

Adapt or die: exploring Ovid and Bernini's  
adaptations of the Apollo and Daphne myth

and

ALL TIME IS BUT

LIGHT AND SHADOW,

short stories

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## Abstract

This creative/critical thesis explores two adaptations of the classical Apollo and Daphne myth, the first by Ovid in Book 1 of his *Metamorphoses* poem, the second as sculpture by the baroque artist GianLorenzo Bernini.

The critical essay considers how adaptation has shaped the myth of Apollo and Daphne, and how the mythic narrative has remained relevant to the present day *because* of these two specific adaptations. It begins with a consideration of the original function of sacred and aetiological myths and analyses extant versions of the pre-Ovidian myth in visual and written form. Chapter 1 explores how Ovid used the myth to redefine the epic genre, its foregrounding of female experience and reimagining metamorphosis as an experience; it considers the metaphorical potential of the new pursuit section, including pursuit and transformation as representative of the creative process. Chapter 2 explores the ways in which Bernini builds on and yet distils Ovid's adaptation down to its core moment, where pursuit becomes metamorphosis. It also considers the influence of the catholic church, and the sculpture's relationship with other contemporary and classical works of art and poetry, such as the *Apollo Belvedere*, the *Apollo Sauroktonos*, *The Sleeping Hermaphrodite*, Annibale Carracci, Guido Reni, Petrarch and Giambattista Marino, notably in the work's aesthetic and its exploration of gender. Finally, it highlights the ingenuity of the sculpture's use of three-dimensional space to depict the illusion of narrative and dynamic time within a stationary sculpture.

The creative comprises a collection of multi-genre short stories entitled *All Time is But Light and Shadow*, exploring the themes of the Apollo and Daphne myth, including thwarted female agency, metamorphosis as a means of reducing and protecting, and the strange ways that fathers save their daughters. It also explores artistry itself, the creative process and specifically the making of sculpture, and the worlds of Bernini and Ovid. The stories are written with varying degrees of realism: future worlds without trees, worlds in which sculptures possess consciousness and metamorphosis as a natural part of life. Throughout it all is the language of sculpture, of cutting and chipping stone, of a world in three dimensions, of time measured purely by light and dark; and the many different voices of Daphne.

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Some say that she was the daughter of Amyclas, Daphne by name, and that, fleeing the embraces of Apollo, she was changed into the tree of like name, after which she was honoured by the god with the gift of prophetic power.

Phylarchus

This is what is said about Amyclas' daughter Daphne... gathering together a pack of dogs, she would go hunting... Now while she was wandering... she attracted the love of Leucippus... (who) donned women's garments and went hunting with her in the guise of a girl... But Apollo himself was in love with the girl, and was possessed with rage and jealousy... so he put it into her mind to go bathing... with her maidens... they all stripped off, and tore the clothes from Leucippus's back when they saw his reluctance. And, his treachery and duplicity laid bare, they all cast their javelins at him... Daphne, meanwhile, saw Apollo coming after her, and turned and fled with great alacrity. When she was almost on the point of being overtaken, she asked Zeus to be translated from the mortal world. And they say she became the tree named after her, the laurel.

Parthenius





Adapt or die: exploring Ovid and Bernini's adaptations of the Apollo and Daphne myth



## Introduction

*There is no fixity in mythical concepts.*<sup>1</sup>

There is no definitive source for the myth of Apollo and Daphne, however the first reference to the myth dates from the third century BCE, when the Alexandrian General Seleucus Nicator (358-281 BCE) established the sanctuary of Daphne in ancient Macedonia.<sup>2</sup> It is said that Seleucus built a temple to Apollo from a desire to link his family name with that of the god, appropriating the myth into the sanctuary, including the river Peneus and a tree growing there that was said to be Daphne metamorphized.<sup>3</sup> After this first mention there is a gap of two centuries or more before the earliest surviving written version of the myth, dating from the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE. It was attached to the conclusion of another myth in the *Codex Palatinus graecus*, a compilation of erotic stories by the Greek poet, Parthenius.<sup>4</sup> J.L. Lightfoot, Parthenius' modern translator, describes the stories of the *Codex* as obscure. In all likelihood, given their rather unsavoury themes, all of the Parthenius myths would have remained obscure had Ovid not taken

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<sup>1</sup> Barthes, 1993:120 quoted by Sanders, Julie, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, Routledge, 2015

<sup>2</sup> While the myth was evidently known in Macedonia, it may not have been universally known in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. Adrian S. Hollis, *Ovid, Metamorphoses* 1,445ff.: Apollo, Daphne, and the Pythian Crown, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, 1996, Bd. 112, pp69-73 points out that when, in Book 4 of Callimachus's *Aitia*, the poet mentions the laurel in relation to Apollo, there is no mention of Daphne, implying that the myth had not yet reached Callimachus. See fragment 87 of the *Aitia*, where after slaying the python, Apollo 'cleansed' his hands 'in the river Peneus [and] then the god cut a branch off a bay tree which grew in the vale of Tempe.' Quotes from Loeb Classical library, *Callimachus fragments*, Harvard University Press, 1975 p68-9

Seleucus' behaviour was part of a not uncommon practise of attempting to legitimize or aggrandize a small city or town by connecting it mythically with older cities, rituals and gods.

*The Brill Companion to Nonnus* also references the Daphne and Apollo myth, a slightly different version.

<sup>3</sup> William Smith, *Greek and Roman Geography*, [www.perseus.tufts.edu](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu), describes the origins of the 'sanctuary' of Daphne, near Antioch in modern day Syria, describing the origins of the city and the General Seleucus Nicator (358BCE-281 BCE), successor to Alexander the Great, who 'appropriated' the 'fable of the river Peneus; and the tree was even shown into which the nymph Daphne transformed'. The entry goes on to say that the Greeks celebrated Daphne long before the Romans. There is also a long entry in Greek by Strabo on the sanctuary of Daphne near Antioch.

<sup>4</sup> Peter E. Knox writes of another version where Daphne's mother is Earth, from Statius' *Thebaid* (1<sup>st</sup> century CE) as, 'the most widely attested form of the myth in ancient literature'.p188, In Pursuit of Daphne, *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 1990, Vol 120, pp183-202 +385-386

up the myth of Apollo and Daphne in Book 1 of his *Metamorphoses* poem.<sup>5</sup> Parthenius' version in the *Codex* was lost for centuries, surviving to this day only by the chance discovery of a single copy in the *Palatinus Heidelbergensis graecus* (thought to be from Byzantium in the 9<sup>th</sup> century CE).<sup>6</sup> Ovid's adaptation meanwhile thrived and began to appear in Hellenistic-inspired Roman art, and, some fifteen hundred years later, was readapted by Bernini as a sculpture in Carrara marble. This thesis explores the shaping of the myth of Apollo and Daphne by these two adaptations.

I want to start with a definition, since the term myth has itself evolved in common speech as well as among the many disciplines in which it is studied.<sup>7</sup> When I use the term myth, I am describing ancient stories concerned with fundamental questions in three areas of human experience: our place in the world, the origin of that world, and humanity's relation to the gods. That most if not all societies, irrespective of their place and time, create mythologies would imply a universal human need to find answers to such questions. 'It [myth] gives man, very importantly, the illusion that he can understand the universe and that he does understand the universe. It is, of course, only an illusion.'<sup>8</sup> The ancient peoples who invented myths told many kinds of stories, and most likely they were designed to be entertaining to aid their retention. However, the primary function of myth was not purely entertainment, but to explain phenomena in the world. Within the genre of myth, Apollo and Daphne is an aetiology or explanatory myth; the kind of myth that provides explanations and origin stories, in this case, the source of the first laurel tree and its connection with Apollo.

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<sup>5</sup> In the translated introduction to the *Codex*, J L Lightfoot, *Parthenius of Nicaea: The poetical fragments and the Erotika Pathemata*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1999, says, p231 'The circumstances of the stories: many are of palpably recent date, almost all obscure.'

Parthenius writes that he chose 'obscure characters or else relate little-known events from the lives of well-known characters,' according to Klooster, 'The *Erotika Pathemata* of Parthenius of Nicaea, University of Amsterdam, 2012, Digital Academic Repository.

<sup>6</sup> Adrian S. Hollis, Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.445ff.: Apollo, Daphne, and the Pythian Crown, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, 1996, Bd 112, pp69-73, 'The transformation of the nymph can be traced back to the third century BCE' (and here he includes a reference to Diodorus of Elaea) '...and the Syrian version of Daphne legend by Seleucus Nicator'. The link to Diodorus comes from Lightfoot's work on Parthenius and is referenced by Hollis also, 'but does not predominate, either in literature or art, until the first century BCE. p71

<sup>7</sup> My use of myth in this work is severed from its original (religious) purpose. It should be noted for some anthropologists this renders myth meaningless, e.g. the "pragmatic" group. See Lowell Edmunds, Jack Goody, among others.

The study of myth traverses a number of scholarly disciplines, from religious studies, literary criticism to anthropology. In order to define myth in this essay I have drawn on a number of sources including Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Myth and Meaning*, Robert A Segal's, *Myth: A Very Short Introduction*. Lowell Edmunds, *Approaches to Greek Myth*, Jack Goody's *Myth, Ritual and the Oral*.

<sup>8</sup> Lévi-Strauss, C, *Myth and Meaning*, Routledge, 2014, p13

We know from anthropology that as peoples move, as generations disperse and spread across the world, they carry their myths with them. They also add to their mythology, combining the gods they already worship with deities they encounter as they travel. As the diaspora continues, therefore, their mythologies composite old and new.<sup>9</sup> We see this with Apollo and his twin, deities carried in this way to Ancient Greece, who have accumulated numerous often opposing qualities and iconography. For example, Apollo is god of the bow and the lyre, latterly of light and male youth, of prophecy and poetry, while Artemis is the chaste goddess of childbirth and the hunt. As peoples move, their myths are often shaped by or relocated to their new regions, other times the link to old homelands remains a connection with the past for geographically displaced or relocated peoples.

Some myths, particularly myths about the gods, were part of religious worship and ritual. In Ancient Greece gods were worshipped in, often regional, cults.<sup>10</sup> We know, from archaeological evidence and ancient written records, that the cult of Apollo links him to a wide number of locations in which our myth might have been forged, for example, at Delphi, Delos, and Pythos, at Amyclae in Sparta, at Corinth, at Banchidai-Didyma, and at Seleucus' Macedonian sanctuary of Daphne, where Polybius's *Histories* speak of a 'grand festival at Daphne' connected with Apollo in the third century BCE.<sup>11</sup> In literature, Apollo has a similarly grand presence, for example, it is Apollo's wrath, and the plague he initiates, which opens the most famous of epics, Homer's *Iliad*. There is mounting evidence that nymphs too were worshipped in cults, such as those in the caves of Corinth, though the majority of archaeological evidence points to small, simple sites, often only an altar, established in celebration of important (rural) features, such as water courses. Currently, no evidence has been found that Daphne was worshipped individually. However, there are some literary references to Daphne that can help us narrow down the possible source of the myth: Pausanias links Daphne with Laconia, one of the locations for the Apollo

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<sup>9</sup> Dietrich, Some Evidence from Cyprus of Apolline Cult in the Bronze Age, *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie*, 1978, Neue Folge, 121, Bd. H.1 pp1-18 argues that Apollo is a 'composite' of eastern and ancient Greek, that at a conservative estimate, Apollo has been in Ancient Europe since 800 BCE, but in his conclusion to this paper, he argues that it was probably more like since the end of the bronze age, approximately 1200 BCE. p1, p18

<sup>10</sup> See Lowell Edmunds, in *Approaches to Greek Myth*, John Hopkins Press, 2014, 'One has to begin not with mythology but with religion and thus with cult—cult to different gods in different cities... Greek religion was polytheistic, not no Greek was a polytheist.' p21

<sup>11</sup> Lowell Edmunds, electronic copy with no page numbers (Introduction) Lightfoot, points out how Parthenius' stories were drawn from a wide geographical area, including Asia Minor, especially Miletus and Ionia, Magna Graecia and Sicily. p229. Apollo and his twin Artemis are said to originate from outside of Greece, possibly of middle eastern origin. Encyclopaedia Britannica suggests that Apollo 'originated in Anatolia and spread to Egypt by way of Syria and Palestine.' Certainly, that are Egyptian influenced images of Apollo on extant pottery.

and Daphne myth, via the cult of Artemis *Daphnaea* or Daphnia, and Peter Knox links Daphne to the Eurotas river in Laconia through Virgil's 6<sup>th</sup> *Eclogue*.<sup>12</sup> Plutarch in his *Lives* also connects the nymph Daphne to Laconia, through identification with the priestess Pasiphaë, implying that they are one and the same person.<sup>13</sup> References to Daphne are sometimes veiled, such as Nonnus' references to the 'reluctant laurel' or 'the sacred vale of Daphne'.<sup>14</sup> She does feature in a second myth, which I will come on to discuss: that of Daphne, Apollo and Leucippus.

Myths began to be fixed in collations and a number were preserved in the newly constituted libraries, such as the famous Alexandrian library. Many of these compilations of myth may well have influenced Ovid, for example: Hesiod's *Theogony*, c.700BCE, the *Bibliotheca* of Apollodorus, c. 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, and Parthenius, in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE. Two further compilations of note for the conservation and evolution of classical myths included Plutarch's *Lives*, and Nonnus' *Dionysiaca*, although tantalizingly, there may be fragments of other versions as yet untranslated in Greek mythographical, scholiastic, and rhetorical texts, according to Peter Knox.<sup>15</sup> The structure of the mythological compilations we do know is along genealogical lines, much as historical texts of the same period would have been structured, with the purpose of clarifying names and origins of key individuals, and their connection to other key individuals of note, sometimes almost in the form of lists.<sup>16</sup>

I want to focus now on the known pre-Ovidian versions of the myth in order to appreciate how the poet reimaged it. The first is that of Parthenius from his erotic tales:

This is what is said about Amyclas' daughter Daphne. She would not go down to the city at all, nor would she mix with the other girls, but gathering together a pack of dogs, she would go hunting in the Laconian countryside... For this reason she was very dear

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<sup>12</sup> Lightfoot, p472. Her reference to Pausanias, Sparta: Paus. 3.24.8

<sup>13</sup> Polybius, *Histories*, Book 31, chapter 3. Plutarch, *Lives*, Agis, 9.

More on Daphne in William Smith (ed) *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Geography* (online) [www.perseus.tufts.edu](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu)

<sup>14</sup> Nonnus, *Dionysiaca*, III.129 and in note, XL.139

<sup>15</sup> Knox, 'A composite summary of all these accounts would run as follows: Daphne flees from the attentions of an overly amorous Apollo, and just as she is on the point of capture, calls to her mother, Earth for help. Rescue comes in the form of a sudden chasm which swallows her up, and the substitution of the laurel tree as consolation for Apollo. The myth is widely attested in this general outline: in addition to Statius, it is found in the Greek and Latin mythographical, scholiastic, and rhetorical traditions.' p188

<sup>16</sup> Lightfoot, p471 refers to the Parthenius' version being linked to both Phylarchus (in his fifteenth book) and the otherwise unknown Diodorus' Elegies. Scholars are divided as to who Diodorus might have been, that the manchette which names him on the surviving manuscript of Parthenius might have misspelled his name.

Lowell Edmunds, introduction (no page numbers on online version).

An example of lists: Lowell Edmunds talks of how Apollodorus names all thirty-one suitors of Helen.

to Artemis, who taught her to shoot straight. Now while she was wandering through the Elian landscape she attracted the love of Leucippus, son of Oenomaus. He despaired of making any other sort of attempt on her, but donned women's garments and went hunting with her in the guise of a girl... he came to please her, and she would never let go of him, embracing and clinging to him at all times. But Apollo himself was in love with the girl, and was possessed with rage and jealousy...so he put it into her mind to go bathing in a stream along with the other maidens. When they got there they all stripped off, and tore the clothes from Leucippus's back when they saw his reluctance. And, his treachery and duplicity laid bare, they all cast their javelins at him... Daphne, meanwhile, saw Apollo coming after her, and turned and fled with great alacrity. When she was almost on the point of being overtaken, she asked Zeus to be translated from the mortal world. And they say she became the tree named after her, the laurel.<sup>17</sup>

To summarise, Parthenius' Daphne is a huntress, and likely follower of the goddess Artemis, who eschews marriage in favour of a single life. As Parthenius portrays Daphne, her interest in the mortal Leucippus inspires jealousy in Apollo, who claims to love her. Daphne's metamorphosis to avoid Apollo's attention, is at the hand of Zeus, at the nymph's request.

The second version of the myth to survive is that of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE Greek historian Phylarchus, quoted by Plutarch in his *Lives*. There are notable differences between Phylarchus and Parthenius: Phylarchus' Daphne is no huntress, and she becomes a prophetess after her metamorphosis.<sup>18</sup>

Now there was a temple of Pasiphaë at Thalamae, and her oracle there was held in honour. Some say that Pasiphaë was one of the daughters of Atlas, and the mother of Ammon by Zeus, and some that Cassandra the daughter of Priam died at Thalamae, and was called Pasiphaë because she declared her oracles to all. Phylarchus, however, says that she was a daughter of Amyclas, Daphne by name, and that, fleeing the embraces of Apollo, she was changed into the tree of like name, after which she was honoured by the god with the gift of prophetic power.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Lightfoot, p339. This version is slightly abridged for brevity. See full text in Appendix 1.

<sup>18</sup> Phylarchus' version is found in Plutarch's *Lives*, which dates after Parthenius, however Phylarchus's text would have been older—though we have no date for his birth and death, Phylarchus was said to be a contemporary of Aratus, which William Smith dates at 215, BC. (Perseus Tufts) Phylarchus is believed to have been born in Naucratis in Egypt but lived in Athens, and is referred to as Phylarchus of Athens by Suidas.

<sup>19</sup> Plutarch, *Lives*, 9.3



The Plutarch/Phylarchus version shows how myth was starting to become literary, and more complex, by the merging together of myths answering the same (aetiological) question, or as variations on the same theme, or about the same deity. This combining of myths is evident in how Plutarch uses the phrase, ‘some say’ but he also introduces a new theme to the myth as we know it, that of prophesy, which is not without foundation, since the nymph cult in the caves of Corinth is linked to prophesising with knucklebones.<sup>20</sup> Phylarchus’s version connects Daphne to the mythical figure, Queen of Crete, possible witch and, in this incarnation, as already mentioned, the priestess, Pasiphaë.<sup>21</sup>

Both versions name Daphne’s father as the mortal king Amyclas. Amyclas is himself linked to Apollo. Firstly, through the myth of Amyclas’s mother, Niobe, who offended the goddess Leto, mother to Apollo and Artemis and they, in revenge, murdered all of Niobe’s children (excepting Amyclas and his sister Chloris). Amyclas’s son Hyacinthus is a second, unhappy connection to the god since it was because of Apollo, who loved Hyacinthus, that the young man was killed.<sup>22</sup> Like Parthenius, Plutarch’s style highlights familial links between individuals, and within this there is a suggestion of the older, simpler oral style that Phylarchus may have preserved.

In the third version of the myth, Apollo sings his suit to Daphne. This version is supported by visual depictions of the myth, which I will come on to discuss shortly, including wall art, and through brief references in two literary sources. The first source is Nonnus’ *Dionysiaca*, in which the author describes Apollo’s singing: ‘Daphne heard him, but felt no pleasure at heart’.<sup>23</sup> Nonnus’ compilation of myth is particularly significant because he preserved other versions of myths direct from classical texts that have since been destroyed. But Nonnus is also supported by the research of Peter Knox who identified a reference to the so-called song of Apollo in Virgil’s *6<sup>th</sup> Eclogue*.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Theodora Kopestonsky, The Greek Cult of the Nymphs at Corinth, *Hesperia: The Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens*, Volume 85, Number 4, October-December 2016, pp711-777

<sup>21</sup> See Pausanias’s descriptions in *Periegesis tes Hellados* where, in describing Greece he skips over whole myths in single sentences.

Lowell Edmunds, p8.

<sup>22</sup> As with many myths, Hyacinthus’ death is the result of divine inter-fighting. The god responsible differs across versions of this myth. Therefore, Apollo’s accidental killing of his lover is a simplification for some versions. This versions, Perseus Encyclopaedia, Pausanian scription of Greece ([www.perseus.tufts.edu](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu)), Harry Thurston Peck Harpers Dictionary of Classical Antiquities, 1898,

<sup>23</sup> Nonnus *Dionysiaca*, XV, 309-10, also

<sup>24</sup> Knox also references Nonnus but explores the connection between the song of Apollo, Virgil’s *6th Eclogue* and both Daphne myths.

Ovid shows nymphs were often huntresses, and Parthenius presents Daphne as a huntress.<sup>25</sup> He also explicitly mentions Artemis as an influence, describing Daphne's chosen life as one of chastity and hunting in the manner of Artemis. Lightfoot suggests Daphne's story is connected to the Peloponnese region, where a number of similar myths can be traced:

Daphne is one of the numerous mythological athletic maidens associated with the Peloponnese, together with the Arcadian Callisto and the Elean Atlanta, Leucippus' own sister. Callisto's is a particularly interesting parallel to the Leucippus story for Zeus is sometimes said to have dressed as Artemis in order to gain access to her... Callisto cannot resist the... power of the god, whereas Daphne is able to overcome her mortal deceiver. Leucippus is cast in the role of other mortal intruders upon sacred, inviolate companies... all of whom suffer... as a result.<sup>26</sup>

Fontenrose's research identifies an underlying source based on the huntress motif. His basic formula is strongly reminiscent of the myth of Apollo, Daphne and Leucippus:

The hunter loves the huntress and she loves him. They are constant companions on the hunt. The goddess loves the hunter; he enters into a sexual relation with her, perhaps reluctantly. A god loves the huntress, but she spurns him. The god then arouses the huntresses' jealousy and causes her to kill the hunter. The god then assaults the huntress. He overcomes her resistance in the early forms of the story; in later variants she escapes him with the help of friendly deities.<sup>27</sup>

Using Fontenrose's formula, Parthenius' Daphne fills the role of the huntress in taking a lover and then dispatching him, or, as often with goddesses such as Artemis, inciting her maidens to do it.

Hunting, in classical literature, especially with regard to nymphs, represents a motif of otherness; of life outside or escape from sexual norms. Certainly, this could be said of the Leucippus and Daphne myth, while the Daphne and Apollo myth is unmistakably a story about desire and sex, albeit sexual attention forced upon an unwilling recipient. It is also about transgression, as Fontenrose's formula highlights, and the difference in consequences between the transgressions of mortals and gods; mortal hunters are punished for transgressions, such as

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<sup>25</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, IV.301-2, 'Now this was the home of a nymph, but one who didn't enjoy/the normal pursuits of archery, hunting and running races.' This said of Salmacis in the adaptation of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus in Book 4.

<sup>26</sup> Lightfoot, p 473-4

<sup>27</sup> Review of Fontenrose, *Joseph, Origen: the myth of the hunter and the huntress*. University of California, Berkeley, 1981, review appeared in *The Journal of Hellenistic Studies*, 1984, pp233-4 by R.G.A. Buxton.

having a relationship, willing or pressured, with a goddess, and here Daphne would be viewed as a goddess. Leucippus's transgression brings his death or vanishing, or both in Parthenius's version. In either myth, as a god and therefore one of the 'undying', Apollo moves unscathed from one transgression to the next.<sup>28</sup> In relation to Apollo, Daphne takes on a position closer to Leucippus in Fontenrose's formula: while not mortal, she can be punished for the transgressions of the hunter. Lightfoot highlights the vulnerability of the nymphs to being raped: 'because of the common unsustainability in Greek myth of the ideal of virginity'.<sup>29</sup> Ovid's *Metamorphoses* catalogues rapes within classical mythology showing that as a fate, rape is extraordinary in its ordinariness.

As these overlapping mythical connections highlight, myth in the classical period grew in complexity and intertextuality as versions of myths evolved out of other versions, and new adaptations were made by adding or merging whole or fragments of myth together. While the degree of intertextuality is not always apparent to the modern reader, since much of the material has since been lost, it was an important part of the Greek and later Roman mythological poetical canon, and came to be expected by its readers. By the period of the so-called Alexandrian poets, of whom Callimachus was the most famous, myth-based poetry was being used to make political and satirical points about the contemporary world, and by the time of Virgil, it was so highly intertextual and sophisticated, it was often obliquely referenced, such as in Virgil's 6<sup>th</sup> *Eclogue*, where a host of myths are alluded to metonymically as types of tree, with each name signifying a single myth: oak, poplar, ash, and laurel.<sup>30</sup>

In the classical world, visual art-forms would have been by far the most common presentation of all myths, given the relatively low literacy rates of the period. The variety of visual art forms, for example, in the architectural statuary in and around temples and public places, and in more daily domestic objects such as amphorae, crockery, mosaics, and wall art, meant that everyone in

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<sup>28</sup> There are many epithets in the *Iliad* to describe the differences between gods and men, but that of the body which cannot suffer, other than fleeting discomfort, and a body which decays, feels pain, and can be killed is the most central. See Emily Wilson's introduction to Homer's *The Iliad*, WW Norton and Company, 2023.

<sup>29</sup> Lightfoot, p276

R.G.A. Buxton.

<sup>30</sup> Virgil's 6<sup>th</sup> *Eclogue*, Rutherford, R. B. Virgil's Poetic Ambitions in 'Eclogue 6', *Greece & Rome*, Apr. 1989, Vol 36, No. 1, pp 42-50, See also Knox for the overlap between Virgil's Poem and Ovid's Apollo and Daphne.

classical society would have the opportunity to see and remember the visual iconography of these myths, even slaves.<sup>31</sup>

Just as in the texts, where the presentation of myths ‘were full of repeated, formulaic expressions, phrases and epithets’ to be easily remembered, so the visual form relied on a consistent iconography for the same purpose.<sup>32</sup> Visually, Apollo and the nymph Daphne were presented across the classical world with relatively consistent iconography. While there was some regional variation in the presentation of Apollo, for example in Egyptian or Syrian imagery of the god, and while he is also not uncommonly presented as androgynous, with flowing chiton and himation, and long hair, he is generally presented as we see in figure 1, as a perpetual youth, with ‘unshorn’ long, wavy dark hair, ‘laurelled’ or wearing a laurel crown or laureate on his head, and often carrying a bow, a lyre or a laurel branch (sometimes all three) in his hand.<sup>33</sup> While nymphs are commonly represented in the visual arts, Daphne specifically is

relatively  
unusual, at least  
in the works that  
have survived.

figure 1<sup>34</sup>



figure 2<sup>35</sup>



<sup>31</sup> Lowell Edmunds, Introduction

<sup>32</sup> Translator’s note, Emily Wilson’s translation, Homer’s *The Iliad*, WW Norton and Company, 2023, p1xix

<sup>33</sup> Early, Egyptian influenced iconography of Apollo, such as: <https://iconographic.warburg.sas.ac.uk/object-wpc-wid-bfhl>.

Nonnus uses the term ‘unshorn’ to describe the long hair of Apollo (as Phoebus, another incarnation of Apollo along with Hunter) *Dionysiaca*, X.222, also in his many descriptions of Apollo, he is ‘laurelled’ or wearing a crown of laurel leaves. XIII.130. Later, Nonnus refers to the ‘prophetic laurel’ that Apollo gives his son Arcas. XIII.451

<sup>34</sup> Figure 1 comes from Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Taranto, catalogue number 8264, 405-385 BCE, taken from an Apulian red-figure krater. Permission to use granted.

<sup>35</sup> Figure 2, British Museum object number: 1867,0508.1061 c. 500BCE, The image is released under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license.

The cup in figure 2, described by the British Museum as ‘Apollo pursuing Daphne’, is the first of several examples of the god and his suit. Given the unfortunately worn condition of the image, however, the museum acknowledges that it could possibly be the image of Apollo pursuing his wife, Kreusa. The material point is that the pursuing Apollo is so common a trope—the British Museum alone possesses several (see figure 3)—that the iconography may well be similar, which is the case here. Figure 2 highlights the Apollo’s physical proximity as ‘hunter’ to the pursued: we see his figure overlapping that of Daphne/Kreusa in several places. We also see that the direction of movement comes from Apollo, suggesting it is at his instigation and that this is not a pursuit of equals or equal intentions. In this version, because of the weathered image, the overall sense I draw from it is of Apollo almost merging with the figure he pursues. His gaze is fixed on her, she turns her neck and twists her upper body round to look at him. Their expressions are hard to read.

Figure 3 shows an Attican hydria of Apollo chasing an unknown woman which allows us to glimpse elements eroded in figure 2 and which we will come on to see in figures 4 and 5. Apollo’s hand reaches forward to grasp the woman’s clothing. His front foot attempts to pin down her back foot and prevent her from fleeing, a motif we saw, less clearly, in figure 2 and will see later in images of Daphne to follow. In this version there are two more women on the right, also fleeing (only one visible in this image), possibly attendants of the pursued female.



figure 3<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Figure 3, British Museum object number: 1873,0820.355, 450-440BCE, The image is released under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license.

Figure 4 shows wall art of Apollo and Daphne dating from the same period as figure 2, around 500 BCE. Apollo is presented with his lyre, wearing the laureate crown and holding a laurel branch. As with figures 2 and 3, the suit is all Apollo's. He wears the laureate or crown of laurel which links him to the python slaying myth, (a tale told very differently by Ovid and Homer) in honour of which Apollo created the Pythian games. The laurel branch reminds the viewer of Apollo's poetic roots since it is the symbol of the god of poetry.



figure 4<sup>37</sup>

What figure 4 so beautifully highlights is the inequality of space, and, by implication, power, between the two figures. The scene, denuded of place or culture, and outside of time itself (as Bernini's adaptation will be), reflects the historical past of myth. The force of Apollo's interest in Daphne is presented by the exaggerated extension of his arm trying to grasp her and the length of his stride, especially when compared with hers.

As befitting their relative statuses, Apollo's movements are big and dramatic while hers are subtle, as we see, looking closer: Daphne's response to the god's incursion into her space is to pivot from her left foot to step away from the god. As with figure 3, Apollo's right foot is landing on top of Daphne's left foot in an attempt to keep her there. His body opens towards and entirely faces hers, while Daphne is shown in the now familiar position of simultaneously looking back at Apollo while preparing to run in the opposite direction. Their expressions are hard to read; whatever Daphne feels is not presented to us and Apollo's expression is similarly impassive, implying that feeling is suggested through action.

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<sup>37</sup> Figure 4, Warburg Institute Iconographic Database, circa 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE.  
<https://iconographic.warburg.sas.ac.uk/object-wpc-wid-bhao>, image available for use under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 3.0 Unported License

Figure 5 is one from several representations of the myth recovered from Pompeii. Dated from the eruption, though in all likelihood older, the story is of Apollo potentially singing his suit rather than pursuing Daphne. Like figure 4, it has some subtle messages, largely on the side of Daphne, while Apollo's body language is more expansive and obvious.



figure 5<sup>38</sup>

In figure 5, we see the now familiar display of Apollonian iconography: the laurel wreath, here with the addition of the sacred lyre, plus some intimation of a tree between them in the background, presumably a laurel. The mood between Apollo and Daphne is calm; almost, but not quite, static. Yet again, the central gesture is Apollo's: he has reached out and is touching the delicate fabric that Daphne wears thrown over her shoulder (the detail in this as wall art is more delicate than in the ceramics); potentially he can feel the wrist of Daphne through the fabric. But here, as a singer he is seated, and though he does not appear to be playing the lyre, the instrument given to him by Hermes, he does appear to be preparing to or just having sung to Daphne.<sup>39</sup> Either way it does not appear to have worked.<sup>40</sup> Daphne's response, a subtly implied rejection, is

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<sup>38</sup> Warburg Institute Iconographic database, image dates from Pompeii, circa 79AD. <https://iconographic.warburg.sas.ac.uk/object-wpc-wid-bgzy>, image available for use under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 3.0 Unported License

<sup>39</sup> Knox,

<sup>40</sup> Apollo is sometimes depicted as an unsuccessful lover. Graves, Robert, *The Greek Myths*, Penguin Books, 1992, highlights, 'Apollo was not invariably successful in love' and precedes to list failed liaisons with Marpessa and Daphne. p78. Even, Yael, Daphne (Without Apollo) Reconsidered: some disregarded images of sexual pursuit in Italian Renaissance and Baroque Art, *Studies in Iconography*, 1997, Vol 18 (1997) pp143-159. While this paper describes renaissance and baroque art, it is clear, having looked at the extant classical representations, that the antiquated depictions have significantly influenced



indicated though her raised palm, blocking his suit, and through the turning away of her face. Their feelings toward one another are also suggested by their contrasting body positioning: Daphne, vertical, her uptight body occupying minimal physical space; Apollo, more horizontally spread, simultaneously lounging back and reaching into Daphne's space, his hand touching the back of her wrist through gauzy fabric, one foot again pressed into the arch of one of Daphne's feet. Apollo's eyes gaze at her, while Daphne's gaze is directed away from Apollo such as in figure 2. Her legs, partially hidden, suggest that they are tightly crossed at the shin, indicating tension. It would be very difficult to view this image as anything but a rebuttal, though gentle, on Daphne's side.

While Ovid's adaptation breathed life into the myth of Apollo and Daphne, it still had to survive the often deliberate destruction of classical culture that followed the fall of the Roman empire. That it did survive owes something to misinterpretation, wilful or not, by Christian scholars. The Bible itself has some overlap with Book 1 of *Metamorphoses*, notably the flood myth. Other 'Christian' elements include Ovid's description of the birth of the universe as the work of *a* god, singular. In Book 2, in the Calisto story, Ovid refers to Zeus without name as the 'Almighty Father'.<sup>41</sup> Doubtless, Ovid rather assumed his readership would have understood he was referring to Zeus but this misreading, in part, explains the continued interest in Ovid's works after the end of the classical period. During the medieval period in Europe, Ovid's works were used in tutoring students, and later adapted into the more overtly moralistic taste of the period in *Ovid Moralisé*. When finally translated into European languages, Ovid's work underwent a revival; his myths are evident in figures from the Daphne in Marvell's poetry and Shakespeare's Lucretia, and finally, as the myth that the cardinal nephew (nephew to Pope Paul V), Cardinal Scipione Borghese, would commission Bernini to sculpt.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps this is the ultimate evolution: from pagan myth to Catholic muse.

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the later renaissance ones, showing Daphne and the laurel, just her and Apollo in a landscape that is unidentifiable, pared down.

<sup>41</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 2.401

<sup>42</sup> For more on the destruction of an estimated 99 per cent of Classical literature by the early Christian church see, Nixey, Catherine, *The Darkening Age: The Christian destruction of the Classical world*. Pan Books, 2017. P xxxi-xxxii, 'During the fourth and fifth centuries, the Christian Church demolished, vandalized and melted down a simply staggering quantity of art. Classical statues were knocked from their plinths... the remains of the greatest library in the ancient world destroyed.'



Before moving on to outline the following chapters of this thesis, I want to comment on adaptation, since adaptation is the process by which the myth has been resuscitated and reshaped over the past two millennia. It is not my intention to explore the theory of adaptation here, but rather, as a writer myself, to explore the creative process of adaptation and in particular, authorial choice, those myriad decisions any adaptor of a work faces in terms of what to keep and where to cut, what to embellish, or diminish. In the absence of a source for Ovid, we do know that the poet often drew on multiple sources.<sup>43</sup> Secondly, in terms of Bernini's sources, his library inventory shows that at his death, the sculptor had a copy of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* suggesting that the Ovidian version of Apollo and Daphne was known to him.<sup>44</sup> I want to caveat this discussion on sources for adaptation with the note from my own practice, since I am aware of how much any creative process is unconscious. To my mind, it is impossible to know and trace every instance of inspiration, and follow it through into realisation, given that inspiration does not follow an absolute chronology and ideas can take minutes or years to emerge in their final form (or simply not produce anything at all).

It has been helpful for my project, critical and creative, to create a hypothetical source of the myth myself in order to understand how far Ovid developed the myth himself. Clearly this must be conjectural since there are many questions that cannot be answered, for example did Ovid have a version of the myth in which Apollo sang his suit, or was the pursuit already in place? I achieved the following simplified version by working back from the Ovid, and considering also Fontenrose's hunter myth theory from which Apollo and Daphne's myth may have originated. This is my hypothetical source myth:

Apollo desires to possess the nymph, Daphne, but she spurns his love, resisting his every attempt to possess her. As he attempts to overcome her by force, Daphne flees, and appeals to a friendly god to save her, who transforms Daphne into a laurel.

Two points follow: the idea of a belief in transformation as an entirely natural phenomenon; and a notional parity or equivalence of value before and after transformation, whereby the beauty of the nymph equates to the beauty of the tree.

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<sup>43</sup> Wills, p144 'Mere translation was never Ovid's practice.... it is well known that for many myths Ovid avoided following a single source, but the usual accompanying assumption is that he combined and varied two or more treatments of the same myth.' Also, Peter Knox, or L. P. Wilkinson's *Ovid Recalled*.

<sup>44</sup> McPhee highlights the books in Bernini's library at his death in her book on his mistress Costanza, p139 For more on the poetic reworking of Daphne in Italy which may have influenced Bernini see, Andrea Bolland's *Desiderio and Diletto*, J. Joris Van Gastel, Joy Kenseth.

My thesis exploring the adaptation of Apollo and Daphne takes the form of a chapter each for Ovid and Bernini in chronological order. Chapter 1 explores what makes Ovid's treatment of metamorphosis different from that of other authors before him, many of whom will have influenced him. It looks at form, the theme of metamorphosis and changing shape, of Ovidian character, and what makes it proto-modern. It considers Ovid's response to the ideas on epic of the Alexandrian poet Callimachus. Lastly it explores the metaphorical themes of poetic creation and the role of the poet.

With minor exceptions, this work is based on the English language translation of Ovid and English translations in scholarship, meaning that any of the body of rhetorical and mythographic writing yet to be translated from Ancient Greek and Latin is sadly outside the scope of this work.

Chapter 2 considers the myth's transfer of form, from poetry into sculpture, and the many narratives that Bernini wove into this one work. It begins with the ways in which Bernini is in dialogue with Ovid and highlights where Bernini chose to adapt Ovid, notably in truncating Ovid's narrative to the pursuit-to-metamorphosis moment, thereby removing almost completely the idea of sexual threat. This chapter also explores Bernini's influences beyond Ovid in terms of painting, sculpture, and poetry, as well as the classical aesthetic and classical notions of non-binary gender. It also evidences Bernini's willingness to draw on ideas and story-telling techniques from theatre such as the use of narrative withholding, and the ingenious ways he uses the three-dimensions of sculpture to create story-telling that can move backwards and forwards in time. Lastly, it considers the role of religion and religious patronage in the sculpture's narrative.

## Chapter 1: Ovid's *Apollo and Daphne*

*Myth does not exist to become the vehicle of such meaning, but to be superbly told.*<sup>45</sup>

By the era in which Ovid produced *Metamorphoses*, in approximately 8AD, the old Hellenic myths had been recycled so many times that a contemporary reader could have been forgiven for believing there was nothing new to say about them.<sup>46</sup> Ovid's genius was to find genuinely new ways of using myth to entertain his readers, reworking old favourites, introducing more obscure myths, revamping them, overlaying and mashing myths together, embedding myth inside myth, reshaping, repurposing into a long string of myths, to create a hybrid poetic form that was entirely his own. As Galinsky puts it, Ovid, 'gave complete emphasis to the narrative and entertaining function of myth, and thereby revived myth.'<sup>47</sup> The resulting poem was so successful that *Metamorphoses* eclipsed many of the pre-Ovidian versions of these myths and in time became their only source for future generations.<sup>48</sup> But entertainment-value is not the only reason for the longevity of Ovid's Apollo and Daphne, although for a considerable time, the perceived lightness and humour of the whole poem almost obscured the rich and complex meaning that Ovid brought to this myth. More recently, Apollo and Daphne has been seen as the de facto start of the poem, and a virtual manifesto for Ovid's unique brand of epic. In this chapter, I will explore the layers of narrative used to enrich Ovid's adaptation and why its themes drew so many later

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<sup>45</sup> G. Karl Galinsky, *Ovid's Metamorphoses*, Basil Blackwood, Oxford, 1975, p67

<sup>46</sup> Nonnus, *Dionysiaca*, book I, Introduction to Mythology H.J. Rose, pX-XI

Virgil's 6<sup>th</sup> *Eclogue* for example compare with Ovid, it covers many of the same myths, almost one per line. Similarly, Ovid turns the tables on some of the myths in Virgil's *Aeneid*, steering clear of some between the *Metamorphoses* and the *Fasti*, and consigning others to short references such as Virgil does here. For example, in his cosmology section, in the 6<sup>th</sup> *Eclogue*, Virgil tells in one line the story of Deucalion and Pyrrha, which Ovid tells so beautifully in *Metamorphoses*, as this short sentence which in translation reads, 'Now he of the stones by Pyrrha cast.'

<sup>47</sup> Galinsky, p63

<sup>48</sup> E.J. Kenny, Binns (ed) *Ovid*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1973, 'What is the special genus of which the *Metamorphoses* is sole representative?... the search for a label may or may not be a profitable exercise; the diversity of labels suggested at all events serves to emphasize the special character of the poem.' p117

artists and poets, including Petrarch, Botticelli, Rubens, Tiepolo and Bernini, to the myth with the hope of adapting it anew.

It was simply not Ovid's style to repeat what he could reinvent, and *Metamorphoses'* form is commonly perceived to be the true ingenuity of the poem, and by extension, the myth of Apollo and Daphne.<sup>49</sup> So, Ovid's form is where I want to start. While there had been innovation and challenges to the relatively prescribed forms of epic and elegy in the classical period, they remained, prior to *Metamorphoses*, discrete and different, and expectations remained in terms of their respective themes, motifs, and similes; even character behaviour had conventional modes (known as *programmatics*, to classical scholars). While Homer's blueprint for epic themes and Virgil's language remained hugely influential up to and including Ovid's era, in relation to form, it is the Alexandrian poet Callimachus whose definition of epic most influenced Ovid's form, and against which Ovid sets himself in his retelling of Apollo and Daphne.<sup>50</sup>

Ovid begins *Metamorphoses* with a statement of intent about his proposed new form which is itself a direct reference to Callimachus. He states:

*Changes of shape, new forms, are the themes which my spirit impels me  
now to recite. Inspire me, O gods (it is you who have ever transformed my art), and spin me a  
thread from the world's beginning  
down to my own lifetime, in one continuous poem.*<sup>51</sup>

The first reference to Callimachus I want to explore comes from the Latin *carmen perpetuum* or 'one continuous poem'. The language is Callimachean, taken from the prologue of his *Aetia* poem, prescribing a new, shorter version of epic, known as the mini-epic or *epyllia*. The following extract from Susan Stephens paraphrases that prologue with Callimachus' new kind of epic outlined within:

He [Callimachus's 'I' narrator] articulated the privileged status of the poet as one who is favoured by Apollo and the Muses, setting out guidelines for the composition of poetry in a series of oppositions—the untrodden path vs the public thoroughfare, delicate

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<sup>49</sup> See footnote 38 in introduction for more from Wills and Knox on Ovid's inventiveness, reworking instead of copying.

<sup>50</sup> Kenny, p118, *Metamorphoses* is 'shot through with Virgilian reminiscences.'

Callimachus dates from the third century BCE and wrote in Greek. Although Roman, Ovid used the Greek names from mythology because he was consciously drawing on the Greek origins of Roman culture and life in *Metamorphoses*.

<sup>51</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, 1.1-4. Italicisation mine.

versus bombast, thin Muses vs. fat sheep, the cicada vs the braying ass. Issues of length (long poetry vs. short) and register (high vs. low).<sup>52</sup>

The prescribed new kind of epic came to Callimachus in the whispers of the god Apollo. Apollo's involvement is of particular significance since he occupies here his role as god of poetry. Apollo's advice to the poet was to avoid writing a long, continuous epic, or *carmen perpetuum*—the same language that Ovid recycles—since long epics could only be bad imitations of Homer, and in effect, unoriginal.<sup>53</sup> By citing that he intends to write a long continuous poem, Ovid sets himself against Callimachus's direction and by extension, Apollo's advice, while at the same time playfully suggesting that other poets' epics may be poor imitations of Homer, but he, Ovid, is quite capable of writing a poem that is both long *and* original.

The next important reference to Callimachus in the same opening passage builds on the role of Apollo as advice-giver to poets and comes in Ovid's first reference to the gods: 'Inspire me, O gods (it is you who have ever transformed my art) and spin me a thread...in one continuous poem.' The convention of Apollo intervening directly to change or shape a poem is known by scholars as a *recusatio*.<sup>54</sup> Virgil used an Apollo *recusatio* in his 6<sup>th</sup> *Eclogue*.<sup>55</sup> While Ovid himself used an Apollo *recusatio* in his *Ars Amatoria*. Ovid's depiction and treatment of Apollo in his adaptation, the role that he gives the god, are aspects of the Apollo and Daphne myth that will be explored in depth in this chapter. But in these opening lines ahead of the myth's adaptation, Ovid draws the reader's attention to his *Ars Amatoria recusatio* where, specifically, he claimed that Apollo prevented him from writing epic by removing the foot of his first hexameter, turning it back into an elegiac couplet, and thus thwarting Ovid's poetic ambition first time round.<sup>56</sup> In writing *Metamorphoses* in hexameter, the rhythm of traditional epic, Ovid is rejecting both Apollo's advice to Callimachus for a shorter epic, and Apollo's previous injunction to Ovid against writing epic, thus establishing an interesting and humorous tension between Ovid and

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<sup>52</sup> Susan Stephens summarizes the prologue of *Aetia* online and as such there are no page numbers, but this quotation comes under the heading, Organization of the *Aitia*. There are multiple spellings of *Aitia/Aetia* within scholarly writing.

<sup>53</sup> Stephens

For more information on Callimachus' *Aetia*, its likely publication order, and what remains of the actual text, I refer to the introduction to Loeb Classical library edition, Callimachus, *AETIA, LAMBI, HECALÉ, and other fragments, MUSEAEUS, Hero and Leander*, translated by C.A. Trypanis, Harvard University Press, 1975.

<sup>54</sup> The *Recusatio* is explored frequently by Ovidian Scholars, but a helpful article on Apollo and Daphne is W.S.M Nicoll's, Cupid, Apollo and Daphne, The Classical Association's *Classical Quarterly*, 1980, Vol 30, no.1 1980, pp174-182.

<sup>55</sup> Virgil: 'As I was praising battles fierce, and kings,/ Apollo twitched my ear, with this advice:...' Translation from 1908 copy on Wikisource.

<sup>56</sup> This point is covered by a number of scholars, for instance, Wills, Nicoll and Celia Campbell

Apollo as to who will decide what kind of poetry he writes. This theme will be developed in Ovid's adaptation of the Apollo and Daphne myth.

Having established that Ovid's 'new form' is epic, what kind of epic does a poet who cut his teeth on elegy want to write? One of the reasons why Apollo and Daphne is sometimes called the true start of the poem is that it answers this question in its provocative opening line, which asserts, 'Apollo's first love was Daphne.'<sup>57</sup> Ovid's epic is shown here to pursue a theme of love.<sup>58</sup> While there had been romantic adventures in epic before *Metamorphoses*, there had never been an epic of love.<sup>59</sup> This particular choice of theme is all the more unusual, because love has its own form, elegy, and by using the theme of elegy in the form of epic, Ovid is at last drawing these two forms together and blurring their historic distinctiveness.

From this initial statement of theme, Ovid's adaptation of the myth of Apollo and Daphne begins with a disagreement between representatives of epic and elegy. Apollo, representing serious poetry, appears fresh from slaying the python and describes his victory to Cupid, here representing elegy, with the provocative suggestion that only he, Apollo, as the slayer of the python, is worthy of the bow that Cupid carries. Cupid, it should be noted, is an Ovidian addition and his sole purpose is to stand in for elegy in contrast to the bullish god of epic. That Apollo is not the winner of this tussle is the next hint that this new form of epic is not following the traditional plan. But this interplay between epic and elegy in the physical bodies of Apollo and Cupid is designed to show the reader that Ovid changes the rules in the full knowledge of the rules, and though his theme might be surprising it will contain the same big, conventional

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<sup>57</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1.451 See also Nicoll for Apollo and Daphne as de facto start of the whole poem. p178

<sup>58</sup> The cosmology, not an Ovidian invention, depicts the origins of the world, including the giants, the serpent, Deucalion and Pyrrha which are also found in other classical texts.

<sup>59</sup> The meaning of *love* in this (mythical) context and within classical poetry more widely is not a romantic, mortal experience but rather a divine state of lust. In some mythical situations, *love* could be used to describe mutual desire, however throughout *Metamorphoses* it is frequently depicted as unrequited and regularly leads to rape. More widely in myth, consent is sometimes circumvented by a god using deceit and magic, as in the case of Zeus, who is said to enjoy changing shape in order to rape women while pretending to be a husband, for example, or to approach his target in the form of a friendly god such as Artemis. The consequence of divine lust is rarely positive, e.g. Hyacinthus accidentally killed by his lover Apollo, and in relation to Zeus's transgressions, his wife Juno often seeks vengeance upon any females e.g. Leto, Io, Callisto. In *Metamorphoses* many transformations are the consequence of rape, e.g. Lotus becoming a tree. Since so much of love is rape, the term 'love' feels inappropriate to modern readers. Scholars call the love themed stories in *Metamorphoses* 'amatory' tales. See also Sharon James on woman as commodity, as object, in this period, and attitudes towards women who have been or been threatened with rape. On a second note. The precise description of what kind of epic Ovid has written, in scholarly terms, is summed up by Kenney in the introduction to his article on *Metamorphoses*, in Binn's, *Ovid*.

subjects of life and death—the ‘momentous’ and ‘epochal’ as might be expected from a traditional epic.<sup>60</sup>

Having confirmed the ‘new form’ I want to turn to another theme in the opening lines in relation to Apollo and Daphne, those ‘changes in shape.’ This is a significant theme. Clearly, a poem entitled *Metamorphoses* is going to possess multiple examples of transformation. There are many sub-themes within this one macro theme of changes of shape, and I will explore them in turn, beginning with the first change in shape, from the tradition known as aetiology, in which the origins of natural phenomena are described through metamorphosis in story form. In this case, the natural phenomenon in question is the origin of the laurel. The story of a nymph turned into a laurel has clear aetiological roots and shouldn’t need signposting to the contemporary reader, but Ovid does it anyway, in the segue between the python myth and the myth of Apollo and Daphne itself.

In order that time should never destroy the fame of this exploit,  
Apollo established the sacred games, attended by huge crowds,  
the Pythian Games, called after the serpent he vanquished, Python.

Here the athletes who won their events on track or on field or the chariot-race, would  
receive the glorious crown of an oak-wreath

The *laurel had not yet appeared*, and Phoebus would garland the flowing  
locks of his comely head with any available foliage.<sup>61</sup>

This passage, with its emphasis on ‘not yet appeared’ is, as Hollis makes clear, firstly, a showcase of Ovid’s knowledge of Greek ‘manner.’ It creates a useful chronology of events and a causal link between the slaying of the python, which in turn required a games in celebration, and the need for laurel leaves to make crowns for those victors. All this history links Apollo with the origins of the first laurel.<sup>62</sup> Once established, the aetiological aspect of the story is dropped.

The second interpretation of ‘changes of shape’ in Apollo and Daphne relates to the way the figure of Apollo is cast and recast in a series of roles within the poem. Ovid never lets Apollo remain for long in one role, finding numerous ingenious ways to disturb him before he can settle. This repeated recasting of Apollo destabilizes the reader’s ideas about genres of poetry, as

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<sup>60</sup> Diana Spencer, from *In Our Time: Virgil’s Georgics*, aired 18<sup>th</sup> May, 2023.

<sup>61</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1.445-450 italics mine.

<sup>62</sup> Hollis, p69

Gottfried Mader explains: ‘While the principal transformation in the story is of course Daphne’s...Apollo himself undergoes a series of pointed (generic) role-reversals whose net effect is to destabilize canonic notions of epic.’<sup>63</sup>

Nonnus tells us that one of the many names of Apollo in classical literature is Hunter, and the Apollo that the reader first meets is ‘still in the flush of his victory over the serpent,’ in the apparent role of the hero.<sup>64</sup> But can he sustain it? Immediately, Ovid’s Apollo lacks self-control, teasing Cupid, ‘What are you doing with grown-up weapons, you mischievous boy? That bow would be better carried by me.’<sup>65</sup> Falling at this first hurdle, Apollo fails to sustain his heroic position by lying, or embellishing his tale with talk of ‘numberless arrows,’ and his prowess with a bow: ‘When I fire my shafts at my foes or beasts, they’re unfailingly wounded.’<sup>66</sup> The narrator immediately intervenes to highlight that Apollo is no hunter and to assert his lack of experience with the bow:

Until it was killed by the deadly shafts of Apollo,  
whose only targets before were the timid gazelles and the roe deer<sup>67</sup>

Apollo, Ovid’s narrator is explaining, has not followed convention and advanced his skill with a bow as writers of the period would normally stipulate, via the set piece, a particular *programmatically* known as a *progression*. Here is one such progression from Callimachus’ 3<sup>rd</sup> *Hymn* describing the young Artemis’s development of skill with her bow:<sup>68</sup>

First upon an elm, second you let loose upon an oak,  
and third upon a wild beast. But the fourth was no oak—  
You targeted the city of unjust men, who wrought offensive injustice  
Upon citizens and strangers alike, wicked ones...<sup>69</sup>

Note Callimachus’s rhetorical emphasis, using first, second, third, and the correlating increase in impressiveness of the quarry—oak to elm to wild beast, to unjust men, ‘wicked ones’.<sup>70</sup> All of

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<sup>63</sup> Gottfried Mader, Programming Pursuit: Apollo and Daphne at Ovid *Met.* 1.490-542, *The Classical Bulletin*, 84.1 (2009) pp16-26

<sup>64</sup> Nonnus, *Dionysica*, V.239, Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1.454

<sup>65</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1.456-7

<sup>66</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1.458-9

<sup>67</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1.440

<sup>68</sup> Note, that in the language of classical scholars, this conceit is called a *progression*, and such language generally, where there is an established formula for a particular event is known as a *programmatically*.

<sup>69</sup> Celia Campbell, ‘(Poetic) Licence to kill: Apollo, the python, and Nicander’s Theriaca in Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Greece and Rome,’ *The Classical Association*, 65.2, 2018, pp 155-174 quoting Callimachus’ *Hymn* 3 120-4

<sup>70</sup> Campbell, quoting Callimachus’ *Hymn* 3 120-4



this progression has apparently been ignored or skipped by Ovid's Apollo. His narrator informs the reader that prior to slaying the python, Apollo has only previously hunted 'timid' deer. He is impulsive then, advancing before progressing his craft as might be expected. At best, this implies Apollo slayed the python by pure happenstance and is an 'accidental' hero.<sup>71</sup> This un-heroic position is further compounded by Ovid's specific reference to deer as Apollo's only previous quarry, since Ovid expects his reader to be aware of the passage in Nicander's *Therica* explaining that deers' hatred of pythons results in the two species being commonly found together: making the likelihood of a chance encounter with the python even more probable.<sup>72</sup>

This short scene ends not with the repeat of 'numberless arrows', but with just two, fired by Cupid, one lead and one gold, which set the story in motion. With these two arrows, rather than the numberless arrows of a pseudo-heroic moment, the narrative direction has been wrestled into the hands of Cupid and his theme of love sets the course of the rest of the myth, and away from those earliest suggestions of heroic, male action. A theme not just of love, but of unrequited, unobtainable love; for Cupid's lead arrow ensures the object of Apollo's love, Daphne, will always reject it. If Apollo is not to be the hero of this epic, what then is Apollo's role to be?<sup>73</sup>

Briefly, rather hilariously, Ovid recasts Apollo in the role of the lover, forced to recite his qualities in hexameter, trying to win over Daphne while simultaneously running after her. 'I am master of Delphi,/ Charos and Tenedos, Patara's temple too. My father is Jupiter. I can reveal the past, the present and future to all who seek them. I am the lord of the lyre and song. My arrows are deadly.'<sup>74</sup> But this is always going to be an unsuccessful suit, given the lead arrow, and, as Ovid makes clear, the pomposity and arrogance of Apollo's character. This can only be the kind of 'love' that ends in rape. But Ovid does not want to dwell on serious consequences, merely to hint at them, and so he pauses Apollo's suit, and allows the god of poetry to step briefly out of the role of the lover into that of the poet, a role requiring detachment rather than passion. Apollo attempts this with a musing thought on Daphne's appearance: 'He eyes the hair hanging loosely over her neck, and murmurs, "What if that hair were neatly arranged!"'<sup>75</sup> It is one of the many abrupt shifts of tone and register that makes this poem so polyphonous and the depiction

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<sup>72</sup> Campbell goes on to highlight a reference in the text to 'deer' in Nicander's *Therica*, in which deer were commonly associated with particularly hatred of the python meaning that by hunting deer, Apollo accidentally came upon the deer's hated enemy by chance, because the deer effectively brought him into its proximity rather than Apollo seeking it out p164 Nicoll best explains Apollo, as inspiration of 'serious' poetry. p175

<sup>74</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1.515-519

<sup>75</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1.497-8

of Apollo's personality, fragmented. Immediately on making this observation, Apollo is made to revert back to his role of lover and pseudo-hunter, which precipitates another change in tone. The language then shifts closer to epic, borrowing conventional similes of the hunt, such as the hare chased by the hound, to describe Apollo's dogged pursuit and Daphne's continued flight, 'one running for safety, the other to capture his prey.'<sup>76</sup> While the language is that of epic, however, Apollo never steps back into a heroic or epic role, in part because Cupid has successfully derailed any serious epic theme, in part because Ovid can't resist making a joke, lightening the tone to entertain his reader; but in most part because of Apollo's chosen quarry, a nymph. The reader knows what will happen if Apollo catches her and, Ovid appears to suggest, there is nothing epic about rape.

While Apollo moves through a near constant change, Cupid remains largely the same, as a foil for Apollo's epic contentions, simultaneously the muse and the instigator of *Metamorphoses'* elegiac theme. It is Cupid, therefore, cast in Apollo's role in the Callimachean *recusatio*, meaning it is Cupid whispering definitions of what should be in the poet's ear, not Apollo. Ovid varies the *recusatio* conceit.<sup>77</sup> And yet there is a further twist. While Cupid may be the one who redesigns epic, it is Ovid, the poet, who controls him.

The third change of shape is metamorphosis. The central metamorphosis is that of Daphne, in this myth, but before I explore this in detail, I want to pause to highlight the significance of Ovid's placing female experience, in the form of metamorphosis —indeed many, many female metamorphoses— at the heart of his own brand of epic. Epic narrative had hitherto focussed almost exclusively on male character, male behaviour and male experience. Homer's *Iliad* cast the die in creating narrative exploring 'the famous deeds of men' with women functioning only as slaves or sexual objects.<sup>78</sup> The significance of Daphne's central role in this adaptation is quietly revolutionary, for through her experience, Ovid legitimises female experience as a valid epic theme and highlights how many of these female experiences are of rape or sexual violence, the

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<sup>76</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1.533

<sup>77</sup> Nicoll, p175, p177 'Ovid's contemporaries would not miss the humour in the idea that the patron of epic and serious poetry should be obliged to abandon his pretensions in order to get his hands on the tree which was the symbol of his own poetic craft.'

<sup>78</sup> Quotation from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, *Il*, 9.186, *Od*, 8.73, from Alison Keith, Versions of Epic Masculinity in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, *Ovidian Transformations, Essays on Ovid's Metamorphosis and its Reception*, ed. Philip Hoare, Alessandro Barchiesi, Stephen Hinds. Cambridge Philological Society, 1999 p214-239, p214 See also Emily Wilson's translation introduction to the *Iliad*, W.W. Norton, 2023

result of which is that women's bodies are *forcibly* transformed, first by the assaults of men and only then by metamorphosis.<sup>79</sup>

Daphne's role is initially a very typical feminine role: object and muse. Our learning about her character is limited to her appearance—hair, beauty, breasts, feet—and that she is the object of Apollo's lust. When she rejects him, she becomes even more desirable to him: 'Phoebus caught sight of her, fell in love and longed to possess her... flight made her all the more lovely'.<sup>80</sup> During the pursuit, she is depicted as another object, the prey-animal, notably the hare, and though the language describing her situation deliberately imitates epic, it makes a subtle point of resisting it. Her flight shows a desire to keep resisting capture, and that Ovid details it, allows it to be in focus in the poem rather than jumping over it, is also notable: most rapes are barely even mentioned in classical literature and resistance rarely so. Through her resistance and as she transforms, there is another shift in her role, whereby her literal body, which has been stumbling and getting scratched, becomes a metaphorical figure worthy of such pursuit. Genevieve Liveley highlights the link in the Latin between bark and book, how the process turns Daphne into a character.<sup>81</sup> But more than a character, as object of the pursuit, she represents an ennobling prize, which in metaphorical terms is not a body but a more abstract form as nebulous as ideas or essences that turn into poetic form through the creative process. While Apollo fleetingly occupies the role of poet, Daphne's transformation turns her into the poetic idea which must transform to become the poem, and simultaneously, the poet, lessened, depleted even, through the act of producing the poem. There is one final way in which Daphne's metaphoric role can be seen, and that is the poetic form itself, so that prior to transformation she is a soft and pliable idea and afterwards, a fixed and definite form.

