

# Anatomy Lessons

By Katie Manning

Book Review:

*The Resurrection Trade*, by Leslie Adrienne Miller. Graywolf Press, 2007.

Leslie Adrienne Miller's latest poetry collection might cause you to spend whole evenings reading antiquated anatomy books. Her title, *The Resurrection Trade*, refers to the business of buying and selling corpses that fueled anatomy studies and painted illustrations in 18th-century France. Miller draws from the images in anatomy texts to create most of the poems in this, her fourth collection.

The only visual image that actually appears as part of this book is the cover art, Jacques Fabien Gautier D'Agoty's "Anatomie des parties de la generation," which corresponds to the second poem in the collection, "Gautier D'Agoty's Ecorches." One especially vivid description appears mid-poem: "viscera on the ground about their feet / as if this were Thanksgiving and they / cornucopias stuffed with squash and fruit." This painting-poem pair makes clear that Miller's poetry goes beyond mere description of the visual art; her poems create new images and make connections that viewers of the illustrations might not have discovered on their own.

The title poem serves as another prime example of the overall work of the collection. "The Resurrection Trade" is in eight sections that respond to eight illustrated plates by the French anatomical artist D'Agoty (1711-1785). Each section of the poem describes a section of a human body. These descriptions include parenthetical letters to suggest that they correspond to a diagramed figure:

Pregnant now, looking over her flayed shoulder  
 exquisitely tailored into deltoid epaulette (A),  
 a sporty trapezius cape (C), and pointy latissimus  
 dorsi bodice (B) inscribed with spiders of inaccurate  
 veins, face and one perky breast still jacketed in skin.

While Miller uses scientific terminology to describe these illustrations, she invites the reader to stay with the poem by blending everyday language into her descriptions. This language blending mirrors the larger tension of the book: how the author works to endow these medical illustrations, drawn from deceased women's bodies, with life.

This blending of the technical and the colloquial throughout the book lends itself to language play and humor, something readers might not expect from a collection named after a trade in corpses. One of the lighter poems in the book, "Recipe for Couples Therapy," begins: "Would that my husband had read Hippocrates' / *Nature of Women*, especially that bit / about the 'Dislocation of the womb.'" The poem goes on to explain what Hippocrates believed would cure a womb that detached and floated to the hips, including "undiluted sheep's milk, fennel and absinthe / right where the panty hamster smiles." Miller's allusion to "panty hamster" becomes even more amusing with the final lines of the poem: "And when you finally start to bleed, he advises, / live it up gal, get it on with your man, / and be sure to eat some boiled squid." This is a moment where Miller allows herself to step back from the morbidity of the corpse trade, and the inventive and bizarre conclusions about women's bodies, and have a laugh at the absurdity of it all. Such moments of humor throughout her poems allow the reader to come up for air before delving back into dissection images.

Another pleasant surprise in *The Resurrection Trade* that breaks the larger pattern of anatomical ekphrasis—literary representation of visual art—comes with the present-day poems that appear throughout the book. "Mother and Son" explores a woman's body post-chemotherapy, her relationship to her son, and her son's grappling with September 11 events and her cancer:

My sister obeyed her son and stood upright  
beside his bed, heeded his command to close her eyes,  
then heard his eeeeeewww, *crash* and felt the lump

of processed fur that was his teddy bear  
hit her shoulder right about the 95th floor, or where

her good breast stood beside its remade twin: 3,000 deaths  
he wouldn't understand against the one he might.

Even more impressively, this poem deals with disease and national tragedy without sinking into sentimentality, angry patriotism, or clichéd images of cancer patients. This and other present-day poems throughout the book balance the historical, imagistic poems; and this balance keeps readers engaged and makes the collection fresh and surprising in its variations.

*The Resurrection Trade* showcases the best in current ekphrastic poetry. Miller brings together the past and present, image and narrative, horror and humor, yet the whole varied collection sings together as a tribute to women's bodies. Miller invites readers to learn about the history of anatomy and of women, to explore the beauty of bodies, whether clothed or flayed, and to enjoy the language play and humor that bubbles unexpectedly from these subjects.