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THE GORGEOUS INERTIA OF THE EARTH

ADRIAN DUNCAN

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To my sister Clare

The ruined temple is not merely a wreck on
a sea of forms; it itself is nature …

Marguerite Yourcenar, from *The Dark Brain of Piranesi*

PART I

I

ACHIM AND BETTINA

It is ski season in this small city of I_.

As Bernadette and I walk, the mountains around us empty of people while the sky falls from dark navy to blacks. Funiculars and cable cars rush downward, hurtling skiers to a squat building at the end of a broad strip-lit bridge that runs into the belly of the old town. The restaurants on the western side fill, but the centre of the city remains almost motionless.

Bernadette and I venture into the eastern part, street after umbrageous street. It's cold and we've not spoken since we left the apartment half an hour ago, to find at this late hour a portion of warm fondue.

There's a sculpture in a park in the middle of the city, of the Romantic-era poets Achim and Bettina von Arnim. It stands over three metres tall and is cast in a now patina'd bronze. Achim sits, grasping the collar of his jacket, gazing in one direction, while Bettina, sitting and leaning back onto his chest, is looking in another. Bernadette and I have spent our time here in I_ drawing, measuring, photographing and

studying this sculpture in an attempt to better understand its form.

Through a fall of snow, Bernadette and I come upon a poorly lit laneway, framing, at its end, brightness. As we go, I tell Bernadette about an image that of late has come persistently to mind. It is of the gable of my parents' white bungalow where we lived when I was a boy, and this abode sits a field beyond a creosoted fence behind which I stand while looking on guilelessly at this gable, my heart thumping, waiting for any sign of life.

Bernadette asks me where this bungalow is now.

'It was demolished,' I say, 'years ago . . . to make room for an expanding limestone quarry in which my father once worked.'

We descend a tree-lined street that opens onto a park flanked to the right by a ridge, stepped out in timber seating. The ridge arcs down to a frozen pond with patches of snow cast across its surface like handfuls of seed. White poplars sway on another hill beyond the pond, and these leaning trees encased in the darkness seem to draw up into them the last of the receding snow.

Along the pond's edge, we approach a lamp standing in its own cone-throw of light. We climb broad steps up into a dark garden maze, crowded around by manicured trees of hovering shapes – cubes, pyramids, spheres. Then we climb a parting set of steps topped with statues ushering us – snow glistening on their fingers and arms – towards lawns and shrubs that funnel down between two arrowing lengths of wall to a cobblestoned square with an ornate lantern hanging from the corner of a restaurant and swaying wantonly in the breeze.

I wake in the night to the dark. My stomach churns.

In the hallway of our rental I meet Bernadette passing me half asleep and entering her bedroom.

I bend over the toilet and throw up only bile, and realise as I ease my fingers further down my throat that to throw up such a mass of fondue and bread might cause pain.

I fill a glass of water and return to my bed, look at my Nokia and note that I have three hours of rest until six o'clock. I lie there and listen; then, I close my eyes and wait for sleep, but it comes only in fits and, in what feels like minutes, Bernadette is at my door, smiling, clothed for the outdoors and telling me that it's time to rise.

'*Caffè*?' she asks.

The first time I heard tell of Bernadette was in an email I received almost three years ago from an Italian curator called Filippo Conte. In the subject line were these strange words, barely a question: *What is it they can see?*

Filippo told me that he and a team of two other visual-art curators were embarking on an EU-funded project to compile a 'history from within' of a selection of sculptures spread across the European mainland. He told me he wanted to work with 'non-artists' and that he'd come across some of my writing on an English website devoted to stone restoration and for which I'd written about three projects I'd worked on in recent years. Filippo said that he found it interesting the way in which I speculated in these articles about the whole form of the ruined edifice, by basing its extensions upon 'the negative space of what remained'. He said that he enjoyed how I likened this act of visualisation to the act of drawing. He then told me that he hoped to pair me with an Italian sociologist called Bernadette Basagni, and he included an essay of hers on the work of August Comte where she considered what his ideals of Order and Progress might mean for a sociologist today. I was informed that this project was one of several other curatorial engagements that Filippo was concerned with at the time and that this one could last, on and off, for a few years. He told me that it would involve some travel. I'd returned from the east coast of the United States after over a decade of working on building sites there and had set myself up as a consultant for public restorations. During the last few years in the US I'd apprenticed as a carpenter, and I was keen to return to working with the material

I first trained in, during my twenties – stone – so I registered as a small business, took out insurance and began tendering for the overseeing of small restorations as a subcontractor to the Board of Works. These sites were often located in fields far from public roads and in the more forgotten parts of rural Ireland, and when Filippo contacted me I was finishing up my current projects with no new ones on the horizon, so I emailed him back to say I'd give his proposal a go. He asked me if I could be in Athens in a month's time, to which I said, 'Of course.'