Metamorphosis can be seen as a rejection of the contemporary Roman virtue of fixity, an idea immortalised by Virgil, who had lived through the chaos of civil war before the creation of the

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<sup>79</sup> See Elena Theodorakopoulos, Closure and Transformation in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, *Ovidian Transformations: Essays on Ovid's Metamorphosis and its Reception*, ed. Philip Hoare, Alessandro Barchiesi, Stephen Hinds. Cambridge Philological Society, 1999 p214-239, p214

<sup>80</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1.490-529

<sup>81</sup> Genevieve Liveley, *Ovid's Metamorphoses: Reader's Guide*, Continuum, 2011. Ovid's Latin description of the transformation of Daphne into laurel here inscribes the intriguing possibility of an extra textual parallel metamorphosis: that of Daphne into character...the layer of bark or *liber* (*libro* 1.549) that encases her body could also be taken to refer to the book or *liber* in which she is now bound in her new form. Like Apollo, with whom Ovid identified at the beginning this tale, the poet also gets his hands on the girl in the end.' p

Augustan empire, in the line from *Aeneas*, of ‘empire without end’.<sup>82</sup> To misquote the opening quotation of this thesis, there is no fixity in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, other than the link between chaos and poetic craft, for poetry is born from chaos of the mind, from ideas:

Almost all creation myths tell this story of the emergence from chaos into order or form. And perhaps one reason for that is that’s how creation myths get formed, that’s how any work of art or poetry is fashioned. It comes from an unformed state or chaotic state, and then divisions and distinctions are made, so that the *Metamorphoses* is telling the story of its own poetic creation.<sup>83</sup>

Everything in this world in which Apollo pursues Daphne is a handspan from disorder and disintegration, and everything must change. Form is in flux. Meaning is constantly changing shape. A.S. Byatt describes it as the ‘shiftingness of things’:

... a shiftingness of things, the way the whole world is constantly in flux... above all things he [Ovid] was interested in, he says somewhere nothing rests, nothing stays, everything moves, everything changes. He invented an absolutely extraordinary form for describing this shiftingness.<sup>84</sup>

That ‘shiftingness of things’ becomes evident in the presentation of metamorphosis in Ovid as a *process*. Prior to Ovid, metamorphosis was an established literary convention.<sup>85</sup> Where metamorphosis occurred in literature before Ovid, it typically occurred off stage, described only as a *fait accompli*.<sup>86</sup> It was a tool of the gods, or a hint of magic in the hands of mortals such as Circe or Medusa. Readers of Homer’s *Hymn to Apollo* were expected to believe that the god simply

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<sup>82</sup> Full quotation from Virgil’s Jupiter, ‘to them I set no boundaries in time or space, I have given them empire without end.’ (*Aeneas* 1.278-9) quoted by Theodorakopoulos. p145 Much has been written on identity in Augustan poetry, for example see PKnox’s work on Augustan poetry, and on the impact of Virgil’s *Aeneas* in setting up ideas of the new Roman Empire as a fixed entity. See Theodorakopoulos, Galinsky for example.

<sup>83</sup> Dr Catherine Bates, Critic and Research Fellow, University of Warwick, in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, *In Our Time* podcast, aired 02 March 2000.

<sup>84</sup> A.S. Byatt quoted from the *In Our Time* podcast (2000)

<sup>85</sup> Though one that was not without scepticism among philosophers such as Aristotle. There was a strong rationalist counter argument to metamorphosis and the more fantastical elements of myth, disputed by such thinkers as Aristotle, Palaephatus, and the lesser-known Heraclitus the Paradoxographer who wrote sought evidence-based alternatives to explain the world around them. Heraclitus the Paradoxographer wrote one such treatise, *Unbelievable Tales*, ‘in which 39 ...familiar myths are briefly told and then interpreted through rationalism, euhemerism, allegory and etymology,’ according to Jacob Stern’s Heraclitus the Paradoxographer, on Unbelievable Tales, *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 133 (2003) pp51-97. P52

<sup>86</sup> For example, *Metamorphoses* by Theodorus, Nicander, as well as the elegiac *Metamorphosis* of Parthenius, see Wilkinson, p146

appeared aboard a ship in the form of a dolphin to express his wishes, while the lusty Zeus is regularly portrayed changing form to have sex with the unwilling.<sup>87</sup>

In Ovid's hands metamorphosis becomes a process worthy of description and as individual as the person experiencing it. Ovid depicts many different transformations in beautiful, shocking detail: we are told that Daphne's 'nimble feet' are rooted, that her 'soft white bosom was ringed in a layer of bark, her hair turned into foliage, her arms into branches.'<sup>88</sup> As we will see in chapter 2, how these details have inspired artists. Through Daphne's metamorphosis, the third in the poem, Ovid shows how *psychological* the experience of metamorphosis is; today, we would use the word trauma to describe it, though no such language existed in Ovid's time. Ovid shows trauma as an outcome of experiencing and witnessing metamorphosis. For example, we are not told of Peneus' state of mind after he helps Daphne become the laurel, but through the overlapping of Daphne's myth with that of Io, we are given a tiny scene where the rivers meet:<sup>89</sup>

This was the gathering point of firstly the local rivers,  
uncertain whether they ought to congratulate Daphne's father  
or offer condolence...

Only Ínachus failed to appear; he was buried away in the depths of his cavern, adding  
tears to his waters in pitiful  
grief for the loss of his daughter Io. He didn't know whether  
she still was alive or had gone to the shades<sup>90</sup>

The connection between the two metamorphoses encourages the reader to draw parallels, or at least intuit a link, between the grief Ínachus, Io's father expresses, and what Peneus may well be feeling.

Part of the reason the rivers are uncertain how to react to Daphne's metamorphosis is their lack of knowledge about the state of Daphne after transformation. How much of Daphne remains in the laurel and to what extent is metamorphosis simply a change of shape — 'the unchangeable substance beneath the changeable forms and appearances'— or is a reduction, and

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<sup>87</sup> There are many references to the many guises and transformations of Zeus in Greek mythology in order to seduce. See mythological dictionary such as: <https://www.theoi.com/Olympios/Zeus.html>. Zeus, for example, notoriously changed form to confuse those he wanted to sleep with, and in some cases trick them into submission, as in the case of Callisto, where Zeus took her own husband's form. He is also known to have changed into a bull, a swan, a shower of gold, and a satyr.

<sup>88</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1.548-50

<sup>89</sup> At this point, the reader has just read of Daphne's metamorphosis, and learns of Io's, but has yet to read of it, as Io's story leads on from Daphne's.

<sup>90</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1.577- 86

if so, by how much?<sup>91</sup> Certainly with the first metamorphosis of the poem, that of Lycaon into a wolf, Ovid is clear: ‘he kept some signs of his former self.’<sup>92</sup> Lycaon was wolfish before he was turned into a wolf. His essence or *ethos* remains the same.<sup>93</sup> The following line from Ovid implies that Apollo too, rather conveniently, believes Daphne has simply changed form: ‘All that remained was her beauty./Tree that she was, Apollo still loved her.’<sup>94</sup> Some elements of *Metamorphoses*’ second transformation would support this simple transference idea, where the description of metamorphosis explains how human features in the rocks become the equivalent in flesh, for example, the veins. In describing Zeus’ awareness of Io’s transformation, Ovid deliberately echoes the very language that Apollo used when describing Daphne’s beauty, implying that much of what is known about metamorphosis is in the eye of the beholder and that too often the beholder is a god, responsible for the metamorphosis, who simply don’t see the experience of the victim, doesn’t care, or just isn’t looking.<sup>95</sup> In Daphne’s case, however, Ovid’s narrator chooses to intervene and undermine the veracity of Apollo’s claim in the phrase, ‘all that remained.’ For this language implies a good deal of Daphne has been lost or that Daphne has lost a good deal through metamorphosis.

The only evidence of Daphne’s emotional experience of metamorphosis, is provided in Ovid’s choice of language. Genevieve Liveley confirms with the point that in the Latin version, Ovid heightens the sense of the suddenness of Daphne’s loss of movement:<sup>96</sup>

.....A *heavy* numbness  
 came over her body; her soft white bosom was ringed in a layer  
 of bark, her hair was turned into foliage, her arms into branches.  
 The feet that had run *so nimbly were sunk into sluggish* roots;  
 her head was *confined* in a treetop, and *all that remained* was her beauty.  
 Tree though she was, Apollo still loved her.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Galinsky, p44

<sup>92</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1.237-8

<sup>93</sup> Galinsky, p47-8 explores the philosophical (Stoical) attitudes about identity, about the essence or *ethos* of an individual being not his soul or his body but his character. There is a line of scholarly opinion that all of the metamorphoses in the poem are consistent with this philosophy, though most agree Ovid is not a philosophical writer.

<sup>94</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1.552-3

<sup>95</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1.401-5

<sup>96</sup> Liveley, ‘Ovid’s Latin conveys subtle effects here that an English translation cannot capture: the suddenness of Daphne’s transformation is caught neatly by the description of her swift feet, abruptly changed to sluggish roots.... p27-8

<sup>97</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, ‘all that remained was her beauty,’ 1.552, ‘all that survived of the cow was its glowing beauty,’ 1.743

The italicised words are mine. Taken together they present a motif of grief: weight and numbness, confinement and reduction. The reference to Apollo's love in the last line could also be read as a weight.

Ovid chooses to end the description of Daphne's metamorphosis so that we are not privy, as with Io, to her experience of living in her new form. Nor, other than the language of her transformation, is the process she experiences given voice. But there is another metamorphosis, that of the mortal Dryope in in Book 9 which seems to act like an extension to Daphne's, where Ovid gives Dryope the voice that Daphne lacks. The passage below begins with the voice of Dryope's sister Alcmena and ends with that of Dryope:

... I stood there, watching my sister's  
desperate plight, but unable to help—though I did my best  
to delay the growth of the trunk and branches by clasping her tight  
in my arms and wishing, I own, that the bark would envelop me too...  
and while her lips were there to allow her voice any outlet  
the words of her sad lament were wafted into the air  
'If the oaths of the cursed can ever be trusted, I swear by the gods  
that I never deserved this wrong. How cruel to be punished for nothing!  
... lift my darling baby again for a kiss from his mother.'<sup>98</sup>

In speaking directly to the reader, Ovid allows here what he resists with Daphne; Dryope can convey her own loss, the undeserving nature of her transformation, the fact she will never see her child grow up. Though there is great humour, such as her advice to her child not to touch trees, there is poignancy too. Ovid's language is visceral and visual: the reader can see what Dryope dreads, what we dread for Daphne, the bark about to cover her mouth and steal her voice. These compounding losses are disturbing and psychologically stressful to read; a fitting end for the fear begun with Daphne's transformation. Some scholars point to the loss of voice in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as the ultimate loss.<sup>99</sup> To the modern reader perhaps there is something particularly chilling in the silencing of victims through transformation.<sup>100</sup>

'Now I can say no more. The bark's soft growth is already  
stealing over my milk-white neck and my head's disappearing

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<sup>98</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*: 9.356-361, 9.369-371, 9.386

<sup>99</sup> Elaine Fantham, *Ovid's Metamorphoses*, Oxford University Press, 2004, p18

<sup>100</sup> For more on loss of voice in *Metamorphoses*, See Fantham and Solodow.

inside the top of a tree. You may keep your hands from my eyes:  
the coating of bark will cover and close them without your help.’

She breathed her last in her final words.<sup>101</sup>

Daphne effectively becomes a prop for her abuser. Apollo literally uses her body, wears it, tears off pieces of her to symbolise his role as god of poetry. No wonder Nonnus refers to Daphne as ‘afflicted’ and ‘unhappy’ in his *Dionysia*.<sup>102</sup> Clearly, Daphne’s transformation has left her more able to express her sense of self, her emotions and opinion than Lotus who can merely bleed or the Heliades, who weep amber tears for their brother Phaethon.<sup>103</sup> Ovid ends his treatment of Daphne’s myth by allowing her to express displeasure at Apollo: ‘The tree is as reluctant as the human Daphne had been, “for the wood shrank from his kisses”’.<sup>104</sup> Perhaps this is what Nonnus means when he refers to Daphne’s ‘arboreal speech’.<sup>105</sup> This would suggest that more like Io, ‘her mind is unchanged’.<sup>106</sup> But the reader cannot trust Apollo to notice. However, Ovid, who throughout limits the reader’s ability to know Daphne, ends the tale with an ambiguous sentiment of subtle resistance from Daphne; when Apollo informs Daphne ‘you, with your evergreen leaves are for glory and praise everlasting... the laurel agreed, and *seemed* to be nodding her head.’<sup>107</sup>

Because of the inherent fluidity in Ovid’s characterisation of Apollo and Daphne, his adaptation presents a new kind of characterization, which, though in embryonic form, prefigures newer, more modern ideas of character. Apollo embodies the nuanced figure, with a polyphony of sometimes contradictory voices within. Some of these changes in the tone of Apollo’s voice are the effect of Ovid’s sudden shifts in mood, determined as he is to keep up his pace and entertain his reader (and though Ovid moves between comedy and seriousness, the poem avoids the drift into tragedy).<sup>108</sup> But Apollo’s polyphony also results from the legacy of so many existing versions

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<sup>101</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*: 9.387-92

<sup>102</sup> Nonnus *Dionysiaca*, Book II.98 ‘Laurel Hamadryad, so shy of the marriage bed, let us both take one road, lest you see Phoebus, lest I espy Pan! Woodmen, pass by these trees! Do not fell the afflicted bush of unhappy Daphne!’

<sup>103</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 2.346-66

<sup>104</sup> Gilinsky, p47

<sup>105</sup> Nonnus XV.300

<sup>106</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1.636-7, ‘When she opened her mouth to complain,/her own voice startled her; all that emerged was a hideous howling.’ See Debra Hershkowitz, p184

<sup>107</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1.565-7

<sup>108</sup> For more on the cultural shift that was going on in Augustan Rome, a pushing back from tragedy in theatre to a lighter tone, see Galinsky. ‘A public saturated with tragic subjects and totally unwilling to experience pity and fear through deep inner involvement and shared spiritual experience which tragedy demanded. The new dramatic form which made



of him within the literary canon with whom Ovid's Apollo is in conversation. Every action, every word, exists within the frame of other similar but different actions and words of the character of Apollo, with the contemporary or scholarly reader constantly drawing comparisons. While it would be beyond the scope of this study to provide an in-depth evaluation of these many other versions of Apollo in literature, I want to offer two presentations of Apollo, by way of comparison, the first in a play by Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*.<sup>109</sup>

...I set out for Delphi  
and the god Apollo spurned me, sent me away  
denied the facts I came for,  
but first he flashed before my eyes a future  
great with pain, terror, disaster—I can hear him cry,  
'You are fated to couple with your mother, you will bring  
a breed of children into the light no man can bear to see—  
you will kill your father, the one who gave you life!'<sup>110</sup>

Sophocles' Apollo's actions shape lives. In the play, Apollo presents Oedipus with a list of his own flaws and offers the king a chance to postpone his fate if he can react rationally to what he has learned, and face who he is. But Oedipus panics and flees, bringing on the very disaster that Apollo predicts. Sophocles' Apollo is the god of prophecy towards whom even a king seeking answers must consult.

The second example of an even older Apollo is Homer's *Hymn to Apollo*, a short poem potentially designed to flatter the god of poetry ahead of a longer performed work. Even in the knowledge that the design of this moment is to flatter Apollo, it shows something of the esteem with which he is generally treated in literature. The moment presented by Homer is Apollo's first appearance among the Olympians:

I shall remember,

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allowance for the changed public taste was the pantomime. The tragic pantomime, which survived throughout antiquity, took the place of tragedy. The subjects were Greek mythology.' p68

<sup>109</sup> For example, in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, the whole play is threaded through with the implications of the wrath of Apollo, in the plagues that hit Thebes, because Apollo is angry that the King of Thebes' killer has not been found, to the oracles that Oedipus meets and through whom Oedipus learns of his actions in killing his father and marrying his mother (unknowingly). Apollo is always there but his voice is never heard. He works through the actions of others. Finally, when Oedipus blinds himself he says that he does it but Apollo's hand guides him. (Summary from *In Our Time*, *Oedipus Rex*, aired 8<sup>th</sup> June, 2023.

<sup>110</sup> Apollo's prophecy in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, quoted by Christopher S. Nassaar, in *Tampering with the future: Apollo's Prophecy in Sophocles' Oedipus the King*, *A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews*, Vol 26. No. 3 147-149, 2013

may I not forget,  
Apollo the Archer.

The gods tremble at him  
when he enters the house of Zeus,  
they spring up when he comes near them,

They all spring up from their seats  
When he stretches back his bright bow.<sup>111</sup>

Although Homer has his playful moments with the god's ego, most particularly in a later scene of the *Hymn*, where Apollo is duped by a river nymph he goes on to punish, the important point is that Homer's Apollo is shown to be capable of taking revenge: he is respected as much as any god in Homer, his powers are taken seriously, he wields the 'bright bow' and just as equally, is a son of Zeus in whose company other gods 'tremble'.

Ovid's work belongs to a much later period, from a time where attitudes towards the gods had undergone significant change, and when, after a protracted and bloody civil war, perhaps the old gods no longer seemed quite so worthy of respect.<sup>112</sup> In the new empire of Augustus, from which Ovid would shortly be exiled, and what was, retrospectively, the beginning of the end of the classical world, the gods were distant symbols:

They were simply traditional machinery without which epic poetry at least was unthinkable... 'The question how this mythical world of the gods should be represented by him in his poem was not one of belief but one of style.'<sup>113</sup>

More than distant, Ovid's Apollo is flawed. The flaws and contradictions that Ovid shows in Apollo's character present him as far nearer to being human than Homer or Sophocles' versions. Ovid's Apollo is inconstant and whimsical, churlish and thuggish, childlike and mannish, wearing his customary youthfulness entirely without wisdom. That Apollo might seek to present himself in heroic terms, in the beginning of *Apollo and Daphne*, shows an essential ignorance of his own true character, his unworthiness; as a poet-god, Apollo is too self-absorbed to maintain sufficient

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<sup>111</sup> *The Homeric Hymns. Hymn to Apollo*, translated by Julian Cashford, Penguin, 2003. Delian Apollo, lines 1-4.

<sup>112</sup> This sense of a new dawn is captured well in Hermann Frankel's *Ovid: Poet between Two Worlds*, University of California Press, 1969

<sup>113</sup> Wilkinson, p192, part of which is Wilkinson quoting R. Heinze, from *Ovids elegische Erzählung*

distance from his subject.<sup>114</sup> Neither is he a heroic subject of epic. He is a failed hunter, a son of Zeus thwarted by a (minor) river god, by Daphne's desire to remain chaste and Cupid's arrows that induced her desire for chastity, thwarted by Daphne's flight from him, despite all his advantages, and his arsenal of godly gifts.

There is one Apollo myth that is peculiarly relevant to Ovid's depiction of Apollo's character here and doubtless Ovid's readers would have known it. The story comes from Callimachus' *Hymn to Delos* and is the depiction of the pursuit of the pregnant Leto, Apollo's mother, as she flees Hera's wrath.<sup>115</sup> Nowhere and no-one dare offer Leto sanctuary when doing so would incur the fury of Zeus's wife, until Peneus provides her brief sanctuary. It is notable that Ovid chooses Peneus over other possibilities to be Daphne's father in his adaptation. Through this choice of Peneus over Zeus or Ladon (fathers or father-figures in other versions of the myth) Ovid surely chooses Peneus to emphasise the parallels between the two pursuits. His emphasis is more noticeable in the Latin, where Daphne is repeatedly described in variations of *nympha Peneide*.<sup>116</sup> Apollo chooses for himself the role of pursuer, paralleling the merciless Hera, while Daphne, though clearly sharing characteristics with Artemis, draws comparison with the hounded and friendless Leto: 'Hence an Ovidian irony: Apollo whose experience in the *Hymn to Delos* should have taught him a deep appreciation for sanctuary refuses to grant Daphne a moment of rest.'<sup>117</sup> Ovid presents his Apollo, god of prophecy, as one who cannot learn from his own history, and who unlike a poet, cannot use his experience to create his art. Perhaps my favourite Ovidian irony is that his Apollo, the god of poetry, is incapable of writing any himself.

Apollo lacks the psychological development of a truly modern character and there is no evidence he is aware of his own failings, but the constant recasting of his character in Ovid's adaptation provides a more complex and idiosyncratic presentation of Apollo than we have hitherto seen. This is due in part to inconsistencies and frequent changes in tone in Apollo's speech:

'Stop, dear Daphne, I beg you to stop! This isn't an enemy  
chasing you. Stop! You would think I'm a wolf pursuing a lamb,  
a lion hunting a deer or an eagle ... It is love that impels me to follow you.

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<sup>114</sup> Much has been written on the arrogance of Apollo, see W.S.M Nicoll among others

<sup>115</sup> Wills, p146-152

<sup>116</sup> Knox, p194 quotes Daphne thrice being 'addressed by this epithet' in lines 472, 504 and 525. Knox also quotes Bonner on the various forms in Latin of attributing a familial relationship between Daphne and Peneus.

<sup>117</sup> Wills, p146

Have pity! How frightened I am that you'll fall and scratch those innocent  
legs in the brambles. You mustn't be hurt on account of me!...  
Impetuous girl, you have no idea who you're running from  
... I am the master of Delphi'<sup>118</sup>

Arguably, many of these changes are the result of Ovid's frequent injections of humour to ensure the poem doesn't become tragic. However, the speech is so inconsistent, so fragmentary, jumping between themes and concerns, changing mood so frequently it feels like the voices of many within one: from entreaty, a confession of love, concern for Daphne's wellbeing, to pomposity and arrogance (above) in seven lines. To a modern reader, this polyphony added to the revelation of Apollo's very-human flaws, starts to move the characterization in the direction of psychological singularity. The identity of Apollo as muse, as lover, as seeker of beauty, is constantly being written over, like a precious papyrus roll.

Unlike Apollo's polyphonic character, Daphne's character is has just one desire: to remain unmarried. There is an inherent tension in what Daphne wants for herself, and what Ovid shows is wanted from her, because she is beautiful. In the world of *Metamorphoses*, Ovid presents beauty as a commodity, and Daphne, as an object of value as a result. Consequently, she is described predominantly as a list of her attributes, from outside, avoiding that inner self: pursued until, 'her strength exhausted, the girl grew pale;' her 'peculiar beauty and personal charm were powerful bars to her prayer's fulfilment'. Daphne herself acknowledges the danger of that beauty when asking Peneus to transform her: "Help me father!" she pleaded... mar the beauty which made me admired too well by changing my form."<sup>119</sup> That tension between inner and outer Daphne means that her transformation is not random but inevitable.

Daphne's character, its division between inner and outer self, and its lack of agency, is the cause of her fate. The idea inherent in the presentation of this tension by Ovid between her inner self and her public self, seeing this as a narrative about the breaking apart of self, even the loss of self through metamorphosis, mirrors more recent ideas of mental illness, in this case psychosis, and the psychological trauma of victims, whereby the individual desires to 'preserve the self' and feels the 'dread of [its] dissolution': 'The... individual's... whole effort is... to preserve the self... he is subject to the dread of his own dissolution... his autonomy is threatened

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<sup>118</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1.504-7, 1.513-6

<sup>119</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1.479-89, Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1.544-6

with engulfment... the full, substantial, living reality of others is an impingement.<sup>120</sup> What makes Ovid's characterisation, indeed the whole poem, feel fresh to modern readers, is the manner in which his writing and his descriptions of the experiences of his characters, pre-figure ideas in modern psychiatry about psychological trauma and living with mental illness, and how the urge to 'preserve the self' and the 'dread of [its] own dissolution' are understandable reactions, to the modern mind, in the face of the individual's inability to control their environment and its affects upon the self.

It has been noted that Ovid's account of the way that Daphne becomes insensate, becomes a tree, is paralleled by descriptions by women of the experience of assault who have survived that experience through... a withdrawing into themselves until they are nothing.<sup>121</sup>

To conclude, Ovid's Apollo and Daphne is a masterclass in extending a story's relevance and transcending the period in which it was created through adaptation. So often, in the modern world, the term adaptation is used as a simile for dumbing down, for simplification, but in Ovid's case, the reverse is true. His genius for innovation in including or repurposing the pursuit convention alters the story both by giving far more weight to the process through which Daphne eventually becomes transformed, but also in undercutting the unpleasantness of her fate: Apollo is seemingly satisfied to gain Daphne even as a laurel, and though his wearing her leaves is still a violation, it is a lesser violation than her rape.

In addition, the metaphoric reading of pursuit embeds important ideas of poetry and poetic creation in Ovid's adaptation. These in turn present Daphne's transformation in a more empowered, metaphorical light, as the poet transformed by the poetic process or the poem itself finding its final form.

Ovid plays around within the poem with the functions of poetry, with Apollo, as god of poetry, having little to do but act as a by-stander, while Cupid sets the direction of the poem and Daphne's metamorphosis represents various readings of the poetic process. Daphne is raised in importance as a result, while Apollo is toppled from the heights of Olympus, his flawed character almost human. But the complexity of Ovid's Apollo moves his characterisation into a proto-

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<sup>120</sup> This is a description of psychosis, by RD Laing, not of Ovid, but Cullen writes of comparisons between mental illness as Laing describes it, and Ovid's work. Leo Cullen, *Transformation and Anti-Augustanism in Ovid's Metamorphoses*, quoting R.D. Laing's *The Divided Self*, Pelican edition, 1965

<sup>121</sup> *In Our Time, Ovid*, aired 29<sup>th</sup> April 2021

modern, more nuanced and psychologically astute presentation of the individual identity. Ovid's Daphne, forced to endure first being hunted and then locked inside the tree for the remainder of her long life, looks to modern ideas of mental illness and psychological trauma.

## Chapter 2: Bernini's *Apollo and Daphne*

*There is but one way for the moderns to become great, and perhaps unequalled; I mean by imitating the ancients.*<sup>122</sup>

Though Bernini's *Apollo and Daphne* draws on the classical aesthetic and its subject is Ovidian, it is no imitation. Indeed, Bernini's *Apollo and Daphne* is as much in dialogue with ideas of the future as the past. Bernini's masterpiece interacts with its audience in a modern way, anticipating the consumption of culture, where experience is king. The sculpture has an immediacy, which belies its complexity. It is a text in marble, with all the multi-layered narrative of the original poem and a work of multiple illusions: in which poetry becomes sculpture; marble is made flesh; stone appears to move in space and time; stasis unfurls as story; a flesh and blood woman becomes a tree. Bernini certainly sought greatness in his career, and he found it in his adaptation of the Apollo and Daphne myth, in his ability to transfer Ovidian metamorphosis into sculpture. Not only did it seal his right to consider himself the equal to Michelangelo and Da Vinci, but, more importantly for this paper, it positioned him as the rightful heir to Ovid.<sup>123</sup> This paper explores Bernini's reinvigoration of the myth of Apollo and Daphne, with particular attention to those many parallel narratives.

*Apollo and Daphne* is a sculpture that can be read in many ways, and each of these ways of reading it I refer to in this paper as narratives. The first of the narratives I want to explore is that

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<sup>122</sup> Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *History of the Art of Antiquity*, 1764, quoted in 'The Legacy of Greek Sculpture', by Michael Squire, in *The Handbook of Greek Sculpture*, by Olga Palagia, De Gruyter, 2019

<sup>123</sup> Scholars frequently point out that Bernini wanted the comparison with Michelangelo, but Franco Mormando does so with his customary directness in *Bernini: His Life and His Rome*, University of Chicago Press, 2011: 'Florentine he claimed to be not only because of his father, but because of the subtle campaign he waged throughout his life to persuade his contemporaries that he was the new Michelangelo, that is, the supreme universal genius of his age.' p13

of metamorphosis, specifically Ovidian metamorphosis. Before I do so, however, I want to establish just what a technical feat the depiction of Ovidian metamorphosis represented to a static art form such as sculpture. Perhaps only a sculptor at the beginning of his career in search of greatness would have taken on this subject and it is no surprise that Bernini was commissioned to sculpture *Apollo and Daphne* early in his career when he had a reputation still to build. All four of the sculptures commissioned by Cardinal Scipione Borghese, nephew to Pope Paul V and one of Bernini's most important patrons, were given audacious subjects: *Aeneas and Anchises* depicts the flight from Troy, and in so doing, pays homage to the mythical founder of Catholic as well as classical Rome; *Pluto Abducting Proserpina*, (known alternatively as *Pluto and Proserpina*, or the more emotive, *The Rape of Proserpina*), also a transitional work, portrays Pluto passing back into the underworld carrying the abducted Proserpina; and *David*, the only Biblical work, and the one clearly designed to draw comparison with Michelangelo.<sup>124</sup> But it is *Apollo and Daphne*, started third but completed last, which is the technical tour de force, perhaps of Bernini's career.

The subject of Ovidian metamorphosis was not commonly taken up by sculptors before Bernini: 'neither hot pursuit nor transformation from flesh to vegetable seemed remotely suited to treatment in three frozen dimensions.'<sup>125</sup> What this quotation from Hibbard fails to underline is that while all metamorphosis presents change, Ovidian metamorphosis is uniquely demanding for a sculptor in that it presents transformation as a *dynamic* process. To adapt the Ovidian version of Apollo and Daphne, therefore, Bernini needed to find a way to create dynamic, on-going change—or the appearance of it—in a single marble sculpture, a form without the benefit of narrative time built in. E. H. Gombrich explains the potential pitfalls of trying to present movement in sculpture: 'As soon as we assume that there is a fraction of time in which there is no movement, movement as such becomes inexplicable.'

The technical challenge of presenting dynamic metamorphosis had attracted painters since classical times, but they too struggled, for the visual arts generally was perceived as at best capable of depicting time in a single, if extended moment.<sup>126</sup> What this meant was that a visual art form could only suggest the narrative before and after that moment depicted, but could not

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<sup>124</sup> Elizabeth Levy and José Granados, *A Body for Glory: Theology of the Body in the Papal Collections*, The Ancients, Michelangelo and John Paul II, Edizioni Musei Vaticani, 2014. Charles Avery, p46-8, 'the pagan history of Aeneas was interpreted at the time as having profound bearing on the origins not just of Rome but of the catholic church. Passages from Virgil were believed to prophesy the Virgin Birth of Jesus as well as the eternal rule of the church.' See Mormando, p17

<sup>125</sup> Howard Hibbard, *Bernini*, Penguin Books, 1990, p48

<sup>126</sup> Most scholars have a variation on the idea of the single 'pregnant' or 'heightened' moment in time of Bernini's genius. This quotation is from Hibbard, p55. The pregnant moment comes from Lessing's *Laocoon*.



present time unfurling as a poem or literature can. Many of the painters who attempted the adaptation of Apollo and Daphne were masters in their own right, but as figures 6 and 7 show, the common failure to present continuous time passing was that the presentation of metamorphosis was as a stalled or completed process, with Daphne left in a hybrid state, part female, part tree, never fully to transform.<sup>127</sup>



figure 6<sup>128</sup>



figure 7<sup>129</sup>

While figures 6 and 7 draw directly from the imagery and detail of Ovid, with del Pollaiuolo (figure 6) showing ‘her arms into branches,’ with a pair of young-sized laurels, and Rubens’ presentation of the line, ‘her hair was turned into foliage,’ (figure 7), these details are all presented at once, as already past tense. The narrative moment of these two works is a combined image of Daphne running while in her hybrid state, and does not offer enough narrative clues for what follows, out of shot. In figure 6, the viewer is as likely to imagine that Daphne floats off, as completely turns into a laurel.

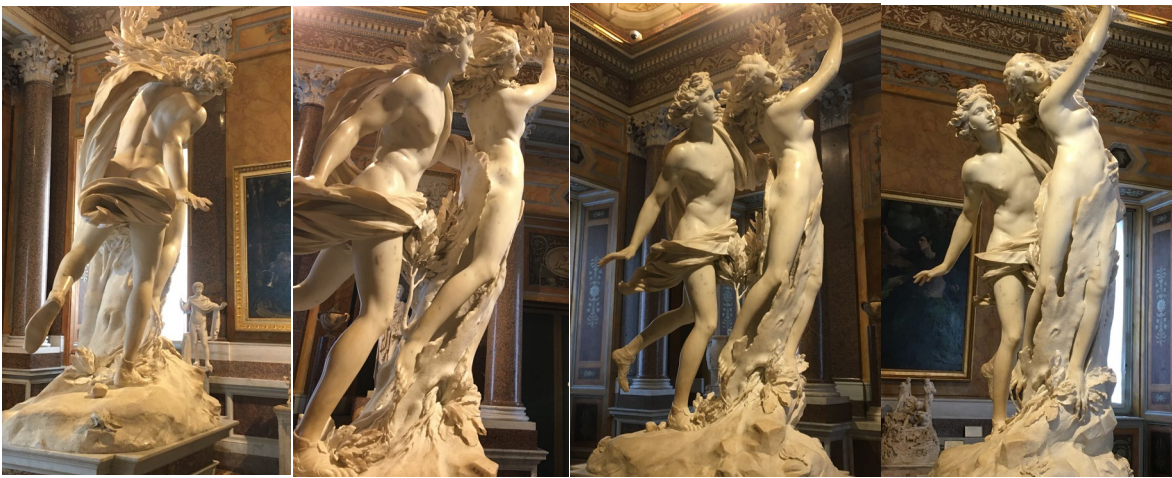
Bernini’s *Apollo and Daphne* not only portrays the same Ovidian details—the bark and leaves and roots—but achieves this within an implied chronological order. This chronological order implies a process to the depiction of metamorphosis: there is a hint of bark (figure 9), that becomes more bark (figures 10-11); there are her rooted toes (figure 9, 12) and lastly Daphne’s fingers turned to leaves (figure 13) and her whole body, visible by a trick of perspective in figures 9-10 starts to become obscured as though transformed into bark before the audience’s eyes (figures 11, 14-15). Just as Bernini had previously convinced his audiences that *St Lawrence’s*

<sup>127</sup> E. H. Gombrich, ‘Moment and Movement in Art’, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 1964, Vol 27, pp 293-306. Citation from p297

<sup>128</sup> Figure 6 from the Warburg Institute Iconographic Database, painting by Antonio del Pollaiuolo, 1470-80, image licensed for use under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 3.0 Unported License

<sup>129</sup> Figure 7 from the Warburg Institute Iconographic Database, painting by Peter Paul Rubens, early seventeenth century, image licensed as above

marble body could be roasted by white marble coals, so too could his Apollo and his Daphne appear to move in time, to metamorphose dynamically. Figures 8-11 (below) show how the appearance of time passing, and of transformation taking place within a narrative, is achieved by a brilliant control of different viewpoints around the sculpture. Each viewpoint shows a specific element of narrative, at a different chronological time. Added together, they give the illusion of narrative time passing. But to decode this narrative, the audience needs to move around the room and the sculpture in an anticlockwise direction. Some of these sections of narrative are only visible from one angle, others from several, but all are not visible from every angle, and no one angle shows everything.



Figures 8-11 <sup>130</sup>

The choice of the moment portrayed in a visual composition is critical. Rubens and del Pollaiuolo, among many others, chose to create a merged moment in which Daphne is both running and mid-transformation, which is not from Ovid. Bernini's choice of moment is also one he invents, but he keeps the narrative chronology separate, and in order. The moment chosen for Bernini's sculpture I will call the pursuit-to-metamorphosis moment and comes at the narrative transition from flight to metamorphosis. Bernini manages to suggest in his composition that the one causes the other. Within this chosen moment, because of the sculpture's clever use of its three dimensions and fully three-hundred-and-sixty-degree narrative, there are many micro moments of narrative evident in the sculpture, which perspective brilliantly appears to expand as the audience moves. So, although Bernini's narrative is a truncated version of Ovid's, the audience experience of the sculpture does not feel truncated, but a rich and detailed, and importantly, complete narrative arc.

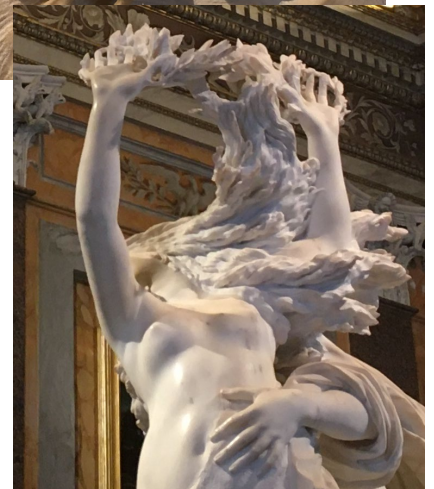
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<sup>130</sup> Figures 8-11 images my own

These micro-narrative moments are created through Bernini's brilliant use of his form, where every inch of the three-hundred-and-sixty-degrees contains interwoven narrative fragments that the audience has to untangle in order to decode. Some of the detail experienced is only meaningful in hindsight. The sculpture relies on the audience's ability to fill in what is missing, to present just enough detail to suggest a bigger picture that keeps building, as the narrative nears completion. For example, no one view of this sculpture shows Daphne running at speed, at least not a comparative speed to Apollo, and yet the audience takes away the fact that Daphne is in flight. At every point Daphne is seen, she is already touched by metamorphosis, but the audience doesn't draw all of these clues in together until they reach the critical view of Daphne half-covered by bark, and *then* all the accrued details make sense (figures 11, 14-15) Until that point, the audience focuses on what is concrete and much like details that could possibly end up as red herrings in short stories, they hold all the remaining detail in hand in case it is needed. So, Apollo running is concrete. Daphne becoming the laurel is also concrete. The narrative points between need extrapolating. So, while the audience views Daphne's legs as running, the aspects of the composition that the audience wouldn't perhaps expect to see there such as the bark, the rooted toes, is held in hand until needed, but they also build intrigue, and create questions that the narrative quickly needs to answer. For example, what is the significance of the canopy of leaves above Apollo's head at the chronological start of the narrative (figures 8 and 16).

I use the term audience here deliberately rather than a less active term such as viewer because of the degree to which this sculpture requires the audience to be engaged dynamically in decoding it, its use of the room itself which is very much like a stage, and the engagement required by the sculpture's audience in assimilating the story. Bernini cedes control to the audience of time passing, and of narrative. If the audience chooses to pause in their walk, they can

figures 12 and 13<sup>131</sup>



<sup>131</sup> Figures 12 and 13 images my own



effectively halt narrative time, if they step clockwise, they can reverse it, and of course they can circle the sculpture again to make the whole narrative repeat itself.



figures 14, 15 and 16<sup>132</sup>

So far, my examination of this narrative has focused on how the narrative is delivered, and the illusions it creates, but what is at the heart of the metamorphosis story? A narrative of pursuer and pursued, the nuance of Apollo and Daphne's relationship needs to be teased out. Initial glances create a number of questions for the audience. Why is Apollo running quite so fast at the beginning and why withhold that he pursues a nymph? There is misdirection too, such as the way the two bodies appear to be coming together (figures 9-11), their heads drawing closer, and that masterfully extended leg of Apollo which initially confirms his running speed (figure 8) which becomes a more joyful kick of his heel (figure 10) but why is he joyful, and what is at stake here for them both?



figures 17 and 18<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Figures 14 -16 images my own

<sup>133</sup> Figure 17 and 18, images my own

The underlying question of this narrative, particularly for those unfamiliar with the myth, is what purpose metamorphosis serves here? Bernini's treatment of metamorphosis has some subtle differences to that of Ovid. Firstly, as a result of Bernini's form, there is a physical issue of the block of marble from which the two are carved, and that it necessitates a far closer relationship than on the page. Apollo and Daphne's bodies curve around one another, almost accommodating one another's limbs as lovers might. While Daphne narratively runs away, physically, conversely, she must remain near him, although towards the chronological end of the narrative his figure becomes almost blotted out by hers. I will come back to this. But there appears to be more of a pull-push between this *Apollo and Daphne* than with the classical adaptations. This does not have to be one of attraction, let alone love or desire. But neither is it unimportant, since nothing Bernini does is accidental. Their relative proximity therefore is part of Bernini's narrative.

Physically, Bernini's Daphne does not have to resort to rebutting Apollo's advances as in the earlier examples of wall art and ceramics and unlike Bernini's *Pluto and Proserpina*, his Apollo does not physically dominate Daphne. Instead, as nudes, their physical similarity is easy to see, of comparable height and build, they are equally slender, long haired, nimble and youthful. The threat of rape has been removed in Bernini, and so, all of this setting up of them as equals, without threat of violence, means that Bernini's metamorphosis serves a very different narrative function.

Indeed, as I alluded to earlier, the relative positions of Apollo and Daphne in the final chronological moment in narrative suggests a reversal of power in this relationship from earlier adaptations. Although we glimpse Apollo first, he leads the audience to Daphne and from this point she is the story. With her transformation, Apollo's narrative function is over. He becomes a bystander, overwritten by her image— for who can forget the final image of her half consumed by bark? The implication of this is that she must be the beneficiary of her own transformation. Indeed, building on ideas that Ovid seeded, transformation becomes the end-game of Bernini's adaptation, an aspiration, even an idealised or elevated state, such as the creative or poetic state of Ovid's interpretation. *Daphne* is the image audiences take away with them.<sup>134</sup> The final view of her lingers on long after the audience has left the *stanza di dafne*. In Bernini's adaptation, metamorphosis can even be said to erase the pre-metamorphic form. If Ovid shines a light on

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<sup>134</sup> Alison Keith, Versions of Epic Masculinity in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Ovidian Transformations, *Essays on Ovid's Metamorphoses and its Reception*, ed. Philip Hardie, Alessandro Barchiesi, Stephen Hinds, Cambridge Philological Society, 1999, p214-5, 'Lucretius' *De rerum natura* and Virgil's *Aeneid* conform to this generic standard in celebrating 'a certain kind of self'. As Georgia Nugent has trenchantly observed, the self in the subject of classical epic is always male....I argue that Ovid makes comparisons with the female an important standard against which he scrutinizes heroic masculinity in epicizing episodes of *Metamorphoses*.'

the treatment of the female body in epic, Bernini literally raises Daphne's body above Apollo as she transforms (figure 15).

As the narrative becomes all Daphne, do they acknowledge each other with a glance? I would suggest not. For though a poem, a sculpture, any work of art being created looks towards its final form it cannot see it, and while the final form of the poem exists, it cannot look back on its more nebulous, unformed self; they are wholly separate and yet connected, by the marble, but also by the mind of poet in which they are transformed.

Bernini's Apollo has the so-called speaking-likeness as though he is about to start talking, but notably, he remains silent, whereas Ovid's Apollo cannot stop talking. There have been suggestions that Daphne's open mouth might be emitting a sound, a gasp, a scream, even a cry, of fear or possibly relief at her transformation. Whether she screams, or not, there are moments when, in viewing her situation, the audience, particularly the female audience, may well feel like screaming for her. It is worth saying that if Daphne's open mouth is screaming, involuntarily or not, then Bernini would be giving Daphne the voice that Ovid conspicuously resisted.

The open mouth of Daphne has been much considered in scholarship, and a great deal of different meanings have been stamped upon it. What interests me, looking at the plural narratives at work in this sculpture, is the very coexistence of multiple ways of reading this particularly element of the narrative. I will explore the open mouth for each narrative, but the material point is that the very idea of fixing one meaning to any one feature is at odds with both Ovidian notions of flux, or 'the shiftingness of things' to borrow again from A. S. Byatt, and the sculpture's embrace of multiplicities.



figure 19 <sup>135</sup>

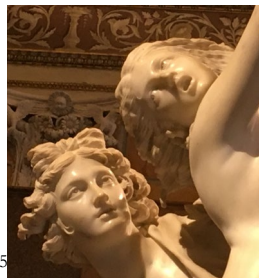


figure 20

Before moving on, it is worth adding that as with so much in this sculpture, where Daphne and Apollo are looking shifts depending on the view point of the audience. There is a little misdirection also. Since from most of the chronological viewpoints, Apollo's gaze, like the early

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<sup>135</sup> Figures 19-20 images my own

artworks we saw, *appears* fixed on Daphne (9-11, 17-18) but in figure 20, as the audience realises what is overtaking her, he is gazing *beyond* her. Similarly, while so many angles from the chronological start suggest their heads are drawing together, figures 19 and 20 highlight that just as Daphne might be said to glance back at him, so Apollo is looking away.

The second narrative running in parallel with all the narratives I will consider, is a dialogue between the sculpture and the wider world of art. Bernini was ambitious and it was through the masterpiece of his *Apollo and Daphne* that in many ways he confirmed his reputation. He was acquainted with the works of many contemporaries and classical artists—I will consider the influence of classical art and sculpture on Bernini, separately, later—against whose works his own would be compared, and, against which, considering Bernini’s character, they competed. While an artist not primarily known to be interested in theory or theoretical arguments, Bernini would have been aware of the ‘antagonistic comparison of painting and sculpture,’ known as *Il Paragone*, since a great deal of what his work achieved went against, even highlighted the baseless nature of their criticisms of sculpture.<sup>136</sup> Notably, that sculpture was too static to recreate dynamic movement and that it lacked in-built narrative time of forms such as poetry and prose (as we have already seen, the noted critic Hibbard referred to sculpture as ‘three frozen dimensions’). However, as already discussed, Bernini’s sculpture proved that sculpture had almost no such limits, and the legacy of Bernini’s sculpture is that it helped to raise the profile the form of sculpture, and of sculptors, within the world of art.

One further critique of sculpture in the *paragone* debate is the form’s perceived lack of voice compared with poetry. Such a position can be seen in the poetry of the Borghese court poet, and Bernini contemporary, Francucci. In a poem set in an exhibition in which sculptures await the arrival of visitors, Francucci writes: ‘You alone, Apollo, among a thousand Apelles/You

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<sup>136</sup> Preimesberger, *Themes from Art History in the Early Years of Bernini*. via The George Washington University, [https://www2.gwu.edu/~art/Temporary\\_SL/131/Readings/preimesberger.pdf](https://www2.gwu.edu/~art/Temporary_SL/131/Readings/preimesberger.pdf). He says that *il paragone* was evident in three ways to Bernini, through rules of perspective, anatomy and foreshortening used in the studio, in the exchanges of letters between artists and critics and in the theoretical writings, all of which, Preimesberger argues, Bernini would have been aware of.p4

*Il Paragone* is a publication of the teachings of Leonardo da Vinci put together by his students after his death. Began in classical times, with ekphrasis, the description of works of art and architecture by students of rhetoric, who were challenged to find ways of describing them, and over time, comparing across the art forms. The debate was finally settled by the essay by Gottfried Lessing, *Laocoon*, who in many ways builds off of the achievements of Bernini in works like *Apollo and Daphne*. Lessing wrote of the strengths of *Laocoon* sculpture as its underplayed emotion, for example, the slightly open mouth that doesn’t scream, the moderation necessary in a work designed to be seen again and again. (1766).

The strengths of Bernini’s works, the multiple ways in which it confounded expectation, were later cemented in the article on the Laocoon sculpture from antiquity.

can bring works to life/ Melodious painter, loquacious sculptor/ Give lifelike accents to what which speaking, falls silent.<sup>137</sup> This criticism however can not be made of Bernini's work. His sculptural style directly rebuts the idea of the voiceless work of sculpture. Indeed, his work has been critically lauded as possessing the illusion of voice, sometimes referred to as the 'speaking likeness,' as Lelio Guidiccioni notes in a letter from Rome, 1633: '[Bernini] works miracles, he makes marbles speak.'<sup>138</sup> As already explored with the intriguingly open mouth of Daphne, and the appearance of being about to speak of Apollo, both figures have the appearance of either being about to speak or to have just spoken. Daphne specifically may have been given the ability to speak, in her open mouth, to prove that it was technically possible, but how like Bernini that she would choose not to. And yet, while Daphne might not choose to communicate herself, who can deny that she, the sculpture, speaks directly to her audience. She speaks on many levels. As an entire composition, she screams to be noticed. She also embodies the many male voices that have appropriated Daphne's voice in the past. To me, she speaks more in the last chronological part of the narrative, the one I take away with me. Sculptures do not speak necessarily in words but in feelings, in experiences, such as the goosebumps up your neck, or down your arms. A sculpture's voice is not just the imagined sound of speech, but the resonance felt, like a perfectly struck note. To look upon this work of marble and feel empathy, to feel experiences chime between audience and subject, is one form of a sculpture communicating, but there is also the sense of the sculpture expressing visually what cannot be voiced and for which there are no reliable words—for sculpture can travel beyond the limits of human experience. All of these forms of speech entirely prove Francucci wrong.

One of the signs that Bernini is doing something unusual in his work is the way in which critics and scholars alike have reached beyond sculpture for a language to describe the effect of his work. Bernini's treatment of marble is likened to dough, or his approach is painterly, or the finish he achieves in marble is compared with bronze. For example:

The metamorphosis takes place in the marble, where the limits imposed by the material itself were surpassed in such an astonishing way that sculpture prevails as never before in the paragone with painting.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Genevieve Warwick, Bernini's Apollo and Daphne at the Villa Borghese, *Art History*, June 2004, pp353-381, quotation from p371

<sup>138</sup> Warwick, p353

<sup>139</sup> Ed. Andrea Bacchi and Anna Coliva, *Bernini*, Galleria Borghese, Officina Libria, p176



There is also, as already touched upon, a great deal of illusion at work in Bernini's sculpture. Audiences are convinced that marble will feel soft, skin-like, that marble is muscle capable of movement, for example, as displayed by the realistic musculature of Apollo's back (figures 8 and 16), or the illusion of running suggested by Apollo's extended back leg.

One of the rare qualities of Bernini was the breadth and depth of his artistic talent, a true *uomo universale*.<sup>140</sup> He was an architect, an urban planner, a draughtsman, one of the inventors of caricature. He designed medals, wrote and put on plays.<sup>141</sup> In direct opposition to the limitations of the *paragone* debate, he liked to draw on disciplines of the arts notably the dramatic arts, outside of the triad of poetry, painting and sculpture. It helped that he had mastered many of these wider artistic disciplines himself by the time he created *Apollo and Daphne*. As a playwright, a man who liked to design sets and put on productions, he was well aware of how to use space, how to withhold detail to create narrative tension. But he was also a man accustomed to being the audience, born into a period experiencing a notable rise in theatre-going, particularly private theatre. Warwick writes of the way in which ideas of performance were influencing all aspects of life and art:<sup>142</sup>

Bernini's convergence of art with theatre sprang from a broader cultural context, an early modern propensity to view all forms of expression, whether bodily or figurative, as performed. Indeed, theatre, ritual and social life were, for Europe c. 1600, proximate worlds...before the separation of audiences and actors wrought by the rise of designated theatre houses and the professionalization of actors, theatre spectators were active participants, and there was frequent intermingling between the space of the stage and that of its viewers... elite forms of theatre performed in private homes increased apace over the course of the sixteenth century.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Charles Avery, *Bernini: Genius of the Baroque*, James Hudson Ltd, London, 1997, p11

<sup>141</sup> Avery, p11

<sup>142</sup> Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, likely first performed in 1606, captures this idea with the metaphor of life as a stage and all its people players to reiterate Warwick's point and clearly, Bernini had knowledge of dramatic techniques, which could have been gleaned from watching as well as writing drama. It is not known when Bernini's own plays were staged, except for one reference through Baldinucci, of the influence of Pope Urban VIII's nephew, Cardinal Antonio Barberini, Jr. For this Mormando offers the date of 1632, while conceding that otherwise there is 'no indication of chronology': 'sources indicate that Bernini had begun staging public productions of his comedies as early as 1632. Baldinucci... simply states that Bernini 'composed and produced' his 'fine edifying plays' at Antonio's 'urging and expense'. p118. Even if Bernini were not already writing plays when he created *Apollo and Daphne*, Warwick notes the prevalence of theatre at this time. And it is clear from Bernini's orchestration of the work in the Borghese Palace that he was very aware of the effect of staging his works: 'Elite forms of theatre performed in private homes increased over the course of the sixteenth century...often involve[ing] role-playing and costumes. Similar types of narrative enactments took place in the studios of artists such as Bernini.' p354

<sup>143</sup> Warwick talking about worlds in the context of European culture. p354

The design of *Apollo and Daphne* has its audience in mind, and while it was not initially meant to be set where it currently stands in the middle of the room, the way that it was set out and the way it used the shape and positioning of the room, shows a masterly awareness of theatre and performance, with the sculpture performing a part and the audience also, as discussed, fundamentally involved in decoding meaning. The original plinth for the sculpture was much lower than that on which it is placed today so that the audience's experience of the sculpture would have been more dramatically intimate, so that effectively the audience is alongside this extraordinarily life-like sculpture. Bernini's ability to control at what point his audience first viewed the sculpture—for there are only two entrances to the room and Bernini did not allow the early visitors to the Borghese to walk into the room—results from his understanding of the dramatic reveal to his audience.

In addition to the role of theatre, Bernini was influenced by artwork of the period and wrote of his admiration for contemporary painters such as Guido Reni and Annibale Carracci, both of whom have been suggested as sources of inspiration for Bernini's *Apollo and Daphne*.<sup>144</sup> Similarities in storytelling can be found in Carracci's Farnese frescoes, with powerful mythical narratives that also told allegories of Christian values such as virtue. They may well have born influence on Bernini's Daphne:

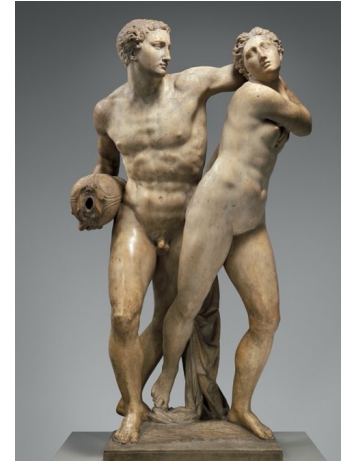
In contrast to the emblematic character of most Mannerist cycles of frescoes the programme of this ceiling is centred on mythology, and Annibale painted the stories with such vigour and directness that the beholder is absorbed by the narrative and entertaining spectacle before his eyes rather than distracted by the less obvious symbolic and moralizing implications.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Wittkower writes extensively on the influence of both painters on Bernini, and Anna Coliva too shows the emotional impact of contemporary painters on Scipione Borghese and Bernini.

<sup>145</sup> Rudolf Wittkower, *Art and Architecture in Italy, 1600-1750*, I. Early Baroque. Yale University Press, 1999, p33

There is also the suggestion from Avery of sculptor Battista di Domenico Lorenzi's influence, specifically his *Alpheus and Arethusa*, carved between 1568-1570. There are similarities of positioning, particularly Alpheus, standing with the weight on his right leg with his left leg thrown back (figure 21). There is similarity too between the positioning of the head of Bernini's Apollo and that of Alpheus' head, and his gaze also shifts depending on the angle viewed, from directly at Arethusa (figure 21) to slightly past her (figure 22). There is a stronger hint of suppressed violence, or the



potential for violence to escalate in the positioning of Alpheus' arm so close to Arethusa's neck, as though he could easily tighten his hold by slipping his arm higher towards her throat, which is entirely absent in Bernini's depiction of *Apollo and Daphne*: Bernini's is a sculpture with no implied threat.

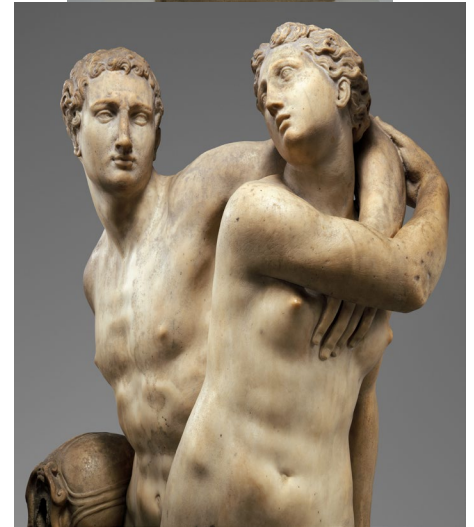


figure 21 and 22<sup>146</sup>  
Figure 23<sup>147</sup>

And while there are similarities of positioning, and a similarly neutral gaze, Lorenzi's work lacks the multiplicity of meanings of the Bernini, so that they may be using some of the same techniques and positions but to different narrative effect.

Returning to the significance of Daphne's open mouth for this narrative, while I would argue that to rebuff the critiques of his form, as the sculpture does, it is the whole sculpture that speaks to the world of art in this narrative, and in this sense, Daphne does not need to speak or

<sup>146</sup> Figures 21 and 22 from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York and are in the public domain.

<sup>147</sup> Figure 23, image my own

reveal her thoughts. However certainly does create an emotional connection with its audience for all the reasons already discussed. Art historians however, have tended to infer any meaning from Daphne's open mouth as a kind of borrowed authenticity, classical mythology as recognised by the lens of baroque masters like Guido Reni, or Caravaggio or his school. Bernini certainly borrowed stylistic elements in his *Apollo and Daphne*, for example Apollo's sandals, as I will come on to discuss in another narrative, but in general, he always reinterprets, rather than copies, and those elements have a narrative function. Interestingly, going back to Bernini's willingness to draw from other artistic forms in his work, notably art historians describe Daphne's expression by similarly borrowing from other art forms.<sup>148</sup> Wittkower calls her open mouth 'horror-stricken' from the paintings he considers as influential, such as Carracci; while Anna Coliva draws a comparison with the world of operatic performance writing of Daphne's open mouth as the image of 'a true 'soprano'... conquered but proud.'<sup>149</sup>

The third narrative is one of time. I have already discussed the illusion of narrative time that Bernini's *Apollo and Daphne* achieves, but in addition, Bernini is the master of choosing the perfect compositional moment, one which maximises the suggestion of passing time; what Loyd Grossman means when he uses the term *the potential of the moment* or when scholars talk of the point of transition.<sup>150</sup> The same talent is evident in *Pluto and Proserpina*, where the narrative moment is a transition between places, where Pluto is depicted re-entering Hades with the abducted Proserpina in his arms; and *David* about to throw his slingshot and kill the unseen Goliath. With Daphne it is her imminent total transformation, which we never see, but just as with *David's* slingshot, the audience has been visually and emotionally prepared to know what will follow and can complete the story in their mind's eye from the details already given.

The wider aesthetic period in time also exerts influence on works of art and particularly the representation of the world within that work, notably fashion and hairstyles. Rubens, for example, choose to portray his Apollo and Daphne in the aesthetic of his time and place, that of the baroque, while Bernini leaned towards a classical aesthetic. The consequences of such choices may change over time, and is largely beyond the artist's ability to influence since they do not

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<sup>148</sup> *Saint Bibiana's* mouth is slightly open, as well as that in the *Ecstasy of Saint Theresa*, and *Saint Longinus*. None of the busts, excepting Costanza's is opened mouthed which gives the mere suggestion of speech — or some kind of sound — to come.

<sup>149</sup> Anna Coliva, p148

<sup>150</sup> Lloyd Grossman lecture on Bernini and the Pope, June 20<sup>th</sup>. While Grossman appeared to think Bernini's *David* the most powerful example of Bernini's craft, whereas *Apollo and Daphne* he likens to a still from a movie, as the moment has already happened.

dictate which fashions endure and which fall out of favour, neither do they exercise any control over the underlying values that create fashions. For example, the clothing choices depicted in the Rubens and del Pollaiuolo's paintings mean that the public will forever encounter each Daphne wearing corset, hose, and layered petticoats, and with her hair styled in ringlets, all of which effectively adds a layer of potentially confusing detail for subsequent audiences who might expect a classical myth to look 'classical'. Even what today we might consider classical, such as sculpture in white marble, is not entirely representative of how classical sculpture would have looked, since it was often painted and gilded, and the original versions of the Roman copies would more likely have been bronze.

Fashion and hairstyles have long been necessary in dating artwork particularly very ancient work where perhaps little is known about the artist or studio. As I will come on to discuss in the classical aesthetic narrative, Bernini borrows the shoes and possibly hair style for his Apollo from the *Apollo Belvedere*, and he chooses to present his characters naked in the tradition of the classical nude. However, Bernini's nude is a neoclassical nude, and different to the front nudity of many Greek and Roman works: Bernini has sanitized nudity for his audience, understanding how far he can push the appearance of classicism while remaining within the bounds of acceptability and decency according to baroque sensibilities. He presents Daphne bare breasted, although he chooses a girlish physique with relatively small and unobtrusive breasts, and all genitalia is obfuscated by flowing drapery and bark. While the classical aesthetic might appear to have aged better than, for example, the baroque in terms of fashion, it is worth noting that Greek and Roman sculptures have suffered repeated mutilation and alteration over the centuries, from the addendum of fig leaves to having their genitalia chipped off, to having the entire sculpture destroyed; and that there are cultures today which would not allow the exhibition of a nude sculpture for religious or moral reasons, meaning that there is no aesthetic entirely without risk.

