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Sacrum

Though lacking the breadth
and mass of the iliac wing,
this sacred bone remains,
for Vesalius, broad as hunger,
as grand and spacious
as the sea. But he leaves names
and reasons for others, wants
only the seven figures of the thorax,
cares more about the Cartilages
of the Rough Artery.

He does not mention how this holy
place, cut from the ox-calf wrapped
in fat, was Achilles’ mourning offering,
how the blessed ram, shank broken
over the fire, was Abraham's sacrifice
after his son. When I think aloud,
Nothing we do living
can be as beautiful
as what the living will do
with our bones, you reply

with ceremony, recounting
cremations from your childhood:
boys at pyre’s base sifting through ash
for that fragment of sternum
which resembles a man

lost in meditation, those shards of hip
worthy of marigolds and hand-thrown urns
to set upon the Ganges. Years later
you find yourself home, on the edge
of a Greater Bangkok throttled
with fires and protest tambourines. There amid talk of the hereafter and makeshift triggers, you tend to a lung bruised through the cage of the ribs, send photos of Varanasi, its bargefields and silks, a barber drawing his knife across the cheeks of the dead and their brothers. What I have yet to show you back is Sta. Rita de Cascia, its reliquary chapel overtaken by flowers, this grave mason preparing a space for my grandfather as we watch the youngest girls of the barangay lifted up and passed, kicking at the air, over the face of his casket. Someone whispers, *So that his spirit will keep to heaven*, and then I know I am not entirely here: I stare as a boy trowels earth into a paste of mortar and spit; I hear Vesalius take his artists to the head and its moveable sutures, the bulwark of temples made for the soft nerves, formed for the sake of the eyes; I kneel beside priests burning camphor upon the ghats, brace this eldest son for what he must break with his hands and the sight of his father’s soul freed from the fabric of his skull.
From the beginning it has been end-conjuring.

José García Villa, *Doveglion*
Swarm

We were well down the ventral axis
   when Father Luke noticed. Our cuts
steady through the skin, our scalpels
   already through the thin give
of the sternum. With each bullfrog
   pinned to its block and double-
pithed by nail, he had by then
   talked us clean through the lungs,
past a three-chambered heart couched
   in tissue and vascular dye. We must
have been deeper among the viscera
   when he heard us laughing,
not at the swarm of black eggs
   spilling from the oviducts to
slime the cuffs of our blazers,
   but at a phallus, jury-rigged from
foil and rubber bands hanging off the crucifix,
   hovering above a chart of light-
independent reactions. This was nothing
like the boys lowing through recitation
their antiphon for the layman whose wife
we heard was trampled by livestock
over trimester break. Nothing at all
like Sister Mary being made to face
the bathhouse scene from *Spartacus* in slow-
motion or her freshmen rewinding again
and again stock films of chariot drivers pitched
from their mounts, dragged
to their ends only to float backwards,
   hands bound up once more
in the reins. The Dean of Men confessed
he knew of no prayer or demerit
that could redeem such disgrace,
   could conceive of no greater sin
against the Corpus. *Transgressors, all of you,*
he said and closed the door behind him,
refusing to look at us or the thing
that seemed to shimmer and twitch
with each frog’s reflex kick against our forceps.
He held us there far beyond
the last bell, waiting for just one among us
to want forgiveness or for a single boy
to take back this mockery of the body
our Lord had made.
Life Drawing

How she is quiet before his robe falls each week to his ankles. This man who sits, nude for my wife, whom she draws with Conté sticks and pastel pencils. Each page in her notebook is a parade of his torsos, galley proofs of breastbones and chests. She explains because these lines are my favorite and shows me, traces with her knuckle tip chin to sternum, jaw to shoulder, clavicle to cusp of the arm. How in three passes an artist makes a place for a head to rest. Later, in blue and orange pigments mixed at the edge of a knife, thinned with linseed oil and mineral spirits, my wife will paint him on a canvas primed black. Again his body will end just above the pelvis, will fade into a fog of armrest or shadow, cushion or hip as if rendered in some fugitive dye. Because he is only the second man I have seen naked, in person. His, just the third I have seen in my life.

When I tell my wife I want to write about her naked, sketch her back’s faint taper as a class might to check perspective, describe the moles I notice on the underside of a breast as we make love, she says I can. And, in return, she will paint the whole of me, bare from the neck down as I pose in our living room. No one will even know this is you. The light will blank out your face.
These Bodies Lacking Parts

With raw sienna crushed by fist
in mortar, umber ground
to tender shadow to flesh,
Michelangelo binds a body,

mid-thrash, to the plaster,
its death flex throwing a heel
into the sheets, a bare arm
up at the drapery tempered

with cochineal red. In this Sistine
pendentive, Judith and her hand-
maid carry the artist's head away
on a dish, buckle at the knee

as if unable to bear fully the weight
of a skull hewn from the whole
of a man. On the mural opposite,
Michelangelo offers his skin

to the Last Judgment, hangs his face
elastic, lacking eyes or mass,
upon a martyr's fingertips. All
around the Redeemer, bodies vault

toward the clamor of heaven, plead
with their thresh and flail to render
themselves apart from the damned,
rowed toward a waiting maw.

• •

These are the men Vesalius halves
and digs into: criminals fresh
from the Paduan gallows, gifts
of the executioner's axe. Unfolding
the heads of petty thieves, he laces what nerves and veins he finds within their sutures into a crown shooting skyward. He figures a new man from their bared tributaries, writes of arteries as latticework. When the anatomist poses for his portrait, he instructs apprentices to draw him directly from nature, beside a body opened at the wrist, his fingers gracing the exposed vessels of the lower arm.
Telemachy

1.

Patron of the head
freed from the neck,
the new year’s feasts
and burials,
martyr of good arms
casting their stones,
benefactor of scattered wheals
like lagoons along the thigh,

Saint Telemachus
bleed for us

into the arena floor,
its crushed sand, its lions halved.