Bernadette and I turn down a cobbled dawn-blue street, walking at pace now until we enter the park where Achim and Bettina sit in the centre of an oval of flickering street lights.

Bernadette arranges her tripod and camera, and after some rearranging and tweaking, she directs the lens towards the sculpture and pulls focus.

I remove several large sheets of paper from my roll. Then, I smoothen them out into a folder we've fashioned from plywood and fabric.

A mountain bird calls, and in the distance a light pings on, brightening a carriage at the base of a funicular. A car passes some streets behind, then the rattle of a rubbish truck. The funicular carriage ascends. As Bernadette blows onto her fingers, the camera's screen comes up and her large blue eyes turn green as she scans it. She purses her lips and with this appear the dimples in her cheeks.

'*Fatto*,' she says, as she hits record on her camera.

While we sit on a park bench with the camera recording the light falling across the sculpture's surface, Bernadette produces in her notebook drawing after expert drawing of Achim and Bettina – a nose, a hand meeting a forearm, an eye, a cheek, an ear. She tells me about the year she spent in art college when she was young and how she found what the place did to her curiosity unsettling. She reckons that the world, if she stayed working as an artist, would be reduced to mere raw material for her work, and instead of pursuing ideas to the point where her curiosity was exhausted, these

fascinations would be pursued only to where they would be applicable to her art, and then this curiosity 'would fall out of use', she claims. 'And that is why I left,' she says. She then tells me about a happy Erasmus year she spent studying sociology in Glasgow. Then she turns to me, pushing some strands of her frizzy auburn hair off her brow, and utters in a broad Scottish brogue, 'Awright, pal?!'

She draws in pencil – a soft and stubby 4B. When I first trained as a restorative sculptor, I was taught to draw with a pen using cross-hatching and line to model space and volume. Yesterday, while we sat drawing the other side of the sculpture, she took the pen out of my hand and gave me her pencil and asked me to try it instead, but once I directed the tip to my paper, she took the pencil from between my forefinger and thumb and put it sidelong between my thumb and the undersides of my four fingers. Then she gently twisted my palm over until my knuckles faced me. She took my down-turned hand in hers and, with the side of the pencil lead, she had me score out a series of short curves, then she asked me to look at the tone along and across the curves themselves. 'You should try drawing like this,' she said; 'it'll give you more light and shadow, and when the drawing departs from what you're trying to capture,' she said, 'lines like this will help the drawing find its own form.'

Bernadette and I pack away the camera, and with our flapping sheets of paper in hand we approach Achim and Bettina to rub and record the surface markings.

The local office of public works here told us that the sculpture was gifted to them in the winter of 1986 by the city of Warsaw. It was cast there some years before by a now apparently defunct Soviet-era collective, whose name we are as yet unable to find. I picture this cumbersome object being dangled into position, on a winter's morning, from a crane surrounded by council workers from whose mouths issue billowing puffs of breath.

I step – quiet clangs at my feet – up onto the sculpture and drape my sheet of paper over Bettina's thigh. Bernadette climbs high onto Achim's shoulder, drapes her sheet of paper over his crown and records the surface of his head, down past his eyes, his lips, his ears, his cheeks.

We work like this for hours, stepping from and back up onto the object, carefully rubbing, lifting and building an archive of the surface, with which we aim to make to-scale plaster models. People pass by; some ask what we are doing, then smile vaguely and gaze past us when we begin to explain. As Bernadette works, she sometimes gathers her hair over a shoulder, revealing the side of her face, her jaw, the pale nape of her neck. Whenever she returns to the plywood sleeve to number then place her sheet on top of mine, she looks over my work – not with any admiration but more in the way of an auditor reviewing the file of a person new to a company. Then she places her sheet down and closes the sleeve again.

