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SUSAN B.A. SOMERS-WILLETT

The Golden Lesson

Leonardo cracks the thief's sternum with precision
and opens the proportion, fearful symmetry
glistening in the flat wet lungs like a bird's folded wings

or two lozenges of yellow amber laid on a plate.
He licks his fingertips blackened by thin strips of kohl
as the cat suddenly and impolitely asks for its dinner.
A body does not do as it is told. He has called Giacomo in,
but the boy is rudely eating a wedge of pink melon

in the kitchen. Sucking at it, in fact. So that
his hands will stick with the fruit all night and
the pages of his books will bear stains and his boyish odor.

The grey shade of evening falls over corpse and artist
as a candle flickers against the body's dark ruin,
the neck corded with hard tendon to tether
the shoulder's weight of brain and skull and through it all
the windpipe ridged with cartilage climbing up

like a soft ladder into the palate. The boy
and his seventeen years know nothing of this,
the life dissected and sectioned out into a dark oval,

which is the head, which leans back as if on a string
tied to the throat; so that the throat opens
into a white-stringed harp centering the imaginary
line between halves of the body, the sketch nearly ready
but for one criminal eye looking up to the artist from the table,

removed from the patient with such desire like a child seeking
a stray precious marble. Leonardo calls the boy Salai,
which means demon. He pulls back the curtain

to reprimand the malingering boy who
now has anise candy on his breath and although
he knows Salai has stolen to have it
he does not comment because the licorice seed
sweetens the room. The thief's hands cripple

on the wood table, and the boy wonders
what pleasure was held in this criminal wrist—perhaps
a thirst made its way into the body to play these strings

and the tongue and hand answered. Salai skims
the corpse's dull skin with his finger, the body
pinned down by the puckering O of the navel,
his hand almost free of youth's dimension.
The criminal eye does nothing

but hold vigil in its rind of boiled egg white
like a blue jewel encrusting a pale woman's ear.
Perhaps the eye will study the artist

as he draws the body. Perhaps, inside the eye,
an inverted picture of the two scholars will glint
as they point and argue about man's divine proportion
and in their conversation will rise a sound from the thief
like a harsh note forbidden in the box of a guitar:

the imperfect soul made art from the Orphic
instrument of muscle and calcium set ringing: yes:
in this room with the blackening window

and the organs' sweet odor hotly releasing,
the criminal will speak the feckless boy and his teacher
like a dark chorus and the indivisible golden chord
will fly up. And who will hear this joy of the body?
Who will play the harp in the boy?