
Peter the Great kissed all  
specimens sweetly  
when first he saw.

Rachel brings lace

to prepare a girl's  
pink arm—  
sawed-off,

submerged—  
for the drape,

the fringe.

Rachel:

a child's arm forever

cradling a stack of kindling,  
a watermelon,

a blue ball.

Caput.infantum A.2, R.I-294  
or *Boy's Head with a Turkish Cap*:

Soaked, his nose is worn  
pumice.

His chin sunk in  
tiers of lace—

he nods when the archivist  
picks up his head.

His hat is lovely. Gold-embroidered

diamond rim, feather  
jaunt, stripes on top.

Only his left eyelid's lashed.

Observation LIV:

*taking Off  
the Top of the Cranium by Saw,*

*We discovered the Snake in the Grass—*

*the Bone here is no  
Thicker than writing Paper*

*I have perforated it*

*Pressing it by my Finger—*



The rim of the lid  
is red and gold,

bright ribbon that belies  
the thin margin between  
open and closed, preservation

and this ruin.

I want to spoil the anatomist's archive—

in my fantasy I pop  
the lids, the vinegary wasted smell  
of three hundred years—

I dip a finger to taste.

Rachel,

I count again  
your life:

you labor  
ten children

(your one hundred paintings,

recognizable in their dark,  
survive).

When you die  
eleven poets write to you.

*Zeuxis' illustrious progeny  
will crown your youthful person  
as their Flower Goddess  
for your beautifully variegated festoons, bouquets,  
and wreaths, painted with a brilliance  
that few can match.*

Hieronymus Sweerts

Speaking of Rachel's flowers,  
a critic once wrote:

*She is the small snowy dome  
which crowns the Everest  
of this particular art.*

Thousands of tiny bones  
in glass houses

enact an opera:  
*To immortalize those who never could live!*

In another diorama,

the tiniest skeleton  
of all  
reaches out,  
mayfly on tip

(it lived but a day).

*Why should I long for the things of this world?*  
asks an infant.

Stringed pearls sag on bone.

Observations XCIV, XXII, II, I, LXXXI:

Rachel teaches me to live close to death—

*Dilation of an artery, containing  
a whole pint of matter—*

*Preternatural  
Closure of the passages  
opened too late by art—*

*A dangerous aneurysm in the arm  
Happily cured—*

*A surprising number  
Of stones extracted from a woman  
eighty years old—*

*A spongy tumor, a particular kind,  
Destroyed the bones,*

*sometimes called a white swelling—*

a honeybee on the wilted rose,  
this small snowy dome.

Rachel plays:

*So there you are,  
wonderful eyeballs—*

*one open, one glass*

*—she reads the imaginary or true Motion of the Womb—*

*everyone can see you  
submerged...*

*the three tiniest  
bones in the body*

*are in the ear, named for their shapes—*

*I can see them!*

*Yours,  
your tiny muscle*

*in my imaginary womb  
it moved.*