After dark, when Bernadette and I return with our implements to our apartment, I prepare a meal of tuna pasta and warm bread rolls. Bernadette charges the batteries of her camera and begins to play back the footage of the sculpture at dawn, now enlarged tenfold on the box TV perched on the sitting-room dresser. As we eat, we watch Achim and Bettina come to light.

But while the object emerges on the screen, I feel myself with almost equal slowness slump on the couch to sleep, until the last thing I think I see is Bernadette's lovely face looking down at me, her brow knotted in curiosity and her left hand now resting gently on my chest.

2

KRITIOS BOY

Out of my living-room window stands an empty building site, behind which the morning sun rises. This frame of concrete was to be another stubby tower of apartments, built to mirror the crumbling luxury block I live in now, but, as the building rose, there emerged pyrites problems in the soil of that site and in all of the sites to the north, onto which now slump scores of new but derelict houses. I bought my apartment off the plans some years back, with money I'd made while at first labouring for about six years on a variety of sites in the suburbs of Baltimore, then working as an apprentice carpenter in Philadelphia for a few more. The day I moved in here, the whole place was empty, and as far as I can tell, nobody lives on the upper floors still, and yet at night comes the gentle cranking of the lift up and down its shaft. I once asked the owner of this building why my block did not fall asunder too and he told me that apparently they used a superior type of gravel as fill for underneath the foundations, and this did not trigger the destructive reactions and expansions in the soil, like elsewhere.

The floor-to-ceiling corner window of my apartment looks out over this wasteland, so instead of using this living space for relaxing in, I decided to convert it into a studio of sorts, with three trestle worktops: a wet table, where I cast small plaster and silicon models of the ruins I work on from month to month; then, to its right, a dry table, with samples of stone alongside a row of chisels. It is here I produce small carvings and patterns on the faces of this variety of stone that I have found in the ruins down the country. The patterns I sculpt sometimes extend into simple figurative bas reliefs, of which many are left unfinished. And then, to the right, I've placed a research table covered over now in paper and small squares of card onto which I have recently begun composing a taxonomy of stone based on samples from a region in the midlands, near to where I was born, but where I am these days engaged in the restoration of an ancient church ruin. This taxonomy of rocks sits under the heading *Strength Recognition and Description*, and I'm trying to arrange them from Very Strong Rock (granites and marbles) with compressive strengths of over thirty thousand pounds per square inch, which requires 'firm hammering to break', down to the no-man's-land between Very Weak Rock and Very Stiff Soil, which seem to have a compressive strength of a mere forty pounds per square inch. In my descriptions of this material I say that it can be 'broken by hand' or even 'indented with a fingernail'. A few small samples of clay and stone are arranged upon the table too – paltry grey things that I found at the base of the escarpment running below the church ruin.

Out of some rays of wan sunlight falling across my

left-hand table, I pick up the foot-tall plaster model I cast yesterday of Achim and Bettina. It is beginning to dry out nicely and lighten in tone and weight. It's based on the drawings and markings I recorded with Bernadette back in I_, and yet there is something in the form that does not quite make sense to me.

The first time Bernadette and I met was in a tiny cellar restaurant in central Athens. We were there to convene with the curator, Filippo, who was working on an art biennial. Bernadette and I had been asked to prepare, as part of the biennial's catalogue, an early draft of our texts on the famous figurative sculpture *Kritios Boy*.

I arrived in the restaurant first and met Filippo. The place, pierced with lengths of smoke-filled light, smelt of fresh loaves, fried fish fillets and bubbling chickpea stews. Filippo was seated at the end of a wooden table, beside a plump, bearded man. Filippo greeted me warmly and introduced me to this soft-handed painter whose name I cannot remember – he was a man who showed no interest in me whatsoever, whereas Filippo, in what seemed to me an unsustainable show of attentiveness, told me that he found my writing about restoration 'fascinating'.

Then, at the steps leading down into this small and convivial restaurant, Bernadette appeared. She was wearing navy running shoes and a long dark sleeveless summer dress. Sunshine slanted across her torso. She looked about a while, until Filippo noticed her and waved her over. Then he introduced us all.

