Anatomy Lesson, December

In December 1650, Thomas Willis and William Perry were surprised to discover that the felon whose corpse they had claimed for dissection in Petty’s rooms on Oxford’s High Street could be resuscitated.

They are, all three, still:
She lies prone on the dining table
Her throat livid where the rope has cut.
Neither Mr Petty nor Willis is ready to approach her
Though they’ve laid their pamphlets, diagrams out
As if she’s something they’ll assemble together.

A clock chimes in the city’s chilly night –
Petty approaches her, his scalpel held out straight,
As though she – Nan, who swung for her child –
Might rise and fight.

Willis flicks a pamphlet page flat,
Looks at the cross-hatched chambers of lungs
Where arrows and Latin signal spaces they will never see
Unless they do so now.
He sighs and thinks of boyhood games,
Rumours of women’s hidden spaces,
Of his mother’s body, safe in her long gown.

Petty shouts – he is beside Nan,
Clamps his mouth to her face, tilts her head –
Willis gasps, shocked at his friend’s low goal –
But the woman gives a throaty chuckle-cough –
Willis’s breath catches in his throat – a sob –
Petty’s scalpel falls – tactful Willis will later kick it out of sight –

But now, just now, they stand staring
In the grip of an ungentlemanly disappointment
At what this woman has done.

Rosemary Appleton