

Interlude: Florence

It is November and I am alone in a hotel room. Outside, an unfamiliar street stretches, empty. It rains a little. We have rented a villa for a fortnight somewhere to the south of here, up in the hills – a place known to us only as a green stretch on a map and a background done in mute regret: dusty slopes planted with cypress rising behind a dozen novels of the English abroad – but we have planned badly and it is the wrong time of year, damp and chilly, mist rising instead of heat above stone terraces, a constant aching mizzle and days to fill indoors. We wanted the sort of holiday that is like a slice of time extracted from the general run of things, and with it a last pass at being just the three of us, a reminder to our daughter that completion is elastic and that she was enough even as we planned her augmentation; but we had things to finish before we could come and then there is the baby to be born when we get back, sometime during the dark and empty days stuffed deep into the gap between Christmas and New Year, so that we could neither come sooner nor wait until in the

mountains there might be an outside chance of snow. We must make do with this place caught in the middle of a half-complete moult. For weeks now, oppressed at home by an ever-growing list of things that must be done before the baby comes, by clothes to be brought down from the attic and washed, nappies to be checked over, food prepared in bulk and bedding organised, bills settled, threads tied, as though at the moment of birth time will dislocate itself and these things will not be possible afterwards, I have dreamed of this room, my solitude, an empty stretch. Pregnancy has conferred on me the privileges of old age, an unquestioned pandering to my body's whims: the flight here was expected to be tiring and so Johannes has taken our daughter on ahead while I am to stay in the city resting before making the remainder of the journey tomorrow, quiet and alone on a tipped-back train seat. By the time I arrive Johannes will have organised things, mastered the geography, bought food, worked out the thermostat, and I will allow myself to be shown these things without taking the trouble to remember, my slight delay according me the status of a guest. For half of each day I will lie on a couch and the pair of them will bring me things: cups of tea, plates of biscuits, tales of their exploits. They will have adventures while I doze and I think that they have been looking forward to it, to their free immersion in those parts of themselves which exist only in my absence. Drifting in and out of sleep on the plane I heard their voices, plotting, their matched heads bent low together, and as we fell through layers of fog towards the ground they laughed.

At the airport I said goodbye to Johannes and to our daughter, and found a taxi to bring me to the hotel, and although at night, nestled in pillows, I am often too uncomfortable to sleep, sat there on cracked vinyl with my legs spread to balance out the weight I do not have time to grow accustomed to, shoulders twisted, I was unconscious at once, and I stayed that way until the car reached the hotel and the driver shook me awake, tenderly in deference to my condition. Now, alone in my room, confused and chilly after the sudden rise from deep and unexpected sleep, disorientated, desolate, I sit down on the bed and start to cry. This happens to me often in pregnancy's third trimester, these sudden squalls of tears that burst from nowhere as a further reminder to me of how little my body is within my control, and there is nothing I can do but wait for it to end, this excess of emotion let out in salty water – and often it seems that waiting is all I do – for my body to complete the task it has been set, heedless of my intercession, and for the inevitable but unpredictable tract of pain beyond, for exhaustion and those first numb weeks when balance is precarious, the tumbling rush to interpret a newborn's needs. In the face of such an immediate future I find myself at a loss, those articles of rule over myself and my surroundings which I have so long taken for granted shown up as barely more substantial than a belief in prayer. I have become so accustomed to the doctrine of the mutability of pain, that suffering can be routinely eased, danger negotiated or renegotiated, that faced with its sudden failure I am terrified, as at a world remade, and I am unprepared. It seems such an unforgivable breach of promise to be reduced to flesh from

which I cannot, by thought, transcend, but blood and muscle go about their business just the same and in my side something puckers, the sharp retraction of a rock pool creature that has been disturbed—