Kritios Boy is an ancient Greek sculpture of a youth hesitating, but it is now damaged, armless and legless from his shins down. What's left of him is installed on a raised metal plinth in the Acropolis Museum. He gestures all day at nothing. His hollowed white-marble head and blank eyes stare out across a suspended landscape of other frozen and ancient figures.

He's in proportion, but is only two thirds the scale of a human youth. There's this naturalistic swivel in his hips that is thought to be the first instance in sculpture where motion was successfully suggested. The art historians refer to it as a moment of 'contrapposto' – counterpoise, where the figure stands with most of its weight on one foot. It seemed to me, when I first saw him, as if he were magically about to step towards someone or something that had caught his eye. I sat for an age looking at him and trying to complete the shape of his long-gone arms and to where they might have been gesturing, or whom they were hoping to embrace, but there was not form or source material enough for me to find sufficient footing for my imaginings. Bernadette was alongside me all that week, drawing incessantly his face, his gently expanded ribcage – as if on the edge of breath – and his damaged right knee hovering above an absent shin. It was as if these three elements of his body were portals into the mystery of this form, his view of the Earth, and the distant thoughts of his maker.

Some months after all of this, Bernadette produced her catalogue text on *Kritios Boy*. It consisted of fragments describing the day in 1886 when his head was finally unearthed by

German archaeologists. She brought to life the moment when the veil of soil was first pulled back from his eyes, and how the light and the strange men's faces filled his field of vision as his long-detached head was lifted free of the dirt. My text described what he heard and saw two thousand years earlier, moments before his head was toppled from his body – phantoms, caprices, rising up into the air around him in chaotic displays, showing the conflagration and sacking of Athens. After we finished this project, but before we were asked to begin on Achim and Bettina, Bernadette emailed me out of the blue late one evening to tell me how much she liked my description and my observation, near the end of the text, where I said that *Kritios Boy* was probably, in this reconstituted form, homesick.

It is some days later and from my desk I can see the evening sun is now descending outside, throwing the gnarled shadow of my neighbouring tower block across the puddles and surrounding soil. I close my laptop and turn off my kitchen light. Then, flicking on some anglepoise lamps, I sit at my second table, which is covered over in drawings of caryatids I traced from an encyclopaedia some years ago. I've begun to carve in miniature the caryatid stolen by Lord Elgin; I'm using a piece of sandstone I found one day on this same site in the midlands, this church for a bygone brotherhood of priests. In preparation, this lump of sandstone was shorn down with broad chisel strokes to a foot-high and a half-foot-wide cuboid of stone. Then, with red chalk, I drew onto the four faces of the piece of stone the outline of this strange quiet-eyed column-being. In the last few days I've begun with a small claw chisel to delve beyond the planar faces to find the curves and the form within. As I go, tapping the back of my chisel and carving further into the stone, I find the chalk lines on the surface, which at first guided me, begin to disappear and I am left to negotiate the stone and the potential forms within in a colourless darkness of my own. As different features and folds appear, my mind turns into that of a kind of hunter, but one whose quarry is the good trapping of shadow. When I am in a flow with tool tip upon grain of stone, I realise that there are no mistakes in work of this kind, only other avenues of approach. Then, I find often, while working on an object and apprehending the perfect shadow, my sense of time disappears into the whole activity and, when I come to my senses again, it is often deep into the small hours of the night.

More recently, in quiet times like these, standing back and looking at these chess-piece-like objects across my tables, and when the adrenaline from my day has fully fallen away, I begin to see in my mind's eye, ghosting *Kritios Boy*'s ruins of a flaming Athens, the gable of my parents' bungalow from almost forty years ago. I think sometimes one sight has begun to happily coax the other into being. I've been visited by these sorts of daydreams since my youth and from where these vivid sights come or go I do not know, but I do know that my parents' bungalow always arrives with the faint smell of creosote and is usually motionless except for the rustle of grass in the foreground, the heaving of a stand of chestnut trees framing out the distance and the cavalier sailing of a crow through the air, before it descends onto an electricity wire drooping from the apex of the bungalow down to a water-stained pole at the side of the roadway below.