The fourth narrative running in parallel through *Apollo and Daphne* relates to classical aesthetics and the representation of gender in classical works of art. Bernini's career coincided with a huge rise in interest in the classical sculptural canon, with many works on public display or in private hands in Rome at the period in which Bernini was working. Many sculptures from antiquity were first unearthed during this period, as part of the *Renovatio* of Rome. Legally, the mainly Roman copies of Greek sculptures that this building programme unearthed were the property of the landowner, and since many landowners were the powerful Roman families, whose sons became

popes, a great number of these priceless works became the property of the Vatican, including numerous sculptures of Apollo. This had the effect of encouraging the church, under the auspices of links that were discovered between classical figures such as Aeneas, with the Catholic church, to effectively justify their new relationship to the church and specifically the Vatican which housed them. Apollo was once such god, ‘subsequently adopted by the Christians to represent Christ’.<sup>151</sup> Bernini had the opportunity to sketch the Vatican sculptures as a boy. The works included the *Laocoön*, the *Belvedere Torso* and the hugely influential sculpture of Apollo, the *Apollo Belvedere* (see figures 25 and 26).<sup>152</sup>



figures 25 & 26<sup>153</sup>

The *Apollo Belvedere*, famously described by the one-time curator of the papal collection Johann Winkelmann as ‘the highest ideal of art,’ remains on display at the Vatican, and the pride of its sculpture collection. The sculpture exemplifies the geometric principles of Hellenic sculpture which means that by using precise mathematical calculations to establish ratios and proportion, the sculptures look highly naturalistic and their proportions work from multiple angles, just as Bernini’s sculptures do (although Bernini’s narrative also works from multiple angles). The presentation and stance of Apollo in the *Apollo Belvedere* clearly influenced Bernini’s Apollo—the hair and face, the presence of the voluminous fabric (though the *Apollo Belvedere* would once have held a bow). Additionally, there are more subtle influences, which classical

<sup>151</sup> *A Body for Glory: Theology of the Body in the Papal Collections, the Ancients, Michelangelo and John Paul II*, by Elizabeth Lev and José Granados, Editizioni Musei Vaticani, 2014

<sup>152</sup> Quoted by Bernini’s son, Domenico, in the biography of his father, (Hibbard p25, among others) and also Bernini’s address to the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture, Paris 1665, quoted by Rudolf Preimesberger and Michael P. Mezzatesta. ‘In my early youth, I drew a great deal from Classical figures; and when I was in difficulties with my first statue I turned to Antinous as the oracle.’

<sup>153</sup> Figures 25 and 26, Images from Vatican museum website. <https://m.museivaticani.va/content/museivaticani-mobile/en/collezioni/musei/museo-pio-clementino/Cortile-Ottagono/apollo-del-belvedere.html#&gid=1&pid=1>. Image in the public domain.

historian Olga Polagia, points out, hallmarks of Leochares, who made the Greek original of which the Vatican version is a Roman copy, in terms of the *Apollo Belvedere's* 'open stance', 'elongated limbs' and 'anatomical detail', all of which Bernini transferred to his Apollo.<sup>154</sup>

As well as influencing Bernini's stylisation of his figures, the classical canon also affected the depiction of gender in his *Apollo and Daphne*. Gender in the classical world was less polarised than in Bernini's lifetime. Bernini would have had the experience of seeing so himself when he worked on the iconic *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* at the behest of its owner, Cardinal Scipione Borghese, head of another wealthy Roman family. The cardinal was so pleased with the cushion Bernini fashioned that he went on to commission more works from Bernini including *Apollo and Daphne*. The myth of Hermaphroditus, as retold by Ovid in Book 4 of *Metamorphoses*, emphasises the merging of Hermaphroditus with Salmacis to create an idealised, dual-sex figure: 'the bodies of boy and girl were merged and melded as one. The two of them showed but a single face.'<sup>155</sup> Ovid's Hermaphroditus, Theodorakopoulos writes, combines the body of the fighting male and the objectified female body that is a sexual target in a world dominated by male desire.<sup>156</sup> This 'complete gender fusion' deserves to be seen in context as the culmination of what Barrow and Silk describe as the blurring gender lines of the fourth century BCE.<sup>157</sup> *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* has two viewpoints rather than the more usual single point, allowing the male and female genitalia to be glimpsed separately: Hermaphroditus' breasts are suggested from the view in figure 27 while the male genitalia are only visible from the other side. This technique of narrative withholding used here as a tactic of shock clearly influenced Bernini's use of withholding in *Apollo and Daphne*, although with different narrative intentions.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> From ed. Olga A. Polagia, *The Handbook of Greek Sculpture*, De Gruyter, 2019. Ultimately, we will most likely never know who produced the *Apollo Belvedere*. points out, there are similarities between this work and 'the Amazonmacy frieze on the Mausoleum of Haliknassos and the Sirens and pirates on the Lysikrates monument (after 225-4 BCE) the latter perhaps (being) the actual work of Leochares or his workshop'. (p364-5)

<sup>155</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 4.373-4

<sup>156</sup> See Elena Theodorakopoulos' work on masculinity in *Metamorphoses*, particularly the feminising effects on masculinity.

<sup>157</sup> See Rosemary Barrow and Michael Silk, *Gender, Identity and the Body in Greek and Roman Sculpture*, Cambridge University press, 2018

<sup>158</sup> Barrow and Silk, p83





figure 27<sup>159</sup>

Non-binary representations of gender in classical sculpture predate the *Sleeping Hermaphrodite*. Indeed, Hellenic sculpture presents gender as a continuum rather than binary opposites. Apollo is typically depicted on the feminine side of that continuum. The *Apollo Belvedere* and Bernini's Apollo share a slender, boyish physique, a beardless face, feminine hair (sometimes Apollo is presented in flowing clothing as well), 'combin[ing] masculine and feminine attributes in a body that is simultaneously muscular and fleshy.'<sup>160</sup> His mix of male and female characteristics is not dissimilar to the *Sleeping Hermaphrodite*, or the *Apollo Sauroktonos* (see Appendix 3 and figure 24). The latter has been described as 'excessively androgynous', and as 'borrow[ing] certain features from a female model such as the rounded shoulders and chest'.<sup>161</sup> At the other end of the gender spectrum is the bearded muscularity of Bernini's Pluto, the gladiatorial or warrior type, or the less typically 'fighting' image of *Laocoön* endeavouring to protect his sons.



Figure 28<sup>162</sup>

Figure 29<sup>163</sup>

<sup>159</sup> Figure 27, image of *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* from NYTIMES.com. The cushion shown in the image was commissioned by Scipione Borghese in 1620. Bernini also repaired the elevated foot. The figure of Hermaphrodite, child of Hermes and Aphrodite in myth is, according to the Borghese Galleries, a 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD Roman copy of a 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC Greek original.

<sup>160</sup> There are many Roman copies of the youthful *Apollo Sauroktonos*, see Appendix 3. There is at least one copy in the Vatican and one copy that was part of the Borghese Gallery is now in the Louvre. Pliny attributed the original to Praxiteles. For a complete history see: <https://eds.s.ebscohost.com/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=3&sid=4ac47292-5caa-405f-b4cf-bbeada328154%40redis> p76 Barrow and Silk

<sup>161</sup> Jenifer Neils, From Praxiteles to Caravaggio: The *Apollo Sauroktonos* Redefined, *The Art Bulletin*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2017, p20. The first quotation refers to the *Apollo Sauroktonos*'s hair (which I have seen on one other Apollo sculpture in the Vatican) and pose. The second quotation is the art historian George Perrot.

<sup>162</sup> The Abduction of Proserpina by GianLorenzo Bernini, image from Borghese website.

<sup>163</sup> Figures 28-29 of Laocoön and open to public use, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/profzucker/51883453175/n>



Bernini's Daphne, with her small breasts and lean, slender body, has elements of boyishness, and is also part of a tradition of classical female nudes. The female nude is a later classical development than the male nude, inaugurated by Praxiteles' *Aphrodite of Cnidos*.<sup>164</sup> Bernini does not present his Daphne along the lines of an Aphrodite, whose body impresses in its ample voluptuousness, or in the light of what the Catholic church might consider profane sacred sculptures designed to produce 'religious awe' in their pagan audiences, or as an even more ancient fertility symbol. Given the perceived immorality of the nude, and given that *Metamorphoses* had been condemned by the Council of Trent and needed moralising notes, Bernini chose the tradition of the virgin huntress Artemis, or the female nude as a sealed object, and therefore sexually unavailable, 'desirable and yet impenetrable to men.'<sup>165</sup> However, we know that Bernini does not copy conventions, and his female nude is half-encased in bark, soon to be locked in, thus doubly impenetrable, her chastity twice-protected.

The female body presents a number of apertures including the open mouth, the vagina. Classical culture depicts holes and wounds as feminine and feminising: 'killing in epic warfare is the result of creating apertures in male bodies with swords and spears and arrows'.<sup>166</sup> In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, just as Apollo destroys the Python with 'numberless arrows', so Apollo, after being shot by Cupid's arrow, is feminised or sexually belittled.<sup>167</sup> In Bernini's adaptation of the myth, the aperture of Daphne's mouth does not signify vulnerability or penetrability. Instead, Bernini turns Daphne's mouth into an instrument or receptacle into which so many scholars have poured ideas and interpretations, imagined screams and howls and cries to her father. Bernini's Daphne has the inviolability of an epic male, complete in her transformation, her secrets her own.

Daphne's open mouth sits in a face whose expression, and that of Apollo, can be seen to mirror classical conventions of neutrality. While many more contemporaneous artists may have reproduced neutral faces when reimagining classical mythology, they did not necessarily do so in the spirit in which the classical artists intended them, but rather to suit contemporary ideas of the

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<sup>164</sup> p46 Barrow and Silk point out that some female sculptures were simply designed for worship and therefore like their male equivalent were designed to be awe-inspiring.

Hetaira meaning a high-class Greek courtesan, see Barrow and Silk, p46.

<sup>165</sup> The Council of Trent condemning Ovid's *Metamorphoses* noted by Warwick, which accounts for the moralising couplet added to all three non-biblical sculptures in this group. *David* evidently not requiring one. p371

Different types of female nude taken from Barrow and Silk p46

<sup>166</sup> For more on male inviolability in the male body in the *Odyssey* Book 12 of *Metamorphoses* (Ovid's reworking of the Trojan War), see Keith.

<sup>167</sup> Lively, p26. 'with evident irony, Apollo the virile hero of martial epic, is penetrated and un-manned by Cupid the playful love-god of erotic elegy.'

classical.<sup>168</sup> However, in this classical narrative, it is important to explain the older Greek convention whereby classical sculptures represented both the god as sculptural icon and the god themselves made manifest. Classical Gods were presented with blank expressions due to the impossibility of allowing mortal access to divine thoughts—although this is not the case in sculptures of mortal people, such as busts of senators or generals, although some of the Caesars do also borrow from this tradition: just walk through the Hall of Statues in the Vatican and witness the rows of near identical expressions on the faces of Roman copies of Greek divine heads, and yet, how each bust of a general and widow looks different, idiosyncratic. Lorenzi's Aruthesa, Bernini's Proserpina (ignoring the tear) and Daphne all present the same wide-eyed, flat cheeked look of the classical goddess, as though sharing the same genes.

On a human level, the Greeks distrusted individualism. Hanfmann cites the Athenian tradition of exiling 'the outstanding, powerful individual,' after experience of tyranny—and thereafter the exiled potential tyrant became a theme in Athenian plays, plays in which the actors wore masks, which fixed their expression.<sup>169</sup> Hanfmann concludes that the late classical age was certainly capable of detailed, convincing portraiture, but the hesitation to probe too deeply remained. The quality for which an individual claimed attention prevailed over the 'uniqueness' of personality.<sup>170</sup>

Among Bernini's contemporaries, and Bernini to a certain extent, God has taken on the old unknowable expression that was formerly used on classical deities, while classical deities as portrayed by non-classical artists before Bernini, are often portrayed with an abundance of feeling evident in their expressions. For example, in Annibale Carracci's Farnese ceiling frescoes, the artist depicts Diana smiling at Pan, and love expressed between Juno and Jupiter. Even with his Proserpina, Bernini allows a tear to express her misery. But importantly, Bernini allows Daphne no expression at all, placing her closer to a God than to the classical Olympians in the contemporary baroque convention. This has some significance for her as a religious image as I

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<sup>168</sup> Many scholars, including Wittkower, talk of the debt to artists Guido Reni and Annibale Carracci. Wittkower, pp5-7, Hibbard, for both, p62-64. 'Reni regularly painted the kind of relief compositions Bernini carved; moreover Reni's assimilation of such Caravaggesque motifs as the open mouth stands behind Bernini's development of forms like the head of Daphne.... Surely Annibale Carracci's Farnese Gallery decorations furnished Bernini with the inspiration he could use most effectively.. Annibale used what Bernini called his 'great big brain' to infuse an antique spirit as well as antique proportions into his art. ... Annibale led Bernini to the interpretation of antique sculpture that bore fruit in the Borghese statues.

<sup>169</sup> George M. A. Hanfmann, *Classical Sculpture: A History of Western Sculpture*, New York Graphic Society, George Rainbird, 1967 From 487 to 417 BCE Athenians voted to banish the individual who was perceived to have grown too influential and powerful.

<sup>170</sup> Hanfmann, p31

will come on to discuss shortly. But for this narrative, Bernini gives Daphne's the bare breasts of the classical goddess, shows her divine perfection in nakedness, but he allows Daphne the sanctity of her own thoughts; and while Ovid puts a handful of words into Daphne's mouth, Bernini, arguably, puts none.

The penultimate narrative running through Bernini's *Apollo and Daphne* relate to the sculpture's interaction with other adaptations of the Ovidian myth, notably by the poets Giambattista Marino and Petrarch. These two poets reimagined the myth of Apollo and Daphne as an amorous tale, though one in which love becomes sublimated by poetry, and poetic creation.<sup>171</sup> Petrarch, over two centuries before Bernini and Marino, redrew the figure of Daphne to create his Laura. 'Laura is linked to, on occasion identified with, perhaps even generated out of, the laurel-tree into which Daphne is transformed,' and his pursuit of Laura is represented in his poetry by the motif of inaccessible love.<sup>172</sup> Through the pursuit of an inaccessible love, metamorphosis becomes consolation for the loss of that figure, the consolation of poetry.<sup>173</sup> 'The sight of Laura weeping is cast as a memory which sonnet recovers and reproduces.'<sup>174</sup> Petrarch writes of the consummation of love as 'bitter fruit' because of its essential ephemerality, the consolation lasts longer: 'Only come to the laurel from whence is gathered bitter fruit that, being tasted, afflicts the wounds of others more than it comforts them.'<sup>175</sup> His relationship with Laura—Daphne—who dies, is never consummated, as with Ovid's Apollo: death/ metamorphosis 'changes nothing'.<sup>176</sup>

Petrarch develops the motif of the poet metamorphosed by the act of writing that Ovid began. The legacy of Petrarch's adaptation of the Apollo and Daphne myth is the reemphasis of the love story element, though unlike ancient versions, Petrarch idealises love, and ensures it is free of the suggestion of violence or rape. The death of Petrarch's Laura turns this love into a forever unobtainable and inaccessible poetical concept: a love that does not age, is not flawed, is

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<sup>171</sup> The term *amorous* used by classical scholars to describe 'love' appears to derive from the *Amores*, love poems by Ovid.

<sup>172</sup> Philip Hardie, Ovid into Laura: Absent presences in the *Metamorphoses* and Petrarch's *Rime Sparse*, *Ovidian Transformations: Essays on Ovid's Metamorphoses and its Reception*, Ed. Philip Hardie, Alessandro Barchiesi, Stephen Hinds, Cambridge Philological Society, 1999, pp254-270. 254

<sup>173</sup> Bolland, p315

<sup>174</sup> Hardie quoting from Peter Hainsworth, p255

<sup>175</sup> Bolland. Bitter fruit is also part of the distich that Cardinal Barberini adds to Bernini's Apollo and Daphne. 'Whoever, loving, pursues the joys of fleeting beauty fills his hands with leaves of seizes bitter berries.' Translation by Bolland, p316

<sup>176</sup> Hardie, p257

never acted upon or subject to change or decay. The influence of Petrarchan ideas is visible in Bernini's sculpture particularly in his version cleansed of the suggestion of violence or lust, and the treatment of emotion as pure, as apotheosis. There is some overlap too in the poetic treatment of Laura and the physical treatment of Daphne raised above Apollo. Daphne too remains forever untouched, unsullied even though loved. Her idealised state is as poem rather than as the figure of love in Bernini's adaptation. The untouchability of Bernini's Daphne is also made manifest in the hand creeping out of sight of the audience (figure 31), trying to touch her, only to land on bark instead of skin. The influence of Petrarch is also evident in the way the two bodies of Apollo and Daphne appear to fit together, cut as they are from the same marble block. They are both connected, in being made of the same fabric—even the space between them connects them. Indeed, to walk around the sculpture is to watch the negative space between Apollo and Daphne diminish until they appear as one— and yet ultimately metamorphosis, leaves and bark, separate them.

Both Petrarch and Marino's adaptations, very much of their era, focus on the male experience. While Petrarch's obsession with Laura is as much an obsession with himself, his muse, his inspiration as poet, Giambattista Marino concerns himself with experience of Apollo in pursuit. Kenseth points out that more than half of Marino's *Dafne* poem is about Apollo's state of mind, specifically the 'frustration he feels in attempting to catch the running Daphne.'<sup>177</sup> Marino's Apollo is more empathetic than Ovid's, trying to understand Daphne's rejection of him, and, in a moment that some scholars see as influencing Bernini's sculpture, describes the still-soft bark covering Daphne's body, and her pulse behind the hardening bark:

And he saw halfway still between blonde and green,  
the gold of the curly hair move on the air  
and he felt in touching the beloved wood  
under the living and tender bark  
tremble the veins and throb the fibres.  
And then he halted.<sup>178</sup>



Figure 31<sup>179</sup>

<sup>177</sup> Kenseth p200

<sup>178</sup> Quoted by J. Joris van Gastel, Van Gastel, J. Joris, Bernini's metamorphosis: sculpture, poetry and the embodied beholder, *Word & Image, A journal of Verbal/ Visual Enquiry*, July 2012, pp193-205, p196

<sup>179</sup> Figure 31, image my own

Marino made much of that brief touch of Daphne's transforming body, using it as a moment to allow Apollo to be humanised by realisation of all he has lost.

Apollo and Daphne is indebted to the sensitivity to metamorphosis we find in Marino.... It is his hand that tells the truth. Not on the abundant naked flesh, but there where the bark has begun to grow over the side of her stomach does he touch her. The nymph's wood, like skin, is still 'alive and tender' in Marino's words, as it slightly gives way under Apollo's fingers. Only as he feels 'tremble the vein and throb the fibres' underneath does he fully realize what is happening, a moment that is echoed in his fleeting facial expression. It is a moment that Bernini has made the focal point of his intricate composition.<sup>180</sup>

This realisation moment is often put forward as being present in Bernini's Apollo also, and seen as the result of the influence of Marino, although it has yet to be proven that Bernini ever read Marino, (and Coliva makes clear that Bernini's patron, the now Pope Urban VIII, found the sensuality and rawness of Marino offensive). There is some evidence of a visible reaction in Bernini's Apollo, shown in the turning of his head towards Daphne's, a focus on her which appears during the middle of the narrative, but as we have discussed, eventually his gaze moves beyond her. If Bernini's Apollo has any kind of realisation at this point, must it be that of Marino's Apollo, given what is clear about Bernini's disinclination to copy when he can innovate? Or could it be closer to Petrarch's delayed gratification that there will be a longer term, private consolation for his loss? Bernini's Apollo has certainly evolved from the churlish, whimsical god of Ovid's adaptation, refusing to accept the loss of anything when Daphne becomes the laurel; he has become a figure more in keeping with the baroque: less resolute than Bernini's *David*, less stoic than Bernini's *Aeneas*, less masculine and brutal than his *Pluto*, and potentially self-aware enough to know that he has forced a transformation in the one thing he did not want to change.

Like Ovid, ultimately pulling the strings of his god of poetry, Bernini, arguably, is metamorphosized by this sculpture. But within the sculpture, and this strand of narrative, there is an idea in Marino's poetry, when he writes, 'the aim of the poet is wonder,' that for me shines a light on Apollo's 'realisation' within this narrative. For perhaps *wonder* is the best description for what is at work here.<sup>181</sup> Certainly classical sculpture was intended, in its religious capacity, to create wonder, *thauma*, which is why sculptures were so brilliantly finished so as to dazzle, be they

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<sup>180</sup> Van Gastel, p193-6

<sup>181</sup> Coliva, p148,

bronze or marble. Perhaps there is a less feminist ending to the poetic narrative, in that like the Petrarchan 'I' narrator, the metamorphosis of Daphne creates opportunity, poetic or artistic opportunity, for Bernini, or his sculptural stand in, Apollo, witness. Andrea Bolland suggests a similar idea in Marino in the segue between the end of his *Dafni* and the subsequent eclogue. She points to a similar theme in a poem by Marvell which implies that the pursuit of Daphne and Syrinx by Apollo and Pan, created for Pan his pipes, through which he plays his music, implying that, 'The metamorphosized beloved may be more desirable than the original.'<sup>182</sup>

The final narrative strand in this work is religious: just as classical sculpture was connected to classical religious cults, so Bernini's career was largely bankrolled by investments in art made by individual members of the Catholic clergy and successive Popes, during the long-running *Renovatio*. Mormando tells us the *Renovatio* stopped only because the church's coffers had been emptied. Although *Apollo and Daphne* was a private commission, it is, and always has been, publicly staged in Rome, and in itself this nude sculpture, commissioned by a Pope's nephew, depicting a mythological transformation, encapsulates the complex situation of mythical works woven into the narrative of the Counter-Reformation. Certainly, although the church promoted the arts, they promoted a certain kind of art, and certain favoured artists of whom Bernini was one. But even Bernini was under the obligations of the sixteenth century Council of Trent, to consider religious imagery intellectual property of the church, and to be wary of promoting false idols—which the mythical gods of Olympus would surely count as—under the aegis of which artists could be reprimanded and their work taken down or even altered.

In 1563 the Council of Trent attempted to put paid to the lascivious sorts of 'idolatry' championed by Michelangelo and Botticelli: observing the dictate that 'figures shall not be painted or adorned with a beauty exciting lust'; a subsequent generation would paint over the naked bodies of Michelangelo's Last Judgment in the Sistine Chapel (and cover up ancient sculptures with prudish fig leaves).<sup>183</sup>

Yet no one knew how to walk the fine line demanded of the artist in this period like Bernini.

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<sup>182</sup> Bolland p311, referring back to a quotation from Marvell with which she opens her article, 'The gods, that mortal beauty chase' Still in a tree did end their race./Apollo hunted Daphne so,/ Only that she might laurel grow./And Pan did after Syrinx speed,/Not as a nymph, but for a reed.' The point of the last line being that Syrinx transformed into reeds which Pan then played.

<sup>183</sup> Squire, part of the edict from the Council of Trent, p742

Given his reliance on Catholic patronage, Bernini is often decried as an establishment figure, one foregoing the detachment of the outsider for financial gain, and it is true that Bernini appears to have chosen silence in the face of dubious and often unlawful behaviour by a number of his most high-profile patrons, in effect becoming complicit with these behaviours because of his refusal to publicly criticise them. For example, Pope Urban VIII, described as ‘smitten’ with love for Bernini; ‘set a new benchmark for greed, self-glorification, ostentation... [who] spent, spent, spent to make his family significant’; and the even more complex and difficult figure of Cardinal Scipione Borghese, liberal art-lover with immaculate artistic taste, who commissioned *Apollo and Daphne*, and yet ‘one of the sleaziest characters in Baroque Rome’, ‘ruthless as any sociopath’. Contemporaries of Scipione Borghese, such as the Venetian Ambassador, were no less critical, viewing him as a man ‘utterly given over to pleasure’. Seemingly so unsuited to a religious life, Scipione Borghese was an art thief and extortionist, who flaunted an openly homosexual relationship and was possibly even murderous.<sup>184</sup> These were the calibre of Bernini’s patrons and the people to whom he was loyal, and royally rewarded with a knighthood (*Il Cavaliere*) and membership of the prestigious art guild, even before the commission of *Apollo and Daphne*.

Arguably, mythical figures in the baroque period were permitted certain iconography and behaviour that the church would not have permitted in the representation of saints and the holy family. Certainly, Bernini’s *David* is less sensuous than his *Daphne*. But by the time of his completing the Borghese sculptures, Bernini had carved two religious nudes which were, in their own way, provocative and ground-breaking. The nude comes from classical sculpture, intended to present the perfection of gods who would in Bernini’s time be seen as pagan deities, and yet Bernini inflected his *St Laurence* and *St Sebastian* with elements of the classical iconography particularly of river gods in painting which he blended with Christian martyrdom, his *St Sebastian* also draws from images of Jesus Christ.<sup>185</sup> These nudes, rightly lauded by critics, were still nudes; presented not as the humble and aged bodies of old men, but bodies of exquisite, physical beauty,

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<sup>184</sup> For more on the very life of Cardinal Scipione Borghese and recent research which adds factual proof to rumours of Scipione Borghese homosexuality, see Mormando ‘Why shouldn’t Cardinal Scipione’s penis get what it wants,’ p44-51. Mormando adds, ‘if there were any uncomfortable moments between Bernini and Cardinal Scipione Borghese, the primary sources are silent.’p50

The Borghese Gallery today includes a number of paintings that were gifted to the Cardinal by his Uncle, the Pope, including the *Deposition* by Rafael that was removed from a church in Perugia and given to Scipione Borghese. He also acquired or was gifted a Caravaggio, *the Madonna and Child with St Anne*, commissioned for a chapel in St Peter’s but almost immediately taken down before finding its way into the Borghese collection.

<sup>185</sup> Avery, p29-30.

as though their suffering brought corporeal perfection. However, neither of these sculptures pushes the boundaries of decency and acceptability as much as the later *Ecstasy of St Theresa*, in which Bernini depicts the suffering of his St Theresa's as physical rapture.<sup>186</sup> It is hard to imagine many sculptors of the period, other than Bernini, who could have got away with that.

Bernini's work highlights the hypocrisy and double standards of that rich and powerful elite whose sons routinely wore cardinal red and purple. These were the same families who owned the classical sculptures unearthed around Rome, many of which had no Christian significance, indeed were pagan symbols of the very false idols that the Council of Trent warned against. Bernini could navigate this world of double standards, although after his *Apollo and Daphne*, he his work changed; he created no more mythical subjects. Still, it is astonishing that *Apollo and Daphne* showcasing a near-naked god chasing a naked nymph was the commission of the Cardinal nephew; and while Cardinal Scipione Borghese himself may well have been more interested in the naked Apollo, the potential seductiveness of Daphne, the seductive danger of Daphne was a concern that Bernini himself felt it necessary to justify, when his biography was written in conjunction with his son, Domenico. Bernini claims that having presented *Apollo and Daphne* to Cardinal Barberini, the Cardinal suggested and provided a moral fix to the sensory charms of the naked Daphne in the form of a short epigram. The telling of this tale, whether true or false, cemented the endorsement of his subsequent patron, and later, Pope Urban VIII, who wrote the epigram, effectively sanctioning the sculpture by approval from the pope himself.

Anna Coliva is convinced that the story is a lie. However, it came about in reality, Cardinal Barberini (later Pope Urban VIII's) solution of an epigram—in effect an edifying note warning of the dangers of sensuality—still survives today on the sculpture's plinth.<sup>187</sup> All the non-religious

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<sup>186</sup> Ruldolf Preimesberger, writes in detail of inner and outer fire, or 'Le Ravissement' of St Lawrence, p6. Howard Hibbard, *Bernini*, p20 describes Bernini as an artist who 'unhesitatingly' accepted 'the status quo...the counter reformation seem[ing] to have siphoned off those doubts and speculations that had made sixteenth century thinks so individual.'

Bernini's career was altered towards the embrace of the Vatican when Pope Urban VIII stepped in to publicly pardon Bernini after the scandal and subsequent backlash against Bernini after he had his mistress, Constanza Piccolomini's face slashed for allegedly sleeping with his younger brother. She was already the wife of one of his studio Sculptors. Scholars until recently dismissed her as a woman of low virtue, but recent research by Sarah McPhee shows that this is not the case. Sarah McPhee, *Bernini's Beloved, A Portrait of Costanza Piccolomini*, Yale University Press, 2012

Italics, mine. Quotation from Charles Avery p31

<sup>187</sup> The epigram story told by Baldinucci, by Bernini's son, Domenico, Anna Coliva believes it is a fiction. p148

The epigram quoted here by Andrea Bolland, reads: U'tque novas gustu baccas tentavit: eandem/ heu mihi servat (ait) nune quoque amaritcm. (Translation: And just as he tested the fresh berries by tasting, alas (he says) now still she delivers the same bitterness to me).

Baldinucci, in his almost contemporaneous work on Bernini, is more coy: Because the figure of Daphne was so lifelike and true to nature, it was judged that it might offend a chaste eye. So a moral warning was attached to it. Cardinal Maffeo Barberini wrote it, and this noble distich was then inscribed [onto the base]. Genevieve Warwick, p 359



Borghese sculptures were treated with a similarly edifying note, though only that of *Apollo and Daphne* survives. Bernini's narrative, his material legacy, given the moral stamp by Urban's epigram, is of a Christianized Daphne, 'free[d]... from sensual passions' who could, creditably, also stand in other narratives about the church, as a figure of purity, as 'Virtue', even Mary herself.<sup>188</sup>

The Vatican's support for the arts emptied its coffers.<sup>189</sup> The enormous sums that the church invested in art—and Mormando cites Bernini as the single biggest recipient of those vast funds—was part of a concerted rebranding of the Catholic church following the criticisms levelled at it during the Reformation. The Catholic church did indeed make alterations, but it also repackaged itself for the modern age—effectively another form of myth-adaptation in the narrative sense—using art and aesthetics as perhaps its greatest cultural weapon, 'to beat back protestant gains'.<sup>190</sup> Bernini, who, after all, worked with eight popes, and was close to many more cardinals and other members of the religious establishment, must have seen how the church used art in its propaganda war with the protestant church. One reading of Bernini's *Apollo and Daphne* is as an allegory of the success of the Counter-Reformation. In this narrative, Bernini's Daphne can be said to embody the Catholic church pursued and forced to transform, ultimately, into an even more essential version of itself. Apollo, in this narrative, is cast as the pursuing (and yet lesser) Protestant Church, and in this narrative above all others, the hand of Apollo cannot be said to sully Daphne's skin by contact, but instead rests on the skin of bark.

For this narrative we cannot read Daphne's expression or know her thoughts, just as the ancients could not read the minds of their goddesses, because who can look the holy Catholic church in the eye and know its soul? As an allegory of the purity of the Catholic Church, Daphne's nakedness is not sexual but the divine as corpus and height of perfection, and superior to Apollo through her act of transformation. Apollo, in this reading, as lesser, occupying the position of a

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<sup>188</sup> Coliva, p148

Female virtue, in this period and running up to it, inferior to male virtue. See M.M. Goldsmith, 'The Treacherous Arts of Mankind: Bernard Mandeville and Female Virtue.' *The History of Political Thought*, 1986, April 01. 'The inferiority of women was embedded in traditions of thought which had been reiterated by the Renaissance on the basis of views held in the Middle Ages which were derived from the fathers of the Church and from Classical Antiquity... she was 'the weaker vessel' (Peter 3:7) more prone to sin, less capable of virtue, more subject to passion and to fear and despair, she was an imperfect man according to Aquinas (following Aristotle), perhaps she lacked a soul. ...at best women were capable of passive virtue.' p97

<sup>189</sup> Mormando

<sup>190</sup> Mormando, p17

childlike figure, or a weaker version of Christianity, can only witness the transformation of the glorious Catholic church over Daphne's shoulder.

In conclusion, it is no coincidence that many people discover Ovid's adaptation of the myth of Apollo and Daphne through that of Bernini. I was one of them, and while I went on to research the myth, for many, the experience of Bernini's sculpture is enough, and this is no accident: while in a simple sense, sculpture is more accessible to most audiences than Latin poetry, the way in which Bernini's work seems to offer itself as a complete history of the myth is the consequence of the brilliant choices made when adapting Ovid. The first of these being Bernini's bravery, his pride, that made him attempt a sculpture of metamorphosis, an extremely difficult theme in art. The second of these brilliant choices was Bernini's willingness to draw on influences outside of sculpture, notably the dramatic arts, to be able to tell the story of Apollo and Daphne dynamically, and let it unfurl over time.

Experiencing *Apollo and Daphne* is to be gripped by a series of stunning visual images of metamorphosis. It is a sculpture that is technically dazzling, incomparably naturalistic and emotionally devastating: there is no forgetting the image of Daphne being consumed by rising bark. No single visual adaptation of the myth that I have seen has equalled this one image by Bernini, and arguably, it is this image which encapsulates what is so salient, so gripping about the myth itself: a life swallowed up before the audience's eyes while that person is not just alive, but still feeling, still conscious and aware.

Because Bernini was a skilful politician, accustomed to managing the demands of his many, different patrons, he was well positioned to juggle a work of so many narratives, some of which contradict the values of other narratives within the same sculpture. He presented a work that operates as a simple mythical tale of pursuit, and an image of the transformation of the Catholic church during the Reformation, as well as a pagan story standing in for a Catholic myth of rebirth and renewal. But it is also a sculpture that represents the dawn of new ideas, in an artistic form from the distant past, it presents ancient (possibly forgotten and certainly neglected) ideas of non-binary gender, of artists and art and the transformation that creativity demands. It is complex because it has so many inherent contradictions, and yet, if you want it to be, it can be exactly what it appears to be: a woman becoming a tree.

## Artist's Statement

There is a fallacy that you can't keep writing the same story. And yet writers do. And architects create whole streets of near-identical houses, poets compile collections of poems going over common ground. Lyricists pen albums about a single love and artists have the possibility to create work in a series, exploring the iterative effect of small, incremental changes across a spectrum of work. This idea of the artistic series is the basis for what I have set out to achieve: stories which each adapt the myth and sculpture of Apollo and Daphne in small incrementally different ways.

I didn't appreciate that I was adapting work creatively. The word adapt wasn't in my creative toolbox, perhaps it felt too big, too presumptuous, given the shoes I was attempting to fill. But ideas of iterative adaptation have shaped my thinking and ultimately my approach. I asked my sources, what if I changed that? My form of adaptation has been developed on the basis of those 'what ifs', and those small incremental adaptations created a collection of stories in widely differing tones and genres.

My own approach has similarly adapted itself. Research inevitably throws up material that suggests new ideas and challenges existing ones. This process began even before I'd written the first story when I came upon the image of Bernini's Apollo and Daphne while researching the Philomela myth for a novel. My reaction to Bernini's sculpture was visceral. It stirred up powerful, conflicting emotions in me. It spoke to me of the appropriation of female suffering and yet it was a sculpture that raised up the female form. Digging further, investigating the *Metamorphoses* poem

from which Bernini had at least partially adapted his sculpture brought even more questions. How was it that the received wisdom, especially among the poetic canon, was that Daphne's outcome was a good one, that transformation was noble, that her stolen freedom had been amply rewarded by becoming a poetic metaphor? My original intention was to rework my Philomela novel, replacing her tragedy with that of Daphne. Then Covid struck, museums and galleries put their art online, and I discovered I could travel around Bernini's Apollo and Daphne using my cursor and wonderful three-hundred-and-sixty-degree simulation. The way in which the work fully used its three dimensions to withhold narrative, to tell its secrets partially, holding back at almost every angle, and then the final punch of Daphne half consumed by bark, spoke to me of the need for multiple ways into this story, not just one. I put aside my novel and began writing short stories.

The cast of characters also suggested short stories. Characters possessing multiple versions of themselves to explore. Although only one Ovid, there were at least two Daphnes, her mythical and sculptural selves. The figure of Bernini was paradoxically misogynistic and yet capable of the most sensitive portrayal of the female body, which led to my decision to split him into multiple versions of himself in order to explore singular aspects of his behaviour and his art. His appalling treatment of his mistress and muse, Costanza required one story, Cuts. Another, Plinth, explored Bernini's objectification of women and his own objectification by two of his most lecherous patrons. Then there was the title story, All Time is but Light and Shadow, which explored the appropriation of Daphne's body, as sculpture, but also as a poetic and artistic metaphor in which the figure of the maker, Bernini, stands in for all male artists in the creative process. There was one further historical character I felt compelled to explore and she was even more problematic. Though she had been part of my original research plan I had not had room for Sylvia Plath, the poet who had used Daphne's mythology to explore ideas of female artistry and inspiration. I felt the story collection still needed a *female* poetic voice, the equal of Ovid and Bernini, to explore issues of the thwarted nymph's voice which felt intrinsic to this project. It was not ideal to introduce Plath in a single story, but I did so, and I also explored ideas of female artistry on the margins, the kinds of women who had potential to be artists but lacked the support and opportunities of men like Bernini. Girls with 3D vision, girls who were culturally banned from creating art once their periods came.

The voices of most of my characters, particularly the children, came to me fairly easily because I suspect they contained elements of my experience and were voices I already, on some level, knew: the scientist in *Laurel*, the child of the art fraudster and thief in *The Pope's Head*, the girl who remade her absent mother out of tins in *Snowglobe*, even the young woman sold into slavery in *Kouros*. Locating the many voices of *Daphne* was far harder, and part of the encumbrance may have been the weight of speaking for a two-thousand-year-old figure so long denied voice of any meaningful calibre. But there was also the issue of my wanting to avoid translating *Daphne* into a modern figure. It was not my intention to modernise her, letting the reader know her every thought and feeling, confessing to camera in a *Fleabag* manner.<sup>191</sup> Neither did I want to use archaic language in a collection which is, to a greater extent, not bound to a specific point in time. To do so would have felt too much like Rubens' painting of *Daphne* in a corset and ringlets, confusingly pinned to the wrong era just because it was the era in which she was remade. I wanted her to remain within the values and the limitations of the source adaptations. Therefore, *Dafne the Huntress* lived in the same world as her Ovidian self and had no greater power to affect change than Ovid gave her. My story had to find a way to allow her the agency to reclaim her place as huntress within the context of her already being a tree.

All stories force at least one character to transform, though metamorphosis occurs within a wide range of tones and genres from realism to fantasy and myth to absurdism. Many stories possess a mythic, out-of-time, quality irrespective of genre. For example, *Plinth*, which is written with a hefty dose of realism, shows metamorphosis happening in a realistic, perceptual shift, where the sculptor becomes object —sculpture—in the eyes of his patrons, and latterly himself. The speculative *Laurel* story and the absurdist *Torsos* similarly show transformation in psychological rather than physical terms. In *The Pope's Head* story, metamorphosis exists in the limited choices characters face. Change is inescapable, but it can, occasionally truly save, as in the *Elgin Marbles*.

Finally, like its classical roots, this is literature that asks questions. Questions such as, what does it feel like to be made? How much of leap is it for a man who carves busts for a living to carve into an actual face, albeit by proxy? Is an artist who objectifies women but is himself objectified a misogynist? What transformation is necessary to safeguard the self in a predatory

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<sup>191</sup> *Fleabag*, British comedy programme in two series created by Phoebe Waller-Bridge and originally produced by Two Brothers' Pictures for the BBC, 2016-19

world? Some stories, like *Waiting Room*, are nakedly philosophical. Some, like *The Pope's Head* have a philosophical underpinning. All the stories play with ideas of adaptation. Adaptation can breathe new life into old stories. Certainly, I believe it has done so here. But it also shows that all things, including adaptation, change and that short stories can borrow from, can adapt ideas of form from art and poetry and song-writing, and that the old adage that you can't keep telling the same story needs adapting too.



All Time is but Light and Shadow





## DAFNE THE HUNTRESS

My sister Syrinx's marriage began after her rape. Having overheard the goat-footed Pan bleating about his conquest, our father called Syrinx to him demanding an explanation. What could she say except to acknowledge what Pan had already admitted and which could not be undone? Syrinx may have been one of his favourites, but my father's honour mattered more; and so he arranged for her to be married to an old, gnarled sea nymph, who would keep her out of sight and not trouble my father further with her shame.

Given that so many of them are forced upon us, nymph weddings are rarely happy affairs. As we painted oak gall on her hands and feet, poor Syrinx wept, and we could only cover her streaked cheeks with moon dust until she glowed, a true wood nymph. Early in the wedding ceremony there is a point when a new husband winds his wife's hair around his arm so that from then until the following sunrise, he might tug her after him thereby teaching his new wife her proper place. Though I had witnessed this part of the ceremony countless times before, because it was Syrinx, and because her new husband's thick-fingered clumsiness tore her long golden hair, I felt a cold fury overtaking me. Why must marriage begin with such cruelty, and only to the female, heaping humiliation on an already humiliated creature?

I could merely acknowledge the thought because a horn sounded through the forest creating panic, for horns announce the arrival of a god, or, as it turned out, a goddess. Gods are

far taller than nymphs, and even before we saw Artemis, her huntresses cast long shadows ahead of them. Such beauty as theirs was like a bright new blade catching the light. We grew jittery in their presence. One nymph duly fainted and another threw himself into my father's waters only to be chased out. As the goddess appeared among us—Artemis, or Artemis-the-gutter-mouthed as we know her, swearing and spitting her way into the glade—the nymph who had fainted was picked up and dusted down, and we waited, at a respectful distance for her to speak.

Except she did not speak but set about dragging down all signs of the ongoing nuptials, tearing garlands and trampling petals beneath her feet. Artemis is known to be hostile to love, rooting out the passions of her maidens, murdering their mortal lovers, or setting her maidens to murder them for her. As her rampage continued, nobody dared intervene, for she was a daughter of Zeus. Steaming with fury at last she paused, and, stabbing the silver tip of her bow deep into the ground beside her where it stood as though rooted, she started demanding, where is it? Where is it?

Where was *what*? None of us knew, but we could hardly ask. Only a minor god, such as a river god, like my father, has sufficient status to question a goddess and even then, there's no guarantee of an answer. However, my father was a coward who took the opportunity during the confusion to vanish. I spotted his trail of bubbles heading downriver towards the edge of his pool, where the bank is steep and shaded with gunnera leaves.

Cat got your tongues?

Artemis's voice seemed so close to me that turning back in panic, I expected her face to be close, speaking directly into my ear. But it was just a trick of the gods. Artemis was already headed across the glade in pursuit of three nymphs, her silver body armour dazzling even in long grass. She used a fresh arrow to whip them. When she caught up with them, she sliced the arrow from the shaft and threatened to cut out their tongues with the tip. Though she terrorized every one of the three in precisely the same manner, not one resisted, and not one of us watching fled: for we nymphs are the game birds of the gods with no sense of self-preservation, bred to stand as we are slaughtered, or raped, or threatened. Fear hypnotises us. Power, the same. We all stood there while Artemis kicked and punched her way through the body of us, pausing now and then to catch her breath and demand, Where's the fucking stag?

If there was a stag, I pitied it.

When she shouted, she got very close to our faces so that she spattered our skin with phlegm. By the time she got to me, she was threatening to skin me and wear me as a cloak. I

looked anew at the cloak she was wearing, fashioned to lie over one shoulder and as she moved it swept the ground just as ripples across my father's waters. She made a show of sharpening her arrowhead, taunting us. But when we did not run from her, she let out a wail of frustration and plucked her bow from where it was planted, firing wildly ahead. The arrow passed by us, glancing the trunks of two huge beeches, before lodging deep in the bark of a third. As the arrow pierced the trunk, I pressed my hand into my waist as though it were my body that had been struck.

I raised my hand. It was too much. Stepping forward I said, Goddess, for which I was immediately struck down. I struggled up. Goddess, you are mistaken.

The huntresses surrounded me, arrows primed, and demanded I withdraw my words, but Artemis made them wait.

No, she said, stepping into the circle to examine me. No. I am never mistaken.

With effort I told her the truth. There is no stag in these woods goddess.... at least none worthy of you. We would know. These are *our* woods.

Any goddess's gaze is a painful thing. I began to fear I could not endure it, but she spared me, turning towards her maidens, drawing her hands together to signal they would depart. Swiftly forming twin columns, they vanished into the forest, leaving only the sense of their presence behind them. Their disappearance was abrupt and silent, not even stirring the leaf litter and fearing that they might as easily return, we remained where we were standing. Eventually, when it was clear they were not coming back, the strange mood lifted, and we could shake the fear out of ourselves, clap our hands and remember the wedding feast. I too roused myself to move on, only to be met by my father, blocking my path.

Not you, he said.

My father's whims were their most savage when awed by a god, and so, though I had a word or two about cowardice on the tip of my tongue, I remained silent and bowed my head before him as I had not before the daughter of Zeus.

He prodded my shoulder with a scaly finger.

You! You imagined yourself fit to speak!

A group of my innumerable aunts crowded round, tittering, repeating his words like an echo: you, you, you... *there is no stag!*... no stag, no stag, imagine!

My father was more than usually verbose, preferring to enjoy his audience than remember his own shameful rush for the cover of his waters. He lectured me long on my unfitness for all

things, and where he left off, my aunts began. Returning to the wedding feast, he left punishment of me to my aunts.

Go out into the wood, they told me. Deep into the woods, far away from everyone and do not return until we send for you.

Such a punishment was no punishment at all, though evidence of how little they knew me, and while that saddened me, it also set me at liberty to walk without a backward glance into the wood. The forest claimed me and soon I was deep enough among the trees to forget the wedding, the huntresses, everything except the sound of woodpeckers in the distance, and the sibilance of leaves. For the first time I was wholly alone, no sisters or aunts, and in freedom I wandered long into the night, as the dew formed, and the hour grew silvery. At first light the sudden sound of voices confused me. Had I walked in circles? How else had I come upon anyone in a forest so vast. I could cross half the globe and not reach its border. I listened. The voices were unusually bright, excited, apparently tracking something. Not just something, I realised from the tree up which I had climbed, they were tracking me. I learned from the winds that my father had washed his hands of me, offering me as a bride to any who might catch me.

After Syrinx, I wanted no one to catch me, and no husband to wed. I felt safe where I hid, for the forests are kind to nymphs. Travelling at night while the owls flew and the wood pigeons slept, I avoided those who sought me out, until one evening, quite unexpectedly as the forest was growing sleepy and daylight was washed out and grey, I saw two figures ahead. Their glowing skin made them instantly recognizable as gods. I hesitated. They were caught up together, arguing over a bow. The smaller of the pair I could see was Cupid, the other, Artemis's brother, Apollo. I could not then, nor can I now, explain my curiosity about Apollo, other than because of having so recently met his sister. But I *was* curious and not a little frightened, being so isolated in the woods with the light dying. Turning, quietly, I retraced my steps, imagining I had become good enough at hiding not to be seen. But Apollo's voice undecieved me.

You... he called after me. Nymph? Don't leave us. Stay. Please? You surely cannot fear us. We desire only company. Nothing more.

There was a sweetness to his voice, even a hint of humility that was astonishing from a god. It caught me off-guard, and I hesitated, oh so briefly. But almost the same moment, I heard him sniff the air for my scent like a dog. As I fled, his laughter kept pace with me. He set after me at his leisure. But though I ran with all my being, and though I was swift and sure-footed, ducking and dodging and crawling without injuring myself, still I could not lose him. He used

whatever magic was at his disposal to remain, always, close enough that I could hear his breath and feel his gaze. Every now and then he called out, as he had the first time, begging me to turn back, promising that he meant no harm, even while he continued his pursuit.

Our feet beat out a rhythm on the hard forest floor, across the dry and broken pine needles. His stride, being twice mine, was a syncopation, a kind of rhythmic parenthesis, that seemed to cup me ahead and behind. I saw him, in those early miles, in fragments, and for all his magic I could see no beauty in him but youth. His strength was in his persistence, for his stamina undid me. Slowly, as my body used itself up, he remained near enough to reach out and touch me, as though keeping pace all these miles had been nothing to him. It was then that I truly became afraid. The trees who had always been my friends started to knock and trip me. Jumping a brook, I pictured my father's mighty river: he was the only one who could save me now. I turned for home and began calling to him long before he could possibly hear me:

Father—father—I need you. I need you. Help, me. Please, father. It's me. It's me. Dafne. It's Dafne.

Nearing the riverbank, I thought I saw his head poking out above water and leaped towards him. I held my breath as long as I could and, surfacing blindly, began swimming, my arms finding new life in the cold river. Nearing the entrance to his pool, I started to believe I was safe, until my hair caught. Thinking it was a branch I struggled to free myself, but I could not. For I was snagged by Apollo's fingers and he used my own hair to reel me back. I fought him. How I fought him. But though I scratched and kicked and bit and shrieked, nothing within my power could arrest him. Taking me by the arms he cracked my back into the steep and stony beach, knocking the breath from me. It was then that I heard my father's whisper:

What can *I* do against a son of Zeus?

I had my legs kneed apart by Apollo, God of Prophecy, of Weaponry and Poetry, while my father looked on. Only when it was safe for him to intervene did my father rise from the stew of his waters and begin incanting a spell.

That spell bound me within the bark of a tree. So many of my family and friends have sought me out here in the forest to try to convince me that I have been saved by this transformation. Saved from what? That they are complicit in the lies of the gods is the greatest tragedy, for they do not see they peddle them as truths. Even one of the beautiful nymphs I have always thought might

be my mother, since we do not know, since our mothers never claim us, came to visit me for the purpose of congratulating me on having such a father as mine.

He altered you to save you, she told me.

Then, I replied, if I am saved, why can't he turn me back?

She clucked her tongue at my ingratitude.

Would *she* spend eternity rooted in the forest?

It is not without irony that my father's magic was too weak to cast me as anything more than a lowly laurel. At the same time, his spell has endured, it endures still. It is but a small step from self-pity at such a fate to fear that in some way I brought this upon myself out of a flawed character that allowed such a paltry spell to take root. But when this happens, I make sure to rouse myself from such a mood, to remind myself that I did nothing to deserve this and yet I am transformed. Did I steal fire from the gods or withhold hospitality from a god in disguise? Did I steal my father's chariot and horses, or covet that which was not mine? I did not. All that was done was done to me and all that was taken was taken from me.

My transformation began innocently, though it has caused me pain since. I remember a slight tugging sensation in my toes that turned into a burrowing downwards until my feet were planted deep in the loam. Could I have fought it? That is a thought for now, rather than then. Then, I had no time. Almost as soon as it began it was over. As my toes twitched and dived, I felt a stiffness swiftly rising up my skin. Though I lived my life prior to this amid daily proof of transformation, under stars that had once been my sisters and alongside rivers that only existed after rape; and though I utterly believed in the possibility of transformation, I could not name my experience as such until long after it was complete. Who can know what becoming a star feels like but a star? The moment I became aware of the stiffness in my shins, it had reached my pelvis; as I registered my pelvis it had already consumed my belly and its pressure was cracking my ribs. And in all this, though some element resisted, there was not even time for it to form into a word, not even, fully, the thought: no. Even in the time it would have taken to speak, bark had smothered my heart, my throat, my mouth and nose; it had reduced my world to darkness.

Those early years were a long, comfortless sleep, in which bark swaddled my body and held it in the same position, arms by my ribs, feet planted, hips a little backwards putting pressure on my lower back. I passed from numbness to pain, back to numbness that was almost but not quite

obliteration. But then my senses, or some of them, started to wake, like a severed nerve slowly knitting together, coming at first in fits and starts, a sudden sound, then nothing for years, something like a scent, at least to my mind, and yet without a nose, I didn't know what was real and what was memory. I learned my own scent, bark, leaves, and then the unexpected pleasure of my own blossom. The beauty of it almost hateful, indecent. Amid so much pain it was hate growing in me that became the true foundation on which I brought myself back. Slowly. Oh, so slowly. But given long enough, even anger grows tiresome. Even injustice no longer lights a fire. Sometimes, I shut my mind to anger. I've even managed to exist for periods entirely on wonder, on beauty, but wonder and beauty burn bright and short. On rare days I find myself able to surrender to the soundscape of the canopy, the differences between the pitch and rhythm of calm days and windy days, and almost call those moments enough.

But it's not enough. And I remember that I deserve more than this, and then the anger roars back, and I stoke it, I stoke it until it sparks. I question: am I even Dafne anymore, stuck inside this tree; and if I am *me*, here, still, how much of *me* remains? At what subtle point do I end and the tree begin? In this darkness, I cannot tell. If, despite my protestations, I am all tree, what then? Does any of the caterpillar remain in the moth? What are cells without memory, what is self without its sense of identity? Such questions have been my food and drink all the years I have been stuck here, and the answers have been so relentlessly bleak that I taunt the gods whenever the chance arrives, Zeus in particular, in the hope of being razed to dust. But then, a smudge of soot is still not nothing; it is carbon, the element at the very heart of life. If I were transformed back to a fragment of my elemental self, without conscience, or history, without senses or future, would I be freer than I am now?

A storm comes. A bad one with rain that is soft at first descending suddenly into a squall. None with roots can stand in rain and not be made alive by it. My bark tingles. I stretch out from the tips of my branches to my root hairs. How good it feels. And then I hear his voice.

Dafne, Dafne.

He is here. I cannot see of course but I feel his presence, sheltering beneath my branches. That furred tongue slandering my name each time it speaks. That's not poetry you're mouthing, I tell him in thought. The downpour softens to drizzle and then mist, his hand pressed to my



bark; how long since I was last touched? It is humiliating to feel this tiny flicker of gratitude towards such a man.

When the sun tries to burn its way through the mist, he moves from under my branches into the damp leaves, circling around me—I'd know the pad of those footsteps anywhere. Now, always desperate for my attention, he will play with me. First, he drums his fingers on my bark and then he rubs the string of his bow against it. We are old friends, the bow and I, an ancient weapon, full of stories, all of which I know since he has sung them at me until I could repeat them word-perfect.

Today's assault-to-the-ears he calls singing is a groaning epic, a chain of make-believe heroics that is as close to heroism as Apollo can ever get, since like most bullies, he is a coward. He only imagines himself brave; and why wouldn't he when the odds are eternally stacked in his favour?

The song finally fades, for Apollo is always swift to lose interest without an audience. I hear his sigh, a true herald of boredom that to my great relief ends only in a clumsy embrace, in weight heavy on me, pressing his cheeks, his nose, his lips against my bark, his arms stretching halfway round my trunk. His touch will leave a mark, something grotesque and warty given he is the least hygienic of all the gods, except Bacchus, his skin is coated in spores. I wish they would hurry up and eat him from the outside in.

Just when I start to wonder if he has tiptoed away—for whenever he is still and silent—he moves again. He twists an arrowhead deep into my side until I bleed. He rubs my blood between his fingers, tastes it with his tongue, and tells me I'm his, his alone, that he loves me, that this will never change, and then he starts beating his fist against my side, asking me why I continue to hold out, why I will not tell him I love him. He begs and he begs until he stabs me again, possibly with the same arrow, I cannot tell. But this time he's half-hearted, and the arrow only grazes me before dropping from his fingers. He presses his ear to my trunk, desperate to hear something. I let nothing pass. Not a thought. I keep it that way until he grows bored.

I take great pleasure in imagining his thwarted expression: what emotion does to his face! Not handsome. His doughy features are wholly unsuited to carrying any loss of humour. He sits and strips a few of my leaves from a branch, and then, bored still, unable to force a response as he would wish, sits and leans against my trunk. He fidgets for some time, but then he softens into sleep. And I wait.

I wait, until, with great concentration, I can feel that his sleep has deepened, that time has passed. The only marker of time I have is some fine hairs of his that have become embedded in my bark. More than embedded, you might say, drawn in.

I feel electrified. If I can draw in a few hairs as I grow, why not more? Why not the whole man? Trees have swallowed all manner of objects throughout time—posts, stones, bones, why not a god? I am trembling with the possibility to play huntress myself. Do I have it in me, I ask myself. Me?

Initially there are doubts. Only a god would lack them. But this is an opportunity that might never be repeated. The more I poke and press my own conscience, the more easily I discover amid its limits, its sensitivities and frailties, a keen desire for vengeance. I stew on it, since I have time. But in the end, the urge for vengeance overshadows all else: why should an individual escape the consequences of his actions simply because he was born a god? I will not let that happen, and though I accept it will take time, since I cannot run after him to catch him, if he stays sleeping and I am patient, slowly adding rings of girth, I will catch him, in my way, encircling him in bark and phloem. He will not wake. But if he does, he will find himself walled in like a statue in a niche, but on the inside. It will be justice of sorts. Provided, of course, the fates for once are generous, and I cannot hear him singing.

## LAUREL

She stands at the entrance waiting to be interviewed by the state's only reporter. It's an interview she's contractually obliged to be here for, though the reporter is showing no signs of wanting to speak with her. He's got twelve minutes to extract himself from the bar before she can leave.

She tries to catch his eye one last time, and briefly she can see that he considers it before turning back to the bar, signalling for another drink. She checks the time. Eleven minutes. Just as she starts to believe it might be avoided entirely, he slides over.

Why trees?

She opens her mouth to reply, but he isn't finished.

Surely, all this money could be better spent funding things we actually need... now?

She takes a moment to absorb the abruptness of his question, to regain her equanimity and remind herself that this expedition is all she cares about. Then she swallows down any lingering feeling before answering.

Do you know I'm named after a tree?

He looks satisfyingly bewildered.

A *type* of tree— she corrects herself.

She tries not to show how much she enjoys his discomfort. These days nobody can recall a single plant by name. Worse, they can't imagine why they would ever need to. His cheek

twitches. She makes a mental note. Then starts the little speech she has memorised for this moment.

These trees—

He interrupts. *If* they exist.

*If* they exist—

Since you have no proof—

She smiles.

Please understand the significance of that *if*, she says calmly. *If* they exist, *if* they have survived out there in any form—these trees must possess a resilience we need to understand; a resilience beyond anything we've been able to synthesize. Do you know of a single species which has survived unprotected ...do you? No? Precisely.

He looks back at the bar as though wishing he hadn't bothered to come over.

We need to know.

When he looks back at her, his expression is one of disgust. The look of the young at the old, or the living at the dying.

We need more cells, she tells him. The banks are depleted. We need to find—

He recoils.

If nature can be made useful again, she says soothingly. Then we have to try—

But he interrupts her: We have synthetics, that's enough.

She keeps her voice calm. Everyone is fearful of what they don't know. She explains.

Everything is made from something. The clothes you are wearing. The drinks you've been knocking back—

Are synthetics—

—derived, once from raw materials.

The twitch in his cheek returns. He's malfunctioning, she realises. He's good. She hadn't even noticed until now. He must be one of the early ones. If she hadn't seen it before, a long time ago now, she would have missed it entirely: where the new self refuses to be synced up to the old one. At least that's what she remembers. Though her memory isn't all that it once was.

He is talking. She makes herself pay attention.

I don't get you, he is saying.

Do you need to *get* me?

How he dislikes this. Possibly he dislikes her. At least the subject is evidently not one he wants to write up. She wonders if he will bother, since she won't be here to check. She reminds herself of her purpose. The expedition deserves his notice. Besides. It's his job.

The way you talk, he is saying. It's like you *admire* the natural world.

He is looking at her very intently.

Do you denounce nature?

I do.

Say it.

I denounce nature.

He nods. Breathes out somewhat shakily. So that is it. That is what they all think. She should be used to it by now. She clears her thoughts. She's on the record. He repeats the slogan, *his* words, but her phrase, fashioned years ago now.

Nature works for us.

Nature does, she says, trying not to sound weary.

If she'd had any idea, when she came up with that slogan, how often she'd have to hear it, say it, think it. Politics is such a waste of energy.

Without intending to she catches the time. Only 60 seconds left. She pulls herself together. It's so close. So close. While she is mentally readying herself to leave, he seems to be deciding whether he's done. She is actually looking at the door, estimating the number of steps in her head when he throws his last question at her.

Is it true you once thought, "trees were in your blood?"

She hesitates, since strictly speaking this is not a scientific question, and they have a contract, all laid out. But she thinks, what has she to hide? She's done nothing wrong. He repeats the question and then adds: Did you think it?

I don't know, she says honestly. Maybe. I don't recall it, but equally I may well have done. You're the one with access to the archives—

But it's an odd turn of phrase, he persists. What did you mean by it?

What *did* she mean by it? She clears her throat and tries to explain the truth as she remembers it. She really isn't a woman who even knows how to lie. Facts are her currency. Facts and hypotheses, the hunt to fill in the blanks, the job of knowing which blanks need filling in.

All I meant was that once, a very long time ago, our ancestors named themselves for things around them, for things they knew and things that mattered: places, objects, even, yes,

trees. All names have histories, but mostly we've become disconnected with them, our names are islands. That's all I would have been thinking.

Not even a twitch.

Her timer goes off and she clucks her tongue, suddenly happy. That's it, I must go, she says. I appreciate your interest in my work, as ever. She gathers her things to leave. Please coordinate with the institute to get your copy approved.

The reporter is already heading back to the bar as she takes the tunnel to the institute. Her team awaits her in the entrance lobby and they share the ride up to the lab. The back and forth of question and answer between them is a deep comfort. Their minds have been built on hers. Why can't the whole world function like our little group, she asks them, feeling oddly light of heart and girlish. She throws up her hands. No need for social get-togethers and tedious interviews! She would surrender whatever part of her makes her human without a second thought. She has enjoyed several generations of embedded circuitry (and what a difference it makes.) It's an idle thing, and otherwise unlike her, but sometimes she considers what a career spent without the threat of mortality, bodily infirmity, or mental decline would have been like. Robots never need to eat or sleep. What time, comparatively, she has squandered.