After the tears have subsided and I have had a bath that I overfilled because I am not used to my increased body mass, after I am clean again, I go out, wearing over my jeans and sweater the old waxed raincoat of Johannes' which is the only thing that does up around me now, and which forms a further layer of skin, weather-beaten and familiar, to protect me from my unexpected and abrasive loneliness. I walk with my back arched forwards and my feet splayed out, the soles of my boots slapping against the cobbles like fat flippers. I have a vague direction in mind but I am in no hurry, and I think that this gentle amble and the soft, uninterrupted patter of my thoughts against the bricks is what it is to be alone, or as alone as I can be with a head hard in my pelvis and feet against the low ridge of my ribs, kicking, and I ought to enjoy it, the respite from requirement I have so looked forward to, but instead I feel only a panicky distress, as though I had woken to find a part of myself amputated. I miss my daughter. I have become so accustomed to her shadow falling in and out of mine, to the way she forces my attention outwards, centring my awareness of space on her small form, which is at once so sturdy and so breakable, and I am used to the sound of her voice, her constant interjections drowning out the unspooling threads of my own thoughts, her commentary filling the silence where my own has gone astray. I had thought that the temporary

removal of these things would be relief, that there would be no sense of loss and that I would not ache, nor feel my hands reach out to touch, to tuck back hair or pull up socks, and find my fingers land on empty air. It is not the first time I have been away. There have been days, nights; but last time she was still fat with babyhood and didn't have the power to withhold. Then she still hung from me, all mouth and fingers, and treated my presence as an unconsidered right, neither looked for nor enjoyed but only expected, so that to leave was respite, a moment when I could feel myself briefly to be whole. Now she has become something else, a mind inside a body, separate, and it seems to me that the extent of that separation from me is the extent to which I cannot bear to be apart from her. I had thought that I would continue to fall backwards into singularity as to a norm from which my deviation was temporary, and that without her I would be myself again, whole and undivided; but instead I am half-made, a house with one wall open to the wind—

and later still, returned to my hotel room, curled up under Johannes' coat like an abandoned pet, wanting the solidity of his presence, the way he stands about me like a wall, with a desire that is close to invocation, I will wonder if this is how it will always be, now, this longing to be elsewhere – the wish when I am with my daughter that I might step apart from her, and when I am apart this anxious echoing, the worry that the world might prove unsound, a counting down to her return; and I will be surprised that something so obvious has taken me so long to understand.

I get closer to the river. The dome of the cathedral rises, drizzle dulling it to the colour of London brick; behind it, hills which ought like the church's roof to awe and glorify are hidden by mist and when at last I cross the river it is nothing but water. My feet start to ache. I wonder what it says about me that I seem to feel love only in absence – that, present, I recognise only irritation, a list of inconveniences, the daily round of washing and child teas, the mundanity of looking after, and beyond this the recollection of what went before and how nice it was to be free; but I didn't recognise my freedom then – or wasn't free, since freedom only functions as an opposite to constraint. There were other things, then; and how can I say, now, that a different choice would have left me more content, and that I would not have felt the loss of this life as now I feel the loss of that one—

In the Giardino di Boboli I sit down on a bench to rest but the rain begins to fall more heavily so instead I go onwards to La Specola, where in a stone-floored room wax anatomical models lie, their hands turned upwards to show finely crafted ligaments, bones, in glass cases lined with white silk like the insides of transparent coffins. This is what I have come to see: the uncanny beauty of these delicate faces above flayed bodies, the fine tracery of silk-thread veins, the layers of flesh removable one by one to leave an empty cavity.

Aside from myself there is no one else in the room, and it is a relief to be unobserved. Standing beside the serene perfection of Clemente Susini's Anatomical Venus, half-closed eyes in a face framed by human hair and below it the open casing

of her thorax, her perfect lungs, her heart, and somewhere, invisible in the configuration of the museum's display, a wax-cast human child, curved and tangled and unborn. Beside her it is hard not to feel that it is I who am the imitation, mere flesh in the face of an object made, not just to educate or to instruct, but because science was once a form of worship, this stripping back of layers a way to wonder at the fierce complexity of God's work, the duty of created to creator. My own body, with its creaking joints and stretched skin, its aches and imperfections, feels by comparison to such still flesh a painful falling-short of what it ought to be. I imagine how I would look laid out like this, formed into layers, each one a shell, demountable, and at the centre of it all the indivisible nut my child makes; and how then all of it might be removed, stacked carefully up beside my open, undecaying carcass. So static I might be perfect, liable at last to a complete accounting, each piece examined, weighed and understood, disallowing surprise, mistake, decay; but amongst so much balance what would be left of me?

I return to my hotel and climb into bed, Johannes' coat on top of me, and I try to sleep so that, waking, it might be tomorrow and I might make my return to that encumbrance of minutiae, love, which anchors as much as it irks so that, tight inside its lacings, I know my shape, my place, and where my edges are.