Then, on nights after the most florid or most convincing of visions, I wake in the dark with the rock-like rind of my consciousness loosened and breached, and into this flows, through the stone citadel of my person, not further images but flood-like – image-decimating – feelings of guilt. It is as if this terrain around me is at last showing itself to be made up of an ancient if poorly conceived complex of civil works, unable to handle these incursions from the water table below.

Igneous rock I: Basalt
Grain size: fine
Main minerals: feldspar, mafic
Structure: sheet
Strength: strong
Breaking pattern: colonnade, columnar

It's a week or so later, just after midnight, and while I try to picture Bernadette and what she might now be doing, I take a seat at my research table, across which I've just spread a range of photographs I once took of a tiny sculpture by a nineteenth-century Irish artist called Launt Thompson.

It was when I was in my mid-thirties, some years after I'd finished studying restorative sculpture in Utrecht, that I first saw, in the flesh, the work of Thompson. It was the week around Labour Day and I was on a six-day break from my work labouring on timber-frame houses in the suburbs of Philadelphia, and I had a strange longing for stone, so I took a drive up and down the east coast, from Philadelphia to Boston and back, and while on this trip I decided to visit the Albany Institute in Washington. I saw Thompson's *Unconsciousness* there, one of the few uncommissioned sculptures he made during his career. I'd learned from old art-history books that he'd sculpted mostly military memorials, so I was always interested in how a work he made out of a pure devotion to his craft might look. The evening before, I'd seen his remarkable, if dejected, *Napoleon the First* at the Smithsonian Mall, and I felt like I had a good handle on his at once academic and intuitive style. *Unconsciousness* is a small reclining female nude Thompson sculpted when he lived in Florence. The card next to this white-marble work – it was sitting alone in a glass cabinet in a large and well-lit room to the rear of the Albany – told me that its other title was *The Chief's Bride* and that the figure depicted was a young 'settler' woman, who as a girl had been 'kidnapped by Native Americans', but on reaching adulthood she was offered by

the chief of the tribe the choice of returning to her fellow settlers or taking his hand in marriage. She chose to marry, and this piece depicts her playing absentmindedly with a baby turtle, which the plaque went on to inform me was supposedly a symbol of this tribe. The funny thing was that I'd interpreted her posture as a pensive kind of waiting in that in-between moment of her wedding night, and I read the turtle as her merely toying with the end of her childhood.

I turn the lamps on my desk off and, as I stand to return to my kitchen to shut down my laptop and go to bed, I hear an incoming email ping. It's from Bernadette and she is arranging our return trip to I_.

In the PS after her initials – *BB* – she tells me that she read, an evening or two before, that in ancient Greece, if a statue fell on you, any damage it caused was considered to be the responsibility of the statue.

When did we stop believing in the life in motionless things? she asks.

Then, some minutes later, she emails me, asking if I was shy when I was young.

Weren't all young boys shy? I write, but there comes no response.

3

SANDRA

My train creaks then swerves towards the snow-topped mountains in the distance. I am to arrive in I_ in an hour or so, where Bernadette awaits.

The dining car, filled with passengers, shudders as I take a sip from my *Weissbier*. Around me up-thrusts of rock and ice and stands of trees emerge out of the land.

We clatter into darkness, and I can feel the train slowing into a dip; then we accelerate out of the mountain and into the gleaming upper climes of the Alps, which carve out the sky above.

These drifting clouds, clumps of evergreens and the snow enveloping the train as it drives onward, become, to a lowland sort like me, exhilarating.

The train shakes once more, and from a carriage behind, a metallic clank grows into a rhythmic boom. I peer out the window, looking back at the far end of the train following itself along the curve as we climb. More snow dashes against the walls and swirls across the carriage roof, as the windows either side cloud over.

Each year, when I was young, a rich local landowner held an international hot-air balloon race a few towns to the east of ours. The prevailing wind was from the south-west, so we, in this town west of the balloon race, rarely ever saw these balloons. It was as if the event took place in a distant or fictional county.

One summer's evening, as my mother and I drove from my football practice back to our bungalow, I remember seeing in the sky above, floating around like unmoored coordinates, hot-air balloons racing on what must have been an easterly breeze. I imagined the curved spaces created between them up there as cool, airless, holy.

When we got home, there was a note on the kitchen table saying that my uncle had called and picked up my father to drive him to a field nearby where one of these balloons had supposedly crash landed. My mother and I went to join them.