Bidding the team goodbye at the door, she enters the manufactured-marble cool of her lab to complete her few remaining tasks. Everything around her has been to her design, every experiment and instrument. Shutting down the last few machines that will not continue running during her absence, she notes the whole system's economy and neatness. She has done good work here. The thought is past tense, she notes. But then she is not sentimental. It is a good sign that she herself has been made redundant by all this efficiency.

At precisely ten past the hour, it is time to test comms. Knowing the schedule, she switches on her comms unit.

Hey—a voice sounds in her ear.

Good, you're there. I'm heading over now.

The designated changing room for her is on the fourteenth floor down. There, in laboratory conditions, she slips into her suit, requiring robotic assistance only in fixing her heavy visor in place. Once all the electrics are connected, her diagnostics kick in and there on the inner visor she starts to be fed her own vital statistics. From here on, she reminds herself, she must remember that everything she sees and hears will be fed directly through to control.

Twenty-eight past the hour. Time to find the convoy.

The first whisper of the possibility of a forest came after a rare purge within the ruling junta. There had always been isolated mutterings about the state of the world outside, whispers that they were being lied to. Conspiracies that suggested conditions outside the habitable zone weren't as universally bad as they were all being led to believe. Gossip. She paid it no heed. That was before The Realignment, before the removal of all forms of media excepting a single clone reporter. Then it seemed that the gossip was everywhere, even in the institute. Talk of the outer world carved into fiefdoms, suggestions of hidden plots of land, clean water, a forest emerging from the ash. That got her attention. She started dreaming of it. She endured several rounds of cleansing and still it persisted. So, she set herself hypotheses, started searching the archives for any hint of a location, possible size, signs of CO<sub>2</sub>, methane, anything living out there. She spoke to etymologists, mythologists (before they too were purged), geographers, geologists, ecologists. Searched forbidden literature. No woodland site, no name in any tongue, modern or archaic, no coordinates; not even satellite imagery or drone footage of any area that could potentially host even a small woodland. It was like the trees resisted being known. She took the reverse position and time and again her experiments proved that nothing could survive out there, nothing had survived. But that was science. Sometimes she'd got a lucky break, an unearned advance, but mostly it was a mechanism in which every tiny detail had to align before it would unlock. She was accustomed to uncertainty. The sum of what was not known was vast, and growing ever vaster, and at the same time, science could prove what could not yet be fully known.

One territory above all others stood out consistently as anomalous. She applied for a grant to explore this far northern-most territory and was openly laughed at and mocked. Her integrity challenged. Her record reimagined with every committee she sat before. The scepticism of purse-holder after purse-holder. Her mission has been called everything imaginable: a pipe dream, a mirage, a fairy tale. Then there was that one time when she was asked: do they call to you, these trees, like sirens of the forest?

They wouldn't have spoken to a man like that. She told them straight, no sirens have ever called to me. Though how she resented that she had to. When she finds nothing, she can name a sizeable chunk of ash-filled desert after that individual. She didn't think they knew it, but in the run through, as her visor was lifted on, she noticed that someone had written on the inside. She

made them pause and looked. What's that, she asked comms. I can see something written on my visor.

Ah, the voice had laughed. It says: Ulysses

Ulysses? What's that for?

The one who resisted the sirens.

She reaches and touches the front of her visor. The colour of the writing has worn away but there's still a slight scratch in the visor to remind her it was there. The convoy awaits her inspection. She keeps to the schedule down to the second though her suit is heavy and making her sweat. She's proud of the ingenuity, though: her entire suit is made of waste products. The fabric alone is a masterful recycling of human excretion, particularly skin cells and hair. Though it has required sacrifice. The accountants insisted on knowing the provenance of every item as well as the cost to ensure it's all accurately mapped back to its human source.

No one has directly mentioned the possibility that she might not make it back, nor the graver possibility that she may not make it there. But she thinks of it all as a scientist. She has used her time to answer as many questions as she could. Answers lead on to new questions that eventually someone else will have to answer. That is the way.

The bay for the convoy is usually designated for garbage since that is the only one long enough. In all there are eighteen trucks. She will travel in the lead truck modified for her use, since travel outside the habitable zone is normally carried out by robots.

Forty-one minutes past the hour: pause for congratulations. Whooping and clapping takes over her comms as she glances down the eighteen vehicles. She smiles, but otherwise does not pause or become distracted from her schedule. Given the years of planning she understands that some members of the team feel their work is done and want to enjoy the moment. She is not of that mindset, but still, she lets the noise wash over her while continuing to check every vehicle by eye as she passes. Everything is where it should be. The sensitive equipment which proved so exhausting to procure has been particularly carefully stowed. She is gratified. She thanks those responsible individually. At the last truck she realises how much tension she is carrying in her body as her muscles release. She gets a warning across the inside of her visor that she needs to slow down her breathing, since she is masked up and oxygen supplies on the trip are finite. The suit spills across her visor all her vital stats for control to see: blood pressure, pulse, blood chemistry, her oxygen saturation, heartrate, and temperature. In the most extreme event, they can override her.



Can we just check non-verbal? the voice in her ear asks.

They are using three forms of direct communication; the visual and verbal are already up and running, only the third option, being used for the first time, has kept her up at night, worrying.

Here goes—

She senses the initial vibration on the back of her hand, and then a second on the underside of her wrist.

Yes.

Both?

Check. Both.

Someone asks her to describe exactly where she felt it and she does, responding through a series of short electric pulses of her own. Vibration communication is another learning from nature, this time from colonising insects, particularly bees. Vibrations are far more economic than speech, faster than thought and much faster than text, since it bypasses expression. Feelings, experiences, are generally underrated compared with facts and data these days. Experience has come to be unfashionable within research and academia. But in this instance, with her usual pragmatism to get the job done well, her persistence in using it is applauded.

I knew it would work, one of the control team hoots, and there is much audible chatter in her ear.

Looks like it's all ready for you.

Forty-six minutes past the hour: time to board.

She heads to the door of the first truck. Once inside and she is stowed, the vehicle will seal itself to avoid the orange dust which is famous in the uninhabited zone. Dust being the enemy of robotics, an immense amount of her energy and that of her team has been devoted to eliminating dust penetration of the convoy.

Ready?

This is the Director of Research speaking.

She laughs. Wow. All the big guns. I'm flattered.

The doors open. She has no sentimental last look behind; she can't wait to get inside. A ramp descends, and she walks into the dark, cramped interior. Windows would have been an unnecessary complication. Besides she will be in an induced sleep. Saving power, eliminating unnecessary risk of dust contamination. These are key. She steps into a harness and pulls it up around her waist, tight. The hydraulics hoist her upwards, gently turning her on her back into

what they call her bunk, but which in truth is nearer to a coffin, though without the fitted lid. In her training she has worked hard at combatting the very human urge to panic in small spaces. Once the final door shuts, she has just six millimetres' space all around her. This, she has known, but it helps to remind herself now she is wedged in that it's for the sake of the trip's oxygen storage. Going over these facts, lying rigid with fear, she knows she's breathing too quickly. The doors seal and all lights switch off.

Darkness.

Deep breaths.

Count! This she is reminded of in all three forms of communication.

She counts her breaths in and out in the hope of maintaining the optimal rhythm to control her agitation and reduce oxygen wastage so early in the trip. A small vibration at the back of her skull soothes a little, reminding her that in a matter of minutes she will be sedated through the oxygen she breathes. In the meantime, she runs through lists in her head. Lists of procedures due to be run in her lab overnight, the likely decisions in the control room; and the mechanical and electronic process by which the vehicle engines are powering up ready to move off.

Forty-nine minutes past the hour: the vehicles levitate. As the engines are firing up, there is a countdown to ignition broadcast in triplicate so that her body hums before the engines. Vibrations run from the vehicle through her body until her teeth ache. At last, the sedative gets to work turning her mind fuzzy. She wills her body to relax but there is so much lateral movement inside her bunk now they are moving that adrenalin is holding off sleep. Every muscle grips, and she's started panting.

Ten to the hour: the first readout of her physical stats. Her pulse is too high, her breathing shallow and inefficient. Breathe slowly, she is told.

When she fails to control her breathing the system, in consultation with control, tops up her sedative through the oxygen supply. Now her body is liquid, but her mind is chaotic, kaleidoscopic. Finally, as they pass beyond the habitable zone and the convoy accelerates, they reach a speed that is smoother, and she surrenders to a drugged sleep.

Day one: Sleep does not preclude work. Her thoughts run over the order of what will happen when they arrive, including the atmosphere verification procedures. She will also face pressure to find her feet. In simulations, she had sealegs for up to an hour after first standing, leading to the

increased compression of her suit. She has had to take medication for her inner ear to increase its adaptability. The doors will not open unless she can walk straight.

Day 2: Sleep is a liminal state of de-experiencing the body; a state of pure mind. It occurs to her that this strange, resting sleep resembles death, or at least the sort of death she will enjoy in which her thoughts, her work, and even some form of her mind (thanks to the circuitry), will endure.

Days 3-5: At the point of having run through everything that is necessary she experiences free time. It leads her mind down new pathways some of which are strangely frightening. She may be about to glimpse her first tree. The realisation brings a sudden wave of nausea-induced-vertigo. Immediately, her mind self-soothes: no one understands more about trees than she; their cell structure, the roles of bark, phloem, the cambium layer, sapwood and heartwood; she has a great deal of knowledge about sub-molecular communication apparatus around the tree itself and the multitude of fungi allowing exterior communication. Fruits, nuts, monoecious and dioecious reproduction, tick tick tick. And of course, toxicity. She makes an audible sigh. Her bread and butter.

Her mind starts to mull over her namesake tree, which she has not considered in a very long time. The laurel was the first of trees, if she is to believe the distant sources, a kind of proto science in which the ancients made up stories about the how and the why of things. The laurel, known as the tree of the gods, was created for love, or lust, or the desire to command or control, the only desire of the three with which she could ever relate. The idea of her namesake tree being made by the gods amuses her, and always has. She recalls that the tree was meant to be beautiful, its beauty derived from the transformed body of a nymph. For this reason, she imagines a laurel as her height, or thereabouts. Its width her width if she stood, rooted, with her arms spread. Although she accepts this is entirely fancy, it has left her with an expectation, not even she realises, that trees are roughly speaking the size of people, and a forest is akin to a crowd. Their colours, since her own world is grey and pale and unvaried, she imagines to be similar, and she has no notion at all of sound or smell. At this point, in a split second, her mind does something unprecedented. It blocks an emerging thought from the archive and the transcriptors. This thought: when she said trees were in her blood, she had pictured a tree and a nymph sharing one body. She knows this is ludicrous, not to mention unscientific. Historically all life shared a cellular

ancestor, and though she could many times have justified the thought by mentioning this, she has not, and now cannot, in the climate she has herself in part created. But neither can she erase the thought for though it is dangerous, it has settled, and she is not prepared to root it out. She knows empirically that humans are not like trees on any level, that humans are special, not because they are made in the light of any god or sentiment like that, but because they are the most ruthless species at dispatching their enemies. She unblocks her thoughts and control makes contact.

Comms went down, and we lost you briefly; are you ok?

All ok.

She sends a small electric pulse of confirmation.

Underneath her, the convoy covers mile after mile of dust, landscape that was once peatland and tundra, forest and field. There are no markers to point the way, only co-ordinates, because even the magnetic field is damaged and cannot be trusted for navigation and the atmosphere too polluted to glimpse stars.

Day 6: She senses a minor adjustment in trajectory, a lowering of altitude and some turbulence. She is aware that she is both dry-mouthed and thirsty and needing to urinate. The vehicle dips downwards tentatively, which she mistakenly believes is all the descent they need. At the second more dramatic plunge, she vomits into the visor of her travel helmet.

You ok Doc?

Did you just puke? —

Aha.

They are down, stationary, though the motion is still felt in her muscles. Once the engines have switched off, she is lifted from her slot and held, standing shakily in the harness. She feels weak, as though recovering from a five-day illness. The effort of holding up her head is making her dizzy. She desperately wants to lie back down again. She is given a shot for her ears and immediately her balance improves.

That's better.

As she sends out scopes into the atmosphere, she starts to feel excitement mounting. She's made it. She's really here. She spends a few precious seconds registering that thought before her innate schedule kicks in.

Landing plus forty minutes: When her vitals have steadied, the harness automatically loosens so that her muscles are forced to take over. Briefly she feels at sea again, but this time the sensation passes quickly. Some of the initial tests of the atmosphere have come back and between her and the lab they determine the exact coating for her outside suit to keep her protected—twenty minutes—and her temperature even. As the outer membrane is tweaked—another twenty-two minutes—she cleans vomit from the inner visor of her helmet and steps into the heavy boots. They are weighted along the shank and toe and extremely heavy to walk in. She checks her blood sugar, which is low, and gives herself a shot of dextrose. Within moments she feels energized.

Come on, come on.

Two hours and three minutes from landing: her suit is ready. It appears out of a side compartment and a robotic arm steadies her and does up the fastening. She feels swaddled, too cocooned to move freely. The twice coated fabric is unyielding, it digs into her ribs and weighs her breath down.

You ok?

Ok and ready to go.

Securing her helmet, she catches sight of her face in its visor. The pores of her skin are orange as dust. She looks down at her hands, her nails. They too are faintly rimed with it but that is nothing compared with the whites of her eyes which have turned orange.

You can disembark.

Roger that.

A sense of unease creeps into her subconscious. Despite all her planning, her great confidence that she had ensured a sealed vehicle, nature has found a way in.

Two hours thirteen minutes since landing: the outer doors open. She makes her way clumsily in the heavy boots towards the ramp. The inner doors open the opposite way to the outer doors. The ramp slowly lowers, and she walks through the opening in the vehicle's side onto dry earth. Earth, she notes, shocked. Though it is dry, littered with organic dust, it is brown not orange. Her pulse quickens and she kneels clumsily to touch the ground, sifting the matter and letting it slip through her splayed, gloved fingers. Still looking down, she describes what she is seeing for the lab in case the visuals aren't clear: bits of broken nutshell, leaf matter—occasionally the veiny spine of an actual leaf. Look up, look up. But she is too caught up by the simple presence of soil. When at last her legs get so tight, she is forced to stand up, she sees them.

She has landed in a clearing around which there is a dense deciduous forest. From kneeling the trees would have looked enormous, from standing they leave her speechless. She lets the view from the visor explain what words cannot. All her preconceptions, everything she thought she knew is challenged by the sight of a row of vast beech trees before her. How big, then, is this forest? And how could she not have seen it on any of the maps? She thinks again of that man asking her, do trees call to you. Is that what she's experiencing now? She approaches the nearest tree, a vast, silver barked beech. *Fagus sylvatica*. The trunk is both smooth and wrinkled in places. She presses her hands against the bark. Does it know her as an enemy? she wonders. It feels solid under her gloved hands. It does nothing back to her. Nothing at all.

She moves approximately south by south west, though her direction has no purpose, she is wandering, gazing around her. She walks under the beech which is so vast that she can't reach a single branch and the leaves above her are seen in silhouette, their beautiful, practical, elongated ovals, with clearly defined veins and midrib, with a wavy edge. She realises that the canopy above is not solid, nor one block of colour. She can glimpse the sky in places. Light filters through and catches the colours, so much green. A leaf floats downwards and she hurries to catch it as it passes her visor and slips through her gloved hands. Bending, she tries and fails to pick it up. She fights with the gloves. They are too thick to be dexterous. Useless.

Use the robots to take samples.

The word sounds alien in her current situation. Like she has forgotten why she is even here.

Use the robots. Hang on. We can do it from here —

She ignores the voices, the vibrations and messages, willed on by a strange compulsion to pick up the leaf herself. After a frustrating number of failures, she manages to scoop the whole leaf into her palm and cradle it.

Command has overridden her and released the robots which gather at the top of various vehicle ramps. The long train itself, and the robots, appear out of scale, smaller, than she expected them to be.

Wait, she says to them, and then turns her attention to moss in a dip between the soil and the roots of a tree. Such a delicate organism, she thinks, peering at it under magnification. How did she not realise how complex even mosses could be? Above her head, on one side of the tree's trunk, grows lichen straight on the silvery beech trunk. *Chrysothrix candelaris*.

Are you seeing this?

The words are spoken out of habit, though she doesn't heed the response. It's for the concreteness of saying the words and describing all she is seeing, since her experience has taken on the sensation of a dream.

The chatter in her ears is building. She's stopped being able to pick out what she needs to know. Too many commentators asking too many questions. It's overwhelming. She wants to press her hands over her ears but with her gloves on, the movement is too awkward. She is fighting the desire to know how it would all sound without the constant babel from comms. What does a single falling leaf sound like? How does it feel?

The robots are ready for you.

Just stop. I need silence.

The robots can do anything you need doing.

And so the messages go on.

Stop fussing with your gloves. You'll damage them.

Just use the robots.

The robots contact her. She tells them to wait. Gets into a battle with comms when they try to override her decision.

It's for your own good. You need help.

Doc?

Doctor?

Please acknowledge you're hearing us.

She just cannot do this. How is she so unprepared for what she's found here? She who is always so meticulous in her preparations. She stops thinking to watch a single birch leaf spinning as it falls to the forest floor. The singularity of the experience is mesmerising. She shuts herself down and just watches as leaf after leaf falls, each one differently, and is yet the same, and to the same end. She follows the light in the canopy, moving deeper into the wood, past beech and oak, birch and sweet chestnut. Such verdure and then sudden patches of light. The way the light of various openings in the canopy penetrates the leaves, is held by them; the changes in colour and texture brought about by this small but exquisite harmony. Having lived her life in grey, the sheer range of colours within the single shade of green is spellbinding. Nothing is still and yet there is silence, beyond the clamour of the artificial noise in her helmet. How has she never realised that silence is a sound?

The deeper she walks into the wood, the greater the amplification of a new kind of noise. She reaches the point when she cannot bear not to hear them unpolluted by talk, by electronics.

Err, what is she doing?

What are you doing?

Is she alright? What are her stats?

Is it the pressure?

DO NOT adjust your helmet.

The robots repeat the same warnings.

No, she tells them. Do not repeat what they are telling you. Listen to me.

When comms blocks her, she repeats in vibration: this is not what we are here for. Stay where you are.

Control sends a first wave of robots down onto the ground.

Go back to the convoy and stay here, she orders them. This isn't the place for you. I want to be here alone.

Most of the robots obey. After all, they are her progeny. One tips off balance and overturns and has to be rescued by an engineer robot. One heads behind the convoy's end towards a small sapling, its circular cutter extended.

No—

This time she walks back towards it but even before she nears the robot it stops.

What the fuck is going on?

This is the Director of Research speaking.

She is clawing at her glove. Trying to tear it off. The effort sends her stats skyrocketing but she no longer sees or feels their warnings, her focus is all on the one task of freeing her hand. She discovers that by clamping her hand under her armpit she can heave it more effectively and something small tears. Stitch by stitch it loosens and then rips. The glove is sent flying. Winded, she leans over, panting, but smiling, inspecting her hand. It looks well-used, lined and wrinkled with visible veins between the tendons of her fingers. She breathes deeply to get the energy to remove the second glove, which undoes in minutes. Now both hands are bare. Leaving the gloves where they landed, she staggers on. Reaching the trunk of an enormous horse chestnut she presses her hands flat into the bark, feeling its texture, the pads of her fingers all making contact. Then she tips backwards, pushing off from the tree, reaching outwards towards light which she



is trying to cup in her hands. Arms out, hands bare, she spirals her wrists a hundred and eighty degrees, back and forth thumbs up, thumbs down, stretching and dancing her fingers.

She overrides the security on her helmet and removes it, awkwardly, bruising her chin in the process. She lets the helmet drop and hears at last the silence that has called to her. Within that silence she starts to identify distinct sounds, the sound of boughs moving in the breeze, of leaves rubbing against each other in their millions. Of sun-warmed bark expanding slightly. She turns slowly on the spot, listening.

Her suit and boots try to turn her back. One last effort from control. But she resists, with effort that leaves her sagging, gasping, hardly able to stand. She is beyond sight of the convoy now and is glad to be, swallowed by the forest. The feeling of being enclosed like this in green air. Nothing in life has prepared her for it. She kicks off her suit with what strength she can find. Then the boots, without which she feels weightless. She crawls towards a drift of leaves and then sinks back, spreading her body wide on the ground, gazing at the canopy. Having lived in compression clothing her entire life, her body feels vulnerable without it, her head light and dizzy. She could be spinning but she is lying still. She draws in deep breaths. Unfiltered, unpolluted air. How is that possible? How have all her experiments been so wrong? By rights she should be dead. She should have been dead the moment she took off one glove; shrivelled by radiation. But instead of railing against science, against the lies she herself has perpetuated, she feels instead only wonder. She tastes the chlorophyll in the air, green, nourishing. She bites it as if it were food.

From her position, watching the leaves fall, spinning, floating, drifting on an unseen breeze, she starts to distinguish, over the voices in her ear, loud as they have ever been, another sound—a soundscape of the very trees themselves—the whisper of millions of leaves in symphony. She feels it like breath in her ear, direct to her, felt through her body as well as along the nerves in her skin. Like being caught up in sound, stroked and lifted by it. Intimate as a kiss on the lips, a hand through her hair. She bathes in sound, that lifts and drops with the wind. She luxuriates in the canopy, in the light falling through, in the explosion of shades of colour. In the motes held by the light. She lies in a drift of leaves. Basting herself in them. She is old, certainly, but alive too. Sound and light and the resinous scent, part sweet, part fungal nourishes her. Sated, now, she sleeps.

## THE TOOLMAKER'S COLLECTION

My dad made tools for a living, tools for working stone. When he wasn't making chisels, he was using them, doing up odd bits of furniture other people threw out, down the bottom of the garden in his shed. At home, he was mired in the fug of femininity from all the women in his life: me, mum, my older sisters Gail and Ginny, and, since her stroke, his mum, our Gran. He left for work most mornings early, sometimes before we were up, and what he did there, in the converted cowbarn, remained an enigma to the rest of us at home. He returned on foot every evening at tea-time smelling of woodsmoke and burned iron, having teased a two mile walk into a four mile meander along the river. He'd almost always have a gift for one of us, something gleaned from the hedgerows and copses, a bit of hawthorn blossom, a handful of Queen Anne's lace, whatever was in season, since we were all fond of flowers and tool makers, as it turned out, had little funds for anything fancier. If nothing else could be found, he'd bring home a pinecone, or a flint, and then, after laying his offering beside the kitchen sink, would let himself out again and crunch his way down the gravel path to the shed.

His shed was neat as a pin. Everything had its proper place. Inside the house he didn't lift a finger, except to light the fires, but the shed, he swept and dusted. He made what he needed, including a broom to sweep the floor, and shelving along the walls right up to the ceiling to house his collection of tools, some the work of his own hands, some of the early ones salvaged or passed

down from his father and grandfather, going back sixty years. What couldn't lie on a shelf had a hook or peg: the broom hung by the door, beside the shed key, his overalls cast a shadow over his tea mug on a crook of Black Elm dating back from before all English trees turned Dutch and died. He kept all his tools in their original boxes, which we girls always thought weird. Like the boxes had a value to him. If he didn't have the original container, he made a far better one of wood. Made to last, he'd say. And it was true: the boxes he built by hand were solid as little coffins, whereas the old cardboard boxes lost their colour and words, and if you picked one up and tipped it on its end, no doubt the tools would fall out.

Except we didn't pick them up. Why would we? Dad had few rules to live by, but this was one of them: no female hands touching his things.

One winter evening, my sisters and I were doing homework on the table while mum set crockery around us and Gran was rattling the grill pan trying to get the cheese on toast back under the heat. The clock chimed the half hour, and no dad appeared. Gran made a clucking sound of disapproval and then her face puckered on one side and a little dribble escaped her mouth. She wiped it away with one of the tissues that permanently stuffed her sleeves. A poke, she said, tapping her cheek, meaning the Other Side had made contact. Gran is a daily communer with the dead, a reader of tarot and palm. Never has a trip been planned in this family or a choice been made without her first making a brew and peering in at the mess at the bottom of the cup to read the leaves. Gran turned to mum.

They've come for Bob.

They found his body three days later in a patch of hazel round where the river bends sharply, about a mile out of town. He'd been attempting to cut down some catkins, since nothing else was flowering. It was his heart, the inquest said. His heart, my mother echoed when she heard, as if she'd suspected as much all along.

My dad had been a man of quiet deeds, but his death made me aware of the ways in which such quietness had spoken. Without him—the space he left—that was true silence. It made us try to fill it when nothing would fill it. Gran walked round the house in a trance, talking at furniture as though it were people, while mum carried a portable radio of dad's in her pocket. And at night, when the house seemed to call of dad's absence most clearly, the whispering of my sisters carried like a party of mice under the stairs. And me? I hadn't a clue how to fill the silence. I drummed my fingers and shuffled my feet, anything but sit still, and what thoughts I had in that time of numbness might be described as resentful.

I *was* resentful. It took time to be able to shape those feelings together and even longer for me to accept the label I gave it inside my head. I wouldn't have admitted how I felt to anyone, especially in those early months when I had no idea what I was so resentful about. But slowly it became apparent, when no one challenged the length of my skirt, or commented whether my eye make-up was getting too much. When no one shook their head as I walked around the house in knickers and one of his jumpers to stave off the cold.

But as well as all those things that I missed, those ordinary things, there was something else, which, to explain, means admitting what is bound to make me sound a freak and for which I blame Gran, because it was Gran who claimed to have seen something in the tealeaves just as mum's waters broke. My family love to call it her *prophecy* like it's a member of our family. What Gran saw, the way she puts it (and she treats it as though it were the national anthem, always standing up to tell the tale) was that the coming child, meaning me, would be saved by her father. I mean. Yeah. Yeah. Imagine. Just imagine living with that. It was an absolute gift for my sisters. They told people every chance they got. On the bus: 'Move aside for Prophecy's Child'. That I know of, they've told the lollypop lady, our two local coppers, the butchers in town, the librarian, all my friends' siblings that they know, our neighbours on both sides right up to the crossroads and of course every teacher I've ever had and some extras. My friends know, their boyfriends; my boyfriend—if ever I get one, which under present conditions, I won't. It's as though they *envy* the very last thing anyone should envy. I've tried to take it lightly. I absorb the mockery; I even laugh when I can make myself. But clearly, the joke's over. He's dead. I'm not saved, am I. It's all been for nothing.

And what did dad do all these years with this weight on his shoulders? If I'd been him, if I had that responsibility forced on me by some of Gran's mumbo jumbo, I reckon I'd have done a few things differently: learn CPR, or Kung Fu. Get an Alsatian with at least one rabid eye and notify the world with a simple sign on the gate saying, danger: dog. Not dad. He carried on just as before, making tools and bumping around in the shed in his knitted vest, listening to the cricket; and the sound of him in the shed, the solidity of his body, the space it took up, the woody scent of him, the way his laugh was so deep it might have been gouged out of him, there was something safe in all that. Something that made me believe to my very bones that he had things covered in an unknown, unarticulated way.

We lived with all dad's things the way he left them for nearly a year, by which time we learned to step round his shoes by the door, hunting beneath his hat and gloves on frosty

mornings for our own, dodging his yellowing toothbrush by the sink. We couldn't approach the bathroom mirror in a gaggle to do our faces because his shaving things might get knocked over. Quite often, as youngest, I turned up at school with one eye made up bolder than the other. I got quite used to an asymmetrical face.

Then one day I came home from school to see my sisters, who by then were away learning typing and stuff, standing by the front door with Gran in her housecoat, and mum crouched on the lawn taping boxes together. Today we are packing him up, she said.

I felt the same as I did when I lied about my fear of heights that time we went abseiling with school. That hideous moment as I was poised on the lip of the cliff about to walk straight over. Breathe, my instructor said, giving me a sharp pinch to get me moving. This clean-up was needed. But I think all of us would have been delighted if one of the neighbours popped round and offered to do it for us.

We divvied up the house and garden. Gran, because of her hip, got the downstairs and Mum the upstairs and attic. My sisters shared our odd little garage behind the house, built when cars were about half as wide and long as they are now. Since I was last home, the shed had been awarded me in my absence. Nan poured me a glass of milk first and then I potted down the garden path. The chickens had escaped again and were pecking the gravel. As I approached, they clustered round me and then scratched and clucked softly in a noise so connected to my memories of dad that it made me cry. Unlocking the tool shed with shaking hands, I let myself in and was overwhelmed by the smell of the place, warmed by the afternoon sun: wood shavings, soldered metal, and the walnut oil dad used to rub into the handles of his tools; even the old cardboard boxes lent a subtle underpinning scent like newspaper; the way dad's hands smelled from tearing it up for kindling.

To stand in his space was to fully understand my loss. My dad was the unlikeliest of saviours, with his David Bellamy beard and his love for home-knitted woollens. If he was my safe place, then this was his. I lifted my hand but couldn't bring myself to touch the box nearest me. It was so old that the shape of the tool within had long since revealed itself in the moulded cover of that tatty cardboard. It was a tiny claw chisel, beside it the straight edge of a rasp. All I held—all I felt permitted to hold—was the broom, no doubt because it was a woman's tool. I clutched the pole he had fashioned and leaned my weight on it until the bristles bowed. Other than the broom, I had no idea what all this stuff my father had accumulated was for and why

each piece mattered to him, and I had an uncomfortable feeling that I'd let the beard, the knitwear, and the tools obscure who he was, and now I'd never get to find out.

Probably, I imagined there would be time for questions, for that slow transition I'd started experiencing with my older sisters, as they became people, rather than the sum of all our childhood slights and scores. One of the oddest things about losing someone is constantly knowing what you left too late, what you deferred. Staring at the shape of the rasp, I had a sudden urge to ask him how to use it and to be able to watch his solid hands wield it, working a join or mending the leg of some old chair anyone else would have burned. Dad had a friend, Bob, who worked at the tip and who called dad if anything interesting came in: an orphaned card table, bench ends without the slats, a tin bucket, a chair without a bottom. He had a saying for it, which Gail etched into slate in her DT class that still hangs over the door of the shed: one man's rubbish can be another man's triumph. Ah—dad.

I pressed the broom into my argyle sweater and swore every bloody, fucking, shagging, cock-sucking word I could think of, at him, for dying.

Then I hung the broom back up on the peg.

Mum had said, stick it all in crates, someone will want it, meaning we'd do what everyone did round our way and put it out on side of the road with a sign saying, help yourself.

I stood there, my gaze sliding down the shelves in front of me, overwhelmed with where to start, knowing that I hadn't the heart to put a single shabby box in the crate. I turned slowly about me hoping something would jump out to tell me where to start, and unbelievably it did: a box peeping out from under the table where he kept his kettle and tea caddy. A metal box with a key in the lock, the kind I'd seen the school bursar carry round for petty cash at the school fair. A petty cash box, I think she called it, as if money were ever petty.

I picked it up. It was clean, almost like he'd polished it, like it mattered to him though it lived under the old camping table and the old oilcloth Gran had in her kitchen before she moved in with us. The key turned easily. It was modern really, not a bit of it was rusted. Opening the lid, I think I expected money, some nest egg dad had been saving, winnings from a lottery ticket, perhaps, or the profits of his mending that none of us had known he'd earned. There was no money, though it did have the little tray I'd seen for coppers and five pees and fifty pences. But instead of coins, he'd stored little shells. No, not little shells, I realised, as I ran my fingers over them and felt the sharp edges, teeth.

Teeth?

They must have been milk teeth from their size, a complete bloody set of milk teeth, assuming we each have twenty teeth; I know, because I laid them out on the oil cloth and made a mouth of sorts with them. Besides the milk teeth was a curl of fair hair tied in a red plastic band, a ponytail that had been sheared off. Hair and teeth. I stared at them. Why? Why would he keep this? Was there a toothless and hairless body somewhere and these were trophies?

Worse than the teeth, and the hair—why did I have to touch them—were the little sickle nail clippings. Ugh! I shivered. The horrible crunch and bend of dried old nails. Then a tiny piece of one caught my skin and I had to flick it off. Tiny nail clippings from the smallest fingers, right up to one or two that could have come from my hand now. My hand. Because these were parts of me, surely. *This* was how he'd chosen to save me?

He'd gathered and foraged for these random off-cuts, like his pinecones and flints, blossom, and wildflowers. Hair. Nails. Teeth, and what was that strange crusty blob in the corner box exactly? A fistful of placenta? A slither of umbilical cord linking mum to me? I shut the box sharply and replaced it under the table feeling as I did so, up my spine and down my arms right to the cuffs of my school shirt, the same sort of shiver I get in the pantry when Gran declares a presence.

Leaving the empty crate in the centre of the shed, I shut the door and locked it but didn't get far. Gran found me crouched on the grass, knees under my chin, with the hens clucking around me softly, preparing themselves to roost.

What on earth are you doing out here with all the midges? Your tea's long gone cold.

I must have looked miserable, because Gran came and the next thing I knew she was stroking my hair, over the back and down the side over my ear, as she used to when I was little and couldn't sleep. Since her illness, especially her time in hospital, she's shrunk and so I let her enjoy the moment of feeling tall. We stayed there in silence a while, though in the end the guilt I had been feeling about the box broke through. I looked up at her, my voice going all cracked and wobbly:

I found his money box Gran.

She stopped stroking my ear and looked down at my upturned face.

Have you seen it? It's got all these bits of me in it.

Bits? She paused and then looked away, clucking her tongue.

Did you know?

Resting my chin on my knees, I squeezed my legs more tightly towards my chest for comfort. Gran touched my cheek. I could hear the pain it cost her to take each step. Poor Gran. Too stiff to be able to sit down easily except on hard chairs. She'd probably been on her feet all day. I reached up to her hand and took it, squeezed it tight.

I heard a smile in her breathing and then in her words.

Well, no, not exactly, Laura. Though it was always his nature to put the things he loved in boxes.

He—I swallowed—it's weird. He had my nails, even when he didn't even cut them. You did. Or mum. Where would he even get them from, out the bin? And *why* would he want to keep them?

Well, Gran said, trailing off.

He had all my milk teeth too.

Not *all* of them. You swallowed at least two.

She let go of my shoulders and drew in a sharp breath through her nose that told me she was done and was heading in. She had dad's abruptness when emotional.

Are you alright, Gran?

She was still in her slippers and listing leftwards as she walked back up the path towards the back door. I twisted right round and called after her.

Gran?

She waved her goodnight to the air. Those slippers. With the seam at her heels coming apart and heels worn right down and no dad to repair them for her. I struggled onto my feet, hurrying to reach her before she went in.

He's got them in a cash box—he put them in a cash box like they were money.

This made her sigh and stop about three yards from the back door. I could see how stiff she was and how much she wanted to sit down. But she waited for me, saying more to herself than me: Isn't that just what he would do?

I held out my hand to her and she took it. Her hands felt small and old and slightly claw-like in mine as I helped her inside, shutting the door to the midges and the moths.

I didn't go back into the shed for several months while bit by bit, the rest of the house was denuded of dad. Mum had to sell what hadn't already been given away, when things got tight,



and things that broke were left broken as there was no one to fix them. Over six months we lost the toaster, the kettle, and had to boil water for tea on the hob. By the second anniversary of his death, we had a family conference about selling dad's tools. Mum had approached Bob, who'd said he couldn't afford them, which had briefly panicked her because she'd been sure he'd be able to help. But then Ginny and Gail suggested a lad they knew who might take them off our hands. It's not as if sitting there in a shed they are a burden to us, I told them. They were a link with dad, and it felt completely wrong to me for strangers to hold the tools, not even we had been allowed to touch.

They'll throw away the boxes.

What do you care about the boxes? Ginny folded her arms and glared at me.

*Dad* kept them! They mattered to *Dad*, I replied, so they should matter to us.

After that I got uncontrollably upset. Gran and mum exchanged glances and later I learned from Gail that the plan had been put on hold. The tools were there a year later when I did my GCSEs, and still there when my results came out. Amid all this, my results came as something of a shock. No one expected much of me, especially after dad. And yet I passed, not in a blaze of glory, but I passed; even got a B for bloody brilliant in art! I was meant to be going to technical college like Ginny and Gail, to learn something practical like typing or hairdressing, but then the school careers advisor invited herself home to meet mum and Gran and ask them to think about me staying on. To do what? Gran asked since mum had completely lost her voice. Art. Me? Mum's opinion was that, since they'd asked, I ought to accept, as though that was how education worked. For me it was unbelievable that I wouldn't now join the family ranks of hairdressers, nurses and now secretaries, but instead had a vague future as the sitter of an A level exam. A little voice inside my head wondered what on earth I would do with one A level, and if they even come in singles? I could tell that no one knew but didn't say anything out of respect for the teacher.

The box stayed under the oilcloth all winter and into the following summer, when at seventeen, I went to stay with my sisters who now shared a flat closer to work. They paid my travel every day into the city so I could visit the galleries and *know about Art*. All the public galleries were walkable for someone who had all day on their hands, and I even ventured into a few of the fancy auction houses, or more likely peered through the windows. I did an awful lot of peering through

windows since so many places seemed to require more than the possibility of one A level to come in.

I also visited museums since they had cafes with marked-down cakes and sandwiches in the late afternoon and it was while trying to wait for a plate of iced buns to be knocked down that I came upon an exhibition that changed my life. I had very little money. I'd started buying train tickets that dropped me further and further out of the city and walking the rest to save money. I'd started coming into the museum at the end of the day for a cup of tea and the café staff were generally kind, often holding food back for people like me. It was an uncomfortably warm day. My feet had swollen and given me blisters, and so I'd come in early and hovered by the kiosk. I was checking how much change I had for about the fifth time, when a man in a suit arrived and hailed the server over to the counter, saying he wanted to buy something and could they please surprise him. When the woman serving said she couldn't do that, that wasn't how it worked, he said, tell you what, I'll buy the lot.

I could tell she felt bad, because she looked over at me and mouthed something, before setting all the cakes on plates on a tray. He ordered coffee also, asking her to bring it over once he had paid. He took the tray, and turned round, trying to decide where to sit, which could have been anywhere since the café was almost empty, when my stomach growled so loudly that he looked down at my belly and smiled. He was standing there, so close, tray in hand, scanning the room again elaborately for a perfect spot to sit down, no doubt enjoying the figure he cut. I'd become skinny by this point on my one-bun-if-I-was-lucky summer diet, I'd undone my laces and pulled the tongues out of my shoes to ease the blisters, and probably looked a little wild and sweaty. He looked back at me, I'm not sure why, maybe it was just one of those things you do. But I thought, what can he do, both hands are holding the tray? I reached over and snatched whatever I could get my hand on, knocking a glass of water in the process and getting his shirt wet. I think I shocked all three of us, myself most of all, and it was the sticky texture under my nails that made me register what I had done. I ran, since I didn't know what else to do, holding the bun in one hand and my bag in the other, the guy with the tray left behind me mouthing off about a crazy thief girl. I thought maybe they'd follow, but neither of them did, at least not that I heard. More out of shame than anything I went and hid in the basement ladies' room, locking myself in a stall, where I swallowed the whole glazed bun like a python, practically whole. Sat on the downturned seat, clutching my bag to my chest, my hands still smelling sweet, I waited for

my heart to stop hammering, and then waited some more until it must be time for the museum to close before poking my head out.

The ticketed exhibitions closed a few minutes before the whole museum and as I made my way out, they were shutting up rooms and sweeping floors. Not far from where I'd been earlier, on the exit side of a dusty exhibition on votive dolls, a group still clustered around a brightly lit cabinet. Several people ahead of me noticed it and veered towards it on their way out, and so I followed. The display case was tall and entirely made of glass which caught the overhead lights beautifully. There were about twenty or so tiny sculptures visible. Each piece made of intricately carved ivory and so tiny that the tallest was roughly the size of my index finger, though a little wider. What patience the sculptor must have had to work on so small a scale, and how tenacious. I forgot my intention to leave and just gazed at them, seeing in them the kind of work I most admired, containing secrets—the sort that slowly reveal themselves to the mind. Why so small, why so intricate? What I had initially assumed to be solid ivory turned out on closer study to be a composite of tiny layers, like shavings. I'd seen very little ivory and wasn't familiar with how hard it was to work, what force or subtlety it required, but surely a piece so small, made up of pieces so much smaller still, required a rare kind of skill.

My head was so close to the glass and I'd been staring so hard, my breath had misted up the display case and so, slightly embarrassed, I wiped it with my sleeve and stepped back, registering all the other people around me, some of whom were eying me a little strangely. The nearest to me was an older man wearing a giant headset that was talking to him, telling him what to admire. He was circling the display counter-clockwise and I was in his way, and he'd been waiting, I guess, for me to move on, or step back. As he passed round me, I heard the tinny voice in his ear and made out the odd word. I'm not normally moved to listen to such teacherly ramblings myself. I made myself do what everyone around me was doing and shuffled around the cabinet. Across from me I made eye contact with a woman who was reading a series of notecards about the exhibit and looking back and forth between them and a particular sculpture I'd been looking at. Her face was quite comical, sort of twitchy like a rabbit, and then she reared back, and audibly gasped, covering her mouth. When she left a couple moved into her spot to read what she'd been reading and did pretty much the same thing, only slower, and with a quiet muttering between them as they turned to go. Then another couple took the spot, one translating the cards aloud to the other, apparently. They just raised their eyebrows to each other when they were done. By this time, I'd moved around near to the cards, and I was pretty much alone, and

so when they left, I slipped into their place and read the top card. But I've never been that good at reading in public, I get all anxious, as if someone is going to step out of the shadows and grill me on what I've read, like at school. Nothing I read registered. In fact, the text just blurred.

But as often happens when I relax, my lagging brain caught up and processed the woman's wail into words, and perhaps laying the words over the sight of my own eyes. Because seemingly at once, as my eyes finally found focus on one of the third shelf pieces, a little fat buddha type about two inches high, it all coalesced: nail clippings. That's what they all told me. These tiny little masterpieces were made with human nails.

I saw how the little crescent filings no wider than my own thumb were woven into each other like diminutive laths in a wall. It brought back the same skin-prickling shock I'd had at my father's money box collection. The note gave a list of the artist's works exhibited elsewhere and specified the medium for this work as human ivory. Was that even a thing? And though the question revolted me even as I asked it of myself, I was asking more: how many nails did she use, and were they all hers, and how long did she save them up? Did she decide what to do with them before or after the idea to save them? I found my eyes now obediently reading along the lines of text even while I tried to stop them. Look away. Don't read it. Don't. I shuddered. Don't, don't. Just close your eyes.

My eyes cannot have heeded me, because the penultimate line will stay with me, I suspect, for all time. It described how the sculptor had saved her nail clippings for her entire adult life ahead of this little collection of pieces, it said, the words underlined by someone who had appreciated them, in purple crayon, as a statement of the carelessness with which we throw away what could be useful, beautiful even.

I thought then of my father's box at home.

Briefly, I glanced back at the pieces in the cabinet, which were now, unmistakably, fingernails constructed into columns and figures. I, who had done my shivering eighteen months ago, felt, surely for the first time, of my Gran's prophecy in the past tense: my father had saved me. And here I was, an art student, the first of my kind in the family, survived, almost to adulthood, understanding that it's because we keep things in boxes, because we protect them, that we emerge, from something like the chrysalis of the butterfly, as who are meant to be.

I took the train home, though there was no one there when I arrived, hot-footed from the walk. Knowing the side gate to be left unlocked, I let myself into the garden down to the end, where the chickens had laid claim to the roof of my father's shed. The key was under the water trough in the coop. Letting myself in, I pulled a chisel from its soggy box just to see what happened. No great insight passed over; no sudden bolt of lightning marked the transition of ownership from dad to me. But by then I knew that what I held in my hand, in this chisel, and in all the other boxes in this shed, including the petty cash box, was possibility. I'd use the parts of us both that he hadn't let us throw away, demonstrating to me, even from beyond this life, never to be careless with what I'd been given.

## CUTS

She is cut from the cloth of her ancestors, including the only one of note, the Sieneſe pope, whose five crescent ſeal is paſſed to Costanza Piccolomini by her father at her birth. Her name is all the legacy ſhe poſſeſſes, and ſhe holds it cloſe, even on her wedding day, when a new wife traditionally cleaves her family name and patches that of her huſband over the wound. Costanza dreads this proſpect as ſhe bites the thread of the laſt jagged hem of her wedding clothes, cut from the bolt of blue cloth: the cloth, of which, along with 45 ſcudi, her dowry conſiſts. It was awarded to Costanza by one of the charities in Rome eſta-bliſhed for the moral betterment of young women, women who might otherwiſe, conſidering the poverty all around them, tip into whoring—

— prostitution, on  
the woman’s ſide at leaſt,  
deemed a ſimple miſfortune of gravity.

Her huſband-to-be, Matteo, is a ſculptor and ſtonemaſon for the grandeſt ſtudio in Rome. Her firſt glimpſe of him, a man ten years her ſenior, is in the nave of the church on their wedding day. His eyes are ſhy, and there is a ſickle-shaped wound on the back of his hand the

same shape as the crescents of the Piccolomini seal, the sight of which calms the queasiness in Costanza's belly. It is his lunch break, he tells her, patting himself down. There is dust in his hair, and the scent of gypsum comes off his armpits when he's warm. She doesn't know about stone yet—that gypsum is the dust of alabaster, Matteo's favoured stone—but she will. In this moment, before the priest arrives, she has an urge to ask him why he takes her for so little? But then their eyes meet, and she notes that he holds her gaze smilingly, and does not once glance down at her body, that body paid to stay pure.

Does he wonder, if the trustees of the charity checked her hymen for themselves before they paid out her coins one by one?

—They did. How else  
could they be so certain she was whole?

The ceremony must be perfunctory. Another couple waits to wed. As Matteo slips a gold band onto her finger, it gets stuck on the knuckle and, when pressed further, pinches the between-the-finger-soft skin. Her new husband startles her by kissing the hand that he has ringed. She remembers the pressure of his lips on her skin for some time afterwards, not as shock, so much, as absence.

In the church record he makes the sign of the cross, while Costanza writes her own name in her looping script. Does he mind that his new wife can read and write? He says nothing, does not even flinch, when she makes a little flourish on the last letter, the egoistical I. An affectation, even she would admit. But when they move as one into the nave to leave by the west door, he takes her hand and squeezes it within his own, the same hands that will, seven hours later, unlace the blue cloth wedding clothes, and seek to remould the body of a girl into a wife, a lover.

Now a wife, a possession, she feels a pressure to change, but she resists inwardly as the form of the stone resists the hand that does not fully understand its flaws, its strength. In the marital bed, for the first time, she cannot sleep but lies rigid, under the weight of his wide-flung arm until a chance shifting in his sleep releases her so that she can slip from bed and press her face to the window. Throwing it open she breathes deep of the night air. The world beyond is dark, without punctuation from light, even starlight. Down in the courtyard below she cannot make out the various stones patiently awaiting her husband's attention: angular blocks, half-finished figures, and some gods from antiquity recently unearthed and in need of repair. She sighs. This is who she is now: the wife of a sculptor, a stone mason, who smells of gypsum even in his sleep. At her spot by the window, she presses her hands together in prayer to her ancestors,

begging their forgiveness for cleaving from them since it is her duty as Matteo's wife to take his name. She visualises stepping out of her old self, as she might her garments at the end of the day. But her mind refuses. She is Costanza Piccolomini and marriage to no man alters that. Taking a breath of sage, she leaves open the window and pulls up her old vestments, stitching her soul back into them with the last of the blue thread.

The house that was his, becomes theirs. Three storeys high, with shuttered windows looking out onto the Viccola Scanderberg. She tends the herbs and bright red pelargoniums that sit in fat pots on windowsills, sweeps dust from three flights of stone steps, and beats the rugs against the balustrade that overlooks the courtyard. There, nestled against the wall and half hidden beneath bougainvillea, she discovers a greenstone woman whose cupped hands resemble the ancient goddess of the hearth. For a couple of breaths Costanza thinks a voice speaks out. She leans down to listen. The statue whispers: cut, cut, cut. Laughing, Costanza takes up a pair of shears and trims back the bougainvillea until it frames the greenstone goddess in flowers of pink.

At night, when the candles are lit and a simple meal placed on the table, Matteo brings home his smile, the scent of the studio, and the gossip about Il Maestro, the man for whom he works. As he talks and eats, she picks flecks of stone from the weave of his shirt before scrubbing it against the pitted laundry board, the water turning silty. Pegging out his shirt in the warm evening air, she pauses at the final peg, enchanted by the sight of her husband standing before the stones, selecting which one to work next. They wait as though patiently by the far wall. He chooses one, an antique torso. Setting it gently in a circle of sandbags which will secure and protect it like a baby in the womb, he gets to work. What draws him towards a particular stone? He works until the light goes, and then by lamplight, filling the tiny courtyard with a fine white dust that rises so high it dims the moon and dirties the third storey windows. She does not tire of watching his hands work the stone. She is learning to trust those hands, so surprisingly gentle, with their lattice of marks and the scarred skin of his knuckles, and she yearns to feel what he feels when he remakes the gods of old.

One evening Matteo is late to dinner. He arrives at the door with an invitation. As she pours wine from a flask, he tells her that every year, at the Carnival for the Vatican Foundry, all the assistants perform a play written by the Maestro himself. What part will you play, she asks. At first, she doesn't think he hears her, but then he shrugs, uncaring. Suddenly he breaks into a laugh and taking her hands swings her into a dance, knocking over the wine she has just poured.



She tries to turn back to clean up the spill. No, no, he tells her, stay with me, and they whirl round and round, in and out of the statues without knocking a single one.

Later, as he works, she turns to the books she keeps for him, recording who owes what. None of the bills owed will be paid in money, since none of their acquaintance has any. They pay bills in kind—a hand carved spoon or plate, a three-cornered stool, some stonework or a painting—and there is much haggling over the worth of each. Her favourite piece is a small oil painting, a phantom image that Costanza calls the fertility goddess, which hangs at the foot of their bed, and smiles back at her as they, nightly, when not too exhausted, endeavour to make a baby. But the babies never come.

This lack of fruitfulness creates a sadness that is itself a pain, carving Costanza's body, rib to hip, sternum to pubis; a pain for which there are no words. She and Matteo cannot speak of it, even allude to it, though she seeks comfort from the company of the greenstone goddess. If the pain worsens, her only solace comes from the Piccolomini seal, which she unwraps from its oilskin, losing herself in its five crescent moons. She thinks of the line that has made her, on her father's side, and of her mother, her true mother, and not the one who appeared one day to replace her without explanation.

The day Costanza and Matteo set off for the Vatican Foundry she wears blue, as has been her custom since her wedding. Her husband sets a brisk pace, already costumed, his arms swinging by his sides. Come, come, he urges her when she stops to check she hasn't dropped something. He turns back with an anxious smile, jiggling the mask he will wear for the performance. Recovering her basket, she runs to catch him. Here, he says, offering her his hand. She takes it, drawing down his gypsum scent, stroking her thumb over the scars on the back of his hand.

At the foundry they part. Setting down her basket to mark her place among the domestic gaggle of wives and daughters, of small boys still in the dresses of their sisters, Costanza forces a smile, sharp as a cut, that brings vivacity to her eyes even when she is not speaking, is not feeling, is even a little bored. The actors jostle. The women brace themselves, sharing out morsels of ricotta, honey and figs. Only the children have no expectations as they roll lustily in the dirt. Costanza keeps her gaze a handspan above the heads of children, but still their presence brings on the old pain. How could it not? The sweetness of their playing, their shrill, sudden laughter and equally sudden tears, the way they dart and dance and tumble wholly unselfconsciously. Grief for her barren state chips pieces from her.

Matteo appears, poor man, playing his part dutifully, with scant effusion; stiff-limbed, eyes grazing the earth. He is the sort of man with no desire to step into the lives of others, unlike some. As her heart extends towards her husband, mutely, she feels the gaze of another on her back. She rubs the spots without noticing it, as though someone has bruised her in nudging past. At one point, as she rolls her neck, which has grown stiff from standing, she turns her head this way and that and catches sight of a man eyeing her over a handful of papers. At first, she imagines him reading the script of the play, but then as his eyes dart back and forth between her and the page, she sees he is sketching. He wipes a smear of charcoal across the chest of his shirt. A child takes refuge under her skirts, one of her neighbour's five boys, their father lately injured, the mother always tired and with her somnambulist's stare. Constanza speaks to the boy, lets him stay, rearranges her skirts. As she straightens, her eyes meet the sketcher's brown eyes, disturbingly intimate even at this distance. The Maestro. Nothing about him is what she expected, though until this moment she isn't aware that she had any idea of him at all. He is tall, and lean for a sculptor, and rather beautiful, with a head of fat dancing curls around a face that is pale as the marble flecks she rinses from her husband's linen.

He sketches her still, undeterred at being caught. She'd like to wade through the crowds and ask him what he means by it. Some small part of her, which she knows to be superstitious, believes that sketching a body steals what it pins to the page. She fights this part of herself, unwilling to appear ignorant, but her resistance brings on a sudden shiver. She takes hold of herself: there can be no demanding of this person, this *prodigy*, able to charge the price of a palace for a single statue, and, most significantly for her, the man who pays her husband's wage. Artists get to remain as uncut fabric, while everyone else has long ago been snipped and stitched into the pattern for their class. The curtain descends, the clapping rises and peaks before drifting into the hunt for baskets, the scooping up of children and the turn for home. The actors crowd around each other, pepped with wine, clapping each other's backs and talking excitedly. She does not see Matteo. Poor Matteo, she thinks.

For there is an inevitability in her movement towards the Maestro. When she reaches him, wordlessly she touches the corner of the paper in his hands, pulling at it, silently asking to see, to know, what about the back of her head has occupied him for so long. Her eyes are quizzical. The tilt of her head a question. She is no-one. A woman of particularity but no beauty. If that is what he seeks from her, her strange non-beauty, what then might he offer her in return?

The pages she is tugging form a sheaf about the thickness of her thumb. He has drawn all that of *her*? These pages are no more than his process, his way of seeking a way in, since he has decided to sculpt her. In his mind she is already a block of stone he must learn all there is to know about, where her fracture lines lie, where she is weakest, precisely how much force he will need to apply and where. To the skilled eye, the right spot, the perfect spot, just waits to be found, and then one tap of the chisel might be enough to crack her open.

She does not mean to, but her persistent pulling on the corner of the sheaf brings the whole lot down. She stoops to gather them together out of some habit of obedience. With the pages on her lap, as yet unseen, she cannot bear to give them back without looking, and so she looks.

It begins with those papers. And then more. Their affair with its peculiar transactionality on both sides. His part is clear: he wants a body, inspiration. But for her nothing is so easy to outline, other than a nameless yearning to learn whatever he can teach her. He captures her on the page endlessly. His focus is breathtaking. Each page he discards costs more than her daily groceries, more than the wine she pours for her husband on his return from work each day. As Matteo labours, the Maestro's hands learn the shape of his wife, beginning with her outline on the page. With each aspect of her drawn, she touches the corresponding part of herself, to know it in its new state. The lobe of her left ear. The underside of her jaw. The clavicle. The bulge of the ulna at her wrist.

At a point of the Maestro's choosing, the pages are left behind, their purpose complete. He holds all he needs from them in his head and sets about learning her body anew, with all senses, biblically, as a husband knows his wife. The intensity of his focus on her, and with her, is the same in all things, and feels heady for Costanza.

And in all this, poor Matteo, moved off a project at the Basilica to work on the remodelling of the tiny church of Santa Felicia some distance from the centre of Rome. As far from talk as the Maestro will send him. She wonders incessantly if Matteo knows. Hurrying back from the studio one afternoon she glimpses him trudging home, his head hung, mouth resolutely pressed shut, and her answer is clear before her: he knows.

Once the Maestro moves to modelling her head and shoulders in clay, he does not touch her with his hands. He scours her with his eyes, but his hands are all for the clay, they depict her

from different angles, testing out each one: Costanza looking left, looking straight at him or over her shoulder. She undoes the coil of her hair when she's asked to, when the model needs it, the lace of her chemise, just a little, as she stoops to unbutton her boots.

When he picks up a chisel, he sets aside his model entirely, becoming once further removed from her. She knows herself to be superfluous. The version of her in his imagination is more satisfying, more obliging than Costanza in real life: he can position her at will, turn her round, undress and dress her as he chooses.

When at last the marble is delivered, he takes her into the studio and presses her hands to a block of dirty stone. It is the last time he ever touches her. His hands on hers could be those of her husband. The same hardness and strength, the same scarring. He smells faintly of dust. She hadn't thought it possible once that two men could smell, could feel, so similar. She has never felt so sharp a stab of regret at what she's done to her husband while at the same moment deeply missing what she has briefly known. She turns her face to shadow, humiliated by these contradictions. She has become many women in this time: daughter, wife, lover, adulteress, paper self, clay model, and now at last marble. He likes her marble-self best. In what begins as a joke he starts to call it his *Beloved*. Beloved is ageless and flawless, exquisitely, luminously white. She holds the light, this marble head of her, as he calls her features into being one by one.

Costanza is no longer invited to the studio. She learns this final demotion by way of one of his servants sent to her, and though it is not entirely unexpected news it leaves her reeling. Not even the death of her mother could prepare her for the loss she feels of having been so utterly the focus of someone. It takes her longer to recognise the smaller losses, that of his seeking her opinion in things, sharing things with her, teaching her matters of his trade. Being discarded, like the peel to the fruit, is a deep and lasting wound. While she learns to bear it, she is practical, cataloguing all she has learned, sharpening her memories and using her new-found judgement so that when she takes payment in kind for room and board, or a single meal, she knows the quality of the piece, its intention, its layers and complexity. If a work has the potential to be worth money, she sets it aside. She trusts her eye now. She knows what sells, what may well sell, in time.

Still, she suffers, and this new pain melds with the old; companion to a childless woman as she fetches water for her plants, lays plates and glasses on the table, folds linen and sprinkles it with lavender seed to ward off the moths. Her attention wanders when her neighbours speak with her. She feels fear at what they might know, at being pitied by them silently. What passed between her and the Maestro, she feels, will take her years to understand, and though not love,

entirely, it possessed her with intensity that nothing else so far in her life has equalled. How to learn to live without need of it, that is her quandary. She has Matteo, good and honest man that he is, a man willing, once, to open his life to her and make over half of all he had.

She is grateful, at least, that she does not crack so easily as stone.

Her life continues, outwardly balanced as her books. She chases up late payments in kind, is thoughtful to her neighbours' children, cooks meals and opens her body to her husband as any dutiful wife would. She sews quietly, tends the pots of herbs and flowers, serves meals, scrubs and darns and polishes the balustrade. She avoids the greenstone goddess, letting the bougainvillea grow over her face and down towards her feet; builds a hardened self around the inner wounded one. But at night, when other couples whisper before sleep, she waits for her husband's breathing to even, pressing her hands to her face, as though trying to seal her mouth.

One evening, when Matteo is waylaid on his walk home, she hears a voice calling out to her from the street below. A memory is stirred in some dusty room in her mind. She rushes to the side of the house overlooking the street and opens a window to peer down. Just visible, part hidden by the jut of the door, she catches a duck-egg blue feather in the cap of a servant. A servant of the Maestro's. Not the one sent to break her heart but the one who brought her wine—the scented wine that his master believed she liked and which she used to serve to her husband. Without stopping to consider why he has come, she gathers her skirts and slips down the stairs and around the inside of the courtyard, dusky and scented with jasmine, to unbolt the door. Her heart thrums in her ears, and her hand on the heavy bolt shakes. The servant is little more than a boy. He holds the wine carefully with both hands. What does this mean? The old smile finds her mouth and tilts it.

For you, madam, the servant boy says.

He hands her the wine, and she takes it with both hands as though to show respect, gratitude even, for the gift she hasn't asked for.

Does he bow? Her thoughts are too flustered to focus. Perhaps *she* does. Certainly, she bends forward a little in acknowledgement.

From the master, he says.

Or does she imagine that part?

And then: slash, slash, slash. He cuts her cheek three times from left to right. The blade is pocketed even as the boy steps away from her. It all happens so swiftly, and she doesn't feel

anything at all except the strange movement of air between them. Then the wetness of her cheek. Only when she touches it, almost absently, and sees the blood on the tips of her fingers does she start to feel shock, and it immobilises her on the threshold of her husband's house, as the women along the street start to light candles and call their children home.

A neighbour tries to lead her inside. But Costanza stays, testament to her sin of wanting more from her life. Besides, isn't the whole point of being slashed to have her shame witnessed?

Parents send their children for clean cloths, for water from the pump in the street. Everyone who comes to help her is practical, precise; this is not a world in which blame can root. No one is marble-pure. Such a city demands concessions, compromises, to feed themselves, their family. Matteo arrives. Seeing the blood on his wife's face, the skin opened down to the bone, he is calm. He has seen many such deep cuts and knows how to clean up a wound. Thanking the neighbours, he steers his wife gently indoors. She is brave, and barely flinches while he cleans the wound, though her face is bloodless and her pupils vast. Then they have nothing else to do but await the governor's men, seated across from one another at the kitchen table where they have shared so many meals.

Though it is easy to forget, this is a city of God. It is Costanza's misfortune to have been slashed to save the face of one of the Pope's favourite artists. He must be allowed to regain face at the cost, in this case, of hers. She is taken at dawn to the Casa Pia, a home run by nuns. Here Costanza is to be locked away at the pleasure of the Governor of Rome among the other Dishonourables, all of them women. The nuns are sisters of the Magdalen, themselves fallen. As Costanza is ushered in, so a newborn child is ushered out. A terrible transaction and one that even in her present state, makes her suffer. The poor child, one of the unwanted, in need of a new mother or a father that Costanza and Matteo, once, might have been. Pray, the nuns command, and when they see she prays in earnest, they pray with her.

Her face becomes infected. This is the dawning of true pain. She cannot sleep. The pressure in her face reaches her teeth, gets into her jawbone, makes the sockets of her eye pulse rhythmically as the blood pushes through. It would just need a faint tap to rupture, to create a new face, a third face. Fever rarely leaves her. She wanders in the delirium of her mind, dreaming of her marble head. The work of genius. What will they forgive him next? She does not cry. She has not been raised to weep. Who would she be weeping for even if she had the tears? The only weeping is her cut, sewn up and swollen tight, scalding. She will not be taken from this earth by

the wounded pride of any man. She hangs on to life by the strength of her will, by the courage of her forebears, with their five-crescent seal.

Slowly, slowly, out of time, her course alters: a new Costanza has been born. Born, she realizes not from Casa Pia, or the slashing of her face, but through the sketches, and more specifically, the sight of herself they offered. She has been a body, kept pure, then sullied, she has been a muse, for the vanity of another, now what? What can she become? First, she must become free. But even if she is never free of this place, and plenty of women choose to stay here, she has been allowed to glimpse inside Pandora's Box. She has knowledge, valuable knowledge, from the world of men, of patronage, and aesthetics, of proportion, of the different smells of stones. She gathers the pages of herself and begins to bind them, in new order, beneath the cover of her name.

She asks for paper, for ink. It takes months to procure. When it comes, she writes, pouring her knowledge onto the page in a few humble lines. She signs her name, without the flourish. For she must appear to be changed—to know the limitations of her sex. She petitions the governor under whose name she is kept and waits, the letter I inscribed within her head, the humble strip of an I. That simple vertical line. She has three of them sewn into her face. The convent has taught her of this new I, forcibly straight, all the curves planed flat. The I of a woman hammered into a thin straight line, no joins left, no weak spots.

At last, after another month, she is sent word. A short line on a page in a hand less capable than hers. When it arrives, she is making new ewes' milk cheese in the kitchen, straining the whey through muslin by hand. Squeezing out every drop, she portions the cheese for the sisters, and for her labour is allowed a glass of whey. She cannot drink it, for its consistency suggests to her the silty water of the laundry, the slime of broken waters, the phlegm of sputum coughed up from dying lungs. She rubs the viscous liquid between her fingers, and then on impulse smears it over the tight skin of her scars. She does this daily, afterwards, in the hope of nourishing them. That night, she dreams of the house on the Viccola Scanderberg, of the balustrade and the sculptures waiting to be made good, of the greenstone goddess. How she misses her whispers. She should have listened. Cut, cut, cut. She mistook the words for the many cuts of womenkind, of birth, of the bond with her mother, of virginity, the severance from family at marriage, from the protection of her own name at the taking of her husband's. She had hoped it would come to mean the cutting of birth cords.

As she dresses to be released, she considers how today she feels nothing but a wound. There are days she feels all scar-tissue, and others when it seems to her that she is a head without a body, or a body without head. She gets onto her knees, head bowed, nose touching the ground, hands pressed hard against the stone pavings. How she prays. She has been required to pray by rote, every day since she has been here, but this prayer is different. Staying within these walls, without men, except in the lines of letters that periodically come and go, she could be safe. But to do so would mean her face remained a mask, her body, a mausoleum. She cannot live locked inside her own body.

Her husband awaits her. She learns that she is being released into his care as it happens. Care? What will such care constitute? He does not meet her eye, under the gazes of her dishonoured sisters, but merely nods his head, eyes downwards, and says, 'Come,' before walking back through the gothic door out onto the street. She follows him. Uncalled upon, she remembers the scent of the herbs she left on the windows in their fat pots. The sage, the marjoram and basil, the sturdier stems of rosemary that had to be twisted. As she walks, she clutches a bundle in her arms, a skein of thread and a roll of simple homespun.

Matteo leads her past the humble church of Casa Pia in which she has prostrated herself daily for months. Back when her head was still full of GianLorenzo. She flicks his name from her mind. She has learned to live without him, but not yet to live without all he represented. She keeps pace with her husband, walking in his shadow. The early morning is cool. On the Viccola Ciambella, Matteo rubs his knuckles absently. He must have missed a day of work to fetch her. Oh, she thinks: the questions that simple thought brings.

A day short of three weeks later, she learns from her father's wife, the woman who raised her, that Maestro is this day to be married to a woman, Caterina Tezio, well above his station. She learns also that the bride has been purchased by the Pope, himself, it is whispered, in love with the Maestro. Bought, she thinks, pitying him. At what cost? That she can pity perhaps astonishes her. But then the world is astonishing. That there can be men in it like Matteo, taking back wives who have disgraced them, and men—one man; call him a genius if you must—capable of sending a child to chisel out his honour from the living bust of her face.



For weeks, her husband will not look at her. Will not meet her eye. When they pass in the house, he fixes his gaze at the point in her shoulder where the collarbone ends, the little dip in the muscle beneath her blouse. Does he think of the bust? They have never talked of it. They never do. Choosing instead to live in silence except for the bang of chisel against stone. Over time, he starts to grunt when he wants her attention, to point or shuffle his sole against the tiles. Then as the seasons are changing, and new leaves sprout on the bougainvillea he finds a single word, wife, gruff and ragged, as though freshly loosed from stone. Then, at last, he speaks her name. Costanza. The slow speed with which he takes up words makes her wonder if he spoke at all in her absence. They must relearn each other in tolerable pieces. She learns his voice, his scent, his kindness; he learns her bustle in the kitchen, the sharp corners of her folded sheets, the way she mends his shirts and leaves them laundered, with crushed sage leaves tucked under the armpits, for when he rises, before dawn.

Costanza runs her husband's business, quietly, since everyone knows women have no head for commerce; she gathers in monies owed, buys and sells paintings received when paid in kind. She does this in her husband's name since the world knows that women have no eye for art. When Matteo dies, grievously young, the business booming, the widowed Costanza is bequeathed, in her husband's will, the house and the art dealership run in his name. The wording of his last will and testament touches her: to my Beloved wife. It is a reminder of something far more valuable than a bolt of blue cloth. She has been loved. And she has loved back.

At her death, some decades later, she is mourned by the Maestro who keeps her picture still, though he gifted away the bust, quite shrewdly, before his marriage. Her face in oils, her body, is mounted and framed on the walls of his quarters and kept there for the whole of his married life. What his wife thinks of this is unknown. Though, surely, she has a thought or two. But the Maestro speaks to Costanza's likeness daily, though he stops, briefly, immediately after her death.

On the day of her funeral, which he knows, but to which he is not welcome, nor invited, for all his genius, he pauses before her portrait. A sudden swell of disillusionment rises through him. He shouts her name. Bangs his precious chisel hand against the frame, though his passion is impeded by the layers of fine silk and spun gold that embalm him alive. He is an old man tied by chisel and mallet to one form, while she is vaporous and free, uncontainable, elusive, as she always has been.

## SNOW GLOBE

Before work, I like to hang from the footbridge. There's only one spot where I can fit through, above the south-bound lane, and let me tell you, squeezing my ribs through the railings is a Houdini act. But once I'm through, my bum on the ledge, it's just a question of hooking my feet and then curling backwards; and then, bingo: the world upside down. It's a kind of escaping without really going anywhere. I'm pretty high up; I mean nothing brushes my fingertips once I'm hanging, not even lorries.

There's never much traffic. We really are the end of the earth. Finally, I spy a tan Fiesta going minor-road speed. The driver doesn't bother looking up—they never do—it's the curse of living here, in the fenlands. It's like the sea for some people, where a single look into all that blue could drown you. I feel the tension in my belly finally leave. I must be beetroot already. I feel that slight pressure in the crown of my head as the blood rushes there. But my hair floats. I wish the rest of me could. Today I'm making a mark. It's not why I'm here, to be honest, but it's kind of expected: who'd climb the places I can without tagging it? So, I got hold of a can and I make it last. It's on the low side and needs shaking. Then I press down and let my imagination guide my hand. Today for some reason, I feel my old art teacher, Old Greasy, watching over my shoulder shaking her head, saying, *that*, Holly, is not *art*. But, seriously, a doodle is so much easier than a conversation. If only everything in life could be expressed in doodles.

I never tag if there's traffic. But so far there's only been a lorry since the Fiesta and for a long time there's just nothing but the white lines and a crisp packet nudged and scooped along by the wind. The bird song is knife-sharp though. I feel it on the way in and the way out. You really hear it with no cars. The hedges are bursting with it as if I've suddenly removed cotton wool from my ears. Here comes a white van down the slip road. As it gets nearer, I recognise that cock-eyed headlight, that massive dent in the bonnet: Clive. So-called Sparky Clive. Not even dad wants to work with him and dad's not picky. Clive's van passes beneath me. I catch the handprints on the filthy roof that Clive doubtless has no idea are there and I get that delicious feeling of seeing what no one else does. Wash your van, Clive. I pull a hair from my mouth. I can almost taste the dust following in his wake. From the Salthouses no doubt. By now the whole town must stink of them. They've been coming down in bits all week. Everyone will be moaning about the price of washing powder as a result, to me of course since dad's behind the wheel of the bulldozer. A few years ago, when there was first talk of demolition, they attracted some do-gooders from out of town who chained themselves to the gates. People came and took pictures of the protestors, and briefly we were famous, at least the town was, but it all died down to nothing like everything always does, and though there was even talk of the idea of doing something, nothing happened. Mum used to say it's the weight we carry living out here, like being ever-so-slowly crushed to death by all that sky. Some people wise up and run. She did. And those that go don't come back. I make myself curl back upright. Woah. I'm dizzy as hell! And when I set off running, I stagger like a drunk.

I'm breathless by the high street, pumping my arms and trying not to wheeze, picturing Doreen standing by the clocking-in machine, drumming her nails on its metal case. That woman lives to give me a piece of her mind. She tells anyone who'll listen that people my age can't be relied on. That I'm way too young to take on mum's shifts. But Pete always had a soft spot for mum, and I'm grateful—he knows I am. Working at Spar's nothing like hanging upside down over a trunk road, but you don't get paid for that. Plus, anything is better than school. On the good side, sometimes the conveyor belts malfunction. It cracks me up. Especially when it's tins. They suddenly about turn and get spat off the far end of the conveyor belt. The looks on customers' faces! Though most of its feigned since dented tins are half price. And you know, it happens so often it's like there's a switch someone presses.

Amazingly I'm only six minutes late. I'm so out of breath, though, I'm practically honking. I clock in—where's Doreen?—open my locker, yank out my tabard and pull it over my head,

trying to tie it up behind my back while squeezing behind the till. Somehow, I get in a mess. What the hell? I look down. It's drowning me. The whole tabard seems to have bloated overnight, like dad after fish and chips and four cans of cider, watching the snooker with Uncle Vic. I'm punching my code into the till and smoothing down the tabard against my belly, but it won't flatten. It's got breasts, this thing. Doreen. She must have switched mine with hers. It's just the sort of thing she'd do for a laugh.

I spot a curl of smoke above the tearoom door. That'll be her fag. Stay where you are Doreen. Besides, it's Wednesday, meaning it should be one of the quieter ones, since no pensions and no dole today; wages, for those in work, get paid on Fridays mostly. I see her reflected in the staff room mirror, sitting on top of a table looking down at a magazine. She's at least as old as mum, but she passed for much younger right up to a year or so ago when she started tinting her hair that strange Colman's mustard shade. What with the hair, and the orange leggings that shouldn't look that good on a woman her age, and that cerise ruffled blouse, she makes me remember the tinned fruit salad they served at school.

Damn. She's seen me. That glare could singe my eyebrows if I let it.

Look at that smirk, she says, clipping out of the staff room in her special high heeled work clogs. I notice her toes are painted coral.

I am smirking, it's true, because this time of day her voice is gravellier than Joe Cocker's.

What are you smirking at?

She launches herself away from me, pushing off the counter with both arms trailing behind her like an ice-skater. She glides as far as a tower of cardboard boxes that have been obstructing the cereal aisle since Sunday—was it Sunday?—when the last delivery came. Yes, it was Sunday, because it was Mervin driving, and he never hangs around when it's me. He's a fan of Doreen's, since she's always got a spare fag to cadge, and even Julie's too nice not to make him a cup of tea with four sugars. You don't have to lean on her to produce a packet of hobnobs either. She's good like that. But not me.

Get this lot unpacked, on shelf, priced up, Doreen is telling me.

The boxes must have tins in, which fits well with my plans, though I try my best to look peeved. Truthfully, though I'd never let on, I like unpacking boxes. Anything that really uses my hands suits me: holding things, setting them out how I want them set, feeling the weight of them. I won't lie, it feels good, pulling one over Doreen. Plus, she'll have to cover the till now just as old Mr Harris arrives with his fish breath and wicker basket on wheels. Poor man. He can't afford

proper tinned salmon since his wife passed and he's living on one pension, so he sometimes buys the cat food. Don't think about it too long. You just can't. Everyone has their story round here. But if it's salmon in these boxes, I'll drop a few tins for him.

I slit open the first box. It's not salmon, it's beans. Well, I'll still drop a few tins in his basket as he passes. Beans are better than cat food. He probably won't even notice, he's that short-sighted. He might even complain at the till, give Doreen the run-around, that we're trying to charge him for things he doesn't even want. I press handfuls of tins onto the empty shelf and turn back to slit open the brown tape on the second box. Cutting through brown tape makes a pleasing sort of sound, hygienic sounding, like the very opposite of a sneeze. For a moment I close my eyes and just feel the weight of a tin in each hand. Each one's exactly four hundred and fifteen grams. If you don't think in grams, that's roughly one standard sized guinea pig. I know because when I was seven, mum bought me one. I'd wanted a dog, but hay ho. GP, as we called him, since we couldn't agree on a name, ended up eaten by our neighbour's dog, Snax. At the time no one quite explained how Snax made it in the cage, or over the hedge. But mum just said, well you'd stopped feeding him anyway, as if that was alright. A tin of beans is also the same weight as a football. It gives me a queer sort of thrill to think of the various weights of things like that, in terms of each other, rather than a funny little squiggle on the side of a tin.

I'm on the far aisle, my back to the wall. The shelves along this aisle are pretty empty, meaning I've acres of space if I want it to shelve all these tins. I don't want to; I know that already. I've got that little tingle in my elbows, meaning I'm going to try something, and to be honest, I can feel something taking shape in my mind's eye. You see I have to plan ahead. Tins don't work for everything I'd like to make, for clouds for example, or the rainbows you see in puddles. But they do work for solid things like houses or phone boxes or legs, if seen up close and very blown up. It's legs I'm thinking about now. I can picture the shoe, the slightly hooked big toe that'll have to be hidden in a shoe, since I can't make detail that small with tins this size. She walked slightly pigeon toed, and I can manage that. And I can turn the label round on the back of the calf to get the varicose veins she got from walking about too much at work when she was about to pop with me. I can picture a little scar under the left kneecap from when she used to roller skate, and the faint blueish veins beneath her skin. I learned her shape in increments, as I grew, from her feet and knees to her waist, and the little bump of her belly and the slightly higher left hip that only I knew about, and the mole on the back of her arm and another at the top of her arm, in the soft skin before her arm pit that I only saw in summers when she wore vests or short

sleeves. It isn't always her I make, I mean, it's getting quite unusual for me to picture her, to picture anyone I know; usually it's things not people I think about. I like to know things as they can only be known through making them, by hand. Oddly dad is the only person who'd understand that feeling. Dad and possibly crazy Mrs Greeson from school.

Anyway, it's going well, I've got the feet nicely splayed and up the calves, and I've even managed to get a little bit of a curve of the muscle because I'm making these big, like giant legs. That's how I saw her as I grew up, getting beneath her feet, as she put it: her legs, her belly and boobs, the underside of her chin, her nostrils. They're all good angles when you're small.

I've got into a real working mood, a deep sort of peacefulness when Doreen rounds the corner behind me and makes me jump.

What on earth?

She gets between me and the tins. I was about to put an important one in place and without it I know what will happen, it will feel I haven't got far enough into things and I'll have to try again, once the inevitable happens and she makes me take it down. Or worse, sends me packing.

Pete! Come over here. She's at it again.

Pete is tall enough to look over the tops of the shelves in some places. Doreen is flapping her hands into her face as if she's so mad she might just overheat before he gets here. Take your time Pete.

Finally, he's here. You couldn't find a sweeter man than Pete. He hates having to make decisions, hates being asked his opinion. I feel bad that I can feel him inwardly cringing at being made to decide something publicly.

We're standing in a line, me, then Pete, then Doreen. He glances softly at me, just slightly, and I feel his look, right in the corner of my eye.

Not bad Holly, he says. It's Cath again, yeah?

I nod. Cath is mum's name. It's beyond awkward this urge I have to build these things. When it comes on, I don't think about this moment now, the reckoning. It's like I never learn how much I hate this bit. I feel myself blush.

Is that all you're going to say? Doreen asks, flicking her nail with her finger.

It's harmless, Dor'. Pete scratches a rash that's appeared around his neck. It comes out of nowhere whenever he has to say a word or two in company, what he would call 'a speech'. I feel bad all over again.

It is not—

He turns his mild face towards Doreen. He shrugs. I wish I could become invisible right now. What does it really matter to you? he's asking her. She'll put it right, won't you Holly?

I nod.

She's had her bit of fun and now she'll put the tins on the shelves, no harm done.

No harm done. Doreen's hands are shaking as if she's smoked too much even for her. Did I do that or did she?

You men are all the same. Soft as you are daft. She's not normal. Only you refuse to see it! People talk about her, you've heard it. And when they talk about *her*, they talk about *us*, and I don't like it, she tells him.

People always talk. You might as well tell them to stop breathing as talking. He puts his hand on her shoulder and steers her back round the aisle towards the staff room as if she's had a terrible shock and needs a cup of tea.

Poor Doreen. She can't bear that it's not all about her. So what if people come here and seeing the pair of legs I've made, have a nice laugh? It won't make them pick up a bottle of salad cream and spontaneously buy it though, because nothing on earth is going to do that. No-one's got money to buy anything not on their list.

I've started picking at the tins around the feet that aren't part of the picture, at least not yet, so that I can keep what I've made for a little bit longer, when I hear someone approaching behind me, clucking their tongue. It's Sheila.

Would you look at that?

Alright Sheila?

Sheila Wilson has been our next-door neighbour-but-one all my life. She's always been Mrs Wilson though now I'm a working person I get to call her Sheila. That's how it's meant to work. Sheila's dad had a fruit shop on the high street. It burned down before I was born, but she can still tie a paper bag at both ends so it won't unravel.

Oh, Sheila, is it? She clucks her tongue in disapproval. I do hate tongue-clucking. So judgemental and yet lazy, like I'm not even worth her giving me a piece of her mind. It almost makes me fond of Doreen. Her foot shoots out and knocks the bottom tin from under the left leg of my bean tin sculpture. I'm on all fours scooping up tins while she's found the most dented and is off in search of Doreen.

She's in the office with Pete! I bellow after her, slightly breathless.

Sheila and Doreen are in cahoots. Sheila's only got Ted living with her now so it's all about Ted's tea: if he's got a hankering for some pilchards, they'll find a way for a tin to accidentally fall and get dented enough to make its way to the reduced bin.

I'm just reaching under a shelf for a final tin of beans when I hear Doreen rushing past me away from the till most likely on account of Mrs Philby entering. I jump up and scoot to my till where Mrs Philby is already waiting, balancing a single English cooking onion on the flat of her hand. It's bin day tomorrow. She'll be after a plastic bag. Ours are free, though there's a fifty pence minimum. The scales decide the onion costs nine pence, but Mrs Philby remains planted, arms folded, the onion lolling on the conveyor belt beside nine pennies. I know that look and pull a bag from the box under the till and rub it until it opens. It's all the council's doing, making people pay for their own bin bags so that now Spar plastic bags are like gold dust. Anything that's free is a magnet these days because people like getting something for nothing. The less they buy the truer this is. When my mum walked out, she packed the little bundle of Spar bags she'd collected in our kitchen. It used to hang on a peg beside the cup stand. I noticed it was empty just before Sheila popped her head round and gave us the message. Oh, she said, your Cath says, So long.

So long? I'd repeated, frowning.

As in she's not coming back, dad said.

He was sniffing around a half pound of butcher's sausages, we don't get them anymore which is why I remember; he'd not yet sponged the dust off his vest, so it was stained around the throat and the little spaces down his belly where his shirt had gaped.

Right-o, he said. More sausages for you and me then, he added, nodding at the little tray I was trying to ram back under the grill.

Most mums I know used to talk about their fuck-off fund which was usually a tin at the back of the cupboard for their flight. Dad says to me quite often, when we argue over the telly channel, or what I've made for tea, go on then, bugger off too. I wonder if I went somewhere less flat would the world really look any different, be any different, and would I? Surely not, since I'd be the same Holly Gough.

With the coast clear and no one heading to the till, I'm free to wander round the shop, running my hands along the shelves, feeling the corners of cereal boxes, and the plastic signs for specials that crinkle when I bend them. It's reassuring to touch things and store up the weight of



them. Even if I can't know where mum is, or what she's up to, I can know how many cans of spam or beans or spaghetti hoops it takes to build her legs up to the knee.

Naturally, as I wander about, I start calculating how many tins of beans we might sell over the next week and what else I might make. I might even get cracking today since Doreen's shift ends any minute. I'm so lost in my thoughts that Doreen manages to sidle up beside me and nudge me in the ribs with her elbow without me seeing her. She's right there, so close I can see the pores on her nose. I don't mean to stare, but I know I'm already thinking about the construction of her nose, the broad shape the base would need, the scale it would have to be in tins of spam, say, or corned beef. But she interrupts me fiercely.

Just do yourself a favour Holly and pack it in. You look weird. It's your dad I pity. People are still talking about your mum, and now there's you desperately trying to be noticed. You should learn to be invisible.

What like you?

Only I think it, I don't say it, because I'm not good at thinking of things very quickly. Things to say I mean. See?

But what's the point anyway. People don't listen. And they certainly don't change their minds. She wouldn't get it anyway, what it feels like to make something come into being like this. Out of my head, through my hands, in tins.

Now she just gawks, she says, throwing her hands up in my face. I blink. Go and flatten the cardboard.

I do it, though I hate flattening boxes. First, I take the bean tin boxes out behind the shop to the little yard that stores the bins, and the cage for cardboard, and where the deliveries get dropped off unless the lorries are particularly big. It takes effort, and I try not to mind about all the sticky tape under my fingernails, but I break down the boxes into a stack and throw them on top of those from last weeks' ham. And then I remember I made an eel from the tinned ham and it worked well. The tins were kidney shaped and flat and slotted in nicely along the floor. It wasn't really a fat eel more like a slightly bludgeoned one, but it felt eel-like and that's what mattered to me. It felt closer than usual to what I'd had in my head. Each tin was exactly the weight of an average hamster: one hundred and twenty-five grams. The knowledge gives me goosebumps still. I was that kid whose pockets were always filled with treasure, with pinecones and bits of paper. I still can't pass a pebble, a good one, without picking it up. When I was very small, Auntie Suzie used to let me play in her garden while mum was at work. I was out in all weathers, she says.

Mum dragged me home covered in mud, or grass stains, or damp from a puddle. We'd have to pass the Bell Pub where Doreen was often on the arm of some lad. She'd call out to us as we crossed the road to avoid her.

You got a right one there.

Sometimes she'd get the bloke she was with to shout something rude.

I remember the feeling of mum's nails in my hand as we walked on. But without fail she'd flash them both a smile. It's only mud, Doreen. At least mud washes off.

I'm polishing the counter when the bell over the door rings. It's nearly the end of the day. Doreen's long since gone home and Pete's waiting to cash up. It's a woman and a little girl. It takes me a few seconds to place the woman, out of context. Shit! It's Old Greasy, the absolute last person I want to see now I've left. She brings the little girl straight to me on the cigarette till.

Shouldn't you be at school?

I don't think she remembers me by name.

I left. Last Easter.

She looks around us and then back at me. You left to work here?

I nod. I can see from her face she thinks I'm a fool. But she's missing what a good job this is for a girl like me. So I tell her. Best thing I could've done, Miss. I could have said more, but I could see that wasn't the right thing and that somehow, I'd already offended her. Her mouth goes rigid and small, when she's cross, sending out little lines like furrows. Also, why is she in in Spar, she's not the Spar type at all. No one really shops here once all the dented tins are gone for the day. And why did she choose this till when it's really for cigarettes or matches.

The little girl grips the counter. I can see the white tension in her fingers. She's too small to see over so I bent down slightly towards her. She has a little freckled upturned nose, nothing like Old Greasy's greasy snout.

I think: Old Greasy's got a kid? Shit. I try not to think that she must have had sex. The kid is cute. Maybe she's adopted? Either way, she's bouncing on the spot, still clinging on to the edge of the counter with her fingers, evidently trying to remember something. It isn't that long ago I used to do the same thing.

What are you after? I ask her, leaning flat on my belly on the counter peering down at her. She has a heavy fringe that she peeps through. It touches the bridge of her nose. She's not looking at me, but through me, to the shelf behind.

Is it still there? she asks her mother.

I twist to look behind me and then stand back up with a crick in my back. What could she be so excited about? Then I get it. The snow globe! I pick it up and blow dust off the glass and set it down in front of her on the counter. Right at the edge so she can see it.

Is this what you're after?

She nods excitedly.

Well then, you're in luck then. Still here.

I feel excited for her, for what could be more glorious than having a little world of falling plastic snow as a present; a forever-winter she can call on when she wants it.

It's been here on the shelf since I was little. When mum worked here and I sometimes had to sit and wait for her to finish up, she'd turn it upside down for me to watch the snow fall. It's been there since the Queen's jubilee, a special, limited edition, commemorative snow globe of Buckingham Palace.

How much is it? Old Greasy has taken out her purse and is opening it. She peers inside the purse. It's one of those old leather ones like my gran used to own, like a tiny bladder with a metal clasp. There isn't a price sticker on the snow globe. There was once, I know, because even in my days it was faded to nothing. I used to try and figure out those ghostly numbers, but I never could put a price on it. I still can't. I'll have to pluck a number out of the air. Aiming at special but affordable for someone like her, I tell her: One pound twenty-five.

Watching my old teacher root around in her purse like a normal person makes it harder to call her Old Greasy. I notice the shift in my head, the renaming as I watch her spread the coins on the counter and count out the right amount. The little girl counts along as far as she can. I'm still shocked that a teacher has no pound notes. Just coppers and five and ten pees like the rest of us.

All there, I say, scooping up the money.

I drop the coins in the till and then nudge the globe towards the little girl, one eye on Mrs Greeson to make sure it's ok to let the girl take it.

Mrs Greeson reads my mind, and nods. Just hold it carefully, she tells the little kid in the same short tone she used to use with us.

I see she's having difficulties, the girl, being so short and all, and I say, here, and lying across the counter both my feet are off the ground, I place the globe in the cup of her hands. Her grin is worth my bruised hips and I grin back and tell her she's a worthy owner after all these

years! She curls her fingers around the little snow globe, eyes bright. We watch her shake it gently making the snow flutter.

Lucky girl, I say, happy someone is going to love this snow globe as it should be loved.

Mrs Greeson's face has gone strange, I'd almost say, excited. She used to get like that at the end of a class if we finished early and had a minute to kill. She'd drag out her postcards and some poor kid would have to pick one at random. She'd snatch it off them as if they might be thinking about keeping hold of it otherwise, and just go on about it, just on and on. Paintings, sculptures, you name it. And if it was that Bernini guy! I hear myself snort at the memory. Back then, we'd laugh at her, but now, I'm starting to think it might be nice to get all lit up inside like that, because I don't think anything does that to me, not even hanging from bridges. I kind of envy Mrs Greeson and the kid which surprises me.

They don't say bye, but then they've got their eyes on the snow globe. I watch Mrs Greeson steer her daughter towards the exit. Pete comes out and gestures with his watch which means fifteen minutes 'til closing. I'm heading for the broom cupboard when I hear the sound that makes me know the snow globe's a goner. I turn back and hurry to the exit and they're standing there, the girl on her hands and knees trying to scoop it all back together. The automatic doors keep trying to shut on them and Ma Greeson is simmering. God, I used to be afraid of that look. The kid's given up and is just wailing now, head thrown back, eyes squeezed shut. The noise is enough to make any sane person cover their ears and walk the other way. But I don't. Mrs Greeson is pulling the girl's arms to make her stand. She's saying teacherly things like, come on now, stop this, but who wants to be told that when your snow globe's broken? Finally, she just loses it and slaps the girl's hands.

It's a slap. The kind with a gap after it as though the world is sucking in air before the scream. I hear it where I'm stood, sharp as if it's me being slapped. The girl doesn't flinch, and I admire her for that. Let's be honest, we've all had slaps like that. I find myself looking at Ma Greeson's expression, which surprises me. No-one could look at that hollowed out expression and not realise she's got nothing left in her purse. She couldn't buy another snow globe even if we had one.

I'm suddenly distracted by Pete. He's made it over to the empty bread aisle and is clicking his fingers to get my attention over the top shelf, pointing to an ancient piece of paper stuck on a pillar. The writing's so small I can't read it even if I squint, but he's done this before, so I know what it is: it's company policy. No refunds, no exchanges. His head dips behind the shelf. Of

course. He's leaving me to sort it out. Well, I'm not following that sheet. I'm already noticing the shape of the plastic shards on the floor, picturing the tubular shape of a new rose. The ones that grow by our back door despite no one ever paying them any heed, and keep on flowering, even when they're covered in black spots and losing their leaves.

This is how I find myself, suddenly squatted down beside the kid, as if I know what to say, and without thinking at all I'm holding out a piece of the broken plastic globe to her. It's drizzled in fake snow mixture which looks a lot prettier than it sounds.

You see this?

She's watching me through beaded lashes.

Just watch.

I'm not going to be like her mum and talk talk talk. My hands just do like they do with the spray can, they follow the pattern in my head, wrapping the plastic into a curl, and then wrapping another piece around it, and then a third until it looks like a rose that's just started unfurling. I must be careful, coz even though they are plastic, these shards are pretty sharp. And every time I catch the kid's eye, we're grinning at each other. Cheshire cat grinning. Thank god she hasn't made a sound for some time so that I think our ears will recover. I offer her the little rose I've made to her when I'm done, and she takes it, her fingers careful as a seasoned salad picker. She shows Mrs Greeson whose beaky face is solemn as church. Mrs Greeson doesn't try to take it, which I think I thought she would. She just stays there. And they look at it together, as their moment, just as if it were still the snow globe. I root around in my tabard pocket and find a couple of elastic bands, the red ones the postman seems to drop wherever he goes. I ask her if I can just borrow it to fix it into place with the bands, and then I'm done. Pleased.

While the kid pretends to smell the flower, Mrs Greeson turns to me.

How did you know how to do that?

She's back to Old Greasy; her voice, an accusation. Like she suspects I've stolen this skill from someone more worthy.

I shrug.

I'm serious.

She rounds on me and looks as if she might just poke me between the shoulder as if we were at school still, and I owe her an answer. Well. We're not at school now. She needs to learn that out here not everything needs explaining. Her forehead wrinkles. I know what she's thinking. I'm the kind of kid who never tries hard enough. The feeling it gives me sends me back to her

classroom. First year secondary school. People like her ask questions, but they don't listen even if we answer, coz what could I say she doesn't already know? She made up her mind that first day. She had the postcards then too. Brought them out to test us. Of course, none of us knew anything. Heads without bodies. This Bernini bloke. I quite liked it all, but I wasn't going to say that, when it would've cursed me forever as a teacher's pet. But I had wanted to think of a way to show I liked it. She named him then. Bernini. And she laughed. Who knows, she said. Maybe the next Bernini will come from the fens. As she was saying this, she was looking way out the window, certain that if he existed at all, that kid lived miles from here.

Well, Holly, she says. You must have 3-D Vision. As she speaks, she nods at me as though to say I can have this little titbit for free. Like we're even. Like she's doing me a favour and not going on about all the rest. But see, she doesn't need to go on longer, coz I understand why it matters. 3-D vision is what sculptors need.

As she and the girl leave, I really want to tell her I nicked one of her postcards. Two in fact. One was a painting of a man become a tulip, and a sculpture of a woman becoming a tree.

She's at the door, just about where they dropped the snow globe. She stops and looks round. It's almost like she's spoken to me and is waiting for me to answer. I'm humming to myself, reaching for the mop and bucket, but I know she's giving me a chance to ask her for something. But I won't. I'll mop the floor where the snow globe broke. No sense some old dear slipping over.

While I'm mopping, a little, excited voice in my head says, I've got 3-D vision. Well, how about that. It's not like death or anything—my life doesn't exactly flash before my eyes, though, later, when I am drowsy watching the telly with dad, it kind of does. I mean, I thought of a few moments in my life, when something didn't quite make sense, and wonder to myself: is that because of my 3-D vision? In that drowsy moment, before dad starts swearing at the telly over the darts, I feel I confess, a little special.

But back in the shop, this has yet to happen. I pour the dirty water from the bucket down the loo, flush it, and put up the slippery-when-wet sign by the exit. Pete's so relieved the day's over; he sends me home early. I haven't chucked the rubbish in the wheelie bin.

I'll do it on my way out, he says, go on then. Hop it. See you at ten sharp tomorrow.

I take off my tabard and leave. On my way home I find a perfect white pebble with a hole through the middle. It's body-warm in my hand by the time I reach the gate.

## PLINTH

This last polish will take him all night. He keeps applying the emery and blowing away the fine patina of dust. Tomorrow, his patrons, current and hopefully future, are coming to measure his worth. His and hers: Dafne, as he thinks of the sculpture. She's almost finished. He would like to stand back and admire her, but he hasn't time. Besides, he knows what she is: luminous, dazzling, her skin humanly soft. The roots of her toes, the fingers becoming leaves. Her floating hair.

He didn't imagine, when he began working on her only to set her aside, as he was asked to complete another, that she, of all his commissions, would be his finest, and worthy of his ambition. He rubs his thumb across her flawless marble patella, the only part of her leg that peeps through the bark he's carved rising up her.

Dafne. You beauty.

Everything he thought he knew about the female form, everything he lusts after, admires, dislikes, disdains, is in her. The sight of her makes him feel his mastery, and as in such moments when his ego is so vigorously and thoroughly stirred, his crown jewels need adjusting. He jiggles his hips in the hope of freeing himself, since his hands are busy, and when that doesn't work, presses his groin into the plinth until the pressure lessens. But his desire is natural, since making Dafne—and the bodies of all the women who've gone into carving her—has been the greatest

thrill, the most unsurpassed satisfaction, of his career. If he were less driven, he might be able to enjoy that all this female beauty has been carved for the one man in Rome least designed to appreciate her. He rubs the point of pain in his belly, just below the sternum, where an ulcer burns. Penance, according to his mother since it first pained him, she swears, when he took up work for the cardinal, that Whoring Thief. How can you work for such a sinner, she asks, for there are rumours, such rumours, that even a mother hears. He shushes her whenever she judges the world in which he works. Not that there is anything she can say about the cardinal that he hasn't already thought. But that is the thing. Just to *think* ill of a man who has spies everywhere would be suicide. Even the neighbours are probably paid to spill the beans. He'd like to be angry about that, as angry as he used to be, but the truth is, it's inconvenient to get angry about the people who foot the bills. And there are so many.

Giving a last rub to Dafne's toes he shakes out his rag and shifts his position to release the tension in his neck for having held his hands above his head so long. He blinks too, for his eyes are dry from the dust, which hangs all around him in the air, gilded by yellow candlelight. He draws in a breath. Tiny specks of Dafne coat his throat and lungs with the tang of fresh-buffed marble. He smiles. How fitting that she's inside him, because he's got little specks of every sculpture he's ever carved lodged in his lungs.

Turning back to the marble, he once again loses himself in the rhythm of his hands, all tension gone. Polishing is just the right balance of consciousness and unconscious action. It pains him more to watch than to do it himself since others, even the superb Finelli, lose focus, make small errors, which is unconscionable so close to being finished. Besides, he appreciates the silence and suspects he should use it to bolster himself against tomorrow. Tomorrow? He grimaces. For surely it must *already be* tomorrow. In the morning then, by eleven, since no cardinal worth his salt gets up before ten; then after eleven, they will come, the pair of them, the Whoring Thief, and the Bloodless Buffoon, Cardinal Barberini as was, until his ascension to the papal throne. How is it possible that man is pope? Though in fairness, he's has seen enough clerics to know, unlike the marble busts he makes of them, they are one thing on the outside and quite another within. He gives her foot a sharp blow to clear the dust, pauses, pleased with what he sees, and feels drawn to look up at her slowly. He taps her calf playfully.

What are you really thinking, heh, Dafne?

The whole sculpture, since to be fair, it is not just Dafne, but Apollo too, though oddly he rarely thinks of him, is broadly rectangular and balanced on a plinth. At each of the sculpture's



short ends, only one of the pair is fully visible. Standing at the short end, he sees Dafne transforming into a laurel. That is really the point of this piece for him. The idea of her transmutation—from nymph to laurel, from woman to marble, from marble to the holy Roman church. It mirrors the way he sees the world, the constant uncontrollable movement of life, like a seepage, a spillage. Nothing stays the same. Boys become men, men turn into popes, popes to patrons. Even a masterpiece is always aging, or in and out of fashion, changing hands. He visualises the antique figure of Mars still covered in earth, freshly dug out as he first saw it, during renovations at the Villa Ludovisi, and as it is now, on display on the villa, cleaned up, restored and the envy of Rome. A block of marble transforms under the chisel, even the most perfect image in his head is rarely the same once the marble works with him, and what he finds there, those unexpected colours, minerals, flaws, all must be incorporated. Everything is transformation: deviation from the plan.

Compared with the physical threat of Scipione, the Buffoon will be a more malleable patron. Such a bloodless creature, though. He crosses himself. Quite unnatural. Does he ever allow his body to be uncovered—bare-skinned as the day he was born? He's like a worm that shrinks from the warmth of human contact. He has never been that way, always loving the human body, seeing its beauty; of course, in his work, he's used studio models, he's even worked from paintings, but his own body is right here: all he has to do is unbutton, or unlace fabric and look at his skin. He once got the Bloodless Buffoon to hold up the mirror so that he could see himself while he was working to check how his body worked. Inwardly, how he had laughed at that averted face. It's not normal to be so squeamish, so embarrassed. He is quite comfortable with his own naked body. Indeed, a version of it looks down on him now, as he works: for he carved bits of himself into every figure he makes.

He pauses to yawn. His eyes water. He needs sleep. Well, he will sleep when it's all over. What he needs more is for this meeting to go well. Once Dafne has been seen, admired, then reputation will free him from all this obsequiousness. He means to drop Scipione and carve whatever he chooses from now on. The Buffoon doesn't know what he wants. He hasn't an idea in his head. As a patron he will accept what he is told from a master. No more busts of dead people. No more churches that no one looks at. No more public fountains. Dafne is proof of his quality. No living sculpture can do what he does. He is the equal to Michelangelo, though people need to be encouraged to say so more. Yes. He has earned the right to be free of the whims of patrons.

Scipione must help him. He must support the works that he himself commissioned—he smiles. What on earth does the Whoring Thief really think of the Buffoon? How he must loathe him. It is almost worth asking him when he is in one of his tender moods, which come now and then, wholly without warning though. But Scipione rides the wind. There is no knowing him, not really. No counting on him. Other than his taste of course, which is unfailing. But he is the past. The Buffoon is Pope now.

He is perched on his makeshift plinth, level with Dafne's breasts. Such perfection. Yes, it does him good to remind himself of that. A cramp has started to make itself known in his shoulder. He cradles the arm, dropping his filthy polishing rag to the floor. What he needs is wine. Patting Dafne's belly just below her lowest rib, he lets his hand linger, the old lust stirring. This time he resolves to find release, and quickly, or Scipione will catch him at it, and what new hell that would be.

He calls out into the stillness beyond the studio where a servant always waits. She arrives. Not you, not tonight. The other one. The blond. The servant sends the younger girl hurrying over. The one whose breasts have been so useful in crafting Dafne's. All his domestics come through an institution for orphans. The city is most grateful to offload them. The orphans work for their positions every bit as much as he does. Rome is daily proof of how easily anyone can descend into the gutter and anyone can rise from it. Just look at the Buffoon.

He orders fresh candles and sends the servant girl scurrying round the room, gutting and lighting. He stands back to watch the way her calves tighten as she stands on tiptoes to reach. She must be, what, fifteen? Waiting for her is making the ache unbearable. Hurry up, he tells her making her fumble lighting the last. She blows out the taper: candlelight makes her young skin gleam. Dafne's, though white marble now, will age, in time, to be just this hue, and apparently softer. Come, he says, unhooking a button at his waist. Just briefly, eyes wide, she hesitates.

He tries to be gentle enough, given her age. He is no Whoring Thief. But though not rough, neither does he care what she feels, or whether she takes pleasure from their frolic, which for him can't be too quick. She frustrates him more than once by trying to cover herself. He pulls the fabric of her dress from her hands more firmly the second time. Leave it. I must look. It is all fuel for his mind however much the release is physical, and when he shoves her down hard against the bench when she squirms, even bruises interest him—intellectually, descriptively. He wipes himself down with a clean cloth and tosses it with his polishing cloths and sends her on her way. Flesh is cheap. Fabric cheaper. Nothing costs him like marble.

First light. Back on his temporary plinth, still cleaning the dust from the delicate leaves round the back of her, he is starting to swoon a little from fatigue when he stoops. He scrambles down, and in so doing, loses his footing and must jump, making his ankles spark with pain on landing. He is shaking slightly. He should eat. He forgets, which is why the kitchen always keeps a fruit bowl stocked to tempt him when he remembers to look for it. Dusting off a date he puts the whole thing in his mouth, working out the stone with his tongue and spitting it floorwards. He selects another, then a third. Their tacky skins have drawn marble dust. Each successive fruit, one of his favourites ordinarily, has been harder to swallow with his mouth so dry and scratchy. He makes a gesture towards a servant in the doorway to fetch wine, and he is pouring a second glass just as the boy who sweeps the yard arrives outside. Swilling out his mouth with a sip of wine, he spits, as he bangs on the window to draw the boy's attention, gesturing: come, come inside and bring your broom.

While the boy sprays the floor lightly with water to damp down the dust, he walks slowly around the sculpture thinking about what remains to be done, not for the work itself, which is finished, but for the room, the whole studio. Flexing his chisel hand instinctively and raising his bruised, grazed and reddened knuckles to his mouth, he sucks hard as a baby on the forefinger knuckle.

Longing is never far away. Rising again it distracts him. He considers calling back the girl, but soon enough the studio will be full of people. The clatter of a wagon pulling up outside reminds him to put in place a plan for moving Dafne towards the Villa Borghese, assuming the morning's meeting goes well. It will. He knows, despite his anxiety for his future, that the sculpture is magnificent; that the Whoring Thief will be delighted. And a Pope doesn't need to appreciate everything made in his honour.

So instead of sending for the girl he calls for water to bathe himself, and a fresh shirt. When it is set before him, he has a sudden urge for more fruit. He calls out as he pours water into the bowl and rinses his face. Then pulling his shirt over his head, he wipes his neck and armpits with a cloth.

And the barber, he calls over his shoulder, feeling the stubble on his chin with the back of his hand.

One is sent for, one who may well already have been waiting in the kitchen given the speed of his arrival. Instead of wearing the clean shirt brought for him, since his body is still damp, he spreads it over the top of the empty plinth and sits back to let the barber go to work. He can only think of the minutes ticking: what is left to be done? What time is it? He tells the barber to hurry. He must dress, given Scipione's habit of surprising him.

A sudden noise from the courtyard behind him makes him twitch and partially turn his head. The Barber almost catches him with the blade. Careful, he's warned, the barber's hand remaining steady, a quality he appreciates and for which he later drips scudi into the barber's upturned hands.

He turns to look for the shirt and finds Cardinal Scipione Borghese has managed to sneak up on him and is holding the shirt in his hands. Considering his bulk, such stealth is always astonishing.

Genius.

The Whoring Thief has his shirt pressed to his nose and is inhaling it loudly. A man so much easier to like when absent.

Clean! He pronounces, pretending to throw it away in disgust. His bloodshot eyes dip at the corners.

Pity.

His always-astonishing bulk is still sweating out last night's excesses. It is always worthwhile, with Scipione, to pay attention to small details, such as whether or not he is wearing anything under his silk today—he is not. He tries not to shudder. Things would have been so much easier if his patron didn't disgust him quite so violently.

He nods at Dafne to focus the Whoring Thief on something other than him.

Perfect, wouldn't you say.

Scipione shrugs. I'm not here for nymphs, I'm here for you.

Well, I'm not finished yet and you should get your money's worth. You paid a fortune for her.

Scipione smiles unpleasantly. Ordinarily, he has something of a money-lender's obsession with talking small change. Not today.

Not even a small fortune.

This is exhausting. Over the years of business together, he has never found a way not to feel flattened by Scipione's presence. His endless appetites. His sudden and devastating changes of mood.

I still need my shirt.

Allow me.

This is all part of the game. He submits to having his own shirt dropped over his head. But he steps away then and pokes his arms through the sleeves himself, does up the ties at the throat, the laces around his wrists. He hopes that this performance is enough to hold the old leech at bay. He moves carefully to avoid Scipione's fat hands trying to tuck the shirt in around his waist.

All the while, Scipione's expression is unreadable. But then there has surely never been a man more capable of such violence while smiling.

Scipione is growing heated, twitching his hips until the silk of his cassock rubs audibly against his hairy legs and catches on the beginning of an erection.

Damn. He curses inwardly and grips the corners of an old tool chest. His splayed fingers are so close to a chisel discarded among old papers on its flat, inlaid lid. How easily he could snatch it up and cleave that little worm from that bloated body. The flesh wouldn't immediately bleed, he would cut so swiftly. The picture in his mind, perfectly detailed, even down to the sound is undoubtedly owing to having grown up chiselling putti.

The Whoring Thief, so adept in changing mood, leans towards him and pats his hand, the one on the chest.

You look worn to a nub. Look at you. No meat on your bones. You should take some wine.

Despite himself, he smiles.

So solicitous of your employees.

Scipione doesn't smile back. Instead, a small sigh escapes him. It sounds so wistful it can't belong to such a man, such a body, but rather must be left over from some much earlier version of him. From his boyhood even.

Some fruit? He asks. I know what you like—

They both know he doesn't like eating around the cardinal. However, a servant has already been dispatched and appears with in an enormous basket of fruit from the Vatican

kitchens: peaches, pomegranates, still-dewy grapes. The fat slugs of Scipione's hands hover over the bowl before gently selecting two pears.

One for me, one for you. He has the kind of smile that is ever wolfish.

Scipione bites into the first pear and chews. Those fat smacking lips offend like a blasphemy.

You hate pears.

The cardinal screws up pig eyes, like pokes in dough. Having chewed with his mouth open, juice has already spilled down his chin and pieces of pear are spatted across the chest of his wrinkled cassock. He leans forward and spits out the contents of his mouth.

So I do!

He holds out the second pear.

This one's for you.

At last. So, this will be the real humiliation for today: a pear to be eaten from the Whoring Thief's paw. It takes a moment to coerce his pride into the necessary compliancy to take the stool the cardinal has kicked over and sit with his head tilted back for the fruit. The cardinal dangles it over his mouth but he can't bite into it, it simply moves with him each time he lunges at it.

You love a juicy pear. Try harder.

The Whoring Thief adjusts himself so that his erection nudges his ribs.

Eat. Otherwise, that pompous little madam will imagine I starve you.

He must bounce a little on the stool to reach. The cardinal, laughing, presses the pear into his teeth, sending juice and fruit squirting down the back of his throat, up his nose, covering his skin with stickiness. The stalk breaks and the mashed fruit falls to the floor between them.

But Scipione, that Whoring Thief, has already forgotten it, intent on worming that little nub of his between his ribs, breathing heavily, sweating out the scent of cloves, a bubble of spit passing back and forth between his top and lower lip.

The first time he met Cardinal Scipione Borghese was in the Vatican sculpture garden. He'd been given permission to sketch there by the Bloodless Buffoon who was, loosely speaking, supervising his education. He'd been lying, gazing up at the Torso of Hercules, trying to understand what made a fragment of a body more powerful than many other examples of a complete one. It was a question that drew him back to gaze at it time and time again. He'd been

lying chewing his charcoal, thinking, when a hand grabbed his ankles and yanked him along the ground on his belly. He dropped his sketch book and almost swallowed the charcoal in fright.

Looking up at the great column of red gauziness he was stunned. He'd seen countless cardinals since his family moved to Rome, and the Buffoon was still a cardinal then, but Scipione Borghese was something else: brooding, and corpulent, with a dreadful presence even while silent; and the proprietariness with which he leafed through the sketch book.

'This is what you do here?' the cardinal said, tapping the sketchbook without looking up. In his manner, the simple words sounded urgent and threatening.

And though he didn't know why, lying on the ground still, smeared in dirt at Scipione's feet, he felt ashamed, and it angered him enormously. Jumping up and onto his toes he bounced on the spot like the boxing street boys he'd known growing up in Naples. But the cardinal didn't even look at him

He found his voice, still bouncing and holding his fists half-heartedly in front of his face.

Those are mine.

The cardinal made no acknowledgement of him at all, and he had humour enough to see how ridiculous he looked, bouncing about unnoticed. So, he stopped and waited. The older man kept turning the pages of his sketches, pausing from time to time, dismissing other pages swiftly, even tearing out several and letting them drop to the floor where he stepped on them either accidentally or by design.

Even then, still filled with quiet fury, he wanted to see which sketches the Cardinal paused at, which he had discarded, and why.

Then, as he had looked through the last sketch, Scipione snapped shut the book and looked at him.

He said, Everything an artist sketches is for his patron, even if he doesn't yet have one.

He offered the book back but then wouldn't let go and a mortifying tug-o-war ensued. At last, he released the book.

How old are you?

Ten.

Ten?

He'd worked beside his father carving stone since he was four. He felt much older than ten by then.

And you are satisfied with these?

Scipione's question made him flush.

Not *all* them.

Proud?

Not of all of them.

Then some?

Yes.

The cardinal made an expression of having heard and understood without fully agreeing. He gave the sudden, sharp nod of a man about to move on. And then he seemed to change his mind and offered some advice.

I concede there is promise here. Much promise. Even perfection, in places. In time, quite soon even, you will get that patron. But I offer this to you now so that you are forewarned: a patron brings money, yes, but also, responsibility, since every work you produce will be an extension of your patron, and never the other way round. Your skill, the true skill of the artist, is to make *him*, your patron, perfect.

The cardinal swept away. It took many days before he could acknowledge that the cardinal's eye was good. He had meant to remain unchanged, out of spite at the man's manner, but each time he finished a piece for his father, or a sketch at the Vatican, a little voice asked, would the cardinal like this? Would it perfect *him*?

Several years later, the Whoring Thief introduced him to his first Pope. The invitation also included, Pietro, his own father, and though Pietro had often talked of the great men for whom he had sculpted, in the anteroom of the Vatican, as they attended the Pope, the sound of his father's yellow teeth chattering made the footmen smirk. Of course, the Whoring Thief had his fun, until his uncle, the Pope appeared. Scipione made the presentation of father and son to his uncle, who asked for a sketch as a present. A sketch of what? Scipione's hand on his shoulder held him fast. Leaning down, he whispered, draw something from memory—one of the statues perhaps. It had been all he needed. Once he started, the working trance consumed him. But where so often his inner eye captured more than he could execute, that day, with the bounty of the twin geniuses of Caravaggio and Michelangelo above and around him, his conjuring on paper surpassed his imagination. A gilded footman led away his father, still mute and shaking, while he remained to hear his sketch vaunted and have his chin tweaked, by a *pope*. Later in his life, he



would declare it pure destiny. But it never felt fated. And his gratitude was evident, and persisted towards other men of the cloth, until he became the little toy of the cardinals. And throughout it all, and for many years after, the one constant had been that look in the Whoring Thief's eyes levelling with him saying, trust me. And he had. Trusted. Submitted. Learned to swallow everything.

The Bloodless Buffoon is imminently expected. Scipione, the Whoring Thief, takes himself back to his villa for clean clothes. The studio is freshly scoured since dust is clinging to the walls. Dafne is lit up anew by candlelight until she glows. The glittering papal entourage blocks the street when it arrives. A carriage draws into the courtyard blazing like the sun god himself bringing the dawn. Half the court disgorged into the building is immediately sucked back into the street to wait, as there isn't room in the studio. The courtyard and street beyond are ringed with harlequin soldiers.

The Buffoon arrives decked in gold vestments, trying and failing not to trip. Scipione reappears, his fat thieving fingers ringed and gilded, touching, touching everything bought with his money, while the doors are folded back, and all the pomp of the papal court is laid out for an utter idiot, a man half Scipione's weight and a quarter of his ambition. The Buffoon looks pale and shrunken, the features of a man overly leached. Once they are inside, alone, Scipione delights in teasing him.

What is this, your excellency. You look dried up. I hope someone is seeing to you properly.

Scratching his balls and leering like a stage-Madam, Scipione is asking to be censured. But the Buffoon, since his ascension to the Papal seat, has become a vessel of doubt, unsure about everything. Dafne only shows him his own bloodlessness and makes him evidently queasy. He asks for a lavender pomade to draw away the sensation and declares that he will tell a story.

Stories have always been Scipione's gift. The Buffoon has never been a storyteller. And so he repeats almost verbatim the well-known tale of a cardinal meeting a young sculptor, of later introducing him to the pope, except it is the Whoring Thief's story, and his pope.

Do you remember? The Buffoon asks.

The Whoring Thief is no longer the only thief in the room. Though Scipione is not easily humiliated, he pities the cardinal this theft more than the papacy itself, but still more, he pities himself for being required to do what he most hates and play a part in the lie.

Do you remember? The Buffoon repeats when he finds himself given no answer. Instead of replying, which he will have to do at some point, for now, he bows, and kisses the papal ring, even before it is offered him, and the Buffoon accepts the answer, indeed, he strokes the ring that has been kissed.

You were such a beautiful boy, the Buffoon croons. God has rewarded you and you must answer.

Of course.

Through your service.

This is unexpected. Perhaps foolishly in hindsight, he always imagined that he could keep God, and the necessity to do God's work, at a healthy distance from his art. Yes, now and then, he has dashed off a bust of a cardinal with a particularly fetching head, or a saint in agony, but these have always been produced in the style of his choosing, and in a manner suited to the kind of sculptor he intends to be. Dafne's brilliance deserves a new era for him. A tabula rasa.

Do you accept? It is quite simple. Either you do or you do not.

He bows. The tone of the Buffoon's voice is surprisingly firm. I accept he says. Though inwardly, inwardly, he doesn't. He is so preoccupied railing against the idea of anyone, even God, dictating what art is, that he misses something.

The Buffoon decides to walk around the studio, apparently desiring to put space between himself and Dafne's licentious nakedness. Picking up a small mallet from a peg on the wall, the Buffoon fondles it, and then swings it in front of him as though flicking holy water. Perhaps it strengthens him, for he turns back to face the sculpture, the mallet looking tiny in his hands.

Was this the tool you used to make her?

It was not, but he isn't going to contradict the pope at this stage in the proceedings, so he merely inclines his head.

Well, imagine that.

The Buffoon seems to grow in confidence.

I am concerned, he says boldly.

He taps the wall behind him with the mallet lightly.

Concerned?

Yes. With the sculpture's licentiousness. The good cardinal, as we both see, is already quite overheated by it and I must think of the damage it poses to lesser constitutions. We must strive at all costs to save man from his frailties.

The cardinal, standing behind him, sneers. From where he is standing he faces the bare legs of Apollo running. He leers at them and the winks. That wink almost produces a tremor in his own voice as he responds to the Bloodless Buffoon.

What do you suggest?

Almost without thought, which is unusual for him, the Bloodless Buffoon says, An edifying couplet. An epigram, or similar.

Scipione looks delighted at the situation. Oh? And who will write this couplet?

The Buffoon makes a humble bow.

I will write it, he says, with a modest pump of his fist. It will be my small contribution. And it will be added to the... he looks about the sculpture hazily—

Can one add to perfection? Scipione asks maliciously.

But the Buffoon will not be riled. He chooses to treat the Thieving Whore's remarks literally.

It will be added to the plinth, etched on a cartouche.

There is something so ridiculous about the way he says *cartouche*, it is almost a relief when the whoring Thief laughs aloud.

Just two lines for your talisman, your Grace, Scipione says when he has finished laughing and wipes his eyes. Etched or not, they had better be good. As you say, the effects of the work are powerfully strong.

As he is talking, Scipione makes a suggestive leer at the bare legs under the marble cloak of Apollo.

They'd better be two *very* strong lines, he shows his teeth in an unseemly laugh at which the Bloodless Buffoon looks again queasy.

The bitterness he feels. Scipione is enjoying playing with them both and the Pope is a fool, though to contradict him is unthinkable, however ill-qualified he might be. And yet he is surely showing his claws. It is as unwelcome as it is unexpected. He smothers his own bitterness, the urge to press his face into his hands. He feels drained suddenly, the weeks of sleeplessness taking hold of him. Catching the bright sky through the window, he asks God, Is this really the best you could manage? Why give me such gifts only to humiliate me?

They leave him. Arm in arm, like lovers, they push open the studio doors into the midday brightness. He starts to follow but Scipione's parting look tells him to remain where he is. But there are no more expressions of trust between them, and he knows now there never will be.

He looks up at Dafne bleakly. How has this gone so badly wrong?

He drags the box tower plinth out from its corner and clammers on top, denting his shin on the riveted edge. On his feet, his balance gained, his gaze is held by the sheen of Dafne's skin, which in the brilliant midday light is almost silver. She looks so human. Over her shoulder Apollo peeps. Using her name, for a second, it's as though she's listening, and about to talk back at him, which of course, she couldn't possibly. But all the same his heart feels squeezed. The unfairness. Every glance at Dafne is proof of his own genius. How can genius not be enough? He has been mistaken about the Buffoon. He may be a fool, but he is a fool who is out-manoeuvring him. How narrow his life suddenly seems, and how barren. Better he had stayed with Scipione.

Beneath his feet the boxes wobble as though trying to buck him off—instinctively he throws out a steadying arm. The back of his hand unintentionally glances Dafne's ribs. When he is balanced enough, he presses his palm to her body, her breast. He removes his hand angrily.

Why weren't you enough? He asks her. You should have saved me.

In response, he hears two sharp words.

Release me.

He staggers so badly he loses his balance and falls. On the ground, his ankle throbbing, one hand grazed from knocking the plinth, she speaks again.

Let me out.

His Penance burns. Footsteps. Returning soldiers ahead of the couple, diverted the wrong way through the courtyard. The Whoring Thief wears the same expression as when he announced having to give away one of the three statues he had commissioned, the sculpture before Dafne as a bribe to the new Pope's nephew.

It is all agreed.

It is the Buffoon who speaks, sounding every bit as pompous as he looks. He gestures towards Dafne without apparently seeing her.

You are no longer needed here. Let the sculpture be packaged for the cardinal by your assistants. *I claim you for God and the altar at St Peter's.*

The altar of St Peter? He looks at the Whoring Thief, but Scipione's returning gaze is compassionless.

So it is. His heart is red marble. He feels nothing as he hears the Buffoon's carriage being ordered, the wheels turning as it is brought round to face the gate. Wheels caught in a rut. Horses whinnying. Metal shoes striking stone. Scipione steps aside to let them pass, the Buffoon with him, like the dog he is, falling in behind. But long after he has left he can see himself back there; maestro and nymph, he on his plinth, she on hers.

## THE POPE'S HEAD

When mum first learned of dad's plan for my birthday, she said, Yeah, that'll happen in a month of Sundays. On my actual birthday, waiting at the door, when I saw his fuzzy outline approaching in the dimpled glass, I wanted to turn and crow at her up the stairs: he's here, he's here, he came. Instead, I pressed my body in a star shape against the glass, which I knew he'd find funny. He opened the letter box to speak to me. The rattle brought mum thundering downstairs.

Let me, she said, trying to lean over me to get the door, but I wrestled her hand off mine and continued fiddling with the Yale.

Fine, she said, stepping back, leaving her hands on my shoulders to speak for her. I got the door open and there was dad, hunkered down on the mat on the path, grinning broadly at us. I had to wriggle free of her hold to grab his face with both hands and inspect him closely for signs of change.

You came then.

That was mum.

Course I came. He looked upwards at her but otherwise kept his face steady in my hands.

Course I came, my mother mimicked, turning the happiest sounds bitter and tinny.

Dad drew back, gently peeling away my hands, cupping one in his by way of apology. The hall light was shining in his eyes so that he had to squint.

Don't be like that, Julie, he said.