As I chased across the field, I could see the fallen balloon, which looked like a giant stricken animal being resuscitated. The wicker basket had toppled onto its side, with a pointed flame sending hot air back into this exhausted form. I walked around it and found two men hunkered at the other end, repairing a strip of rubber. They told me they were going to 'lift off again'. I stalked around the flailing thing once more, until, on one flank, with no one there to see me, I stepped forward and touched it. I stepped back to see how or if my gesture had altered anything. Then I pushed again – harder, this time – on the flank of this creature, until a dried cow pat was revealed in the bent grass below. The ease with which I put this huge object out of shape, and the feeling on the

palm of my hand at that time, touching this angelic thing, is one I can still feel if I close my eyes and think back to the hollow roar of a gas flame, the smell of silage, dung, and the excited murmurs of those ghostly figures gathering round. By the time I returned to the wicker basket, the balloon was beginning to lift from the ground like a person's head, still heavy with sleep, rising from their pillow at dawn. Two men and a woman struggled to hold the wicker basket at an angle as the aviators – or 'continental ballooning enthusiasts', as my mother called them – arranged themselves within to direct the blue jets of hot air into the anus of the bloating beast. I remember my father leaning on his walking stick, his older and yet far healthier brother beside him, both of them looking up at this tear-like balloon taking shape above the broad green field. My mother joined them. She took my father's hand in hers and squeezed, and he looked to her and smiled. Then they both squinted up at the balloon now stretching skyward. I looked down at the base of the wicker basket to see that instant when it lifted free, and, when it did, I saw many blades of longer grass caught in the folds and weft of the wicker tug for a moment, until they were overwhelmed.

Bernadette's eyelids quake as she peers into the mountain wind. She leans in against me as we look on at the swooping and disappearing of a dozen or so calling birds. Other visitors in colourful hats and scarfs drift to and from this viewpoint that looks down onto the city of I_. As I approach the stone parapet – and as the air expands – I feel an intense triangulating tingle in the centre of my stomach. I step back as two birds, as if on wires, swing past and away. They cascade down into the valley below, then careen again up on a contour of air.

We try to make out the park far below where Achim and Bettina now sit, but we cannot see a thing. Bernadette shrugs and suggests to me I follow her.

She makes off towards a path leading to a blowy upper flank, over which a light snow now scatters.

As we go, the path narrows and the folds of land to the right fall away.

Eye-high clouds scud past, as Bernadette walks on hymning a light-hearted tune, but I begin to falter.

'I want to show you some goats!' she calls over her shoulder. 'Down in the city, I was told that there are ibex up here!'

Through the twilight, we descend in the cable car, back towards the base of the mountain.

As we judder past a support, and then, for a second, soar, Bernadette takes hold of my hand.

It's warm and encompassing.

She squeezes, and I squeeze back.

Through the snow-lined trees, we see an old restaurant between the foothills of the mountain and the edge of the city beyond.

We find two seats at the bar and order a glass each of a local beer.

An old moustachioed man appears from behind the bar, looks around the otherwise empty room and goes.

A clock ticks through an open door.

Bernadette and I sit for a while in a strange shyness into which we say very little.

Then she asks me about family and my home.

So, I tell Bernadette about the winter night when my mother, Sandra, saw a statue of the Virgin Mary speaking to her in a grotto to the rear of a country church a mile outside of our town.

'It was the last day of January in 1972,' I say, 'and it happened long before such things were in vogue. I was only nine years old at the time.'

And I then recall to Bernadette the beatific, absent smile on my mother's face when she arrived home that night, her clothes soaked through to her glowing skin.

I tell Bernadette that I found it terrifying to see my mother, all of a sudden, at once so elated and so reduced.

Bernadette looks at me a while, but says nothing.

'Languageless but beautiful, was how she described it,' I say to Bernadette.

Then, I tell her about how my mother was asked by the local priest to check herself into a psychiatric hospital in Dublin for a month, to 'get over these hallucinations', as he called them. I then tell her that I've not spoken about this to anyone before. And as I sip my beer in this old bar, I picture that adamant bald priest at the head of my old classroom with a blackboard behind him filled with lists showing the hierarchy of saints' names, he on one of his regular visits, teaching us boys the catechism.