I turned my mind away from whatever was going on between them, and focused instead on the giant rucksack behind him, proof that the trip really was about to happen. I felt around either side of him with my hands, and he helped by lifting up an arm or twisting slightly so I could reach the pockets while still talking to mum. There were two bagged up sleeping bags, two rolled sleeping mats, and, under his arm mid-way down his left side, a tiny gas stove.

We're really going to cook stuff? I whispered, excitement building in me.

Uhuh, he grinned. Cool, yeah?

Very!

I get this kind of bubbling feeling inside me. It came on then, a kind of madness throughout my whole body that makes me urgently need to move. Mostly I jump up and down, but that has occasionally led to me headbutting someone. So at school, when it comes on Mrs Bradley sneaks me outside and lets me run laps of the building, but that was equally ill-suited to the current situation. So, I just stood there practically humming. Dad noticed and pretended to get a shock off me which made me laugh and helped. But then he pulled another funnier face. He was still squatting. I'm getting a dead leg, he said, starting to stand, lopsidedly, the bag listing, the little stove swinging, hitting the side of the door. My dad is very tall. I always forget just how tall until he's there before me, and this time with a massive rucksack stacked behind him; he was a giant. I wondered at all the amazingness had he squeezed inside that bag to make it so huge. The prospect made me dizzy.

Jesus Tom, my mum said. Are you on the run?

We're camping! I swivelled round and glared at her. We *need* stuff. Just because you have no idea—I said with a sudden panting fury.

I took his hand very firmly in mine and splayed his fingers, so that I could lace our two hands together, making sure she was watching. She needed to see that we were a unit, he and I. Why did she always become like this, so doubting? He squeezed my hand back and winked. He had the twinkliest eyes. Nan called it mischief in the making but to me it was pure glee. He emitted it the way my mum emitted weariness; and, when she got going with nan, a good degree of sourness.

My mum said, Go on then, push off, but back by eight tomorrow, you've got school.

I couldn't help but shriek as we started down the path to the gate. The sound brought out the head of Mrs Wilson in the ground floor flat.

It's my dad, I said, holding up his hand to wave at her.

So I see, she said.

He's taking me camping, I added, feeling I might have to tell everyone we met.

Well good luck to you, she wheezed. Adding, I hope you've got a slingshot in case you get a pigeon cooing all night above your tent.

I laughed, because I was happy, and because she hadn't made a single mean comment about dad being there, even though I knew mum talked to her when she thought I wasn't listening; but most of all, because there was no chance of pigeons keeping us awake since the best, most amazing part of our plan was that we weren't camping in a park or a soggy field, but in a *museum!*

When the subject of my birthday had come up, Dad had asked what I wanted to do, and I'd just said, go camping, and he'd said that he could go one better, and take me camping at a museum if I told him which one I liked best.

I said the V&A because it was my favourite museum, and he'd said, Good choice. I'll see what I can do. We hadn't got to say anymore because mum was due back from work, meaning Dad needed to scarper. That's how it had been since she changed the locks on him; just little scraps of time like that, like him waiting outside school for me, or catching me on my way to Brownies. The school caretaker had already dobbed dad in twice, so everything about the camping trip had been on a need-to-know basis.

We turned right onto Coral Street, and just as we were about to cross at the lights, Mrs Lloyd appeared with her dog carrying her mother's shopping.

We're going camping, I told her.

In January? You're mad, you'll freeze your socks off!

I grinned back at her, showing my teeth, as Dad took up my hand and set off at a speed that required a few steps of skipping for me to keep up. No doubt I had a lot to say, it being my birthday. As a rule, dad encouraged me to talk, telling me I was *interesting beyond measure*. In the hundreds of thousands of times I'd thought about this moment, I'd expected to memorize the whole trip, down to the tiny details such as the journeys there and back. But as it turned out, I was so busy talking I didn't cotton on to the fact that we'd skipped past the tube at Russell Square, until I saw the railings of the British Museum. The penny dropped.

No, I said, frowning and stopping dead.



Dad kept walking, tugging me by my hand. Come on, he said, dropping my hand and letting a gap form between us.

As I watched the gap grow, I felt bereft and yet unable to move. What Nan would call stubborn. But really I wanted him to meet me halfway. He turned round after a few more steps and threw up his hands. He was facing me now. A group of oncoming tourists flowed around him.

What? he said at last.

You know.

He shrugged. So, it's the British Museum.

His voice could hardly be called conciliatory. Ordinarily, one of the things I really loved about my dad was the way he didn't pretend, didn't lie. But sometimes, as with this, it was hurtful.

He stepped towards me. He said, Turns out I don't know anyone useful at the V&A, only here—he gestured around him—So, it's here or no camping. Take it or leave it.

Hmmm, I said, frowning again.

The streetlamps had not long come on and we were caught in a pool of yellow light. It must have been about four o'clock. Wednesdays were half days at the museums in London, and when we'd worked out my birthday was on a Wednesday, dad had high-fived me and said, All the better for us, because even having had to wait until school finished, we'd have loads of time to nose about.

But you said, I began. You promised—

Yep.

You said I could choose anywhere—

I did. But this is what you've got, kiddo. This, or Baskin Robbins on the way back.

I could hear Nan's voice in my head, my mum's mum, saying: Tom Gibson's a walking disappointment—that's how she talks about dad—a walking bloody disappointment. She's a woman with a comfy array of put-downs, mostly on themes of *time will tell, only idiots trust a bank with their life savings*, and *daughters never see their fathers for what they are*. How would she know? I wanted to ask, since she was a stork's child—at least, that was *her* story—without a dad. The nearest she had was great granny Lynne, who drank stout like a man, and had a beard like one too.

It was one of life's moments to put up or shut up when it came to dad. No way was I going to let myself become like mum or Nan, the kind of person who thought the worst of every

man I met; sour and spinsterish and hoarding away life in little broken squares like the seconds-chocolate she nibbled from the drawer.

You're wrong, Nan, I told her in my head. He's not a disappointment.

I had all that in my head looking at him: my tall, wonderful dad. He tilted his head again like Mrs Lloyd's basset hound. It was a shame he didn't have the hanging ears to match.

What's it to be? he cocked an eyebrow. Baskin Robbins or a night in your second favourite museum?

The museum!

We met in the middle, his arms around my shoulders, my face pressed into his belly. It was a good sort of belly, though not for smooshing into, because it wasn't soft or cushioning like other people's. In fact, he wasn't like anyone else I could think of. At school in assembly when we were told to close our eyes under pain of death and speak to God, I prayed to be as interesting as my dad when I grew up and avoid the kind of life my mum had had handed to her. My nan too. They were too worn out to be interesting.

Come on then.

He hitched his backpack a little higher and we walked together down Museum Street past the main entrance, which I always loved, with its enormous steps leading up to those revolving doors that freak some people out. Instead, he took me round the corner to the staff entrance. It was a cloudy evening, with quite poor light away from the streetlamps. I didn't see the person who let us through the street gate, from where dad took us down some steps to the basement, which, like most basements, smelled green and damp, and even though it hadn't rained, something was dripping audibly as we waited for the door to open. The woman letting us in, I did see. She was blond, which I can't say surprised me since dad often drew blonds to him. Mum dyed her hair back to brown after dad left, as if it was the hair dye that had somehow caught and dragged her into dad's orbit. No joke, I swear it has darkened several shades in the run up to today.

This is the nipper, he said, tapping me on the head and pushing me past the light. The woman didn't even acknowledge me, and he gave my back a little shove onwards, so that I kept moving, grateful not to have to watch their phony giggling, that way adults are, touching their hair, smiling too much, when they want to get what they want.

I marched on, calling over my shoulder at him, I'm heading in. The hall was dark and smelled of school bags and swimming pools. I knew he would stay behind talking to her, I heard

them whispering, and that was ok, but I was aware that this woman, any woman, could derail things, so, I kept on walking. I suppose I was expecting at some point for him to choose. Briefly, I considered reminding him what very specific day it was, but that felt something a little kid would do, or a nag, so I just held my course, thinking of what lay ahead, listening to the sound of my shoes on the lino. The whole place, most probably because of the smell and the shiny-type lino, reminded me of mum and the hospital where she cleaned. When I was little, on days when Nan couldn't keep an eye on me, mum took me with her to work and I watched the sun come up crayoning pictures on a chair while she cleaned around me.

The end of the hall led to a staircase. I wobbled briefly in my commitment to plough on without him. It felt a separation to walk up to a different floor out of view. I hesitated, I was angry at myself afterwards, and particularly after I bawled back over my shoulder at him, I'm going upstairs now, because, to my inner shame, I sounded a lot like mum. I decided to wait on the first stair and thankfully he called up to me.

Alright, alright, keep your hair on! which instantly made me smile because it was a phrase he and I always used together. I heard him talking very loudly suddenly about keys and stuff, about cleaning up, and being out in the morning early before the cleaners came and I heard her let herself out the door as I reached the sixth step.

Finally! A little scoff escaped my mouth for which I berated myself since such noises were pure Nan, but it was relief, I think, that at last we had this whole amazing place to ourselves.

Trotting on up, free as air, my bag bouncing on my back, I started thinking ahead to my midnight feast. My supplies, originally, consisted of the remains of a pot of jam I'd lifted from the fridge. I'd planned to eat it, off the spoon, without a commentary on hygiene. But then Nan altered the situation by coming over last night and giving me an early birthday present: a bar of Dairy Milk. Not to get all Charlie Bucket on you, but it was pretty exiting to imagine eating the whole thing. Mum made me bring a torch, which now I was here I appreciated, plus pyjamas, a clean pair of pants and socks for tomorrow—like the exhibits cared if I had changed my undies. I had decided I wouldn't bath, clean my teeth, change my clothes or anything until at after school tomorrow. All the scents of the museum were essential for verisimilitude—tick, Mrs Bradley, I used your pretentious word of the week—when I regaled the kids at school about the wonders of camping with my dad.

Beyond the half landing on the stairs, the dark getting creepy, and feeling prepared, I took the torch from my bag and lit my way beyond strange hangers lined up in the coat-check, up

towards the shop just inside the museum entrance on the ground floor. It was the main museum shop, pretty large from the outside, and made with glass walls so that even with no lights on inside I could make out a fair bit just from torch light. Continuing, I turned left into the main atrium, under its glass roof. Once upon a time, I'm told, i.e. within Nan's lifetime, which is a pretty lengthy period, this area had no roof, and was some sort of outdoor space. I made my way to the right to my favourite statue, a guy on a horse on a madly tall plinth. I've always found the very idea of a boy riding naked but with a cloak quite hilarious. I mean who does that? Surely it can't be safe on either count, cloaks get caught in things, and the boy's janglies must have got smooshed every time he got up there. The horse, though, is beautiful. I've never ridden one. If the plinth were shorter, I'd get up there and sit on it.

I dropped my bag beside him to mark the spot of our camp. I stretched, windmilled my arms a bit to get the blood flowing and remembered dad—where *was* he?—and turned back to shine my torch down the stairs. Nothing. I wouldn't call what I felt alarm exactly, but I did suddenly have the urge to run back downstairs and get him.

I called back down. I'm up here.

And when no answer followed decided to run back and find him. I made it almost back to the door before seeing him standing side-on in the hall, a few steps further down from the door, adjusting the strap of his rucksack as if he'd just taken it off and put it back on.

What are you doing, I asked, and then, because I immediately realised I actually had no desire to know, because adult stuff tended to be long and tedious and not about me, I told him not to worry.

Come and see what I've found.

I flapped my hand at it him to get across my sense of urgency, and he finished sorting out the strap and smiled at me, and together we walked back to the stairs, past the coat check and the loos, alongside the shop, where this time I let my torch light pierce the inner darkness, catching glimpses of the often-odd assembly of things for sale, scarves mostly.

Do you know, I said, turning to dad who'd come to peer inside beside me. I've never set foot in a gift shop.

Mum had an aversion to *tat*, though quite why her aversion needed to limit me has never been fully explained. That aversion had been her Get Out of Jail Free card since I can remember, her answer to every entreaty for a souvenir. It never really helped that every zoo or fun place we used to visit seemed to require walking through the shop to exit.

That all said, mum was not here. I walked right up to that glass wall and made a little O on the glass with my breath as I imagined its stock of little foil-wrapped chocolates with the museum's name on them, those plumed pens, half quill, half biro I'd seen other kids taking home. I'd always wanted one of those.

Just looking, I said, winking at him, to make my point.

Out into the main courtyard under glass I said hello to the statue again and showed dad where I'd left my bag.

Dad laughed, Well, you're fast.

He looked around slightly shiftily and muttered to himself.

What? I asked loudly.

He whispered something unintelligible.

Why are you whispering?

Out of respect, he whispered back. Too much noise is damaging to some of the exhibits.

Was he teasing? He wore his serious face, even though I knew it was unlikely to be true given how much my class had shrieked around the meteors in the science museum. Perhaps they were less fragile as not manmade? To be fair, a meteor has survived falling to earth. Oh, I didn't know. Didn't care.

Ok, I said, quietly, feeling dispirited that whispering felt slightly against the overall spirit of the occasion—this was surely a celebration?—and focused instead on preparing our base, partly so that I could poke inside the bag to see what goodies he'd brought. I unrolled the sleeping bags and mats and laid them out in parallel rectangles. The sight made my heart sing. My mood was further lifted by finding a thermos in one of the pockets—I felt it, carefully. Having stipulated I wanted hot chocolate before bed, it was good news that Dad seemed to have taken me seriously. You see, dad and I had been planning this trip, or a version of it, since I could remember. Some families watch football, some ramble in parks and woods. Dad and I had always liked museums and galleries, and luckily for us London was full of them. Once, he took me on the ferry to Calais, and from there by train to Paris just to check out an exhibition; once, we took an overnight ferry to Oslo. Once to Dublin.

I was about to dive further into the bag, which was made up of a series of tantalizing compartments, when Dad made a funny noise and pulled the bag towards him, saying, Hang on, I've got something for you. You've no way had enough sugar yet. He dug out a Freddo and gave it to me saying, Let me get things sorted. It's your day, you should be exploring.

I couldn't disagree with that.

He smiled. His voice gentle, playful. You go. Build up an appetite. And I'll come find you when I'm done here.

I'd be in the Greek and Roman halls. I always went there first when we came here together. He had all kinds of favourites, but he was good like that, always happy to come and look at mine. I set off, tearing the wrapper with my teeth. Having eaten the Freddo before I reached the stairwell, I looked back and saw Dad's torch around the entrance, dragging our camp into a corner. Sweetened by sugar I didn't mind so much. He must have reasons of his own, I figured. What did I know really? I'd never camped before. There must be all kinds of considerations. All that really mattered to me was being able to see the sky, though not the stars, since nowhere in London was so dark you couldn't see your own hands in front of you. Love you London.

Reaching the Greek and Roman galleries, I felt happy. Though many of my favourites were in the V&A, there was a lot here I could never grow bored of. Neptune, Aphrodite, Bacchus, massively bearded and holding grapes. I sat on the floor and removed Nan's bar of Cadbury's from the bottom of my bag and let myself inhale the room, its ancient mustiness. When I shone my torch on their faces, they appeared more dramatic, the shadows more pronounced. I got up, making my way through the bar of Dairy Milk, enjoying the sense of decadence at eating a whole family-sized bar myself, never letting the taste weaken, cramming more and more in my mouth until I could hardly breathe. Then I approached my favourites, the headless, armless, sometimes legless statues held on metal wires, and sometimes, a head, mostly without a nose.

I remember overhearing a visitor once telling her husband that the noses were cut off deliberately by the Christians. Something about not wanting anything but Jesus himself to be perfect. I'm not sure where Jesus came in, he always seemed to have a fine nose himself, out of wood, on a cross, like the one above the headmaster in assembly. I always think about how it smelled and what it would feel like if I took it down and touched it. Dad said a good nose and a good pair of hands were invaluable. He'd taught me to touch statues carefully, lightness of touch being essential, he said. I didn't really know what he meant, but I suppose we wouldn't want the statues to lose any other parts of themselves because there was a limit to how much could fall off before they stopped being what they were meant to be and became something else. Where did those fallen fragments go? I thought of Nan's heathers in the garden held in place by bits of

broken brick and stone. Was that how it was for the bits that fell off over the years, had they been mistaken for common or garden stone, used as rubble beneath pavements and roads?

Hmmm. Somehow, I'd dropped the balled-up foil from my chocolate and had to hunt about for it on the floor. I don't like to leave litter, not because I'm a goody-goody, but because at school when we were small, we were made to watch a programme about a hedgehog dying of thirst because it couldn't get its head out of a tin can. I ran my hands over marble, and alabaster (carefully). I even licked one or two to verify the taste (dusty and slightly chalky which was unexpected). The bronzes, mostly bits and pieces, were behind glass. I could forget everything outside while I was in here, like the clock stopped. I could step outside and find it was evening, or the next day, or the day after next.

Dad found me downstairs by the bits of broken marble body parts from the Parthenon in Greece.

What have you seen?

I told him as we walked back towards the boy on the horse now milky in the moonlight.

He saw my gaze divert itself and looked where I was looking. What a beauty, hey? He said, smiling.

I don't think they have these in the gift shop, I said, and his smile broadened.

But you'd like one? He asked.

I nodded, grinning, But with a shorter plinth so I could get on the horse too if I wanted, I said.

He got his serious face which always cracks me up. His face really wasn't made to look serious. It makes his eyes all buggy and his mouth twitch. Moving closer, he pointed upwards to the horse's open mouth. There would've been a bridle and reins, originally, he said, of the missing pieces. See, how the boy's neck is cracked through. There's some thought that perhaps this isn't the original head.

They can swap heads? I said, thinking how incredible it would be to be able to do that in actual life.

More often than you'd think. Makes dating a piece tricky, he told me. Hairstyles matter.

It was true now I thought about it that the boy on the horse had quite a unique hairstyle. Very different fashions then, I said. And then I noticed that both the boy's arms were cracked right across at the same height. Look, I pointed, his arms too. Maybe someone swapped them, I said, feeling my eyes growing wide, thinking.

Dad looked pleased. You've got a good eye there, kiddo. He's probably been repaired. The legs of the horse too, see?

I did see.

It's important to use your eyes, he said. Notice things, what's original, what's not —

But it's still old, though, right, the bits added?

He nodded eagerly, really getting into things now. Four hundred years, compared with nearer two thousand. Our sculptor, whoever he was—

He went on talking but all I could think of how much I loved the way he included me, our sculptor, not the sculptor.

While he was talking about the way bits of Roman sculpture were dug up and repaired, by the church no less, he fetched the thermos and poured me a cup of hot chocolate, which was so hot as to steam into my face which felt just the thing. I looked through the steam at the boy on the horse wondering who he'd been, and if that was really his head—

Worth a packet too, he said, at last.

Then he said I must be having a sugar dip, which was unthinkable on my birthday, and started getting stuff ready for tea. I wanted to see him cook on the tiny blue stove, but he said that he'd spotted a microwave downstairs, which would be quicker. He took the tin and stuff in a bag and nipped downstairs while I drank a second cup of the hot chocolate while testing out which sleeping bag I liked best. Dad returned with plates of baked beans with tiny sausages in. I ate mine chasing the sausage bits about with my spoon with a tartan blanket over my legs. It was a proper picnic blanket, like I'd seen once in the park when posh people brought wicker baskets to watch a film one evening.

He'd thought of everything. He really had. I wished all his critics could see how thorough he'd been. The blanket was so soft to touch. He said I could sleep with it wrapped around me inside my sleeping bag if it didn't make me feel too claustrophobic.

To finish, dad pretended to sound a trumpet and produced two rather bashed about cream donuts, my absolute favourite, and we ate them off plates on the floor without using our hands.

We were all sticky-faced and giggly when we were done—I won, and dad said he was pleased I hadn't lost my edge—and I had that contented, full-belly feeling that makes me feel I'm pretty much a cat when it comes down to it; give me a good meal and I'll curl up and nod off, especially on a rug like this one. Dad was tidying up and I noticed he had a new tattoo on the



inside of his wrist. A letter? Something small like a rune. Dad loved old stuff. The more obscure the better. It used to drive mum mad the way he went off on *a tangent*, she called it. You're losing me Tom, she used to laugh when he got all worked up about what he'd read on the bus coming home from whatever job she'd found for him. He learned everything from reading, he said. He picked up magazines people left on the tube, and the bus, read anything and everything cover to cover. He got really obsessed with pottery when I was about five or six. When I was going up to bed, I'd hear him trying to get her to grasp what he meant by red-figure, black-figure, Corinthian, geometric. She could only shake her head, rub her eyes, because she got up so early even then, and say, Hang on, wind back, I'm getting there. Tell me one more time, Tom.

Dad said, Did you see downstairs, that's where they repair stuff.

What kind of stuff?

Smaller things, I should think, like pots that have cracked—

Pots?

And heads —

Severed heads? I hoped he might be about to tell me a gruesome story. But he didn't.

Yes, and no.

Tell me something scary.

He started telling me about Tutankhamen's tomb again, which was a story I'd heard a lot by then. I like curses, don't misunderstand me, but it being my birthday I'd been hoping for something new.

Oh, he said, leaning over and poking me in the ribs where it tickled. The curse of Tutankhamen bores you, does it, kiddo?

He tickled me harder. I started squealing, forgetting that we were meant to be whispering. Shhh, he said, laughing so much himself that the sound came out his nose.

I was wriggling and squirming and laughing silently so much I drooled on his knee, which only made him laugh harder.

Boring, I managed to get out, which set us both off again.

Finally, he let me go. I had laughed so much I felt done in. I picked up the thermos and poured out the last dribble of cocoa and sat back to drink it. What do you actually do? I asked him, curling my legs under me, and chasing the little grains of chocolate powder around my teeth with my tongue.

What do I do?

Hmmm, I muttered, yeah, like, do you have a job, like mum?

He pulled a face, a bit like mine earlier when he was tickling me.

It's ok, I sighed, yawning, while wondering why I even asked such questions when dad was nothing like mum. I suppose I just don't know what you do all day, I added. With mum, because she came home and we ate together between jobs, she'd say stuff like how disgusting people were when someone cleaned for them, or how rude they were to her if in the offices she cleaned, when people stayed late, and she had to clean around them. I just suppose I'd never heard dad talk about what he did, no tools lying about, no work boots like other people's dads or brothers.

In the end it didn't matter, because he didn't say anything, except to ruffle my hair with his hand. I'm not keen on having my hair ruffled truthfully, though he always has a nice enough way of doing it.

I'd saved the Egyptian stuff to see with dad. He tied up a bag of rubbish and asked if I still wanted to go back and see the sarcophagi, that he hoped he hadn't scared me, and I said no chance, unravelling myself from the blanket and standing up. The mummies are amazing. To think these were real dead people; that people were ever so tiny, and that they really thought they'd need all the bottles and jewellery and stuff they were buried with in the next life. Why do people who have lots always imagine they can take it with them? That's another of Nan's sayings.

Dad was explaining about mummification, and we were laughing about the idea of them all being mummies and where on earth that word came from—No, I said, when I could see dad's mind working, I don't need to know right now, and he got what I meant, because I'd already taken out my jam pot and was eating the remains with my spoon.

Probably not a good idea talking about the squishy bits or exactly what they did with them with you spooning that in your cakehole, dad said, winking at me, at which point I started to feel a bit sick and had to nip to the loo. When I got back, feeling slightly better, dad wiped my face with a fresh cloth. He'd wiped down all my sticky fingers from the glass around the exhibits.

At no point did dad tell me I looked tired, that I had school the next day, all of which, oddly, because he didn't mention, I remembered clearly. Even when I started yawning, he just wandered along beside me, saying nothing, until I walked into something mid-yawn, and he said, You ok there, kiddo? And I confessed that I was half asleep. He put his arm around me. Me too, he said, kissing the top of my head.

Back at camp, he tipped some crumbs out of the sleeping bag I'd chosen, and I wriggled in. The inside of mine smelled of mud which, dad said, was owing to his having done a job, recently, with clay. I fell asleep imagining my dad working and living in a field, and growing stuff, like sunflowers, that reached up to the sun, and melons, like the ones on the market that Nan liked. But then I realised I had no idea how melons grew. Did they form on branches like apples or on the ground like marrows?

I woke up thinking it was morning, but it was just dad with his torch out. He was sat with his back slightly towards me, legs in the sleeping bag, so I couldn't quite see what he was poking about for in his rucksack. He called over his shoulder to me, Back to sleep.

Normally, you wouldn't have to ask me twice. Dad says I sleep like the dead. Once the apartment above ours caught fire and they had the fire brigade round and, so the story goes, I didn't even wake up. But maybe it was all the excitement of being in the museum or too-much-of-a-good-thing as Nan calls it boiling away in my belly, but I couldn't settle. Maybe I did drop off without noticing it, but when I turned over to tell him what a brilliant day we'd had, he didn't reply. I got out my torch and shined it where he should have been, to find his sleeping bag rolled up and his rucksack gone. I hated it, but I heard mum's voice in my head saying, why, he's buggered off! Which I hated, because to be the sort of person who believes that means becoming the sort of person who'd never camp in museum in a month of Sundays, who works some knacker's thankless job like mum. Being, in short, ordinary. Being anything but ordinary meant ignoring the common opinion of dad; it meant seeing him with eyes open; it meant curiosity. I chose curiosity, slipping out of bed in my bare feet and running with my torch towards the shop, the loo halfway down the stairs, the coat check. Above me there was one star visible but even that required a leap of faith. I'd spilled cocoa down my school shirt, I noticed, and I wasn't entirely sure where I'd left my shoes and socks. Down in the hallway that smelled of swimming pools, the doors were all shut, but as I moved further down the hall, I caught a chink of light under one and knew Dad was there. Opening the door, I found him holding a pottery head in his hands, a head about the size of a football; a bald head with a hat painted on, and dark, angry looking brows and a slightly piggy-tipped nose.

I just knew, then, that this whole trip had been a lie. That maybe the Dublin and Oslo trips had been too. That tonight was all about the head in his hands. So, I seized the moment.

Did *you* make that?

He turned to look at me. In fact, there were two heads, I realised, the one in his hands, and a second, identical one on the workbench. Beside him his rucksack was open and deflated, bubble wrap spilling out, taking a breather before being needed again.

He put the head down on the bench very gently before turning and drawing out bubble wrap around the other head until it was covered.

Did *I* make it? He finally replied. Don't be daft. He grinned as wrapped it up until it was completely swathed. Imagine your old dad having the nouse to make the likes of this.

I came over. He unwrapped it slightly so that I could see the face, which was really something.

Can I—I asked reaching out with my hand.

If you're gentle, he said, because it's really old. Really, really old. They don't make things like this anymore.

I touched the nose with my fingers gently. Felt around the eye sockets (the eyes were blazing and quite intimidating). I didn't point out that this he was clearly lying about there being nothing like it, since there was a second one right beside it on the bench. Instead, I touched its cheek lightly. Clever old dad, I thought, wishing mum could see it too. Wishing Nan could. The clay was hard to touch and warm, far warmer than the marble boy and horse upstairs. Body warm. I wished the boy were made of this instead.

What's it made from?

Terracotta.

Terracotta. Nice.

It's of a pope, he said, as I stood popping a small piece of bubble wrap I'd picked off the floor. They made them after the pope died. In remembrance.

I watched dad making a kind of nest for it in the inside of his rucksack. When he'd secured it and made sure it was covered over, he nestled more bits of bubble wrap and old clothes over the top before tightening the draw string and closing the bag.

The rucksack was back looking as it was meant to, unchanged. But everything had been changed by it.

We walked up the stairs together. Dad walking carefully, wincing now and then if he moved too fast. I waited for him in front of the darkened shop, looking through the window.

You know, I announced, tipping my forehead against the glass and letting my breath mist it up again. I've been meaning to let you take me to the shop.

It's all locked up, dad said, as though it were a great shame.

He made to walk slowly back to our sleeping bags around the corner and I followed him a little of the way deciding what dad would do if our positions were reversed. You've got to up the ante, he would have said. So I asked him a question.

If you didn't have the nouse to make it yourself, where did you get it?

He raised an eyebrow curiously.

From the shop, maybe? I suggested

The faint tension in his face softened into amusement. He finished packing up, and came over, bag on his back again.

Now you mention it, he said lightly, a hand on my shoulder steering me towards the shop entrance, that's exactly where I got it.

We looked at each other.

So, you're thinking, that if I got in there once, I could do it again?

I beamed at him.

Exactly.

He gave me a crinkly smile then. The kind I adored.

You got me there.

He set down a plastic bag of rubbish, and then taking a pouch out of his pocket, sort of like a tobacco pouch except it was full of little tools, he drew out a sort of metal file or pencil and opened the door. Then wrapping the canvas pouch back up and pocketing it, he beckoned me in. I needed a pouch like that, or I would do, I felt; a toolkit in a pouch would be way free of ordinariness, of drudgery; a way to live an extraordinary life too.

My booty was a pencil with the museum's name on, a tiny spiral notepad for my secrets, small enough to fit in my palm, and a mug that said British Museum. The mug smelled of wood shavings having been used to store pencils at some point, which for some unknown reason pleased me.

It needs a wash. But that's alright, isn't it?

I nodded. I felt content now that I'd got what I wanted. We found some bubble wrap under the counter by the till and dad wrapped the mug for me, and then he locked the door after us, and picking up the bag of rubbish, we went downstairs, along the hall, and let ourselves out.

My accomplice. He winked at me.

We headed towards a greasy spoon for breakfast. The sun wasn't yet up but London never sleeps. The pavements smelled of morning, the night buses trundled on as if to prove a point. One passed us as we waited to cross at the end of Museum Street, a single passenger sitting by the window on the top deck, all the lights shining just for her.

## ALL TIME IS BUT LIGHT AND SHADOW

You began as pure white. Bright whiteness within and without, out of which you met your maker. His tender face loomed close to blow dust from the web of your fingers. The intimacy between you offered consolation from the mallet and the chisel. Your trust in him was absolute, even when he brought the cloth that burned your skin to smooth away every chisel mark, excepting those he wanted seen. He polished you to brilliance and then he left you.

Fixed by your feet and the backs of your knees, you waited in the pose he'd allotted you, only able to observe a very small patch of wall space, your cube of air, the dust clinging to the ceiling. Without him you missed his steadying hand on your skin. The longer he stayed away, the more you wondered what was expected of you. But patience rewarded you and from disorder, you gradually discerned patterns, the first and greatest of which was light. Light revealed the world of repetition that transfixed you: light dark, light dark. In that balance of light and dark whatever was first exposed then became hidden. Light and dark accumulated like units you imagined you could hold on to, but their sheer relentlessness grew too much and you had to let them flow without you, and trust they were there, always, in front and behind you, stretching out.

While darkness seemed one solid thing, light could splinter into rainbow shades, not one colour but a whole palette, from smoke-edged yellow through to lilac and blue. Light formed shapes, circular dapples, shafts that poked and fingered, and great walls that severed and blocked;

while darkness had its own weight that could blanket and smother, and still be able to float like spider's silk. Dark could eat up light, eclipse it. While there were lights that felt so thinned-out, the very air holding them seemed empty.

It was light that showed you your own body. Behind light came shadow settling into crevices and niches, highlighting to you the contours and hollows through which you began to know yourself: your bare toes, your bare breasts and belly, your hair trailing behind you like an apology; and that expression on your face, whatever it was since you could not see it, that stretched the skin taut and hollowed your mouth. Shadow could smudge and blur, tugging itself across the whole map of your body until it concealed shape and line and depth, until all light was incrementally banished and you were dimmed to flatness, the whole curve and cut of you muted to shades of grey, and then black.

Even without him, the space around you was rarely empty, and just as seldom quiet. Workers arrived and vanished at intervals, tools were blunted and sharpened. The crack and split and chipping away of stone under the chisel, and everywhere, dust. You watched to understand their purpose, and in doing so began to grasp the ways in which you differed. Your uniqueness. For though stasis, of course marked you out, you began to see strength in stillness. The relative freedom to think your thoughts. How they, in contrast to your new-made skin, looked dull and painted. You would not trade their ability to work for yours to dazzle.

Your maker's return was announced by his shadow stepping into the room ahead of him. You waited to be alone with him. You were made for patience, it seemed. And when the space around you emptied, all but him, some of your former intimacy returned: he gazed at you with the old expression, head tilted, those fevered eyes. But now, although you didn't fully understand, you glimpsed what work did to him: the gaunt cheekbones, the thinness of his ribs beneath the stained shirt; the way his energy spilled and seeped into everything he touched, including you. He raised his lamp to your face, and though you were two separate figures, in that moment, the shadow from the flame made you one.

He brought people. He claimed aloud that they came for you, though when they appeared, those first few, they hardly looked at you all. They glanced at him and at each other, suggested a form



of words to be cut into your plinth, which to your astonishment, he accepted, as though he mistook your body, your lustre, for his own. When the space around you emptied, when he pushed that old wooden box beside you to stand level, together, as he had been accustomed to; when he ran his hands up your knee and over your belly as though they were parts of him instead of you, even though you couldn't fully account for why you did it, you hissed at him:

Release me—

You were half afraid that he would, but he didn't. You began to doubt if he had heard you at all. He had no chisel in his hand, and when he jumped down from the box, were you grateful to be joined still by your knees and feet to the white Carrara? You could not say. But when he left you, you had much to think over, for in the midst of all this, you had almost forgotten that he had named you: Virtue. You let this word sink into you, and you slept.

He returned in bright light to carve words from your plinth though none of them had meaning to you except by the weight of the absent stone which you could calculate as though you held it in your hand. As its dust settled you considered your naming, though you had existed quite contentedly nameless until this point. The quiet ceremony of naming confounded you. And though you still could not grasp why a name was needed, you viewed it as a form of ownership and, at the same time, an act of distillation: could you truly be summed up in a single word? What was Virtue? What did it even signify?

You slept a great deal. The light motes in the air changed from golden to pink to umber. A cloth was thrown over you. The surprise you felt, sluggish as you were from too much sleep, as the cloth fell into heavy folds right down to the base of your plinth. Its presence, its weight in particular, brought an unexpected peace. Your world reduced to that which was inside you. It was not unpleasant to be stilled like this, the colours and sounds of the world muted. Your eyes adjusted, learning to pick out the dots of brightness through the weave of the cloth, and almost as soon as you had started to make sense of the patterns of those pin pricks of light, you were discomforted again, first by the sound of footsteps around you, and a snaking rope finding your waist. You panicked and that sensation made it impossible to think clearly, to try to prepare yourself for what lay ahead. You found the rope tightening and biting, and you were jerked a handspan off the ground; and tipped forward, so that dust from your niches and crevices tickled

your face, and you swung unpleasantly, the ropes around you creaking in a way that made you afraid. You caught noises that you could not first identify: hot breath, metal on rope, a strange nickering that was as much a vibration as a sound. Another sudden jerk hoisted you higher. You swung queasily, head looking back up at your feet. Some small adjustments brought you the right way up. There was a change in the air temperature, a breeze you could feel through the heavy weave of fabric. As you were winched around, you had an uneasy sense of re-experience, an ancient memory of having hung on a rope like this before.

You were settled down. The plinth was not returned to you. Instead, you were balanced on a coarser bed of wooden planks which spoke to you of your great weight, your fragility. You had the instinct to throw out your hands to balance yourself, but you couldn't. You had to trust in the wooden planks beneath you, and they did not let you down. You began to feel that beneath the planks was air, and then you moved, forwards this time, and the conveyance around you groaned, wheels you could not see, but heard acutely, ground against hard stone beneath them and occasionally caught in ruts from which they had to be nudged or lifted. Every fresh clammer you savoured. You tried to imagine the picture you made but couldn't. The wheels rolled on. Sometimes you stalled, and voices around you gathered into a pitch-point, and there was much bustle and braying of animals, before you continued moving, slowly.

There were scents too, on the warm wind. A hint of lavender sent you voyaging back to a memory so ancient it was formless, everything in it nameless and yet memory brought it alive. It came from a period, long ago when you had been part of something vast and monolithic that swelled and shrank with the effect of heat, wind and rain.

The journey ended as it began with the ropes around you tightening. Instead of being lifted, you were dragged up a winding slope and then shunted into a darker space where the scents of outside were shut out and replaced by those more familiar to you: beeswax and lemon-vinegar. You were brought to rest in a room whose light could be made out through the weave of the cloth. You detected flecks of gold and pinkish light, and though you felt excitement, you were also afraid. Why were you here? Who or what had brought you? Most frightening of all, you wished you could ask if He knew where to find you. You thought perhaps that He might pull the heavy cover off of you, but nobody did, and you remained where you were in the stillness while the new space settled round you.

In the morning your cloth was lifted, and what a sight. You were framed by a setting of the palest stone, with glints of gilt and paint. The light made you glisten from within. There were two entrances to your space, and you became aware that faces peeped at you and those faces wore expressions which softened the blow that none of them, though you never stopped searching for it, was His.

You heard voices. There were voices of the light that emanated from those admiring faces, whose meaning did not immediately strike you, and which you had to learn to understand; and the singular voice of the night which you innately comprehended. At first you did not try to engage these voices. Those that flattered you and spoke of your beauty, your perfection, soothed you, but their absence did not signify, and the voice of the night talked to itself, and at times to others unknown, but not to you. Then, as a result of the space around you being painted, you were pushed first to the far side of the room, and then, returned part-way back so that you were stranded in the centre of the room, away from the comfort of the wall but better able to glimpse the painted ceiling. As you warmed to your new position, you spied a figure in the mirror, a reflection with skin of pure white, skin that held the moonlight as yours did and gleamed coolly even when the air was warm.

That brief glimpse of white gave you courage. Though you did not know what it was you sought to hear.

Hello, you whispered, your head unpleasantly tilted away from the door. Can you hear me?

I can hear you.

Even though you asked the question, the very fact of the response panicked you and made it difficult to answer.

Did you hear me? the voice repeated more than once.

Through the panic, you felt the unaccustomed pleasure of speaking and being spoken to, of being heeded, that differed from those unspoken exchanges with your maker. You had no idea what else you might say, since you were aware that you had no control over what words came back or how they made you feel. Still, the very idea of being heard was so novel to you that it made you want to try. Those early exchanges left you exhausted from trying to think through all the permutations of his responses, of understanding what he said and what he meant and that the two were not copies of each other, not remotely. You came to expect these exchanges. To look forward to them. You learned that the voice was male, his name was Aeneas. You were

tempted to ask what Aeneas meant and how he came by the name, but he grew more voluble, and the opportunity slipped past untaken, and you found you didn't mind, that not all words had to pin down meaning. It transpired that Aeneas was not one but three figures, or rather, Aeneas was one figure, but he possessed a company of two others, who he named for you, since they themselves did not speak to strangers. Anchises, he explained, was his own father, and Ascanius was his, Aeneas's, son.

And you? Aeneas asked one day. The question was so uncoupled from your earlier question that he was required to explain it. He said: I was asking, if you have company?

Ah, you thought.

No, you said, on reflection about that silent figure behind you. No, you couldn't call it that.

You learned, over many of these strange conversations, that the voice you heard did not come from the figure you could see.

So there is another? you asked, not quite believing it.

Of course. His name is David.

David. You repeated the name in your own thoughts. David. David. Trying to picture what he was like and failing, trying to imagine how you felt about his existence. What is he like? you asked Aeneas.

I take it you cannot fully see him then?

Only a glimpse and I cannot make him out from that.

At this Ascanius snorted. He had begun to make his opinions known through such snorts and giggles.

You tried to imitate his snort and found you didn't like the way it felt. What does that — you tried one last time to make the sound—mean?

Aeneas sighed. He considers you fortunate, he explained.

Fortunate that I cannot see more? I don't understand.

And though you tried repeatedly, Aeneas could not be coaxed to say more. But you had come to understand the extent to which Ascanius loved gossip, and how those questions of yours hanging between you would worm into him until he had to answer. At last, he spoke directly to you as his father slept.

David doesn't say much to anyone.

Hmm, you said, how curious.

He's too busy holding his expression in the way he considers most becoming.

And how is that? you asked.

You'll see, was all he said.

But will I, how?

Perhaps Aeneas had been listening, waiting to speak, or perhaps he was woken by the noises of his son's amusement, but it was he who clarified: he means to say that David cannot speak because it would make him look less like...Him. He holds the expression said to be most like Him.

You felt uneasy, and deliberately didn't ask Aeneas to explain. But true to his nature Aeneas explained to you anyway.

*Him*, you know. Our maker.

You meant to say nothing, since the very idea of your maker as stone sliced deeply into you and made you tremble.

Aeneas prodded you into a response.

Now, do you wish you could see him?

The sound you emitted was proof of the shock you felt. You had no words better than that terrible sound. Aeneas chose to interpret it his own way, as a judgement on him.

You don't believe us?

You made yourself form the words: I didn't say that.

You should, because we can see, you remember, in three directions.

Yes, you have told me.

You did not speak for a good while. You could not be sure if you would ever speak again when conversations seemed only to disturb and upset you. In this silence, you were brought round from deep within yourself by the sound of wheels rumbling on the marble floor. Something approached, though you could not imagine that it could be something pleasant. You wanted to avert your attention and return to the place you had been occupying, and the feeling you had there that you are untouchable.

The figure loomed in your thoughts just out of sight, though if you strained you might have glimpsed it, just. You did not strain. The lights in the museum, as Aeneas had a habit of referring to it, were slowly extinguished though moonlight through the windows was bright enough to make you glow. The shape appeared draped in a protective cloth, as you had been

when removed here, so not to frighten you. Aeneas did not speak, and you felt that perhaps some contention had been averted. But then a new voice reached you, a woman's voice.

You are rather incurious, Daphne.

Daphne? You had heard the word without it accumulating any particular meaning. You had gone so far as to wonder what Daphne meant, but never, imagined it could be a name, a figure such as you.

I'm talking to *you*, the voice mocked, with your hands full of leaves and your toes slowly rooting.

Offended by such familiarity you switched off from listening. You did not appreciate the tone, so like Aeneas at his worst, full of pomposity. But even while you blocked her voice, your own body confirmed to you the veracity of her claims, first your toes, which confirmed that they were rooted and your fingers, that they were midway through transforming into leaves.

It was your habit, when offended, or confused, or unsure, to switch off, and so, you willed yourself into a necessary, protective sleep. When you woke, the figure remained where she had been, but uncloaked, and determined to be heard. The moment you became aware of her she was speaking to you. Her voice seemed to delight in itself.

Daphne, Daphne, she crooned.

I am Virtue, you replied out of habit even though you no longer knew if you believed it.

We both know you are not, the voice chided, when it had finished laughing.

She called herself Proserpina, which sounded unlikely, given the woman herself had a voice that was solid and unbreakable, and entirely without doubt. How she *talked*, though her words had the curious effect of making you feel more rooted; even the leaves at the tips of your fingers reassured you they were there, and at times and the scaly patch around your middle, which she called bark, seemed to drag at you, like the sudden darkness as the last candle guttered.

She nurtured something that had not before existed in you and soon enough you could not imagine how you had survived without her and her stories. She taught you new words and their meanings, detailed the possible lives, homes, and families of the kinds of people who might pass through the museum. The type of people who might come and look at you.

How can you possibly know this? You wanted to ask her and on certain occasions you managed. When you did, her answer was always the same: I lived in such a house of people as to see the whole world there.

While she drew out Anchises and bore Aeneas's patter quite resignedly, she took perverse pleasure in refuting David, most specifically, his claim, which at different times you had heard him throw to each of you, that it was on his account that anyone visited the museum: Why, all of you would be forgotten by now if it weren't for me.

What rubbish, Proserpina declared when he used it on her. *You*, better worth seeing than *me* with my Pluto, and three-headed Cerberus?

No one prefers a Biblical, she told you. Biblicals are duty and sufferance, she explained. Do you understand me?

You said that you did not.

She hesitated.

Imagine the cloth that they throw over us when we should not see.

You thought of your single journey here, under the heavy fabric. How safe it had made you feel.

But we are not that? you asked her.

We are much better, she explained, for we are Mythicals—

The word lodged in you as few words had. Aeneas must have been affected similarly for you heard him take the word and repeat it several times with evident pleasure in doing so. You preferred to take the word into you and wait until the world was sleeping before trying it out. Hearing it in your own voice.

We are like the cloth being taken off, Proserpina continued, the very view itself—

The light through the weave? I suggested

The light itself, she corrected me, smugly. For she always had to have the last word.

What self-delusion, David scoffed softly, before turning silent, after which not even Aeneas could encourage him to speak.

You glimpsed His face in David's once, as his space was being renovated after a leaking window. The doors between your rooms had been tied back and David shunted towards the door to avoid him from being spattered with plaster. You were unnerved. Though you had imagined yourself prepared for it, you were not. The shock. His face in marble. It was a shocking likeness. So

shocking that you started to wonder whether His absence might be the result of having been, at some point, turned to stone.

Proserpina, who saw all, howled.

Who cares, you fool of a nymph, she said, he's long gone. While we're still here, Daphne. *We*, the made, are the ones that really matter.

Though Proserpina was the one made for grief, as she regularly reminded you, it was is you who seemed to be weeping.

You dealt with the shock of David's face by turning outwards. Now that you no longer expected to see His face in the crowds, you made a real attempt to notice them. Those you could see, filing in, though too numerous for you to remember individually, started to form designs in your mind, patterns. Men versus women, young versus old, individuals over groups, who stayed longest, who seemed most interested, and even to wonder, though you found almost impossible to care, what it was in their lives that brought them here.

The ones who sketched you, for example, who came to you with His name in their mouths, you mostly discounted, since you were yourself and not an extension of Him. The ones who didn't look up from the books they read, the ones who read the notices and moved on, some box in their mind ticked, like the museum was a check list; the ones who leaned their backs on you, or let their children scale your plinth and smear your skin with sticky fingers, who took photos of their children up close, without relation to you, making you background to their lives—those you didn't want. But the ones who stood there, silently often, the ones who followed the words written about you with their finger pressed to the page, or gasped aloud at some point which moved them, who spoke to you, aloud; the ones who hoped for an answer; the reverence, in short, that they showed you, the tears they cried, the stories they tried to share with you, because you touched them in ways they tried to fathom, those were the ones you wanted, collected. Women, mostly, whose fashions changed, whose haircuts and footwear, and the degree to which they dared to bare their skin—though none so much as you. You pitied them their dull and mottled hides, their all too brief lives, their inability to hold the light. Even if shadow could be said to improve them, they were unanimously wiped out by light.

Finally, your skin grew grey as shadow, a shade that suited you. You hardly listened to the tour guides, who spoke of your history in many tongues, while visiting children crayoned over pictures of you, and teenagers took selfies by your side. Despite all your intentions, the story,



your story—which Proserpina had so many times tried to tell you—slowly reached you. There was a poem, you learned. A kind of story in song. A very old story. And within it was a list of names, a string of words, nymph, daphne, laurel, which, like the oaf behind felt of you and yet not you. A facet perhaps. An aspect, but not the whole.

Then am I *Daphne*? you asked Proserpina, when at last you must.

She laughed. No, you goose! You tell her *story*, but you're not *her*. He made you to resemble her, to stand in for her, a copy that would not perish as her own body had.

I'm a copy?

A statue. We are *all* statues?

Not special. Not Virtue. Not even Daphne but a *copy*, a representation? You stopped asking questions. What you wanted to know couldn't be learned from others.

Who were you, beneath the gleam of polish and the chisel-marked bark that wrapped around your legs? Beneath the stories he'd mapped onto you. Beneath all that. If you drilled down, you'd find a part of you, a core of marble that no hand had touched, a part of you that had stayed pure, unseen, uncut, unshaped by anyone else's idea of who you were. To burrow down within was to meet your most ancient self—for you had many. That part at least was true—and this self dreamed it could flow, that it had a capacity for fluidity beyond anything you could possibly have experienced in your current form; memories left over from an earlier self, a connected self, which existed long before you saw light, long, long before you were cut from a wall of rock and hoisted free, before the first blade, before the first hand even envisaged a chisel. Such a thought might once have turned you restless, but it did not, because you knew, now, that you had never stopped changing, that you would keep changing, at a pace, no maker however long he lingered would ever witness. You'd been made, remade, and made again. Life turned to death turned, through pressure, to rock, that had built up and turned and tumbled and been shoved down deep into liquid rock, the forge of the earth, at the whim of tectonics. You felt that legacy tingle in your fingertips. Your building blocks were the foundations of all things, in the carbon molecules of calcareous rock, that came from sediment, that came from life. In the calcium that became calcite, in the limestone that became pure Carrara marble. Your journey started well before your maker's, and you have, you finally grasp, long outlasted him. He in his turn is on his way to becoming sedimentary, rocks that could, in a span of years no person can fully comprehend, and if he was

lucky, if he was patient, be mined, cut and shaped, as you were, and fall into your time now, and the world of light and shadow.

## THE ELGIN MARBLES

The woman on the telephone told her that the casting would be at six-thirty. Raffy checks her watch for the last time: five-eleven. Before she leaves, she puts the dishwasher through a quick rinse cycle. She has already decided to walk the extra stop to the tube to calm her nerves. Leaving the steamy potwash, nestled behind the staff-loo and kitchen of the Italian restaurant where she earns minimum wage, she waves at the waiting staff she passes, and they wish her luck.

She hasn't had an audition in over a year, hasn't got a part in considerably longer (she doesn't count the odd job through her father). Crossing Leicester Square from its seedier side and heading towards Charring Cross tube, she decides if there is even a hint of good news, she'll call her dad ahead of seeing him as usual on Sunday.

When she was a girl, she loved Sunday lunches. She can still conjure her mother's face over the chicken pan, the slightly beaded upper lip; the scent of thyme from her stuffing; the knots in her mother's apron that she tied up behind her, and tightness of the cord under her own fingernails when she was allowed to untie it. There was comfort too in her father's routine, in the crack of the newspaper as he turned the page, the marks made on the tablecloth by his black-tipped fingers; the fuggy scent of his aftershave mingled with sweat, and the steady rhythm of his breathing. But when he was particularly taken by an image he'd freeze, his ribs would still, and the room fall silent. Her mother would freeze too. While she tried not to count the seconds her

father held his breath. She half expected one day he might die of it and face-plant in the paper, but he never did. He'd resume his breathing as though nothing had happened, while turning over the page, or her mother would call them to the table.

Since her mother died, she's cooked Sunday lunch every week for her dad, though she missed the week of the funeral, for obvious reasons. The first week her uncle bought the chicken home from the butchers for her, and she managed to tie up her mother's apron and get the oven on and she was peeling carrots at the sink, when her father came into the kitchen, and briefly mistook her for her mother. It was an awkward business which thankfully they never talked about. Some weeks later he arranged for some headshots of her, proper ones. She didn't particularly want them, but she went along to make him happy.

Despite it being rush hour, even the crush of the tube can't dim her enthusiasm for the audition. However, her nerves return as she changes trains at Waterloo for London Bridge. But the feeling passes, and by the time she's exiting the tube, she's equal to the evening's brightness. She checks the time, but her watch appears to have stopped at twenty to six. She doesn't let it bother her. Her phone has a clock. She sets off. She has the directions on her phone and plenty of time once she gets there to warm up her voice.

Following the phone's directions, she turns down a side street. This area is full of old warehouses, tall enough to keep the streets below permanently in shadow, which feels eerie, in high summer, when it's bright daylight everywhere else. The road is quiet. No one walking. She shivers and lengthens her stride. Not a single kebab house or chippie. It's almost like she's left London behind her with the summer weather. The air tastes different too, sieved of diesel and grease fumes. Soon enough she puts her fears behind her and enjoy the power of her stride. She's tall for an actress, too tall, and often enough she's forced to stoop around actors, particularly famous ones, who all seem to reach below her shoulder.

But she was right to walk. The exercise makes her aware of her body in a good way. Most of the time she forgets she has a body and when she's on stage, one of the main reasons she hasn't given up on the whole acting thing is that she becomes almost vaporous, able to pour herself into other things. As a model, and she was so young then, she felt brittle, broken into pieces: Olay took her face and hands; New Look her body; Revlon her smile. At twenty-six, with the threat of bailiffs from an unpaid debt, her dad set up a meeting with a producer he knew, at his *studio*. The studio turned out to be a windowless box beyond Norwood, a single winking lens

her audience. The guy asked how she felt about nudity. In general? she replied. No, he said. Right now.

She crosses another dark road. The potholes are vast. There is litter in the gutter that's been there so long the paper has turned black. She passes a boarded-up pub called the Quiet Woman. The faded pub sign shows an image of a woman holding her severed head. All the way down the rest of the road she has that skin-pricked feeling of being watched. It makes her speed up her cadence until she's sweating. She crosses another road and has to wait on the white lines for a bus. The new road on the other side feels familiar and welcoming. So much of the London of her childhood is captured by this one street, full of two storey Victorian semis carved up into flats, their front gardens filled with wheelie bins, each with the flat number painted in white. She relaxes. She must be nearly there. It's been a good twenty minutes, she's certain. She crosses a road that has been blocked halfway down by a row of sleeping policemen, their inner metal workings showing. On her right there is a cul de sac of deserted garages, their painted doors all locked shut. The only greenery she can see grows in cracks in concrete.

Dusk is coming. The streetlamps have been switched off for austerity. After the halo of city light she is used to, the greyness feels cool against her skin. She is walking along a large concrete building, she realises, which turns out to be the theatre itself. She looks up but she's too close to see much beyond the ground floor. It looms over the local houses like a power station. What is this place? She had high hopes from the scale of its roof on Street View that it was a proper theatre, but now she's here, it looks like it's been many things, mostly industrial. She busies herself with trying to find the entrance, so not to feel her disappointment, or worry about what is going to happen now she's here. The third flank of the building has a smaller entrance built on. A large black door, freshly painted, which gives her hope, and a column of brass signs screwed into the brick. She looks down the list of names and sees the one she's looking for: The Elgin Marbles.

That's it. That's the name the woman on the phone call mentioned. At the time she thought it an odd name for a troupe. She discovered, when she googled the name, what looked to her like piles of rubble or salvage in some museum; a smattering of stone limbs, which, it said, had been ripped off some building and shipped back to London to be *saved*. That word had stuck with her. The improbability that anything so violently treated is being saved. It sounds eminently unlikely and yet, knowing the world, equally likely to be true.

There's no bell by the door, and no knocker. Right now, she'd relish kicking a can or cracking a knocker, anything to make some noise, but instead she turns the handle which opens to reveal a beautifully tiled Victorian hallway of the kind she's glimpsed in a certain type of house on a certain type of road that no one she knows lives on. There is a smell of theatre though and she draws a long satisfying breath before heading in. Beneath the single dusty light there is only a staircase, steep, leading upwards and to the right. She's out of breath by the third set of stairs. Again, there is comfort in telling herself that this must be some theatre; the height of it. She pictures a room at the top where they rehearse.

The landing at the top of the fourth flight leads to a door with a sign for the company, larger this time, screwed into the door at head height. She steps inside. The room is empty. Cavernous. Long, rectangular, with windows down one side only and, and she smiles at this, a great curtained area at the end that must be a stage. To the right, are pillars, and beneath them a section of darker space that seems to have been gouged out of a former hallway, making the stage slightly off-centre.

Hello? She calls, poking her head inside the door and looking round.

When no one appears, she tries again, this time sucking in her belly and using her diaphragm to project her voice further. Hello?

By now she has inadvertently walked into the room. Having expected a riot of people auditioning, or backstage in some way, it's the stillness rather than the absence of people that confounds her. She turns slowly, to be thorough, ensuring she hasn't missed a sign saying back soon. What she does see, well, in truth, what she *notices*, since it starts in her peripheral vision, is a coming-into-focus of figures, statues, set out in a diagonal grid pattern across the space. They appear to be advancing out of the pillared area except they are stationary. It feels uncanny, how they appear to be here, physically present, real, when they were not here moments before. As she turns her head slowly, she sees more of them, and what she had already noticed comes more fully into focus, like those visual 3-D puzzles that were once all the rage.

In the direction she's facing, the nearest statue is life-sized. It reminds her of public statues, the ones found in parks on plinths, in random street corners, ghosts from lost ages. Statues of famous and influential men. But these are women. All women.

She steps towards the nearest statue drawn by the expression on the woman's face as she looks back over her shoulder, as Raffy has done countless times on lonely, dark roads. The face captures a moment between knowing and not knowing, when the body is starting to sense it is

not alone but doesn't yet have proof. This turning back, the slight pause as the eyes adjust to long sight, this is the moment caught here.

Beyond this first statue is a mother and child. But it's a far cry from the biblical depictions she remembers from school trips to the National Gallery. This is no sainted woman with a halo, no bald baby looking eerily like an old man sucking at her breast. This is a child, holding a child. The mother, dressed in skinny jeans and a vest, holds the child as though she can't believe where it has come from. Her face is so full of wonder, despite, or perhaps because of her youth, that briefly, Raffy envies her the knowledge she has never known. And yet her eyes are drawn to the thin arms holding the child, the bitten nails. She wants to throw a circle around them both, mother and child. To protect them as her own mother once protected her. Who did this to you? she wants to ask.

The woman nearest the child has her back to her. She is squatted down, knees wide, leaning over, her hands working something from the soil. Not unlike the young mother with her child, this woman, forming something carefully out of sight, looks afraid, hungry, too young. Raffy sees her ribs through the fabric of her clothing, which does little to protect her body other than for decency's sake. Her bare knees poke out into the air, forgotten, her feet anchor her to the mud. Her whole being is directed towards whatever it is she is making, though Raffy has the sense that some part of her is aware that she needs to be careful not to get caught. Stepping a little to the left to see better, Raffy notices that the woman's hands are moulding earth, or clay, into a small figure.

At a rough estimate, there are perhaps thirty figures spread across the room in all manner of poses and most are caught in ordinary moments, stances that Raffy herself might recognise or know, though several could be described as extraordinary, and yet, as her eyes are drawn to them, it is everything but their extraordinariness that holds her gaze. For example, one woman is turning into something, she can't tell what, maybe a flower, and all the technical cleverness while amazing is nothing compared with her face. Her total lack of choice. Raffy's body understands and could probably mimic that expression now even though she would struggle to explain it.

The effect on her of so many figures in one space is overwhelming, bringing tears to her eyes. The figures can only be human, in that at any moment, any one of them could move, or reach out to her, or call her over and she wouldn't be surprised. But there is something chilling too in the fact that they don't. She feels her own body wanting to encourage them to move, to speak, to reach out. She has an impulse to touch the fine fabric falling across the body of the

woman becoming the flower which looks finer than a gauzy snooper's curtain, the sort people around her flat still peer through and call it privacy. She touches it, quite unexpectedly, and its texture startles her, for it is like nothing she has felt before. She immediately withdraws her hand. She doesn't know whether to admire the effect or feel afraid. What she is seeing here really has no equal, nothing like it at all that she can compare it with. The fabric she had imagined would be soft and floaty feels grainy, weighty. When her gaze drops unconsciously she spots goosebumps up the woman's calf. She shivers and steps back.

Is this a prank?

She forces herself to touch the woman's skin. It's the only way to know if these figures are as real as she believes them to be. With effort, she clasps the woman's bare arm. The moment she makes contact she feels the muscle beneath, but she lets go. The arm is horribly cold.

She clamps her hand under her armpit and looks around her, feeling suddenly shaky and unsure. Her heart has begun to thud. She is afraid, but not of the statues, and not for her wellbeing. She feels afraid of something else. If she had to put her finger on it, she could only say something feels unnatural. But then she considers whether she feels safe here, and the answer is far easier: she does. At which point she relaxes. She is not someone who has to know everything. No good has ever come of revealing. It is enough to be part of this surreal company of women. She feels called here. Yes, called here. And just acknowledging that sentiment is a relief to her. It feels somehow right. As she is thinking this, purely by chance, her gaze catches that of the squatting woman making the figure out of mud, in an exchange that can only be called human.

She exhales audibly. Thank God. Thank God! She chuckles inwardly. The miracles of theatre. She wonders if she can learn her own way of creating this mood, this uncanny stillness and physical coolness of the body that so successfully disturbs. Perhaps a menthol spray? Some other type of coolant. Make-up friends might know. She will work on her skin, which is ordinarily pale, but which will need work to match the magnificently chilling grey tinge to a hint of blue. To think that this is the work of cosmetics! What a performance though, to get under her skin as it has done. This company of misfits, of— she gets it suddenly and laughs aloud at her own blindness: the Elgin Marbles. Oh yes. of course. The company is made up of broken bits, like the statuary rubble saved from demolition.

She didn't know until quite recently that people being statues was a thing until, on a shoot in Times Square, a figure that she thought was a statue suddenly tried to take her hand. How she squealed. It was like the moment when she thought her father's heart might just stop, only now



it was her heart. Of course, the person was dressed up as Lady Liberty in the middle of Times Square, how could he not be an actor? She'd laughed herself out of the shock, and then she'd loved it, and stayed there watching the statues catching other tourists out until the whole shoot wrapped up.

Her hands itch to applaud, to show the company her appreciation of their subtle craft, but the stillness, the silence, is so profound she feels unable to shatter it. Instead, she starts to believe (dare she?) that she might join them, that she might be actress enough to pull it off. She starts with a small decision: what position she might consider taking, if she were to step into character herself, right now. She feels like one of the old concrete bollards down in the road outside, cracked open from frosts and driving scrapes, all her inner scaffolding on display.

In a series of shy steps, she positions herself. Yes, this will be her spot. There will be time later for make-up or props. Now she must pin down a single truth she wants to convey. Something drawn from her life. She feels again the strange nostalgia she experienced on the way here, passing the row of garages. It's a memory so faint it is bodily recollected rather than seen in her mind's eye. It must be from her very early childhood, back when she felt truly safe in the world. When she was just a daughter, her father just a father, before she had any knowledge of the world of men. She hesitates, doubts again: is this good enough? She lets herself sit as though on a curb; knees drawn up. This is how she would wait on the pavement curb for her father to come home when she was tiny. Just beyond their own garden gate on the curve in the road where she could see him coming soonest. Sometimes the neighbour's cat would join her, trying to rub against her, leaving the taste of cat hair in her mouth. She sees ants hunting for food on the pavement, smells tarmac warmed by the evening sun. The slamming of doors in the distance. Kids on bikes. She is a child with a child's body, soft tufty hairs on her shins, scabs on both knees, dirt between her toes, wearing hand-me-down sandals two-sizes too big. Her hair is so tightly plaited, her scalp itches. She has just scratched it, in her mind, and is basking in that brief feeling of relief before it feels tight again. She waits, her eyes pinned on the end of the road where, soon, she is sure, she will see his familiar form, in outline at first, that gait of his, and his empty sandwich box under his arm. She has the hint of a smile on her lips. Yes, she thinks, this is how she wants to remember herself. Before breasts and hips and headshots, before images of her floating freely on the dark web. The obedient and loving daughter. Waiting, waiting, never to grow up.

The air is softer than candlelight. The longer she holds her knees tightly into her chest, the more disembodied she feels, as though she is floating when sitting still. Will they accept her?

She desperately wants them to. While she is gathering her thoughts, she hears a distant sound: footsteps coming up the stairs. Another applicant? Panicked by the thought of competition when she is not yet ready to defend her place, assuming she needs to, assuming there is only one spot to fill, she falls fully into her role. A tiny but necessary relaxation at the base of her neck. While outside, heavy boots nearing the top step; breathing laboured, resentful, a little wheezy. There is no knock, instead a figure falls into the room. Raffy cannot spoil her pose by turning. She tells herself she must accept that she will not see the competition to be able to judge, that this control is part of what is required. Except the woman is loud. Still out of breath, the actress, whoever she is, walks around, feet slapping on the hardwood floor. Circling, circling, bewildered. What the....? What the fuck? Is this a joke? Then the clatter of her receding feet. The third contender doesn't even step into the room, doesn't open the door, which has banged itself shut after the previous applicant. This woman seems to stop at the door, her breathing audible. Raffy doesn't know how long the woman waits there, unable, or afraid to knock, since she has no sense of time herself without her phone.

The last applicant is a man. By now Raffy can hear the difference in approach. The heavier tread, the smell of male sweat that precedes him, the way he leans into the room by hanging off the doorframe with one arm. She can never know how much the two women preceding him saw, but what is clear to her is that he sees nothing. He crosses the room, circling through a half dozen statues Raffy can see, as though they were not there. He announces his name clearly, several times, and then he kicks a column. She hears him swearing half the way downstairs once he finally leaves. In his wake, the room seems to hold its breath. His presence felt like a scythe in the silence.

Raffy hugs her knees all the tighter and pictures her father's figure on the very edge of her road. The male actor's anger, still palpable in the room, feeds into that image of her father, so that it is sharper in memory. Inwardly, she feels satisfied. He could not see the company, herself among it. The thought of what that could mean is too much to unpick now. She begins to believe it is possible that they want her, that this role is hers to be lost. She can finally picture herself here, living the performance of her life.

The warmth of light glancing her cheek tells her that night has passed. Standing at ninety degrees to the window, she cannot see the rising sun except as a glow in her peripheral vision, but she can imagine it. In fact, in this moment she believes there is no limit to all she can imagine. She has grown chilly from a night of statueism. She is perhaps a little stiff, she thinks, but otherwise none the worse for her adventure, and how good it feels to have passed a single night

as part of something greater than herself, become lost to it. Inside it. She is aware, that out of habit, she might like to yawn, or scratch her belly, as she does most mornings as she becomes slowly conscious of where she is. It would be pleasant certainly to feel the animal stretch of her own limbs, the softness of her own skin beneath her fingers, the reassuring weight of muscle. But all this anticipation must be weighed against the pleasure of her own continued performance.

The urge to remain part of the pack is stronger than the urge to reassert a sense of herself. As a concession, she allows herself the pleasure of contemplating what the noise she would make if she were to announce herself as the young man had done in the night. A whoop perhaps, a holler or laugh? She decides on a celebratory howl starting at the very tunnel of her throat and ringing along the roof of her mouth. She can almost taste the sound of it, the reverberation in the cartilage, the animal thrill.

She lifts her tongue in her mouth, not to start the sound, but to imagine making it, but the muscles do not even twitch in response. She tries to suck in her cheeks, to move anything at all, but she can't.

Before last night, she might have panicked, and felt a swallowed-up kind of claustrophobia. But she stays calm. She blinks, mentally, for not even her eyelids obey her.

The warming light of the rising sun spans her left side, turning her skin a kind of subtle apricot after the dun-grey of night. The studio air rings. Motes of light catch her eye like a sort of hearty applause. She thinks, briefly, of what she would say to her father, had she turned up for tea, or even called. She imagines her voice telling him: I got the part, dad. His laughter down the telephone line and then his voice. That's my girl. Wait 'til the lads hear. Do me a favour though, Raff, will you? Send us a picture.

## TORSOS

The police were called to the scene at the museum. The message was simple: a foot had been found. The note was passed to an inspector at his desk, who took pleasure in reading these five words aloud to himself. The case had pleasing potential, he thought, rising to fetch his coat, and where a foot lay, a body must be close behind.

Arriving at the museum the inspector was ushered around to the side entrance of the building. Inside, he found the curator waiting for him beside an audio point, signalled by a large graphic of an ear.

He knew nothing of curators; she was the first of her kind he had met, and he suspected the situation was mutual. He sniffed at her, expecting the earthy scent of a digger, but she gave off peculiar hints of rare elements and death. Startled, he reminded himself to be cautious. He was here to ask questions, and yet there was a great deal that even an inspector could not ask.

Withdrawing his notebook from his pocket, he turned over the pages to a blank one and licked his pencil.

The curator watched him with astonishment. Is that—she seemed unable to get the words out. Is manual recording of something this sensitive wise?

He made a small gesture to suggest this was the way the process worked, fought the urge to sniff the new-sharpened pencil, which he may have still done furtively, and began questioning:

It was you who reported the incident?

She nodded.

And discovered it also?

She hesitated.

You can nod.

She nodded.

His pencil was pressed hard into the paper as he waited for her to elaborate. When nothing was forthcoming, he offered her a way in.

A foot, I believe?

She nodded again, her expression distressed. He could hear her pulse quickening over what he could only assume was the sound of a clock ticking, which of course was impossible since there was unlikely to be anything analogue in the whole museum, excepting himself.

Perhaps I could see for myself?

Of course.

The whole conversation possessed an underlying tension. It was some moments yet before the inspector understood that some of that tension was inside him and that as it put it to himself, he felt on the other side of things here, in this place of former worlds. Closing the notepad, he reminded himself that he was good at his job, nodded at her rather formally, and suggested she lead the way. Her steps were noiseless while his own shoes squeaked against the white tiles, and his breathing, under pressure to keep apace, was magnified by the otherwise total lack of sound, which he experienced as pressure against his eardrums. The light everywhere was constant and brilliant. Finally, the curator paused at an area that had been roped off and used the scanner to open the doors. He followed her into the first of a series of interconnected galleries. Finally, he thought, exhibits. His nose detected a rich and complex blend of scents and he thought to himself, *this* is the scent of antiquity!

His nose reddened. His eyes watered. Withdrawing his standard issue cambric handkerchief, he started swabbing. The scent was strongest, he noted, in the centre of all this whiteness. He followed it to its source. Something human appeared to be suspended in air.

Is that—

He moved closer. Three torsos were apparently levitating in the centre of the room, though he very quickly spotted the near invisible wires on which the torsos were suspended. Still, the sight was impressive. As a professional man, he would ordinarily make every effort not to

express shock at crime scene, but he understood that shock was the desired response here—the very intention of the exhibition’s design, and so he allowed himself a little noise of alarm which brought a satisfied smile from the curator. The smile lasted until he withdrew his notebook and pencil.

Are you really going to use that? she asked. I can lend you a device. Let me have something sent down, she insisted.

No, that isn’t necessary, he said mildly, this is the way I do things, I assure you it’s perfectly safe. No hacking this way either, he said, trying to make her laugh, but of course she did not.

The inspector set to work sketching. He preferred images over words because they were more primal, they did not first have to be turned into words, but merely reproduced. He noticed over the years that they made his notes extremely accurate. He sketched the three suspended torsos, and the one lying on its back on the pure white floor, the wires and rig that had held it suspended from the ceiling neatly folded in a pile.

His sketches carefully noted differences among the three hanging torsos and, despite the damage, the fourth on the ground. The furthest left torso, he noticed as he captured it with his pencil, and the most complete of the four, was the torso of a man, from chin and neck down to the right hip, the left side being slightly truncated at both ends. He had the remains of both shoulders, but nothing beyond the deltoid. He might, once, have been carrying something, for the finely wrought muscles of his chest and belly seemed tighter on one side, and the other side subtly elongated. The torsos to the right down to the one on the floor were each slightly less complete, the first having only one shoulder, the third beginning at the pectoral muscles and ending at the belly. Still, the inspector noted, it was possible for him to conclude the whole from the fragment. The only individual sense, and consequentially the aspect requiring a degree of conjecture, was the potential attitude each might have held.

Lastly, he drew the damage to the torso lying on the floor. Sketching, he had long noted, also avoided judgement through language, terms like damage as opposed to the word wound, which was hovering in his head. Images simply showed evidence without implying opinion which was, in his position, far safer. All the time he was sketching the curator continued observing him. He imagined her taking her own notes in some more technologically satisfying way, as though he were somehow under suspicion. What stuck him as he stood over the torso, taking care so as not to affect the spatter pattern around it, was the shape of the mutilation of the belly. The damage

appeared to be blunt force trauma from below, and from the side, such as he had witnessed in the prison stompings early in his career. He squatted down and craned his neck to see as low as he could. There was some force evident downwards, such as might imply a foot stamping, but also injury incurred during an upwards force such as one might expect to see from an upper cut or a kick. Some of the destruction had been inflicted while it was still hanging, but the majority appeared to be the result of being kicked while on the floor. He turned his attention to the spatter evidence from the different blows. The material was quite well distributed across the floor, a fine white dust. Licking the tip of one finger he pressed it into the dust and tasted it. He heard the curator's shudder of disgust.

Mmmm, he said aloud. Interesting.

It was more than interesting. For his palette possessed a capacity for history that his brain lacked, recognising the musk of long dead beasts, the barest hint of the east wind, the rains that had scoured the land when this torso was first created; he felt the hum of half-life from a hint of granite, tasted lime, calcium, potassium, and underlying carbon.

Still squatted down amid the spatter of dust, he gestured to the torsos. Tell me about them.

The curator, who had drifted away slightly, made much of turning her attention back to him. What would you like to know?

The question suggested an openness that her manner entirely shut down. He cleared his throat.

For example, are they copies or originals?

She paused, and then said, I can't believe you really have to ask? I thought they had sent me an inspector.

He made what he hoped was an expression of humility.

Let me be clear, since evidently you require it stating, that no museum of our calibre would display copies.

Over the spiral spine of his notebook, he caught her watching him, and the peculiar hardness of her glare. He stopped writing.

The thing is, he began and then hesitated. The planets, the stratosphere felt closer to him than history. This whole experience of being here was leaving him afloat, unmoored. It wasn't as if this kind of thing had been taught at his school. Not history this ancient anyway. He'd been

taught exactly what he needed to know and nothing more. His sense of a period beyond his own lifetime was hazy.

So, originals? He had never felt so unsure of his terminology and every subject seemed taboo.

Yes!

Rare?

Priceless.

This was not entirely what he had meant but he recorded the comment anyway. He had the strange sensation that the more he asked the further away from the details of the crime he was travelling.

While he sketched out the spatter pattern and scribbled notes about scent and texture and colour of the fine white dust, he used a series of dots and dashes he had developed over his long career to denote distances which he paced out. These days he had to regularly practise to keep up his fluency since crimes of any sort were so rare. Around him the curator was humming. Her agitation seemed particularly fuelled by a discomfort of his craft. Though he didn't want to be, he was quite aware of her loneliness. How difficult it must be to possess all this knowledge that no one can share.

They are so fine, he mused, so beautiful, he continued, staring down at the damaged torso.

Is that a rhetorical question?

What? No. I was just thinking.

She consulted a small display near her wrist. Perhaps you could think silently in future like the rest of us.

He smiled. You don't need to stay here, if you have something pressing, he said. I can find you if I have any other questions.

This really isn't somewhere you can just wander around.

The emphasis was on the word you, which, naturally, wounded him though he made certain not to let it show. And yet his own hurt reduced his inhibitions and rather freed him up to ask questions he had held back from.

How did they get here anyway?

She stopped humming.



Everything is documented, she said, sharply. All documentation is in order if that is what you are suggesting.

He frowned. Tread carefully, he warned himself. He needed his pension after all. That was not my implication, he said gently. What I meant was more in the line of their history here, since they are so old. How long they have been here? What has been done to preserve them?

We've had them since their rediscovery. They were removed here for their protection and held here ever since.

Removed from where?

You know I cannot tell you.

He knew that he really ought to look away at this point, to show some subservience. These types. They said there was no controversy and then acted as if everything was controversial. Hated being required to explain themselves to people like him. Before he could say anything aloud, she had found a particularly curt voice, as though he were the one who needed reminding of the law.

I don't know where you think you're going with this line of questioning, but what is obvious, what *you* should be considering, is the crime itself. I have yet to hear a single question on that.

And what do you consider the crime to be?

Without hesitation she told him: Category violation.

He stood up too quickly from where he had most recently squatted after pacing out a particular pattern. His feet felt painful and he was briefly unsteady. Aware that his own age was not unprofessional, he yet found himself offering a kind of gentle bow of apology, which required a small step backwards, and striking something concealed there with his heel he stumbled. The side of his hand hit something hard and bulky. Turning to look at what had brought him down he discovered the foot!

Of course, he said aloud, for he had forgotten all about it.

It was almost the same colour as the floor itself, although on closer inspection it was slightly grainer and off-white, but a close enough match to have been almost impossible to detect from a distance. It lay on its ankle bone, sole facing him. He estimated it was about thrice the scale and size of the torsos, which were life-sized. Although, when he first saw it, he had been certain it was laying down, now, as he sketched it, it stood upright, the flat of its sole pressed to the floor. He circled it and though it was stationary it gave off a sense of an almost quivering

preparedness to move. Such a fine ankle, showing just a hint of shin and calf. The foot was balanced perfectly on a sinewy arch, its toes splayed, as though it had never known the restriction of boots. It was the most beautiful foot he had ever seen. He fought an urge to lift his trouser leg, remove his shoe and sock and regard his own foot.

He came and stood behind the heel and looked in the direction in which its toes were pointing.

Hmm, he said, following the direction of the centre metatarsal with difficulty because of the white. Over there. It's pointed over there. Where does that direction lead?

Though he didn't expect an answer, the curator wearily walked in the direction he had indicated. As she neared the wall, he saw something.

Is that a door? he asked, excitedly, pointing beyond her as the curator leaned towards a scanner to get the door, which silently opened. The inspector hurried over.

Where does it go?

Gallery Four, she explained. She held the door for him.

Gallery Four?

Legs.

Legs. He smiled but she did not. Well, worth a look I should think.

He hurried into the room in case the doors suddenly shut him out, and yet all this hurrying over and enthusiasm tore him a little in two, for he was curious about the leg room, and what it had to tell him, but he was also still reeling about discovering the foot. Without meaning to he had stopped following her and had to catch up, along a hallway lined with so many different pairs of legs, floor to ceiling, in display cases. Most were behind glass though not all. He couldn't see what the basis was for protecting some and not others. Some were in pairs, but most were lined by their original side of the pairing, with the left on one side and the right on the other.

Legs seem more common than torsos, he said.

He walked through the room slowly, noting that they were displayed like the torsos in order of completeness, starting, nearest the torso gallery, with legs that were in a few cases whole, or in larger parts, preserved, with less visible joins. All stood upright, lefts on one side, rights on the other. As he progressed down the room they shortened. There were visible differences in quality, but the presiding factor was height. About mid-way he reached the legs cut off at the knee, and beyond that they were fragments of kneecap, and then fragments of what he took to be shins.

How he wished he could just linger, take it all in, but as she had made clear, this was not a space in which someone like him could just wander freely. But even still he made a note of this particular spot, just in case the opportunity ever presented itself. The curator had already exited the gallery and so he was forced to follow.

Is that how they *want* to be catalogued? He called after her and she duly turned and waited, looking annoyed.

Again, you are missing the point inspector. We curate. That does not mean we consult. That is not how curation works. They are grouped by their aesthetic significance, their contribution to aesthetics.

And who decides that?

He regretted the question. It was the foot, he realised, it had made him a little daring.

Do you really want to be thrown off this case?

You could explain, couldn't you, but you won't.

You don't need to know!

It was odd because one of the central tenets of the police corps was that all policemen were the same. That rank did not duly matter. Rank was more connected with age and pension criteria. Long service. Lose a policeman and he can always be replaced. One is the same as the other. He muttered something along the lines and the curator, hearing him, finally made a sound of approval.

Exactly.

A head is a head, he said, quoting without remembering where he had read it. A leg is a leg.

At last, she seemed to be pleased with him. For someone like you, inspector. A head *is* a head, a leg is a leg. But heads are not legs. Not the same value, you understand. As you see we have many legs but, alas, scant few heads.

It was true. He had yet to see a single head.

Why is that? he asked.

I would have thought it was obvious.

Apparently not, he thought, frowning.

Because we destroyed them, she said mildly, holding his gaze as determinedly as if she were scanning his retinas. Before we brought them here to be conserved.

You destroyed them in order to conserve them?

The idea was far from absurd. With population as it was, with so many arms and legs available, it was often hard to find enough to occupy them all.

Not exactly, she replied. You know nothing of history, that is clear. That is as it should be. However, if you did, you'd appreciate the natural way of things. Every great civilisation including ours is necessarily built in the desecration of an older one. No civilisation believes itself defeated while their gods still smile and the glories of their civilisation, their art and so on, still exist. A civilisation only knows itself to be defeated, truly, when its achievements are crushed, its art is destroyed, its gods decapitated, their genitals cut off. Their hands too. Hands signify so much of what a people can achieve.

And their feet?

Pardon?

You must cut off their feet? he suggested. There are no feet.

Not here, no, she said, in the foot gallery, just through here.

Well lead on.

I fear you learn nothing, she corrected him, it's not at all the same with feet. They entered gallery five. Feet are just lower and therefore easier to reach. Feet are nothing, she said firmly. They are cultural barbarians. As you just witnessed. Only able to stamp and crush and pursue.

And dance, and run, he wanted to add, but did not, and still her words affected him deeply. By the time he could shake off the mood her words had brought down on him, she had moved on to talking about security, something he realised he had neglected to ask.

We should have foreseen such vandalism!

Vandalism? He queried.

Immediately her gaze dropped to his employee number on his inspector's badge.

Civilisation requires order and classification. But sometimes it needs to be imposed. We can't expect that everyone will understand. But it's for the benefit of the whole system. I would have thought you, inspector, would appreciate that part.

They have come to the end of a long line of left feet, where an empty case drew the inspector's attention. Presumably the foot had smashed its way out of the glass. Broken glass lay on the floor and a few fragments were still wedged in the join between the plinth holding the box and the ceramic tiled floor. He took a sample and pocketed it before noting something further.

I think we are finished, the curator said from the far end of the gallery. Fill out your report, file it, you know the procedure.

Of course. Consider it done. As he walked towards her, it occurred to him to ask what happened next. What will you do with the—

He had been about to say *foot*, but the curator interrupted him on the presumption he had been about to say torsos. She explained, and as she spoke, a reinforced gurney appeared in the corridor behind her heading through the foot and leg gallery back towards the torsos.

It will be taken to the lab and repaired, she said. We are experts in restoration of course.

Yes. Of course, he said politely. Can I just— he asked, indicating that he'd like to follow the gurney which was just then vanishing through the door.

Of course, she replied with evident disapproval. We have said we will cooperate fully.

He nodded and hurried after the gurney, arriving just in time to see the damaged torso being lifted off the floor and wheeled away. A large machine appeared from another door hovering a few millimetres off the floor. It was controlled remotely by an attendant also in silent shoes. It cleaned the spatter-dust into a museum grade filter ready to be inspected and potentially reused. The room was back to how it had been, as unsettling as it was intense. The inspector's eyes started watering again. The foot, he noticed, must already have been removed for it was gone.

He set off for the entrance, and arriving there to find it empty, pushed his way out of the gallery's revolving doors. He thought he saw the foot reflected in the glass, as though it were standing behind him. He turned round, but it was nowhere to be seen.

Back at the station, the inspector completed his report, had it triple stamped by reports-received and saw it dropped into its appointed pigeonhole, where it would sit for the necessary number of years before being destroyed. At his desk, alone, pondering the case, he felt the beginnings of a yawn. Everyone else had turned down for the night. What was he thinking staying up so late? He pulled his standard issue cot out of the knee hole of his desk, and was retired for the night, when a message came through.

It was the exchange. He was needed back at the museum. The communication indicated that the situation was extremely urgent. Hurrying back to the underground, a carriage moved him at double speed to the area of antiquities. The street of the museum was silent. At the museum entrance, he was asked to show his security pass and he stood waiting for clearance, mulling over the statistical unlikelihood of first crime let alone a second.

The night porter let him in. The lighting in the halls had been dimmed. A smaller, older model of the curator met him, since the museum was closed.

You'd better come, was all she said, before leading him through the museum back to the gallery of the torsos. There, on the floor, in the centre of the room, two of the remaining three torsos had been removed and laid on their sides, their ribs dented with what appeared to be the same blunt force. The hint of a neck in the larger of the two torsos had snapped clean off from the blow so that despite their original differences, they resembled the earlier torso almost perfectly.

The inspector searched for signs of the foot and found a trail of dusty footprints leading towards the leg room. The curator hung back, he noticed. Have you inspected where these prints lead? he asked.

She shook her head.

He felt slightly buoyed up by the fact that her presence here proved older types still had their place.

If you have access to an office, I suggest you stay there, he said, and I'll come find you when I'm done. As he ushered her back towards the cordons, he was aware of his keenness to get on and use his skills to hunt and seek. His phenomenal nose led him forward, his eyes trained on the faint markings of dust prints. Even for a foot of its size, the gap between each print was significant, requiring, he estimated, a considerable will to achieve in addition to great litheness of form. His left leg, always the eager one, quivered with anticipation. The door to the leg gallery was open. Letting his nose lead, sniffing deeply, he hurried towards the foot room negotiating a much more sparsely populated display case on his right, and an empty case on his left. He circled the empty case, the tip of his nose twitching. The scent indicated that foot had lingered by its old case. What had it been thinking, he wondered; did it feel fear at leaving its glass cage? His compulsion to find the foot was overwhelming. He reached the door, only to discover it led to an emergency exit. The realisation was a powerful disappointment, and he pounded the walls with his fists. The scent of the foot was everywhere at the door. He sniffed the locking mechanism, the bar, the artificial eyes, and came away with powder on his nose. Doubling back, he hunted for a window that looked outwards in the direction of the emergency exit. He found one, and saw beyond a courtyard, illuminated with security lights, and then a wall. He knew the foot was out there, somewhere beyond the perimeter.

Before he could investigate outside, he must let the curator know. On his way to her office, he spoke to security. Just a few questions, he explained. Had they checked the emergency exits, the windows, the sensors? Had they evaluated whether there had been any breach?

Yes, he was assured. Everything had been checked. The place was locked tight, alarmed, no sensors had been tripped.

Have you walked the perimeter? he asked urgently. Outside?

Nothing can breach our system. He was told again.

But what about something in here trying to get out?

Their blank stares answered him, and he hurried to inform the curator that he needed to widen the search and then asked to be let out.

He had never, he realised, standing in the unlit back road, possessed the leisure to walk the streets for no purpose, day or night. Turning west, he followed the museum perimeter until he reached the part of the wall with the courtyard on the other side. On his approach, his nose began to twitch, his eyes to stream a little. He did not even need to inhale; he could taste the foot on the pad of his tongue, the arch of his tonsils. It was focused acutely on a spot about five meters from the pavement where the foot had landed. Standing on that same spot he felt rooted by a connection to the foot that was far more than this shared location. He felt exhilarated, as if he were trapped in mid-chase while standing still. Lifted by it—made younger even. Immediately he scoffed at himself. Surely this was evidence of nothing more than age and senility and would lose him his job.

Engrossed in thought he didn't sense the movement until the air rushing past seemed to knock him backwards. At best he had a fraction of a second's warning in his peripheral vision, no scent at all. He felt violently displaced though nothing had directly touched him. It took him precious seconds to regain his balance.

The only sound that came out of his mouth was not a word at all but a sigh, a sigh that made him sound like he was deflating.

There, in the hazy moonlight, was the foot, magnificently drawn upwards, balancing on the toes and metatarsals.

Wait, he called, fearing the foot was about to go. Please.

The foot swivelled slightly on its toes to face him. Its simple beauty made him believe that the curator was wrong: a foot was not nothing.

I should, he began without conviction, I should, by rights have you destroyed.

The foot made a slight bow. Of course. It replied. What cannot be categorised ... you know how it goes.

And he did. Of course he did. The foot hesitated as though it might say more, or at least the inspector hoped it might, but then it pivoted on the ball of its big toe and bounded away, leaving the inspector sniffing the empty air. It was there again, he acknowledged, that scent, that feeling he had first encountered outside the foot's shattered cage, only now more acute, and yet still imprecise and indefinable as ever. A sort of yearning, he decided, drawing down a deep breath; craving an outcome that could not happen. Like taking a stroll in the evening, he thought. Like wanting a child of your own. Or falling in love.



## HER FACE IN THE WATER

When the world was water, and above it, wind and sun, each was presided over by one of three brothers named for their dominion, and though these dominions were equal in size, only the God of the Waters had learned how to produce sons under his salt skin; and how he was envied for it. The God of the Waters little valued the sons that formed so easily under his salt skin. He dislodged them, as he would a barnacle, throwing them far across the ocean and wherever the child landed, the sea floor rising to meet it created an island of basalt rock.

Over the years, as the islands grew in number, dotted across the water like stepping stones to the horizon, Peneus, God of the Waters, yearned for a daughter. Daughters, however, could not be produced by fathers alone. Peneus knew this, just as he knew that he would need his brothers' help to produce a daughter. But the gods never give anything freely or unconditionally. There would be a price and naturally his brothers would demand the one thing he would not give up.

A child could not be shared, at least not shared, and *live*. He knew it to be so and yet his desire for a daughter was so overwhelming, so unrestrained, that it required all of Peneus's self-command to flout it. He spent his days swimming the length and breadth of his watery world,

avoiding the ever-growing chain of islands, and the warring voices of his sons brought to him by his brother Wind. When his brother Sun burned down on him trying to singe his salt skin, Peneus dived deep into the blackest seas where it remained still and quiet.

The watery world offered much to console him, from the shifting beauty of its many atolls, its worlds-within-worlds of reefs, its forests of kelp and great curving sandbanks on which the God of the Waters sat under the soft luminescence of stars while his brother Sun slept. He himself rarely slept. His brothers saw to that. But he was strong, and when he tired of swimming, he walked across the pure white sand of the dunes, where his steps left no prints.

But all those endless years of fighting his own desires took their toll, and before they should have, the first grey hairs pricked his salt skin and began to weave through his salt crown. His bodily strength was undiminished, he knew, but his breath was growing shallower, so that he could not dive so deep, nor stay out of the burning, bitter Sun so long. Peneus found refuge in sea caves filled with air and his howls rumbled long through the deep.

The waters grew glassy with his unaccustomed stillness, without the constant motion of his arms, swimming. As Peneus pulled himself up out of the ocean one day, it was as if the waters he left behind were covered with a vast, smooth skin and any creature breaking the surface to breathe did so concernedly, hurriedly, as though they defied a taboo. The God of the Waters stood on the curving bank of an atoll, the sand filtering between his toes, and allowed himself to acknowledge that he wished to leave prints; for a life should leave a mark on the world to show that it has lived.

Taking himself slowly to the very top of a large dune, he raised his salt-smearing arms to the skies imploringly.

Come to me, Sun! he cried. Come Wind!

He expected their curiosity, and Wind, the more curious appeared first, whistling towards and past him, far across the oceans, intending, doubtless, to circle the world and reshape all lying in his path, needling the black basalt rocks, whipping up waves, flicking the spray from the sea and remoulding dunes he skimmed over. Peneus watched as the ocean smoothed back into a glassy pool, and duly waited for his brother Wind to take physical form and land soft as a drop of rain on the coral shore.

Peneus, God of the Waters, acknowledged him gravely and his brother was immediately sobered, and his nod deepened into a bow.

Peneus knew he must be patient and wait for Sun, who was stubborn and would need to burn himself out before stepping down from the sky. So it was that Sun burned white enough to make the sea smoke. Throughout this show of strength, Peneus said nothing, and in time, his patience was gratified. For Sun began to worry that being so far from his brothers might allow them to shut him out of whatever they discussed, and so cloaking himself, he climbed down from the sky.

The God of the Waters thanked his brother. Drawing himself up to his full height, he opened his arms and whether from surprise or deference his brothers came to him and submitted to his embrace.

Parting, they each had taken the measure of the others, and though Peneus knew himself to stand taller, still, and broader, and to wear the kingdom's salt circlet in his hair, his brothers would not easily do his bidding.

You called us, Sun said. What could you want that *we* have?

Peneus, God of the Waters, said simply, A daughter.

At the word, Sun laughed, thinking that his brother must be in jest. He looked at Wind, who shrugged.

But why? Wind asked, understanding his brother was serious. What need have you of a daughter when you have sons enough already?

The God of the Waters, said nothing.

Sun, always the more mercenary, calculated his odds. Our help will cost you, he said. You know that.

I do.

Wind wanted to add something, but Sun shook his head. Instead, he said, Well, this is interesting, you must admit. Allow us a moment.

Of course. Peneus gestured towards the archipelago's tip, its long, curved beach of sand cupped by shallow water.

When they had walked the beach and back several times, they returned with their terms.

We must share her.

Share her equally.

Equal parts for us all.

The God of the Waters did not hesitate to reply, though it cost him.

Equal shares. Of course. Of course, my brothers. I would expect no less.

And so, a daughter came to be born to Peneus, God of the Waters, a little girl with sea-green eyes and hair the colour of sunlight through water. She was perfection, though her father had not known perfection ever existed until he met her. Her smile, the laughter in her kind eyes, her tenderness, brought great joy to her father, and some vigour too, for he swam with her around the watery world, and in her early years, before her salt skin began to grow, never left her.

Her presence effected their watery kingdom just as clearly, for wherever she swam, the darkness cleared, and sunlight fell in golden rays. Around her, the water seemed to bubble and swirl with life: the fish lost their timidity, the water birds bobbed in the wash that trailed her, and whenever she swam to the surface, the sunlight found her nascent salt skin, the wind sought to stir her hair, for the gods of Wind and Sun were impatient to draw her out.

As they watched her, her every move and breath were reminders of their brother's debt, and it emboldened them as never before. They left long shadows and the burn of gales upon their brother's form, pestering him, so that he could never rest and must be always vigilant for the safety of his child.

At last, their bravery grew to the point that they would step down on the beach in human form to speak with him, and their question was always the same. When would they get their share of her? Peneus replied: When she is fully grown.

And for a period, his words chastened them, and they withdrew, ever watchful, always avaricious, squabbling between themselves. As Peneus's daughter grew up, they coveted her all the more, for her own sake as well as their brother. They hissed and spat at him all the harder until they began to distrust each other. Why wait, they each wondered. Why not take her now?

The God of the Waters sent his daughter swimming deep, far from the gaze of her uncles and called them to him.

You are hasty, he said. Think what you demand. Take your shares of her now by all means when she is small. But if you do, your shares will be far smaller than they could have been, smaller than mine, after I have let her grow to her full size.

His brothers considered this not indifferently, and while they did, Peneus pushed his point home.

Do not settle for a fraction of a fraction, he told them.

With bad grace his brothers agreed to wait.

But their attentiveness grew as they estimated greedily the girl's weight and their portion of it. Their constant focus made the girl avoid their scrutiny, spending her time deep underwater and far from view. Underwater, she brought her share of sun and wind with her, down to light-starved caves and crevasses, and everywhere she swam the light soaked into every surface until it gleamed, and colours that had never been known before grew visible. Fish, which had been fearful of dark places, now moved about in great shoals, setting up home in the wondrous nooks and crannies of coral reefs and rock-faces.

Her father used his time wisely, patiently planning. His days were filled with love for his daughter, for her kindness, which in turn, seemed to seep into him, her gentleness making him gentler. Wading slowly in the warm shallows, the nurseries of fish no longer hid in the shade of rocks but darted merrily between his legs, and turtles and sea otters brought their young to glimpse him sculling on his back.

As his daughter grew, so did her strength as a swimmer, criss-crossing their watery kingdom, weaving between the basalt islands of her brothers, under fire from their warring voices and the insults they threw across the seas at one another.

As though her growth fed off her father, so he declined, until one day, the day his daughter swam twice around his watery kingdom by herself, Peneus tried to stand and walk slowly through the shallows and found he could not. His salt skin hung loose over his frame and his salt circlet slid unhappily to one side of his head. Aware that his weakness only served to embolden his brothers, Peneus, God of the Waters, spent his days musing silently on what he could do to save his daughter. His daughter noticed. And at first, she tried to lure him into the waters to swim beside her, but when she understood that he could not, she swam to him and implored him:

Father, are you unwell?

He smiled fondly at her, Just a little tired, he said.

She drew herself onto her belly and regarded him, thoughtfully. He knew that she was no fool, that she saw more than he would want her to see. He kissed the crown of her head.

You notice too much for your own good, he said.

And what do I notice?

He hesitated, unsure how to explain to her. I had thought, he began and then stopped and tried again. I have been trying, trying and failing, to stop time.

Stop time? Why would you do that?

He considered this. There are some things a father does not want his daughter to know, he told her. That he oughtn't tell her —

According to whom?

He fished for the right words.

I made a promise, before you were born. One I could never keep. Unless you do not grow up. Then the promise need not be fulfilled.

But I want to grow up, she replied. I need to. How else will I get my salt crust?

They sat together, not speaking, and at last, as was her habit before she went swimming, she kissed his salt-scarred nose right on the tip.

Yes, he replied, coming out of his thoughts to wave her towards the open seas. Yes, you must go—go, enjoy yourself and leave me to think.

She swam away as swiftly as ever, but she turned back to look at him, and each time she did, he waved her on. It pained him that she was anxious for him. Once she had lost sight of him, she would forget him, as she should, and the seas would keep her safe while he decided what to do.

The last thought released a rush of questions he had no answer for yet. Seating himself on a bank of fine sand, he let fistfuls filter between his webbed fingers to pass the hours until Sun set, and Wind blew himself halfway round the world and he could think.

How to save her? And more than that, what to save her for? He had felt more than usually weakened of late. All the time he wasted up to this point, to be rushed now, just when he needed to do the right thing. He would not leave her to be torn to pieces. He must find a way to protect her and that meant an alliance with one of his sons or his brothers. But how could he convince her to accept it, and would it make her happy? Whenever he had that thought, he could think no further, for how could it ever make her happy, when they were such selfish creatures?

He came to see that saving her required changing her. Hadn't he seen the sea change with her in it, from dark to light, from still to teaming with life. She had done that, meaning it was possible, but a change of the very form of a god must require a greater force than he knew how to muster. He rubbed his face tiredly. It had to be done. It had to be. The issue was how?

By the first fingers of light in the sky, and the first stirring of the wind, he had a plan and all he could do was steel himself for the first sign of her return. It came in the merest ripple of water on the horizon's lip. He rose stiffly to watch her progression from the rim of the bay. The first moment she paused and raised a hand to wave at him and he waved back tore at his heart.

The sun's rays caught her hair, making it shine as she approached, trailing the creatures of the deep, caught in her light. Despite everything ahead of him, he felt a moment's happiness.

She swam up to him where the waters were shallow and pale.

How serious you are father, she said.

He smiled at her. Serious, perhaps. It's a consequence of my evening, he apologised. For I've have been thinking.

Oh, you have, she teased. And what have you decided?

He could only smile again, but he could not match her lightness.

I have been contemplating the way to keep you safe when I am gone.

When you are gone? she repeated more seriously. Surely you will live forever.

No, he replied gently. We live as long as we are able.

At this he raised his eyes to the horizon where he knew his brothers were watching.

Would you consider a form an alliance with one of your brothers —

No!

Then, with one of your uncles?

She gasped. You know I would not.

He did not rush in but waited, sure his brothers had caught her words, for he had heard the hiss of Wind. But he needed to push them more.

He cleared his throat. She moved. He reached out half-heartedly but she slipped around him, saying, I will not be pinned down.

He laughed, despite himself. You make your point well. But it wasn't my intention—if you'd listen, I will explain. I want to keep you safe—

It didn't matter that he couldn't finish because she was already stamping her foot in the water. No! No! Why do I need any of them? she replied. Don't you know me at all? How can you suggest it, the way they follow me all the time, Sun's burning eyes, Wind's hot breath. I'd rather die than belong to any of them.

The air was full of electrical anger. It made Peneus's salt skin tingle. Thunder cracked above him. Good, he thought. Hear this. Good. Good.

She was keeping herself carefully out of reach.

He beckoned her. She resisted. He looked at her as sternly as he could and beckoned again and this time she came. They met half-way, each of them up to their knees in water. He embraced her, resting his chin on her salt circlet. No, he said. No-one should *dare* fix you down.

Wind responded first, sharp as a blade, attempting to tear through her. Sun burned blindingly. Grasping his daughter's arms before she could understand what he did, Peneus, God of the Waters, thrust her underwater, right down to the seabed. The move was so sudden, she didn't fight him, and only gasped, open-mouthed in shock. The look on her face was unbearable as bubbles began to stream into his face. Above him, Sun burned his back so fiercely it smoked, so fiercely, in the end that Sun himself turned from white hot to icy and the cold stripped the heat from the wind. The temperature in the water dropped, turning it sludgy, thickening as it froze. The colder it became, the more fiercely his daughter fought him. Her angry string of *Whys* froze as bubbles before they could break through to air.

He held her fiercely against the seabed until the very last moment, as the watery sludge froze hard, and then whipped his arms clear of the water. He had no time to save himself, and remained stood, scalded by cold, half in, half out of the water beside her. As the wind turned his back to ice, his hair, his salt circlet, as the sun tanned his salt arms white. The only cry he could emit was silent.

Muted, alone, the air silenced by frost and ice, Peneus, God of the Waters, remained fixed to the seabed long before he froze there. Though he wept inwardly, no tears flowed.

Around his head the icy wind blew. The sun, removed of heat, hung like a white sore in the pale sky and the light everywhere, robbed of yellows and ambers, stood dull as dead-seatrout scales. Snow began to fall, coating the God of the Waters' salt beard. It caught in the fan of his eyelashes and the ancient grooves of his mouth. His only action was to brush a window of snow in the frozen sea to glimpse his daughter's face beneath the ice. He fooled himself that she too looked back at him, though she gave no sign of seeing him. No sign at all.

When it didn't snow, Wind scoured the icelands so hard he grated layers of ice into powder and threw them upwards so that it seemed to be hailing, land to sky. His brother Sun burned cold until the ice cracked deep into the blue. When Wind blew himself out and Sun was all but extinguished, there was icy night that went on and on endlessly, punishing Peneus, God of the Waters where he stood. Unprotected by water, the cold burning deep.

The stars came out and the traces of their tears across the heavens blurred time and the snow was a mercy of sorts in the numbness it brought. It had burned through Peneus's salt crust skin towards his heart. He breathed ever slower, his hand, brushing the ice each day, took longer each time to clear it. Beneath his feet, the ice creaked.



And when at last, all sense of time was forgotten, and brothers Wind and Sun were so numb they could no longer remember the source of their anger, they came down to meet their brother, approaching from the east, which was behind him. They called in their voices, scoured and brittle and not what they had been, but Peneus, God of the Waters, did not stir. Baffled, they circled round to meet him face on and saw his filmy eyes, the deep cracks in his frozen body. Sun placed his hand upon his brother's arm and knew that life had left him. The gods of Wind and Sun cried out, for they had loved their brother, once, and their howling grief fractured his body and it fell in uneven shards at their feet.

But what of Peneus's daughter? In their anger, the brothers had quite forgotten her. Only later, as they swept aside the snow, they recalled her and looked in vain beneath the ice to find her, but she eluded them. Slowly, as they regained some of their former strength, Sun and Wind warmed air and rock and water, and the ice was blown to the very ends of the world, the seas flowed back and forth into oceans, but no face could be glimpsed in the water. Instead of calm stillness, the seas flowed with a new current, that mingled and swirled, that brought new pathways across the watery kingdom, sluicing from the deep to the shallows and making the oceans brim with life.

Once or twice, when their backs of Wind and Sun were turned, Peneus's daughter raised her head, such as it was, a wave of seawater running white and then diving under the foam, for, since the salt of her skin had long since washed from her body, she was pure water, warm water, running through the cold.

## KOUROS

Since my parents have taken to talking heatedly the moment we retire each night I haven't been sleeping well, and so it has become my habit to rise with the dawn and fetch water from the river. We keep two large buckets tucked under the laurel on the way to the gate, and stooping to pick them up, I notice my father standing dark as a statue with his back to me. Clearly, he hasn't slept. He stands encircled by *kouros*, the clay grave-markers he makes, awaiting the sun to harden them. I should explain: *kouros* in our tongue is the plural—the masculine plural—which is given automatically these days. There is a female version, but the word, so little used, appears to have vanished from my head.

I call across to my father, but he doesn't hear me, so I set off, the buckets swinging in my hands. I wonder if their squeaking reaches him, but if it does, he is in no mood to heed me and doesn't turn, doesn't unfix his gaze from some distant point he hopes will save him. I pass out of the gate and onto the road under the cypresses. The road to the river isn't especially scenic, but with the sky hinting at unusual things this morning, with its tinge of pink and coral on the horizon, I begin to wonder if today will prove auspicious. Walking means precious time to myself. I listen to the leaves rustling and try to unweave the strands of tunes within them to identify their singers: cypress, plane, aspen. I feel the light dew in the grass beneath my feet and the resulting spring that within an hour or so will be burned out by the sun. The sun is important in my father's

work, now he makes his *kouroi* (masculine, singular) from clay. Traditionally, before, well, before, they were carved from local stone, a greenish grey colour, which was wonderfully atmospheric at the ends of the day when the light flattened. He kept a few of the old stones, but now, like the rest of us, he makes what he can from what he can glean, which in this part of the country means clay. He makes his figures from the memories inside his head, whereas previously, when business was good, he made them to order, to reflect an individual life, a particular body. Now, since he will not stop making them, we are overrun with an army of kouros that no one comes to buy. Of course, people still die, but with the war, the fact is only the very rich can afford to honour their dead, and even then, only their sons.

The air is almost cool this morning, like walking through autumn cobwebs. I'm deliberately placing one foot ahead of the other, like a *kore*—aha, how the shy word appears once the hunt is over—that is, a feminine grave marker. I can recall the one we kept at home, long gone now, with her exquisitely carved dress, and her hair cut short over the forehead and left long over the shoulders, as my hair would be if I unpinned it. The skill with which my father created folds of cloth from stone, almost too delicate to have been made by any hand. I used to think he conjured them. The image of the *kore* is so strong, I find myself becoming her, the stone girl, whoever she was, gathering up the cloth of my dress in one hand, the very picture of death in life. I like to imagine myself in other bodies, and my body borrows gravity and seriousness from that long dead girl, as I walk as though about to step down into water. How was the free hand positioned? Palm up, in a gesture of offering. All I have to offer is this bucket. It chooses this moment to swing and creak, and I am a fountain of tears and laughter. The laugh ebbs into a sensation of softness in each cheek and I feel lighter for it. Yes. Yes, surely, this is going to be an auspicious day.

It is good to laugh. I feel transformed by this brief stint of freedom, thinking my thoughts and staring at the first birds in the sky. At home, where there used to be bird song, now there is none and we live as three people willing themselves not to change, holding themselves rigid so not to spread and fill the absence amongst us. It doesn't help that we are in the business of loss. But then my father's family has seemingly always made *kouros*. Those little bodies have fed and housed us for years. A trade is all that keeps a man from destitution, my father says. It was a phrase he was meant to teach his son, but he has only me to lecture. My mother always kept out of my father's work, only stepping in to take payment, whatever form the bereaved family could offer. I suspect his reason for conferring that part on my mother is that he doesn't like partings.

Each *kouroi* is a piece of him. It lessened him to be present when they are exchanged. When my father's grief remoulded him, I was still a girl, and he let me shape the clay into *kouros* until my first period came, when I had to stop. I understood, though it saddened me, that a woman making *kouros* is trying to act like a man. We have no man among us now. That part of my father never really made its way back here.

Ahead, despite the coolness of the hour, a heat haze is forming, hanging like a promise of the future, beyond the furthest point I have ever walked. There was a time when I might have asked what came after that point, but these days it is safest not to try to find out.

Reaching the river, I turn and follow the path upstream. In my grandfather's time this whole area was thick with olive trees and the almonds still fruited. The trees are gone, and little grows here but angry, sharp-thorned shrubs over which I stumble and catch the hem of my clothes, which are starting to feel too thick in the growing heat. I will swim, I decide, readjusting the handles in my sweaty palms, since it's early. Who knows, perhaps others will also have risen and there will be talk before I return.

We have a saying in these parts about clay being our end and our beginning. Doubtless it is all things to people who use the earth they walk on to make ends meet, to make bricks and plaster, cups and grave markers. Yet it is common knowledge that we were formed from stone by the first couple, Deucalion and Pyrrha, after the flood when the world was empty. Pyrrha was given a riddle to solve, and the answer was to throw rocks over their shoulders, which she did, and out of those standing stones all humanity grew. It is true that there is a stone inside all of us, some feel it more than others. My own small stone is broken into three, which I can feel sometimes at night when I lie thinking.

I am startled by a group of migrants who have lost the road and are coming across one of the barren olive groves. Perhaps they were looking for food. They are elderly, men and women who have clearly been travelling some time and look worn and wasted. I clear my throat to greet them, but they cover their ears for fear I say magic words. Among them a voice shouts at me in a dialect I do not recognise, but I grasp the fear that makes it shrill and sharp, and step back with a bow to wait for them to pass. I wish I could have asked them how long they have travelled. It is said that further along the valley the river has dried out or slipped underground. I favour the latter since rivers are wily and look after themselves.

Our local pool is formed each winter when the river floods. It is in an oxbow on the near side. When it comes into view, I forget the travellers. Already someone has spread cloth over a patch of acanthus to dry, meaning there are village women here. What luck. I hurry towards them happily and spot two sisters up to their bellies in water on the far bank, unfolding a piece of linen between them to be washed. They see me and beckon across the water. The younger of the two does a little jump of impatience and so I drop my buckets and rush forward, not even pausing to tie up my dress. I am no swimmer and so I push off on my belly, head back, spread my limbs and float towards them. They chatter to me as they wade as deep as they dare, still holding the linen sheet between them. We meet on the far side of the pool where the sisters, who, like most women who cannot swim, have their feet planted in the mud. There is much of river trees about them, sturdier in the water than out. We hug, and I can't tell what is sweat on my face and what tears. Blessed gods, the older sister exclaims. It is the old way to bless a younger woman and I accept the blessing for the love that guides it to me. I cannot speak to them of how worried I have been that it has been so many months since I have seen them.

We share talk of ourselves first, as we slap and twist the linen in the water to work the dirt free from the weave. The world becomes three of us in this pool, and the rising sun glinting off the hint of mineral in the rocks known locally as the three sisters. They used to be women. We know this because they weep. Men, it seems, prefer to poke things to break them apart. We tell no-one the three sisters are here for fear that one of the temple priests would sequester them for Apollo. What need has Apollo for black stone? I look around me, since the god of plagues and weapons has struck women down, cursed them and transformed them for far less than thought.

So many have disappeared, we bring them back to us by talking of them. We start with the old dead. The grandmothers of my youth. One of us will share a name, and we will all sigh and say, remember her. And our bodies do remember, in ways that our thoughts cannot, mimicking her stance or her expressions, and through our bodies that poor dead woman comes alive again in us. We are like the muses, three creatures with one good eye.

Inevitably far memory turns to near memory and we share news of those who will not be returning, husbands and grandsons, nephews and uncles, and, lately, mothers, daughters, nieces, granddaughters. Whole families have disappeared together sometimes. I fear they have been lost in the cracks of the earth. Since the drought they are the shape of thunderbolts. Creatures of the underworld use them to slip between worlds and draw untold numbers down in their place. This

is the new type of vanishing. The other, more ancient type of vanishing will likely be my fate. All three of us here at the water's edge will vanish in increments, life's slow reduction—eyesight, hearing, patience, kindness. As a child I vowed to become a bird or a river or a sea, something travelling toward a distant point. My mother used to slap me for wishing anything different upon myself than what I had. Her own transformation was instantaneous but far less magical than my imaginings. Born free she became a slave when at seven years old her father could no longer feed her. My father who bought her freed her to become his wife. To my mind, a waste of a transformation.

I can't think of my mother without hearing her voice in my head. It has a stubborn quality that sticks, so that I am reminded of the buckets casually thrown behind me on the bank and my purpose in coming here to fetch water. The buckets seem to grow and change form, becoming my parents: my mother, to the right, my father standing on her left. This is duty calling. I sigh. The sisters accept from me the corner of the linen we are folding, embrace and kiss me. For they had parents once.

Though we haven't sold a *keouroi* in years, people turn up from time to time in the hope of being gifted one. If they are mothers of sons, my father used to be able to offer them a baked clay disc to place on their loved one's hands or eyes, to pay to cross the river Styx. They were my mother's idea, made by pressing a coin into the clay before baking them. We gifted two per body, but then someone stole the coin we used to make them, and we had to stop.

I fill my buckets and struggle up the bank, the soles of my feet slick. I make the top, and spill nothing. I am practised. It's all the shoulders, which must be kept straight and not tip forward, and in the balance. As I set off, I feel the sudden tug of home, like a line being slowly wound in. I have never tested the limit of that line, but today of all days I feel its tension, and wonder what am I returning to and whether that explains the strange vibration around my ribs? I feel more breathless than normal, though my arms stay strong, and the water in the buckets doesn't slop.

The sun has risen, though it remains early. I squint as I head into its glare. The brightness brings that strange state of not-seeing, the glare of red through my closed eyelids. I don't know why the sensation makes me picture my father as he was when I left him, his back to me, and feel something of how he used to be, his refusal to see, especially in grief. Fathers can step outside their grief at losing their sons. They can demand to be left alone, untouchable, while their wives, their daughters must go out into the world to discover the bodies, bring them home, wash and

dress each one and prepare its shroud, so that a father can throw a handful of dirt into the grave and imagine his job is done.

I glimpse the tops of the pines, the cypresses, and poplars beyond, marking the nearest edge of my family's land. My buckets have spilled very little though I know Gaea is thirsty. I used to wonder what I would become if Gaea took me. I could find solace, I think, in becoming roots and leaves and flowers. It runs in the family, for my mother loves her garden. Whenever I need comfort, I picture her under the ilex, where the winter lilies grow, a sharp-edged woman at home on the spiky carpet of old leaves. To speak it would sound harsh, but it isn't harsh. Though she is a woman with all the soft clay long since rubbed off and she is twice baked, meaning she is strong until she breaks. There, now, comes the red clay wall into view, marking the edge of the compound, the chimney of the kiln built into it, slightly crooked. I am about to set down my buckets and rub my hands, which burn, when I am startled by the approach of wheels behind me. The sudden sound dislodges a company of rooks from the pines who fly cawing overhead. My heart flutters after them. I take the moment to catch my breath, setting down my buckets, to watch whatever creatures emerge from a cloud of red dust over the road. Slowly, the meal-coloured muzzles of a group of asses appears out of the cloud, led by a man whose beard, clothes and skin are powdered red from the road. He gestures to me. Though I would like to step back, for he has much of the spirit of the underworld about him, I resist. Cupping his hand to his mouth to make his voice carry I realise he is asking for my father.

Relieved to have somewhere to take myself, I nod and, catching up my buckets, meet my father striding towards me through the gate. He scarcely acknowledges me but appears animated towards the stranger. I turn back to watch the pair of them bellow at each other like old bulls meeting in the open road. Beyond them, just as I mean to move on, I see a group of women emerging from the dust. Even if they do not belong to the man talking with my father, they appear to, because the dust has blotted out any sign of who they were. Now they look from the same, poor mould. I turn back and lift my buckets towards them offering them water to drink, but they politely shake their heads. After the rooks and the dust and the hollowness of their faces, I worry that they are auguries and feel suddenly afraid. I rush my buckets through the door to the house. Once inside, with dust on my tongue, I set down the water and cup a handful to drink. One of the rooks lands on the ground just beyond the door, wagging its black beak at me as if trying to warn me of something, but the drink has settled my fears. Now I look back at its blue-black form thinking that one day perhaps I will become a rook and see the world, freed from my

buckets, rising high on the cool breath of the winds. Perhaps I'll float over the sea and hear whatever sound the waves make. In a flock of possibly hundreds, maybe tens of hundreds, I should never be lonely.

My mother is calling. Once I have washed my face and hands, I rush out to find her exactly as I pictured her, beneath a dark ilex.

Who is that? she asks gesturing towards the gate. I explain that the man is a kouros maker from further along the valley. Oh, she says with a peculiar tightness to her voice. Did he ask the gods to bless you?

I frown at her. This is not a phrase I have heard her use before, though it is common enough from other people. She does not believe the gods care.

What? I ask her playfully. Should he have?

Perhaps I spoke disrespectfully, I don't know, but her response surprised me, shocked me even. For she is ever a woman who speaks her mind, who reprimands and has the last word. But she stayed silent. Her face a box that has been nailed shut. What? I ask, but she turns her face away and I grasp that they have been arguing each night about me, and my future, whatever future that could be?

I change tack. Why is he here do you know?

She shakes her head but retains the look that is distressing me. I have always been awed by her directness, and I know that I must grasp my own fate. I am no child, and a mother cannot succour her adult daughter forever.

Am I to be married? Is that what you have been deciding on.

She turns back to looks up at me slowly, mournfully, and nods.

I take whatever feeling this news brings and press it hard like clay in my hands. I feel its shape and weight. I have never expected much. In this time of few young lives, and even fewer living men, any husband is a rare thing.

Him? I ask.

My mother shakes her head.

Then who?

She makes a sound at the back of her throat. She has never liked questions. To her, fate is sealed. I see merit enough in not knowing my fate for it is surely easier to embrace the feet of something vast without looking up to know its height. I swallow. I am left with the unpleasant image in my head, of myself as a kind of corpse being exchanged for a dowry of grave markers.



There isn't much time, my mother says, rising. We must dress you.

Together we drag out an old chest with fabric we haven't looked at in years, some dating back several generations. They are mostly odd scraps and off-cuts of redundant finery, fragments from wealthier times. I stand with my arms reluctantly raised and my mother winds pieces of linen around my body until I am surely as wide as I am deep, and I have hips for the first time in my life.

The weight of material is considerable. The heat starts to make me pant. Surely, cocooned like this would be an ideal moment for my body to change form. I take the finest piece of cloth we have found, a tiny weave of azure cloth with a trace of gold at the hem, and offer it to Artemis, goddess of chastity, a known man-hunter. Take this, I pray to her. Goddess, see me.

It really is a beautiful fragment of cloth. If only I had more to offer her. For I cannot be transformed if I cannot be seen. I lift it slightly so that the gold thread catches the light and try again. Please goddess, take this, since it is all I have to honour you. Take this and change me, sacred huntress. Make me a bird, or a forest river, running away from the mountains.

Nothing happens.

Breathe. It is my mother appearing from the family shrine. Thought of the shrine brings to mind my brothers. As if she hears my thoughts, she takes my hand and presses into it three small figurines. Closing my fingers around their bodies is an intimacy I would never have been allowed had they lived. My mother holds a figure of me, to show me she will keep it safe. It lacks the smokiness of those of my brothers. My father must have made me, perhaps with my brothers when they died, but wrapped me away.

How long? I start to ask but my mother takes my hands, each of us still clutching our figures, and squeezes them.

Any moment.

Now?

I swallow at her confirming nod. But then I remember I represent her, just as I represent my father. Their only child, now, carrying all our futures with me. Pride makes my neck lengthen and draws my back straighter. I smooth my hair into place with my hands. I am like the *koré* figure I admired so much, feminine and graceful, as I shuffle in all my layers of cloth towards the door. My father is surely still outside, lookout. As I move, I float. The only part of me that feels solid is my hand clutching my brothers. Stepping outside a seabird, miles from the sea, flies overhead, its angular wings catching the sun. Traces of a grass snake in the earth cross the path as I walk in

search of my father. Omens of transformation. Everywhere around me there are signs that I can change. Why is my body so stubbornly attached to this shape?

My father is nowhere to be seen, but I think I hear his voice on the road, which is now in full sun. It is not quite the heat of the day, but the shadows have pulled themselves up, eaten up by the hours of the morning, and now are biding their time until they can slide out again on the other side when I am married. My mother catches up with me and smiles encouragingly. I shuffle at the pace my bound legs allow. The kouros convoy has moved on. No wonder my father hurried out to greet them, but now as we round the corner onto the road, I see him standing beside a different stranger. A man with the breadth of the soldiers who carried my brothers off to war. My father and the stranger walk towards us, my mother gestures for me to wait. As the man approaches, the sun on his face, I glimpse how travel-worn and sun-scoured he appears. The corners of his eyes and cheeks are lined from looking into the sun, and the colour of his skin makes the streaks of white in his dark hair seem indecent, like rape at the temple. An old, thin scar crosses one knee cap. A new one curls down his right leg from calf to ankle.

My father makes a vague acknowledgement that it is getting late, that the road will be blistering. It is my mother who hands me over. I don't know what I expected, some ceremony at least to mark the transfer. But without even a look or a greeting, the soldier loops a chord so newly waxed it is orange from the hive and binds my wrists. What is this? I gape. Even a reluctant goat walks free to the market. I press my bundle of effigies between my ribs and elbow for fear of dropping it. My father still has not looked at me.

We set off without a backward glance. My mother calls out a strangled version of my name and though I could turn my head, I don't, for to look at her would make me weep and I will not do that to her. Her words gratify a humble need to be named and that must comfort me as we walk. At first, there is only the exaggerated noise of our breathing and the crunch of our feet. The road is gritty and dusty, and cracked a fist's width in places. What were once fields, without the men to irrigate them, are dusty strips of earth. I note my passage beyond the village boundary, and beyond that, past the edge of the world I know. I trip several times on stones, unable to widen my stride because of the endless layers of fabric swathed about me. The soldier sees me wobble and turns round, unsheathing his blade and slits the tube of cloth so that I can walk at pace. Several strands of cloth drop and I must leave them, which grieves me, as though leaving a part of myself on the road. Over the course of the next mile more loosen and fall, to be left in our wake and I begin to fear I will unwind completely. When we stop for water, and I set

my brothers down to drink, the soldier helps tie up any loose pieces of cloth, a kindness I did not expect from him. After that I walk easier because I am no longer being reminded of what I've left behind. At the second stop for water by a brook, I find the courage to ask him what I should call him.

Should I call you husband?

His mouth performs an awkward twist. He looks at me with his strangely guileless eyes and tells me, that he has answered to many things in his life but not that.

The shadows are already sliding free of their subjects. Slowly they lengthen over the road and up the hill, but we gain little respite from the heat and none at all from the flies. Indeed, though it cannot be possible, it seems the flies deepen the faster we move. I have blisters on my wrists from the rope and blisters between my toes. My calves and backside ache but my companion shows no signs of tiring. Indeed, for his size he is astonishingly swift. I suspect he grew up in the mountains, for he has many characteristics of the goats that live there.

Do we go to your home village? I ask. Are you from the mountains?

He politely does not point out that we walk away from the mountains. Instead, he says, I go where I'm sent.

I feel another sudden pang of loss at those words though their significance I perhaps resist understanding. Perhaps I do not stare up from the feet of the giant after all. Day tips into early evening, the flies are replaced by mosquitos, meaning that we must be nearing water, which may mean a village, perhaps even our destination. The longer we walk the less able I feel to ask him questions.