'He insisted that she go,' I say, putting my glass back down onto the bar, 'out of form.'

'And did you believe her?' asks Bernadette.

'It never occurred to me not to,' I reply. '… And we visited her for weeks, my father and I, in that dreadful hospital in a

dark corner of Dublin, bringing her sweets and flowers, and watching her change. Then one night some weeks later,' I say, taking a sip from my beer, 'my father received a beating when he'd defended her honour in our local pub. A few over-devout young men had called my mother a heathen for "adoring the false god of the Virgin Mother". The beating broke him, though,' I say to Bernadette, 'and not because of the injuries that wrecked his balance forever, or because these men were once school friends of his, but because it made clear to him that he, my mother and I were now outsiders in the town. He never fully recovered his sense of balance, and this led,' I say, 'to accidents at the quarry where he worked and forced him into early retirement, until he passed away when I was eighteen.'

Bernadette raises an eyebrow. Then, looking at me, her eyes softening, she gives my arm a rub.

'It's gas,' I say. 'About ten years later, the whole blooming country was seeing statues of the Virgin Mother, all over the place, moving and speaking!

'But they weren't hallucinations – "Marian Apparitions", was how they classed it,' I say.

Then, after a silence filled with the weekday quiet of the bar, Bernadette turns to me and begins to gather up her hair, and she smiles and tells me about when she was young, and the variety of absurd hairstyles she had through her teens, laughing at herself at times, and she then points out a small impression on her nose where she had it pierced with a ring. She tells me she was a punk and a tearaway and, growing up, had countless run-ins with her mother. Then she tells

me how she met her ex-husband, Stefano. It was at a music festival near Pisa and he was camping in a tent next to hers, and they simply began talking.

'Simple as all that,' she says, dusting her palms.

I take a sip from what's left of my beer as she plays for a moment with the black onyx ring on her forefinger. Then she lifts her large fabric bag from the bar and, from a side pocket, she takes out a photograph of her eight-year-old daughter, Philomena. She looks at me and back to the photograph, telling me that Philomena has her father's dark eyes but, unfortunately for her, her mother's hot temperament … and at this she laughs once more.

Stone, like glass, is strong when compressed, but is quite fragile and prone to rupture when pulled apart or suddenly struck. A stone carver, then, is a rupturer of stone, and a restorative stone carver is at first an embalmer and then an enhancer of this initial pattern of rupture. Over the years, I have come to enjoy working with granite most, because I can tell from the grain in a piece of granite the way it formed on cooling, epochs ago, and if I can tell this, then I can imagine the molten igneous flows before this cooling took hold. Granite normally gives good strength in one direction, but, if the rift plane of the stone was more complex or formed in other directions too, then the grain in the stone becomes less uniform, and, though a more complex stone like this may be much easier to quarry, it is more difficult to sculpt.

Over our last lovely day in I_, Bernadette and I walked around the city taking pictures and making drawings of the strange rock that we realised was used in almost all the walls of the city's buildings. We stopped into a bookshop café for refreshments and we asked the owner about this rock. Her face brightened as she told us it was called *Höttinger Brekzie*, a limestone mined on the other side of the northern ridge, and she gestured out the window, to beyond the wet street flanked with grey pointed roofs, and on up to the white mountain peaks floating amid the clouds far above. The stone's surface seemed so porous and grainless, and I imagined, as Bernadette and I walked around looking at it and rubbing it, that if I were to strike it with a pointed chisel this matrix of aggregates and clastic sediment would fall apart in directions I could never foresee. I then imagined every ounce

of this rock transforming itself into currents of silt-laden water, and all of the city of I_ lying underwater too, with only its arches and walls and lintels and towers discernible through the slower-moving silt drawing out its forms within its fluid world. I imagined walking with Bernadette through these quiet sub-aquatic streets of an underwater I_ and coming upon not Achim and Bettina, in their romantic pose, but instead a statue of a lost Greek caryatid looking on impassively at this glittering architecture of silt gathering and dispersing around her, and it struck me that, whenever I look at a figurative sculpture in this world, that the object at hand must, like this, be enveloped in a medium of its own, which I myself can scarcely or will never wholly penetrate.

Then, near the end of that last day together in I_, Bernadette suggested we swap the notebooks we'd been keeping while taking our measures of Achim and Bettina. She wanted to see where our thoughts were going. As I flicked through her notebook, taking in her small sketches and doodles and notes in Italian, with arrows to and from one thing to another and another – sometimes pages apart – inventing for her connections and new routes of enquiry, I saw, among three rough sketches of Bettina's hands, a tiny drawing of my face in profile.

It is some weeks later, evening, and the land outside is dark. The city twinkles in the distance, its lines of electric light crisscrossing the vague reflection of me in the window, seated and hovering out beyond. It is during late hours like these, on weekdays like this, when my apartment block is at its most silent.

I'm sitting once more at my research table, clearing away my old photos of Thompson's *Unconsciousness* and placing on the table instead the cards showing my unfinished taxonomy of stone. I'm struggling to find descriptions for the way one might break open the middle-strength stones on my list – the sandstones and shales. I've tried such formulations as *Can be broken by hammer in hand*, but I am unsure if this might read as the stone in hand or the hammer in hand, or both. I'm considering *Can be dented with chisel* or perhaps even *Cannot be cut with a saw*. I wonder then if I ought to include how the rock responds to these blows, with descriptions like *Crumbles under blow from hammer* or *Mostly retains form, but cleaves under blow from pointed chisel*. I've written them out on these pieces of card and put them next to a list of rock types, from granite, marble and basalt on through to limestone, sandstone and into the clays. I've begun to realise that I'd like to extend my project beyond stones found around sites in the midlands and produce instead an atlas that connects the most famous incidents of sculpted stone back to the parts of the Earth's crust from where they were mined, and from this I'd like to include a lithospheric description of the most recent geological processes that brought that seam of rock into place. This might then show a reader something

of the stone and the conditions encountered by the sculptor while the object in question was being shaped.

I bring an unruly lump of limestone in under the light of my lamps and lift a small, pointed axe, and I administer to the stone a slight sidelong smack to see what's just beneath the skin. I lift the shining stone closer to my eyes, then back, and I strike it once more, and again, and again, and as if like sparks from a flint, an image comes to mind of my mother – from that night, decades ago – of her shivering on our sitting-room floor, holding herself and grimacing in goose-pimpled ecstasy, and I realise when I see this image again and again and again … that I've not thought fairly about my mother for years. I realise that, when she fell into the habit of praying, she eroded the selvedges of her consciousness and this must have led to these incursions and visions and religious experiences. I realise also that, when she accepted what she saw in that grotto that night, years ago, she must have felt a kind of collegiality with these holy entities, and then afterwards she must surely have felt an abandonment from them that neither my father nor I could have allayed.

Even though she was in and out of hospital often, then, we still had some great weeks together. Some days, when I'd arrive in from school, she would pretend for the evening that she was a cat, a wolf, a cow, and we would not speak a word of English until the following morning, and, with my father already gone to work at the quarry beyond the hill, she'd appear in my room and almost sheepishly help me get ready for school. Then there were other evenings that were far less carefree, and she'd fall deeply into herself, her intelligent

dark eyes glazing over while looking at once at me and right through me. Mostly, I assumed, from the savage grinding of her teeth, she was lost somewhere else far away from me, in prayer. I remember on one such day, when I was maybe eleven or so, she told me that, when you are being haunted, you are not seeing some strange otherworldly entity, some ghost appear before you, but it is more that the haunting entity has entered your person, to the point that you begin to see what this entity sees … 'And when you are being haunted, John,' she said, my hand in hers, 'you are not looking at strange things in your world, but actual things before the eyes of the haunter.'

I did not sleep for weeks.

By my early twenties, she was mostly in care, and I used to travel up each weekend from my home town to see her. It always seemed to me that she, by this time, could not wait to leave this planet that had taken and disintegrated her 'dear Tom Molloy'. Whenever I visited her, she was heavily sedated, and I found it hard to watch her even more leadened to this world and its banal old gravity that, in some deep part of her, she clearly wished to be free of.

Then, near the end, on the late buses home on Sunday nights, looking out at the gleaming fields and the glittering pub-filled towns passing quietly outside, I remember resolving to turn myself away from her impossible sky and look instead to the rocks and tides of the Earth. And yet, these days, decades later, I feel myself turning back again to look once more at what might have been her sky.