I have far too much time for thoughts, the principle of which is to wonder if I am married, and what marriage to such a man will be like? I have only known my parents' marriage, from the outside, and I know enough of the inside of baked clay to know there are many reasons for fractures and splits. I try to find a way of grasping what this change will mean to me. Will it be like shutting a door, or gaining a new vista? My mother once said that marriage was like sowing a garden. I have the skill to sow seeds, but what of my husband, will he be heavy-handed and break things like a man picking flowers, or will he be like a boy stabbing a stick in the mud, poke poke poke. I know that's how babies are made, a seed poked in and a baby pushed out. I know that some women die in childbirth, while others never conceive, and I've known women endure all manner of spells and charms to bring on a child. I've known women transformed into cats for

being mothers and women transformed into snakes when they've failed, or when the baby born is the wrong sex or the wrong species entirely.

At a stone bridge yellowed with lichen we stop. I rest on the side of the bridge listening to the running water which reminds me of home in winter when the river is high. My body aches, even so, I never fail to find beauty in fading light. Then, on the wind, comes the scent of a settlement: woodsmoke and dung, and, as we set off, walking faster now, the unmistakable stench of latrines.

Even the mosquitos have gone, as we pause, and the soldier provides something hard to chew on that may well be leather. I hear voices in the distance. The hills I have known all my life have levelled and the sky, the air around me presses my face, my throat. I can't make my mouth chew or my throat swallow, so I spit into my cupped hands and let the piece of tack drop into the dust. A dog on its belly inches closer, licks its lips and waits for us to move on, sniffing the air. I am heady with thirst. I cannot even moisten my lips with my tongue. Along the journey we have passed a handful of strangers, but now, at twilight, people start drifting towards us carrying tools, as though they have been farming the land, though we have seen precious little evidence of farming. They seem too old to be provided for by such work. But as I eye them, so they study me and I realise that they see in me someone different, someone wrong, from my light hair and pale eyes, my many layers of clothes, my sharp boned features.

We set off again. The people who head in our direction weave in and out of each other and us. Now in almost darkness, the soldier's pale tunic retains a kind of light for me to follow, although I am never further than the length of rope between us. We meet archers coming towards us and he stops and speaks to them before moving on. I think of the shrine to Apollo on the edge of my village. The best of what little grew in the valley was requisitioned for him by the priests; the best almonds, the best olives, the best lambs each year slaughtered in his name, and for what? Apollo is the wandering god they say, his eye always caught, his interest always piqued. You can never find him when you need him and when you don't, when you want to hide your fine-looking daughter from him, you can be sure he'll turn up, eyeing her, so that from then on you live looking over your shoulder. But I find, as the smell of funeral smoke hits me, that I am appealing even to the wandering god. Come change me. I'll be anything you please.

There are dogs, skinny and scabbed over with mange. Even when I don't see one or feel one watching me, I can hear them fighting over scraps. Further on the flies return, except these flies are not farm flies from muck, but a softer-bodied, lazier kind that feed on salt and mucus,

and try endlessly to settle around my eyes and get up my nose. The village I had been expecting never appears, instead we have slowly entered a vast encampment of soldiers. I realise two things: that I have left my brothers back by the river, and the husband I unwillingly accepted is no husband at all. I understand that part when I see him against the frame of many hundreds, even thousands more. There is a strong smell of the foundry, of smelted iron, and death. I know death better than anyone, I've grown up living off it.

We take a path that winds through lines of tents from which soldiers spill. We come at last to a rough marketplace, marked out by painted white stones, and a pit where cocks are fighting, with a pillory for punishment at one end. The soldier ties me to the pillory, and spits into the dust. There is an exchange of sorts and the soldier, with a brief hand to my shoulder, leaves me, but I have ceased to imagine our futures lie together. Still, tied to the pillory, I slip into a dazed kind of sleep. My cheek pressed into the post only to be woken by a woman drenching me with a bucket of water that makes all the cuts on my skin sing. It is past first light. I blink the salt of sweat from my eyes as hands tug at the many layers of cloth. My body emerges from its chrysalis unchanged. Just as pale, excepting my hands and feet and face, as it has ever been though newly ringed with welts from the rope. Someone brings me a cup of water. I am like an old statue in a niche at a temple that has been forgotten, aged stone softened in places by lichen and moss. A youth, with a scar across his eyes comes for me as the moon first reveals itself in the blue. He slips a rope noose over my head and unties my hands, leading me past more rows of tents in an easterly direction.

We arrive at a large tent, not far from where the horses are stabled. I smell their ammonia, the surprisingly sweet scent of clean straw. Right to the last, I hope that the tent is for feasting, or for preparing meals. I can cook, I croak, badly needing water. But I am quickly disabused. The tent has only bodies, and ale, each in their way making the air humid. Candles are being lit on scattered tables, those not already covered by sprawling tangles of male and female bodies twisted together like snakes. I smell the iron of blood. Many have just returned from fighting; many more are in the process of numbing themselves. And a few have already succeeded.

I start to weep. I didn't want to be a wife. I didn't seek a husband. But there are, here, palpably worse fates being laid before me. I pray to every god I can think of to change me, not slowly, as I fear, but all in one swift motion. But I know even as I pray that I am not of a kind blessed to be noticed.

A woman takes my rope and lifts it over my head. She gives me a glass of ale, which I drink, and then another, and bids me to find a spot and lie there. The advantage of being unnoticed, I try to counsel myself, as I seek a corner and press myself into the wattle and daub wall that provides shelter around the edges of the tent, where the wind nips in, is that I can become a nub so small, I might as well be a pebble, or a peg to hold the tent firm. I try to curl my knees into my belly, wishing I had something with which to cover myself. I learn quickly not to wish for things, not to wish for anything, for I am soon covered by the weight of a man, and then another, and then another. As I am poked, moulded and remoulded in a manner of ways I could never have imagined, I cannot stop myself calling out to the very goddesses who refuse to see me: Hera, Artemis, Athena, Hecuba, Hebe. I remain, here, my back to the ground, neither snake, nor crook, nor rock, nor river, but resolutely, absolutely myself.

## THE NYMPHS OF THE FOREST

We laid a trail last week, set the bait and waited. A few sniffed around it, but only one bit. Our man. That's how we like to think of him. They don't share real names—on these particular apps we use. The apps that brought us together, us and one man. It's for him that we wait, like a colony of rooks in a brown ploughed field, pecking the dirt, and squabbling, as the sun lumbers over.

His text back is swift: Yes. I know it. I know the hut. See you there at four.

We have two hours to kill. The meet-point he says he knows is the Old Hiker's Warming Hut, the only building for miles. It's not what it once was since the roof partially fell in, but it's dry enough when there's nothing more around. The walls are a pebbledash, once white, but the local kids graffitied them, daring each other to come up here after dark.

We're on.

We keep no tick of time in watches. We feel, we smell, we track his scent, so faint at first, but building. We see in scent. We see in touch. It builds a picture in our heads as he leaves his house, his truck in the drive, and hitches out, first south, then east, hopping in the car of a mother driving her kids back from kindergarten. He jumps in at the light. She's so shocked, she just drives on. He's twice her weight, how can she not comply, for her kids' sake. For her own. She drops him at the intersection of the freeway when he asks. There, in the garage forecourt, not far from the gas and air, he spies a logger just going to pay for fuel. When he climbs up to the cab, Coke in one hand, bag of pretzels under his chin, there is our man, sitting in the passenger seat. What the—the logger asks, but face to face, there's something about our man that even a man with an

axe in the back of the truck fears to push. He accepts what he cannot fathom how to change, buckles up, opens the window to give himself the option to jump. Where you headed? he asks and then nods at the answer; fine, fine. All the way to the forest park the logger has a wasp in his ear, a sound-memory from way back—some old folktale about the forest that gave him nightmares as a kid. He can no longer recall who told him, or what happened, but his body remembers the feel of the fear that came on after dark. He grips the wheel with both hands, and the moment he's through the height restriction gate at the forest park, he finds his voice: Out. Then he turns tail and goes back home, his load of logs forgotten. Our man laughs smugly, imagining the logger's fear is for him. He laughs again, like it feeds him, and uses his hands in both pockets to drive up his jeans.

He's here. He sets off walking amongst the pines, north by north west. A good sense of direction. As he walks, he's muttering to himself, one word, your name. It's what we gave. We hope you don't mind. Just our little joke. He's here for you. For a version of you. A fantasy. On our soil. In our wood. Oh, the thrill, the thrill! Because we never really know if they will come. And now, he's so close we inhale a mouthful of his musk: cotton balls and swarf, dead skin cells, Palmolive. He looks older than his picture by two decades, in fact, the picture he sent was a man who might have been his son, were he the kind of man who could raise one, which he's not. Then again, to be fair, and we believe we should be, we are quite a little older than we look, and our picture isn't even of us. Or you. It had to match his expectation. It had to be his taste. Which is niche. Which is awkward, to say the least.

A woodpecker drills in the distance. As our man walks deeper into our territory, we take the time to drink him in: there are scars on both knuckles that turn the sallow skin so purple it's almost puce. We see the shadow of broken bones in those hands. A slight accident kinked the little finger. His body's four decades old, or so we gauge from the lines across his skin. He's in good shape, as his continued pace makes clear. He thinks hunting keeps him fit. At the firebreak, cut into the forest, he turns left and takes the start of the trail, the yellow one we mentioned. He keeps an eye on the little yellow icons on the posts. He's unfazed, in our world so far. Nothing yet has reached and unsettled him, his focus remains hard and clear on why he's come. Which is why, of course, he's here. A man who stokes the fear of others for his own fun. People in his hometown cross the street or double back when they see him coming. Women in his life have endlessly placated him, the ones who couldn't cross the street or run, the ones stuck, already hitched to his wagon through biology or bad luck—mother, sisters, and the chain of broken



women leading way back, who covered up for him, excused his behaviour so many times it became a habit: sure, nothing broken, it means nothing, probably an accident, or my fault, really, it happens all the time. This black eye? I did it. Walked into a doorknob at night. And my wrists, a little handcuff fun, really, don't give it another thought. Besides, you know me, I bruise easily. And anyway, who can blame him, he could have anyone, he chooses me though I'm getting old, I'm getting ugly. We rub along.

We follow at a distance, taking care to make no sound. The birds are settling, ready to roost, vocal, just now, before they are silent. He follows the yellow trail markers, but with such little heed, we know he's got the route in his head. Doesn't get disorientated by the lack of markers, by the endless span of green, doesn't even take out the phone in his back pocket to check his location. Knows his north from his south. His constellations. A proper hunter, that's how he thinks of himself, like those guys on Discovery shooting skunk and deer. We spread out, sniffing in his wake, until we encircle him. He can't see us, yet. But we see him. No one touches him. Because we're disciplined. We know the drill. Not yet. Not yet.

It's hard for us to hang back when we read his thoughts, thoughts of you, your profile we conjured up for him to lure him here. He's going through his mental card deck of your photos, the ones he asked for, and which we manufactured and sent on your behalf. We know what he'd like to do to the you in the photos, what he's imagining right now, that sends his pulse skittering like that, the bloom of heat across his belly. It's all so predictable, in the end, though he doesn't see it. In fact, the very idea of how predictable he is, is well beyond his mind. He thinks that he's a man with a unique past behind him and a future in front. He's so sure of where he's headed, he doesn't even look where he places those army surplus size elevens. For a hunter he doesn't pay much heed to tree roots, scarcely notices until he trips, the loops of bramble, the stubs of fern and bracken. He goes down upon his knees and groans. He gets up, moves on, only to misjudge the ground a while later and pitch forward. He grabs a branch to keep him up. Beneath the bark, the tree is trying to warn him, in the tiny little ways that trees can talk. But he's not the kind of man to notice little things, like a nudge to the palm, he's too single minded to look for signs. He can't be far; his mind is telling him. He's worked out the pace, the length of his stride, the terrain covered. As he's mentally scything his way through the overgrown path, he registers briefly, that it's grown narrow and so much wilder and more overgrown, that it's almost as if no one has made it round the yellow route all year.

We keep a steady distance and stay down wind. We watch him pass through the light and shadow of spruce and share what we see in whispers, since his hearing is very simple, very low-pitched. He imagines our words are the wind, and the shivers of the trees.

He checks his watch. He's going to be handful of minutes late. That bothers him enough to raise his pace into an efficient jog, partly to catch up but partly to warm himself up. For the wind is rising, and the wind is cold. He spots the roof tiles through the Norway Spruce and Scots Pine just as those newer breeds begin to thin, be supplanted by more ancient trees, for this wood was all beech in our day. Now it is a little larch, a little alder, some birch, though it needs thinning since, with no canopy, it enables snow drifts, and the deer cannot get through to feed; more oak and maple. There's Elm of course, and Laurel. We plant one in each forest lest we forget.

He walks towards the Warming Hut. The door is ajar. Dark inside. Some ivy has grown through the hole in the roof. There's even more graffiti than last year. Words painted over other words so none of them make sense. Always the scent of old woodsmoke from the inside though fires have been banned in the forest for fifteen years. Such rule breakers, these hikers. In winter there are snow trails through the forest. But it's not winter quite yet, though the days are shortening fast, and the sun has fallen behind the line of trees, sending the shadow of the warming hut three or four times its height in front. Our man walks through the shade to the door. He doesn't speak. Doesn't use your name though it's there on his lips, ready. This is a delicate moment. He leans his shoulder into the door to shift it, since it swells this time of year. His hands, he saves for later. He knows exactly when the time will come to use them. For he punches his way through every situation, right through and out the other side.

*Daphne?*

Finally. Your name is spoken. I hope it doesn't shock you to hear it said aloud. It's been so long. But even still. Your name, spoken aloud, in these woods.

*Daphne?*

At first, we made up names. Made it part of the game. But they seem to trust the names of living things. It became trees. Then the laurel, as a kind of stand in, and finally, by unspoken agreement, you. We hope you can laugh with us, wherever you are.

The wood is silent. We tried to keep it so. We know what travels, in which conditions. Out he comes, standing in the warming house door. His expression is thunderous. He's been had, he thinks, she's not here. She never, perhaps, intended to come. He clenches his fists, as they hang by his sides. We laugh, for he can't hear us. At this, his pulse quickens. Has he heard

us? Perhaps he has. His skin is damp. His shirt is sticking. He steps forward quickly, but then halts. Hesitates. What on earth is he to do now? His hesitancy is delicious. We savour it while it lasts. He taps his foot, thinking the sound of his boots on the packed earth seems loud.

Now it's time to let him feel us. We sigh into his face. He shivers. Not from the cold, for our breath is warm, but from the human sense of nearness, the only real intuition they still possess. It's such a thrill, that first hint of recognition he's not alone. Minutes ago, it would have thrilled him, would have made him feel tall. Now it shrinks him a little. How we'd like to let it rip, to scream and shake our hair. In the early days, we made mistakes, moved too fast, let our feelings overwhelm us. But now we know better. We don't lose our heads. We remind ourselves what we are and what we're not—men; of the lines we will not step over. We do not penetrate. We will not cannibalise. Though fear, by our admission, is capable of both.

He feels us. The sixth sense of being watched, followed. How well we remember it ourselves, from the old days. You can't explain to someone who's never felt pursued just how it feels, the not seeing but feeling, the presence of silence, in which your echoing voice sounds extra feeble: *hello? Anyone there?* Questions we hate ourselves for asking. He says your name first, as a question. He hasn't given up the hope, the belief, that you're here. No mind. Of course, this has never been about us versus you. He calls your name in several directions, even though, we know, he knows you aren't there, that you can't be in all directions, as we are, as he feels us to be. He spits after he says your name that last time. Spits in the dry earth at his feet. On the sticks and skeletal leaves. His voice is thinned to a rasp, so incongruously tinny from that meaty body. We're up close now, smelling his breath, glimpsing the white plaque behind his yellow enamel, the tiny shots of blood in his eyes.

We push one of us forward, we follow the plan. It's all about noise now. The breaking wood we always start with, perfectly dried for this occasion. How beautifully the ripping sound carries. The perfect blend of crack and tear. So very evocative of what he'd like to do you, to us, if he could just get a hand on. We know he thinks it, we see his thoughts. The crack of the splintering wood rips through the silence, and with it his body heat rises. He's sweating so thickly his checked shirt adheres, his jeans stick to his thighs, his knees, his calves. He's sweating so much his mucus membranes are drying out. His eyes, the inside of his nose, his throat, his mouth. He wishes he'd brought some water to swill his mouth. The temperature, which was, until the sun sank, a belated summer warm is now chilly and shadows half consume us all. The man, our man, half remembers something, about shadows in the night but we don't let him remember, not yet,

not here, though there may be a point when it helps us to hurt him, to grow his fear. He's starting to shiver. One of us, an impatient nymph who should know better, slips in close, lets her hair fall across his face so that he grabs for it, and almost gets a hand on it before she steps back. Whatever he feels in the tips of his fingers, being the nearest tangible feeling he's had so far, does something to him, going so far as to highlight what feels wrong: the lack of a presence that still feels like a presence. That's what's so uncanny, so eerie, so, though he cannot yet name the word, frightening. He turns and tries to head back towards the main road. But we are ready. We won't let him retrace his steps, not one. He must come deeper into the forest. Away from light pollution, and the hope of 4G. We lean forward so that our breath warms his face, his hands, his neck. He swats his skin frantically, as though our breath were midges on a humid night, until someone runs a finger up his spine and he cries out, and then raises his hands either side of his neck to the base of his skull, as though the stem of his neck has given up and could at any moment let his head roll free.

We push him, taking it in turns, little pushes to the chest. He reels and spins, shunted this way and that, as though the very ground were shifting like a stormy sea. One of us readies herself and screams in his face and though the register is not of his hearing, he feels it like glass in his skin.

At last! The chase. No more stopping and starting, no more idling around. How we love to be running, free, to be following the shadow of something that makes us feel hungry. The urge, the compulsion to chase, matching his every direction. The speed we can move! There's no movement of his we cannot counter, cannot beat. He's starting to understand that what follows him, what's after him, is not giving up; is gaining, when it chooses. At first, we continue in our silence, but then, for effect, we make noise, our noise, from our lungs, screaming, calling, squeaking, laughing, howling, shrieking, kicking up stones, flicking up leaves as though from our unseen feet; cracking pinecones with our teeth, biting beech nuts, and splitting acorns. The release, for us, is heavenly. Necessary. It calms us, oddly, though it doesn't sound calm. Then the brambles do our bidding, little nooses laid across the earth for human feet. His boot catches. His body hurtles forwards and down, almost in slow motion. All the force of the fall goes in his ribs. We hear them cracking. His retching. Which is the sound of more than pain. It's failure. The understanding, that it's almost over, and he's not going home.

Every part of him that leaks is leaking. Sweat steams off him, though the air is cold. His body screams in protest, at stopping, at the thought of starting again, if he were able. Stationary now, his body sags. His knees are shaking, trousers starting to come underdone, the belt buckle

torn loose in a thicket and the laces have loosed so that the eyes of his army surplus boots gleam. He manages to get onto his feet, holding his ribs. Leans his back against a tree to keep him up. His bladder goes last, releasing a surprising amount of liquid down the left side of his jeans. A very little makes it down the boot, on the inner side, into the moss and lichen floor which drinks it up. This lichen is made for drinking urine. If he would just glance around, he would see it growing up the sides of the oldest trees in the forest. A little history lesson. A portent he's just too spent to see.

Even then, even now, when things are as they are, and his back is against the hard place, there is greater lightness of his sex, that we sense, a slipperiness, that incites us to go on. Maybe it's the privilege of having the world cut in his shape, maybe the heritage of being made in the image of the kings of gods, maybe it's just the bodily freedom of no womb, of no guilt, of never having to carry through, never having life planted in your body. The only responsibility he knows is his hands, their legendary squeeze, to end a life. But ending a life is easy.

We are on our way, we hunters of the woods, to getting our minds where they need to be, so sickened, so incandescent that the inner workings of our eyes gleam, and the light in his eyes is reflected in the backs of ours and we see him seeing us. Onwards. We are, at first, like a merry constellation, despite the falling mist, the low ceiling of cloud covering the moon. The recognition in his body, reaches us like a low-level hum, the sort of hum a creature makes when it's being soothed.

And he, our man, what is he thinking? If only he could learn, could change. We would leave things calm and safe. But he's a man, and fear makes him bleak and black-hearted, for though he can barely stand, though he's long done running. We feel how much he's hating you right now, Daphne. How that fury keeps him going long after his body's done, thinking, visualising all he would do if you appeared before him. How he would make your body pay. He's thinking he wouldn't wash the blood off his hands, after he has finished with you, that he'd enjoy falling into his bed smelling of your suffering, letting your blood and fluids sink into his skin until in a week's time, a month's time, all you that's left of you are little carmine flecks round the hairs on his wrists, little stains of red around his pores.

And that is why we hunt him; is why we cannot let him leave. There will always be a version of you Daphne. A Laurel. Some child he meets when nursing his ego on his way home. There's always someone lesser to break. Always someone who won't be missed. And there's him with his secret talent to draw them in.

We step towards him slowly, taking our sweet time, until our bodies, our five hundred, block out the light, and all the light comes from within us, through the orbs of our eyes. Can he see our faces in this light, the creases and crows' feet, the welcome lines that bring relief? Our lived-in bodies with their roomy skins. Our grey-shot tresses and haggish chins. To ensure he can, we move the clouds from the moon and the light lifts, and he sees what manner of creature has netted him, beaten him, is beating him still. What a shot of adrenalin that looses. He's momentarily lifted by outrage that we are *women*, to haul his back from the green lichen of the beech and set his weight on his feet, lift his hands before his puce and puffy face and swing at us, just once.

Even slumped, his mind is obscene. The things he thinks. The things he would like to do. We wait, condensing into one thought, one mind. The human body is so inefficient. So wasteful of its energies. It cannot convert belly fat or bile, and men, such as our men, have a surfeit of that. We know, because we can feel it, he's soiled himself, the inside of his shorts is rank with bowel slime. His cock has drawn itself up to half its size, and where his balls once hung are empty sacs swinging with his boxer's rhythm, back, forth, back, forth. His lungs burn. His tongue's dry. He's making a noise he's never heard before. He's so light-headed, he's well past seeing stars. He'd like to curl up in the damp moss and die.

We can't let him.

As he tries to fold into a foetal hump, your name, Daphne, cuts his dry lips. Even now, as he sees it, it's someone else's fault. We move in. At an easy pace. His weary eyes see us fully now. It matters that he sees us. He must know, what manner of creature transforms him at her will. That moment is always a test of character. Some, who can, wail, some find a final rush of hate, most weep. Rarely they think of what they might have been. Of their mothers. Of their sisters. This one screams. And we let him, while he can.

He thinks, they all think, that this is as low as they can sink. They want to wrap their arms around their ribs, draw up their knees and pity themselves. But we know, that worn down as he is, he isn't done yet. And we know, yet, what he thinks. We let him hug himself, because we are better than they who would, if things were the other way round, the old, ancient way, of us down there and him up here, show us no pity, pin down our arms with his elbows, our legs with his knee; we've been there, every one of us, we know the feel of the earth in our backs, and the pressure, above and behind, so the only thing giving, that *can* give, is us.

What we do is this: we lay him gently on his side in the leaf litter. We lay down the bark we've gleaned, Elm bark, since numbers are woefully depleted. We roll him along the curtain of woven bark strips, until we've made a fine wattle around the man. We sew his new skin into place with silken threads until the wattle is firm, and the man wears a trunk like a corset. His feet, peeping from the bottom when he's righted, will root him here where he belongs. His arms, we concede, are pinned in, but gently, so when the wind gets through his branches, as they grow, the whole of him can move with them. We give him that. We give him more than he deserves to be given. We give him company too and daylight. He will know the pleasure of bird song, of the seasons, of blossom and chicks hatching in his boughs. His eyes by now are wide as winter moons, his nostrils flare, and his mouth gapes with disbelief. We know the only good man is a neutered man, is a silent man, is a man whose fists cannot pound, whose cock cannot screw, whose mind is forced to think, in silence on what he's done.

Lastly, we gather up leaves, gather moss, gather seeds. Mostly beech and oak, with a little hazel in the mix. We never use laurel, never evergreens for it is preferable for men to know fallowness, to be bare limbed and broken by wind. We ball the mulch in our fists first and then soften it in our mouths. We chew until our spit and gristle do their work. While we're chewing, we move around him, our new tree in the forest. We spit the leaf mulch into our hands and shape it, we take our time shaping it, and we send our ugliest, most misshapen sisters to be the last faces he sees, and their breath, for we do not clean our teeth, their breath is the last scent he smells before we shut him in, before we silence and blind him from the outside.

And when he screams, let him scream, for we have hunted well and are full of song as blackbirds. We hold his sorry history in our singing. We keep it. We learn from it as only women learn. We nymphs of the forest. Our song, sung in circles, our hands joined, our voices glugged, our song draws the moon from the shadows, stirs the blackness of the forest, gets the sap moving in the live wood and makes the beetles dance in the dead. We sing until the sun raises, deep in the woods we have planted. Some of us, the undisciplined, like to squat and piss on the tree roots. Some break off little twigs from the trees they love best, and wear them, as souvenirs, in their hair or woven, if they're patient into mossy crowns. For we are the nymphs of the forest. And the forest is ours.

## WAITING ROOM

She finds herself in the hallway. The building feels familiar though she can't remember when she's been here before. Down the hall there's a handwritten sign saying, welcome, pointing towards an office. She follows the direction of the arrow and arrives at a hatch. Peering inside, she finds no one there. She leans on the ledge and peers over, briefly imagining office workers to be like children, hiding in or under things. Wryly she smiles. Of course, there's no-one there.

Turning and crossing a shaft of light in the hall, she enters a waiting area lined with bucket chairs, the stackable sort. Seating herself, she tips her head back until it rests on the wall. She rubs the ache in her neck. Did she sleep funny? She must have. Absently she looks around her: a good-sized double parlour, roughly half as wide as it is long, with all the solidity of pre-war architecture; the Great War, of course, the one before her father's. At each end, there are tall sash windows, which doubtless overlook the back yard and the road. She could get up and look but instead she savours the freedom of sitting here doing nothing, with supper still to be made.



The whole room has a strange absence of scent which is a relief, since the smell of beeswax and pine always fills her with guilt. She's at best a negligent housekeeper, lacking the compulsion to straighten and polish—certainly *she* will not leave her mark on the world in the neatness of corners or the tidiness of drawers. Her lack of—no—her apathy for homemaking was a point of dissatisfaction when she was married, and any invocation of domesticity still depresses her. Except here. It's as though the room has managed to push aside such feelings leaving her curiously light-of-heart, happy, even. When her legs start to swing back and forth beneath the chair, she's astonished to feel carefree; even as a girl she was never that.

She is thirty years old, a mother of two. How did that happen? She's been told that her children, a girl and a boy, at one and two years old, are at the age when they most need their mother. Being needed in this new way is like being consumed. She's so tired and tiredness seems to amplify her self-doubt. Like now: she's wondering, did she leave the stove on before she came out? Did she? Did she? Her inner critic, the one facet of herself that has been ramped up by motherhood, owing something to her dead father, and whatever is left of her conscience, keeps jabbing at her and demanding to know what kind of mother hasn't already run home to check.

And she *should* check. She knows that. The problem is she's exhausted, and this room has somehow got her believing that she has the right to just sit here and think. No doubt that makes her a terrible mother; and though the admission hurts, she knows she has nothing left to try—and so, here, because it seems that she can, she lets her mind go blank and her tired gaze wander where it may. It slides up the well-polished floorboards (mahogany, tulipwood?) right up to the baseboard, with a hint of lacquer the renovators missed. Once upon a time these boards must have been painted. It feels like uncovering a secret sign of lived lives before this one.

And then it comes: that wonderful sense of a poem nudging her subconscious. She welcomes it, though she would be grateful if it would hurry and take form. As it is, it drips words at her, images drop into her head. Each of them slippery. Since her children came into her life, she's never known a period quite like it for poems forming. This flood is surely a sign that this is her moment. Or it should be. Not from the number of poems, but the quality. But that's the appalling part. They keep slipping from her. She's only captured a fragment of those that have tried to form in her head. The rest are lost, since poems can't be resurrected; they aren't blocks of marble to be chipped at when time allows, but the magic of an instant, like photographs.

When she can muster the energy, she is furious, and her fury finds a home in all the wrong places, mostly herself. All the stupid, stupid, things she's done to herself when mostly she's angry

at him for not being the kind of husband who could be generous to her, as she has seen him be generous to himself, with his talent, since he is a poet too. But he hasn't had to learn to be generous. Success has just come. Never for him the agony of imagining all he might have written.

Motherhood asks too much. She can say this now, despite the love she bears for her children, because being here has allowed her some distance, some space to see herself as she is. It would be so much easier if she didn't love them, if the scent of their downy heads, their soft skin, the feel of their tiny hands in hers didn't make her almost hysterical with love. But part of all that intensity is that she's suffocating. It makes her want to tear away the tiny hands that have a stranglehold on her body, her heart, her head—to rip away these tentacles of love and scream. Desperately, she needs a moment to step out of it all. To leave the frightening narrowness of life behind her: diapers, baby-milk, clutter, tears, tantrums, belly-raspberries, applesauce, laundry, laundry, laundry. Motherhood balled up the paper-thin sense of who she was, and it knocks about inside her, trash in a can. Children carry the weight of their parents' failings and hers will be no exception, although she cannot think on what that will be, not yet. But in this sanctioned space, she can safely untie the chord that binds them and let it drop. She will take it up again. She will. She will. Soon.

But first—the bliss of a body that feels solely her own. She stands, stretches beneath her skin, follows whatever movement her muscles want. A lean, a tip into a step that becomes another step that becomes a kind of dance. Unknown, unseen, unchoreographed. Her body finding its cadence, wrists twisting, palms stretching heavenly, arms snaking, legs gliding her forward and back; free and unencumbered; airless, weightless, unwatched, unjudged. Time folds in around her. It doesn't matter that she can't recall what she was doing before arriving here or where she will be headed when she leaves. She floats in movement, until she grows breathless, and has to catch her breath propped against the whiteness of the wall. She finds she is smiling. Smiling still as she notices a faint line in the paintwork opposite, little wider than a hair's breadth. She walks to the wall, her fingers instinctively touching, tracing; finding not just a line, an outline, but a door, its handle evident only when the angle of the light creating a shadow makes it so. Taking the handle, she pushes it down and steps through the door.

What she finds is not so very different from the room she left, excepting the two elderly men deep in conversation. They face one another seated on gym bleachers. They are both wearing white. It makes her notice her own clothing, which is not white, a colour she hasn't felt permitted

to wear since grade school, though the sweater she's wearing dates from that time. She has no idea whose skirt she's got on, but the boots, she's almost sure, are her mother's.

She waits. The men haven't noticed her yet, and the one who was speaking is *still* speaking. She witnesses the shorthand of old friends, how they go out of their way to accommodate each other, cupping their ears to hear better, speaking slowly, and repeating themselves without appearing to; and their laughter, its ability to fill the silence when they are out of breath, though they never seem to run out of words. She steps closer. The tenderness of her gaze, she discovers, is wrapped around something hard, something like envy; and yet she feels an equally hard stone of certainty that they could become her friends. It is the effect of this room, she is sure; this place, wherever she is, wants to oblige her, like it is inhabited by a happy ghost.

The fellow on the left seems mid-way through an anecdote that shows no sign of reaching completion and his companion listens, his cheek cupped in his hand. He has a habit of turning away and smiling to himself periodically, since his friend permits him no opportunity to speak, and it is clear to her that he has learned to run a gentle counternarrative in his head. She often does something similar, and his behaviour strikes her as generous, though she has never thought of her own behaviour as such. As she makes this observation, he turns his head as he is prone to, and by chance, their gazes meet.

Immediately he breaks into a smile. Such a sweet smile. And sits a little straighter. Well, hello there, he calls over to her, beckoning her.

She looks over her shoulder and he laughs, though not unkindly, more in puzzlement. What are you doing? There's no one else here. Well discounting *him*.

He's referring to his companion, who, having finished speaking, has slumped a little waiting for his breath to catch up like a man at the end of a marathon. He says to him fondly, You know we know we have company? That's right, we finally have company. You were so absorbed telling your story you didn't even see her arrive.

The man turns and seeing her breaks into applause. Will you look at that! he says, pressing his hands together and touching the tips of his fingers to the point of his nose in a kind of prayer. A woman, too.

Then they both try to convince her to sit beside them, patting the smooth surface of the bench, calling it hard as packed earth, impossible to get back up from, murder on the back. But all so good-naturedly, that how could she not. She decides to sit beside the first man, and across from his friend. As she settles in, they are talking to each other.

You said it was just a matter of patience. You did. That if we just waited a little longer... you were right. He was right. They turn to her. Here you are—

If there is a phrase for the meeting of strangers who already feel like friends, she can't recall it. There should be one, she decides, trying to think one up. There is such warmth between them, which has reached out and enveloped her too, making conversation flow and silences feel safe and easy between them. Her mother claimed that her earnestness was off-putting and it's true that she was a solitary child. She found the small talk of others hazy and vague when her own mind was a scalpel dissecting every little thing. And if there was any hint of an act in living among the bloodied carcasses of ideas once she was through with them, there is no sense of performance now. The bulbs of her cheeks ache from smiling.

Have you been waiting long? she asks.

They gesture between their two selves to determine which of them should explain and then the man beside her says, We've been asking ourselves the same thing.

Don't you know?

No!

The two friends laugh.

Should we?

We probably should.

It's this place, she says. Don't you feel it?

Like that friend who actually wants to listen, the man opposite her winks.

Like it wants to unburden us, she says.

That the kinds of things that usually break or crack will bend here. The man beside her announces and she nods.

I like that, she says, smiling. It's all those things, right?

This bench though, the first man announces running his hand along the smooth stone seat. I think it's part of a test.

She thinks he is being serious.

This bench has to be *endured*, I think.

Oh, do you, the man opposite is twiddling his hair and briefly stops to look at them both in amusement. You think that's why we're here? To endure the bench?

Why not?

Perhaps you are right, she says, happily, leaning her weight into her hands on the bench and stretching her legs a little. I find it quite comfortable, but then I've only just sat down.

You wait! They tell her. Even a young thing like you, you wait until you try to get up!

I like this, this here, she says, suddenly, surprising herself. Sitting here, on a bench, being companionable. I don't know why it normally feels so much effort.

It seems to be that if we must wait, we should enjoy it, the man beside her declares.

His friend snorts.

Oh, I know you hate waiting in general, the friends smile at each other, and then at her. He may have mentioned it. They all smile. Forced to do nothing, forced to sit and talk with two interesting people. To me, that's a gift. I used to feel the same way when my father took me fishing—

I am not listening to you talk about fishing, his companion throws up his hands. Death masquerading as life if you ask me. His hands are restless. He kneads one with the other, grasping imaginary chunks of himself like making balls of dough. I was just never one for sitting around, that's all. There always seemed so much I wanted to *do!* From the age of three or four, I worked alongside my father. I'm sure my mother was relieved at having one less of us under her feet. But I loved it—took to it immediately. I've always been up at dawn. Too many thoughts in my head to relax. I jump out of bed, and can't wait to get working. My mind is always two, three jobs ahead of my hands. Before I sat down here, and couldn't get up, I was in the middle of something, I'm absolutely certain. I always said that was how I'd go out. But then, getting a bit older, each time I got part way through a project, I would pray: not yet, please God, let me finish.

When she was a girl, they used to talk about her intelligence as a gift and tell her all other kinds of thoughts were sinful. She wasn't pretty enough at school to get noticed until she started sleeping with men and discovered a certain quality that was more useful than mere prettiness, call it gameness, that served her well. It was the only certainty she felt, the way men responded to her, all sorts of men. Her only confidence. She feels it now, while the man opposite is talking; a faint awareness, almost like an answering hum to something inside her that is always switched on, always looking. He must be nearly eighty, she thinks, but some men are just born that way, always interested. It isn't about handsomeness or beauty, though he may well have been handsome, with those bones, that face. Even with a few teeth missing though he hasn't lost his self-belief. She always fell for the wrong types. No doubt he still sees this younger self in the

mirror. Then again, if he were a few decades younger, she would probably go to bed with him, and he knows, she can tell.

Her mother, in the uncomfortable talks they used to have about men, would have called him predatory. Of course, the talks stopped after she got her period, as if her mother already knew she was beyond help. Though with the benefit of experience, now, she herself would label this kind of man faithless. You can't matter to a faithless man. They won't remember you, even if you are their wife. Her husband—why does she persist in calling him *hers*?—

What about you, the man sitting beside her asks.

Even though the conversation about her marriage has gone on privately inside her head, she reacts as though it were public, shooting out those barbs of hers that cut into her as much as anyone.

And what would you like to know about me?

Ouch—

I'm sorry, she begins—

But he is already talking, crediting himself with not being clear in what he said. He steers conversation generally towards lightness and self-mockery, and he's very good at it, and in doing so making them all smile.

I *should* have said, he repeats, I should have said to you what about your *work*? I'd like to hear you talk about it. And we have time, don't we, for a proper conversation?

My work?

His smile loosens something in her. Yes, your *work*.

She could make all kinds of political points here, points that are really aimed at other men and other conversations. About a *woman's* work, and its sphere of the domestic, the prison of childcare—

Maybe I'm putting it back to front, he says. What I meant, what I was really asking you, was what you care for, the things you care enough for to write about.

*What I care about?* she falters. Not because he seems to know so much about her, but because of the thoughtfulness of the question.

I *care about* many things, she says hurriedly. As though he will realise that men do not ask such questions of women writers and move on. But he sits and looks interested in her. So, she keeps talking. I *would* like to talk about my work. I'd *love* to talk about it. You'd know better than I perhaps, but it so often appears to make many men uncomfortable, the very idea of a female

poet. A female intellect, perhaps. I always wanted to write. Even before I really knew how to, how poems worked. I had books of stories, my parents encouraged all sorts of books in the house, philosophy, biology, no religion of course, literature, all languages; poetry. I loved the classics. I read and read, anything I could find, I had this hunger, as a child, I know a lot of people say that about children—she was hungry for knowledge—but I really was. I consumed words, pictures, lists, maps, everything. I think I read because we weren't the kind of family who asked the questions I wanted answered. By my early teens I had visceral obsessions, the things I wasn't allowed to talk about bloated in my imagination. Writing punctured them. Poetry felt like sticking pins in—

She brings her hands to her head.

She is being woefully earnest, she realises, frightened she has given too much of herself away. But they are both sitting looking at her, willing her to say more. And so, she keeps talking.

I don't suppose my saying things like that helped, she admits. I wouldn't acknowledge taboos in my writing, because I felt; well, why should I? It's my imagination. I get to set the rules of what I can and cannot write about. I think a good poem, a good story, leaves you feeling raw, vulnerable, defenceless. People don't like to be made to feel that way. Or left that way.

I always found it easier to notice the dark by the light.

Yes, I can see that about you. But sometimes it *is* just dark, she says. Brutal. I loved that side of the old myths. They never sugar-coat anything. They show life the way it is. You live, life sucks, you die. The end.

She loses confidence on the word die. It sticks in her dry mouth.

No exoneration, the second man says, suddenly.

No exoneration, she repeats. Enjoying the feel of the words in her mouth. Especially not for women.

Ariadne—the first man offers, seeming to stoke an idea or a memory in his companion.

When she wakes up alone—

Or Daphne—

Daphne...she says almost dreamily. She visits me, you know? I always thought she wanted me to do something for her.

But you did! *Sheathe the virgin shape in a ...* what was it? something *of wood*. That was you, no?

Scabbard, she thinks automatically. But aloud, she swallows audibly, and says, yes, yes, I did, I wrote that—

Concoct a Daphne. Conjure a Dryad?

Yes. And nearly— she is so moved. To meet someone who has read her work here in this waiting room. To be taken seriously as the writer of poems. A woman poet. That stuff you write, her mother said. Your doodling, her father called it, not even giving it the status of words. Her husband let her read her work to him, when he still wanted to have her, even commented on it, but really all he wanted was for her to hear his words. To tell him how brilliant they were, which she did—*Conjuring Up a Dryad*, she whispers. Though the novelty of correcting anyone feels shattering.

Just one? the second man asks cheerfully. Just one? Just a single dryad? I'm partial to a naiad, a dryad, myself, he says while she pats her damp cheeks. How are her cheek damp? She watches as he conjures a figure from the air.

What was that? What did you just do then?

He shrugs. Reaching to take his hands in hers, she lifts them to her face to inspect them. She sees the lattice of scars on his hands and down the sides of his fingers. Why hasn't she noticed these before now? She touches their raised scarring with her forefinger. Little white notches. Then, because suddenly she must know, she lets the man's hands drop and takes the hands of the other man, the one beside her, and though he has only the odd scar, he too, as she has, on his right hand, the third and fourth fingers. Writer's notches, that's what she's always called them.

But the moment is lost, because behind her someone has approached and is clearing their throat audibly, politely, announcing their presence. They all turn. A woman, short and sturdily built is straightening the front of a brilliantly coloured headscarf. The man opposite sits up, loosening the fabric around his throat, swallowing audibly.

I do hope you're here for me, he says when she is close enough to hear him.

The woman is looking across their faces, as though saying not you, not you, ah you. Sylvia?

When there is no response, the woman tilts her head as though to question her. It's not you? she asks.

It *is* me, she admits, but I don't really feel like myself, here—

Well do come, it's your time.

What does that mean?



The man beside her is wagging his finger, remonstrating his friend. Is she here for you? Of course not! Anyway, you'll leave here over my dead body.

Over mine, over yours.

They bicker. But it is the bickering of friends who might at any moment burst into laughter.

The woman repeats her name. She gives off the faint scent of sandalwood.

Should we all come? She asks in lieu of any further information.

Just you.

That doesn't seem right to her, and she says so. They've been waiting far longer than me. It wouldn't be right to jump ahead of them.

It won't take long and then you'll be back. If you want to.

She doesn't know when she reached for the hands of her two companions, but she is gripping them now, her back arched uncomfortably. The man beside her squeezes her hand in return.

We'll be fine here, he tells her. You go. We've got all day.

It's your choice, the woman tells her.

You should go, he urges her and when she just sits there open-mouthed in confusion, he tries to stand and tug her off the bench, but he isn't steady enough on his feet and she has to help him to sit back down. These benches, he says, dryly, grunting with pain.

Did you hurt yourself? she asks. She knows it would be an excuse not to leave if he has.

No, no, just a momentary stiffness, that's all. But you should go. I mean it.

He tries to enlist his companion's help.

Don't you think she should go? We'll still be here won't we. Won't we?

Though he is less convincing, the man sitting across from her nods. We'll be here. We will. If she comes back.

How strange it feels walking away from them. Turning back at the door to their room she sees that they have managed to get onto the same bench, a tangle of unmajestic limbs which they are trying to sort out. She finds the woman waiting beyond the next room beside the welcome sign. How very long ago it feels since she was last standing here. The woman opens the door to an office just along from the hatch, still empty. The office at the end of the hall is a little cooler than the waiting room. She rubs her arms with both hands.

It's how I like it, the woman says. I've never been a fan of central heating.

It's true, the tall sashes are drawn up and the light in the room is a little overwhelming until her eyes adjust.

Why don't you sit.

They sit on wicker, on little flowery cushions that someone has embroidered. In places some of the stitching is coming undone. She is starting to get a headache, perhaps she is clenching her teeth, she does that sometimes.

The woman crosses her legs at the knee first, and then switches them over so that they are crossed neatly at the ankle. Well, I'll start. Welcome, she says. I'm sure you have questions.

She hesitates.

Such as why you are here? the woman suggests.

She tries to think, she must have had questions at some point, but right now she can't recall any. Her head feels thick and confused. Like she is coming down with something. She blinks. The back of her head has begun to ache again. Ah, she thinks, relieved. I do, I do have a question, if I may?

The woman nods. By my guest—

Out there, what did he mean when he said, *if* I come back?

Yes, the woman nods. That's as good a place as any to start. But before I answer that, I need to say, that there aren't any rules here. Contrary to what you might think.

I don't follow?

Well, what I'm trying to say is that there's no requirement for you to— well, you don't need to remember anything—

I didn't think I remembered because I needed to.

Well, she smiles uneasily. That's a whole other conversation. What I mean is you don't have to have any beliefs, any religion, though technically you are here under God's mercy, that just means whatever *God* means to you.

Not a thing.

Which is your prerogative. Though if I can offer a little advice, I would say, don't rush into anything—

I'm not comfortable with the idea of religion.

Again, it's your decision, no one wants to dictate anything.

She is starting to wish she could get up and walk out.

You can, the woman says. At any point.

How did you know what I was thinking?

Her head feels tender. She touches it at the point where the skull meets the vertebrae.

The old sleeping-funny ache. Her fingers feel cold.

Headaches? Hmm. The woman says.

What? Her fingers absently probe the ache a vertebra down her neck.

Neck too? The woman looks sympathetic.

They sit in silence for some time, and she wonders why she hasn't just got up and left as she feels she would like to. What is holding her here?

There is a creak of wicker as the woman leans towards her.

You stay because you have questions... sometimes the answers are not what people want to hear. If I can free you from worrying about those two out there perhaps it will help? Yes, they're waiting, they've been waiting, for you, and now you're here. They can wait a little longer.

For *me*?

Mmm, the woman says. As I said you don't have to remember.

Yes, you said that. But you know that repeating it makes me *need* to ask questions.

And you can. There are things I could tell you about them, out there, if that would help?

No, she says quickly. No, I don't want that.

They sit there, then, without speaking. The woman opposite because she is perhaps waiting for a signal to continue that doesn't come. But it doesn't come because the woman is still thinking, starting to become aware of a knot tightening inside her. It takes even longer for her to be able to ask herself what is knotted up inside her? What does her body know that her mind does not?

Should I be explicit? the woman across from her asks eventually.

She takes in a steadying breath.

I think you might have to be.

You died.

What?

When you think about it, I suspect it is a little less unexpected than for some people.

How can I be dead, we are talking? I can feel the embroidery on this cushion.

It's a lot to take in.

Wait a minute, but they can see me, the two men outside—

Well, the woman pauses, and then instead of explaining, just gives her a wry smile.

They're dead too?

Yes.

And you?

We don't need to get into that.

Really? She scrunches up her face as she tries to make sense of what this means. Where am I then? Is this hell?

Such places as heaven and hell. Paradise. Nirvana. Elysian Fields. The Fields of Asphodel. The Halls of Valhalla. The Place of Torment. She smiles. We don't use any of them. In our own minds, we prefer a more neutral description.

The woman's face has become serious, slightly strained even. It's impossible to look at that face and not believe her. The woman looking at her has to turn her own face away, the fingers of one hand absently playing with the ridges of scars on her skin. It takes her a lot of courage to bring up what she is thinking, and when she does, she doesn't look up, her mouth is trembling, and her words shake with the pain they cause her.

I left them?

Don't think like that.

But if what you're saying is true—

It really doesn't help to think like that.

Perhaps you're thinking it's all a bit late, that the time for thinking of them was....

She can't finish the sentence. The woman reaches over and clasps her hands, and together they clutch each other. Despite the chill, and the faint draught through the open window, there is no mistaking the warmth of the woman's intentions or her kindness.

I just wanted.... I just needed a break.

This is why it doesn't help to remember. It never feels the same afterwards.

It is a long time before she can speak, and when she does, her voice cracks. But even in the most horrible grief, there is a hint of a fraction of her old curiosity mixed in there; the compulsion since childhood to question, *to know*.

This is where *everyone* comes when they die? They *all* pass through here?

Yes.

The woman has let go of her hand and sat back in her chair, but the room no longer feels cold.

But there must be so many... billions, over time, trillions. How can they all, where do they go? ... and... is it truly only me dying today? In the whole world, just me, here? No, no, it's ridiculous.

The woman doesn't try to answer her, she just lets her questions come out.

How can death be me and you sitting here? And if it is.... she says when no answers are given her. If it is, what would that mean if people knew? Where is the judgement they taught me about at school? The hellfire and damnation?

She strokes the soft skin of the back of her hand in search of comfort. Through rooms like these she is really expected to believe, have filed every murderer and rapist that ever lived and died, every genocidal despot, every wife-beater and child-molester? The columns that have passed through here. Ludicrous, ludicrous, and yet, this is not a dream. Though at times it has felt like it, she knows that it is not. And she cannot ignore her own pressures lately, the depression she couldn't lift, the anxiety, the confliction about her work and her life. Why can't this be death? She's tried to get here several times and failed. What irony if she died accidentally.

As she tries to accommodate what she's been told, every now and then, an angry thought flares through her: how can all deaths be equal? Where is the distinction, between lives lived well and badly? The energy she has wasted on shame! She thinks of her father and of his war, and what it's meant to her, all her life, living under the shadow it has cast; of her father's *side*, the Nazis; of the fascists and communists of the twentieth century, of the sheer weight of the cruelty mankind has levied on mankind under which her generation has struggled. If she hasn't always believed in goodness, she has believed in evil, coming from her line. And Daddy? Did *he* pass through here? He must have, because he's not here, unless he's hiding somewhere waiting to leap out. The thought sets her heart racing, makes her sick and liable to start laughing and not be able to stop, at this joke, this utter joke of a place.

You said I didn't have to remember. Does that mean I can forget that I'm dead?

Yes, yes, you can.

And that's what you meant, then, when you said I didn't have to remember?

Among other things. But if I can offer you a last piece of advice?

She doesn't mean to nod, but she does. Please.

I wouldn't rush into anything. You're specifically not here to remember. That is our gift to you.

She lets herself out. She stubs her toe on the door in her battle to open it. But she will not be helped. Retracing her steps back to the waiting room, the first one, the one near the entrance, where she danced, she is halted by the sight of them, the pair, arms wrapped around each other holding one another up. How they have shuffled so far is a miracle. She has forgotten that they are here for her, forgotten who they might be or what they have done in their lives, forgotten everything about herself. It is just a moment of the three of them. She loops her arms through theirs and gently steers them towards the bucket chairs. This room is nicer, she hears herself say. It has a view at each end. I haven't seen it yet, but it brings so much natural light, and natural light is good for us.

Pulling chairs together, she manages to get them all seated.

The one thing she allows herself to know is that she and he are poets, and their companion a sculptor of marble. This will be their focus. She learned from the scars on their hands, from their thoughts and conversation. It's all any of them needs, she decides firmly. It is more than enough. They can quote poetry. They can throw lines back and forth. How much they two might know that has since been lost, she thinks, with a brief prick of pleasure.

The sculptor is still breathless after some time sitting in his chair. She strokes his wild hair, wrapping a curl around her finger as she has seen him do. She worries about him until she remembers that they are dead. She wonders briefly if there is any differential, or whether dead is all the same and then she laughs. She sits back down in a chair between them both, and then changes her mind and sits opposite.

They each sit tipped forward, weight on their knees, expectant. Waiting for her.

You know what I've been thinking? she asks. I've been wondering why we've been brought here, we three.

You think it is deliberate then? asks the poet.

I do. Yes. We could have been put in any number of combinations, with any number of other people, but we were put together, so there must be more to it.

Perhaps something connects us, suggests the poet.

Perhaps, she says. But think about it. Did you meet anyone before me? Even see anyone passing through?

The poet starts to say something and then closes his mouth, tilting his gaze away from her while he thinks. Then he looks back at her. No, he says. No, I don't remember anyone.

Do you? she asks the sculptor.

I've got a good head for faces, he says, but no. I feel logically that I must have done, but I can't single out a single face.

I think it's Daphne, she says. She's what we have in common. I've written about her, you, I suspect, have too, she says to the poet.

I did, he says, and *he* sculpted her, the poet says of his companion.

That's enough, is it? the sculptor asks.

She shrugs. I don't know. I don't know how it works.

She feels frustrated, as though her being taken out and spoken to has changed things between them. Don't be deferential, I hate that, she says suddenly, and with unexpected force. Nothing has changed between us just because I know—

But of course it has changed, and she sees it in the poet's expression.

But it has changed, he says. It must have been a shock for you.

She looks away, wary of the kindness in his voice.

You wouldn't just sit there if you knew what I did—

You think you're the only one with regrets, who made a mess of things? he asks her.

The sculptor sags in his chair and looks pale. I think I thought I was dreaming, he says at last, or I hoped I was. He tugs a lock of his hair. Do you remember a time before me? he asks the poet?

I do, the poet says.

You were alone so long, she says.

He shrugs.

A mess of things, she says suddenly, since the words have got stuck in her head. That is an understatement.

They laugh suddenly, she and the poet, the sculptor looks on baffled and their laughter dies as quickly as it flared up. She has started to cry, she realises.

She kept telling me not to remember, that it was *my choice*, and not to rush anything, she says. I didn't realise what she meant. She is crying now in earnest. She tries to press the tears back into the corners of her eyes until she can't keep up. Her face gleams wetly as she describes for them the precise smallness of the apartment kitchen, which for so long had been the room of her own, little more than a galley; the weight of the stove door, and the way, which she hadn't thought through, it dug into her spine as she lay down; and how she'd never felt more lonely sliding her head along the stove floor; how looking up into the oily underside spattered with meat juices she

never found time to clean, even death was a remonstrance; the hiss of the gas, which she had to explain to them, which rather broke her mood; the time it took, the surprising amount of time to think as she lay waiting for death, in the knowledge of how ridiculous she must have looked; that terrible arch in her spine, the pain in her neck and the back of her skull against the metal, the strange bout of dry coughing, so innocent sounding, like she'd swallowed a fly; the room door shut, which she could just glimpse if she looked down her nose; the indecision prior to the act itself about whether it was safer for the children sleeping just beyond, if the door were open or shut. She thought, as she was passing, of the songs she sung to them as she lay them down. Not a perfect moment, far short of it, for they'd been crabby and so, despite her best intentions, had she. She expected peace to befall her, instead she had lists, not the usual lists, since she wouldn't be going shopping for groceries, but lists of what she was leaving behind, of conversations unsaid, even, the irony, of a new poem that started to form in her head word by word. As her back cramped, she went over the other ways she could have snuffed out her life, the ones she tried, the one's, particularly a gun, that she ought to have considered more fully. But the idea of the mess; no, she hadn't wanted that for whoever found her, what if were one of the children, though she was almost sure they wouldn't leave the room, even if they could climb out of their cots; she'd left their favourite toys.

When she is done, they squeeze her hands, wipe her face with the white cloth of their clothing.

And now you must forget it, the poet says.

How can I?

Because you've already tried the alternative of living with it all and it didn't work. They are offering to take it from you, so let them.

She finds herself thinking of Daphne. She has always considered her fate, her metamorphosis to be a punishment, but there is benefit in being swaddled and insulated from the world, including yourself.

She hears the poet breathe sharply through his nose and then sit up.

We have to face who we are, not, he says, looking at her firmly, not what we've done. We are all of a kind made fragile by our natures, by lives lived fundamentally in contemplation and examination of the world. I'm not denying we haven't each found consolation in other things, but that our minds are liable to wear us out if we don't help each other. That is why we are here, I'm convinced.



The sculptor who has been oddly still, stirs in his bucket seat, and he clasps his hands together. May I offer you some of my own experience? he asks.

Please—

I lived a long life, eight decades, and I was certain that I had learned a great deal about some things; at some things I even felt proficient; I tried to rewrite history, I admit, and as I faced death, and I had regrets. Yes, I had regrets as a husband, a father, a man who had wronged others, and I admitted my sins. But God help me, the biggest regrets, the ones that overshadowed the merely personal, were about my work, and those ideas I'd let die because I couldn't find a way to bring them to life. As a young sculptor I lived and worked among the talk of many artists. I learned a lot from listening, from watching, from seeing them share ideas. And I loved sharing ideas with them, ideas were as important as the sculptures they led to. But after Daphne, I stopped believing that; I imagined the sculptor who could sculpt her needed no-one else, and that no opinion but my own was worth consulting. I grew so arrogant, I stopped learning, I became fixed, immovable in my outlook. I believed my own propaganda. I was practically divine in my own mind and in truth, though of course my biographers don't dwell on it, I died practically friendless, even my poor wife could barely meet my eye, and I produced nothing to equal Daphne. What I'm trying to say— he clicks his fingers softly— help me here old friend.

There's *always* regret?

Yes. thank you. There is always regret, and an artist rarely gets the balance right between family and work, and most likely the bulk of those regrets post life are not of people, or things, but of ideas. My hope for us all is that in this place, where, as you put it my friend, the things that would break outside can be made to bend here, perhaps this is the space where we have no regrets, where ideas can find their form—

She takes his hands in hers and kisses his battered knuckles.

The poet, swallows audibly. I could do with a drink, he says.

There is *always* regret, the poet says, and I suspect the exact form will be personal to each of us. The balance as you say, he nods at the sculptor. I agree that there is hope, here, real cause for hope. I know what being shut up alone does to a mind that needs to be active, to be challenged, and stimulated by conversation, by fresh ideas. Exile pained me precisely because it took from me the circle of friends with whom I took apart ideas and defended others from being taken apart, and it stranded me among people who, however well-intentioned, lived day to day, meal to meal. It couldn't have been crueller. I missed my wife, whom I had, in my single act of

nobility, insisted remain in Rome. Instead of saving my best words for how much I loved her, I wrote only to tell her of my unhappiness, my lost audience, of how I fanaticised about attending my own funeral just to remember who I had been. We who are word people learn most slowly, most painfully, that words are not always sufficient.

The poet stops because he can see that his friend is looking pale, weary. He smiles at him fondly.

I wear out my friends still, and I will stop, he says, his old lightness returning. He wiggles in his chair until he moved himself nearer the sculptor. Here, he says. Take a nap, old friend. Use my shoulder as a pillow.

The sculptor tries to resist, chuckling softly at himself, but his eyes are so heavy he can barely keep them open. The poet shifts again, to accommodate the head that presses him back into the chair, his head against the wall, as she had sat when she first seated herself here.

As the sculptor sleeps, she feels that her body has relaxed, and that her left foot, under the chair has started gently swinging. She looks across at the poet, sitting carefully guarding the head of the sculptor so that he catches it before it lolls.

I'm glad it is you, she says.

Her words draw his gaze to her face. He smiles.

He reaches his hand towards hers and she takes it, and he shifts his body so that she can dig between his leg and that of the sculptor to find one of his hands, buried there for warmth. Giving the poet's hand a little shake of emphasis, she says, When he's had his nap, I think we should get up and have a walk around and try and find a room with better seats.

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## Appendix 1:

J.L. Lightfoot's full translation of Parthenius of Niceae's Daphne myth: p 339

This story is told by Diodorus of Elaea in his elegies and in the fifteenth book of Phylarchus.

This is what is said about Amyclas' daughter Daphne. She would not go down to the city at all, nor would she mix with the other girls, but gathering together a pack of dogs, she would go hunting in the Laconian countryside, sometimes straying further into the other mountains of the Peloponnese. For this reason she was very dear to Artemis, who taught her to shoot straight. Now while she was wandering through the Elian landscape she attracted the love of Leucippus, son Oenomaus. He despaired of making any other sort of attempt on her, but donned women's garments and went hunting with her in the guise of a girl. Somehow or other he came to please her, and she would never let go of him, embracing him and clinging to him at all times. But Apollo himself was in love with the girl, and was possessed with rage and jealousy when he saw Leucippus associating with her; so he put it into her mind to go bathing in a stream along with the other maidens. When they got there they all stripped off, and tore clothes from Leucippus' back when they saw his reluctance. And, his treachery and duplicity laid bare, they all cast their javelins at him. The gods willed it that he disappeared. Daphne, meanwhile, saw Apollo coming after her, and turned and fled with great alacrity. When she was almost on the point of being overtaken, she asked Zeus to be translated from the mortal world. And they saw she became the tree named after her, the laurel.

## Appendix 2:

Pausanias, Description of Greece 8. 20. 2 (trans. Jones) (Greek travelogue C2nd A.D.) <sup>192</sup>

"The Ladon [of Arkadia (Arcadia)] is the most lovely river in Greece, and is also famous for the legend of Daphne that the poets tell . . . Leukippos (Leucippus) fell in love with Daphne, but despaired of winning her to be his wife by an open courtship, as she avoided all the male sex. The following trick occurred to him by which to get her. Leukippos was growing his hair long for the river Alpheios (Alpheus). Brading his hair as though he were a maiden, and putting on woman's clothes, he came to Daphne and said that he was a daughter of Oinomaos (Oenomaus), and would like to share her hunting. As he was thought to be a maiden, surpassed the other maidens in nobility of birth and skill in hunting, and was besides most assiduous in his attentions, he drew Daphne into a deep friendship. The poets who sing of Apollon's love for Daphne make an addition to the tale; that Apollon became jealous of Leukippos because of his success in his love. Forthwith Daphne and the other maidens conceived a longing to swim in the Ladon, and stripped Leukippos in spite of his reluctance. Then, seeing that he was no maid, they killed him with their javelins and daggers."

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<sup>192</sup> <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0160:book=8:chapter=20&highlight=daphne>

## Appendix 3



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<sup>193</sup> The image of the *Apollo Sauroktonos* taken from Wikipedia is located in the Louvre but was part of a bulk purchase of art from the Bourghese Gallery bought by Napoleon. According to Jenifer Neils, in her article 'Praxitiles to Caravaggio: The *Apollo Suroktonos* Redefined', the around 40 copies of the lost Greek sculptures plus other replicas (including coins and gems) including a Roman copy in the Sculpture Gallery in the Vatican which Bernini may or may not have seen. What is unusual about this sculpture is that it shows Apollo as a youth, when he is typically depicted as a youthful adult god.