

ON
SEEING
THE
MARBLES

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ON
SEEING
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MARBLES

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a

it began to drizzle so
we climbed the steps and
filtered through the columns
into the atrium where

it being dark i took my
guide's elbow

strong currents
pushed us to a light filled
courtyard the acoustics

so much like a swimming
pool we said then into
darkness again and through
two further rooms before we
came upon a large

opening that marked the
entrance to the gallery

oh no my guide said
everyone had the same idea

all these bodies coming in
at the main door to
circulate

there was no escaping
them such a turgid room

vast really no windows just
grey clouds pressed to the
high glass roof the panes
murky like thames water
we waded to the side

found a cove where fewer
currents eddied

ok these marbles
not multi coloured balls
which people tend to

lose but sculptures taken
from a temple pale slabs
ranged about the sandy
walls long strips of them
laid out beneath the thunder

sky such murky clouds
such sandy walls and
those slabs a goldish hue
from quarries close to
athens no?

well i confess i got
nothing from them silent
as they were no cues at all
in fact just shoes
shuffling on humid tiles

the squeak of soles there
were kids calling lapping
voices and underwater
someone said they'd like to
bring their mother here

β

we went then to a
smaller room smaller than
the main gallery the ceiling
however no less high the

clouds no less thunderous
against the glass panes
above our heads

it was a smaller space
true but larger in a sense

more real to me at least
being full of things for
touching

here my guide said
in front of you there

i put out my hands and
found a tacky cylinder
something like a candlestick
squat fluted anchored to its
spot and close beside there

was another and another
i counted eight in total
columns i said a
model of the temple
so there i was before

the portico my wrists
upon the steps my fingers
running up the columns a
double row supporting the
pediment a gable framed by

the roof which corrugated
stretched beyond my grasp
towards my watching guide
now then i said
addressing them i invite you

to close your eyes and
choose a corner a patch to
sense with just your hands
wait they said i forget
am i east north or west?

the model stood upon
a plinth and on its side my
fingers quickly found
embossed a braille panel it
told me w big w

so west i was and opposite
my guide was east

i have here they said
the same as you i'm in front
of the east portico the east

entrance to the temple
here are the columns and
above them the pediment a
stage where once there was
a host of statues ranged in a

line it's empty now i
perceive and just below the
pediment where the column
tops end square i'm finding
a kind of horizontal border

yes i said and at my
position in the west my
fingers felt the border they
described and along its
length i found two plaques

of three lines apiece they
framed a smooth space a
void

where the metope
sculptures would have been

my guide said but now
there's just a space they've
chosen not to represent the
sculptures on this model
not the pediment nor

the metopes nor the
carvings on the frieze

well i made my
disconcerted way around
the border of the model

of the temple my fingers
marking column after
column then i wandered up
the flutes and strayed to the
empty spaces to the voids

where once there could be
seen calvary suddenly at a
gallop then people ordered
in a line they processed
shuffling a holy mantle in

their hands and here
sacrificial bulls being led
mostly placid but one
smelling blood resists and
they tackle him

my fingers came to
rest on the steps of the
model of the temple on the
plinth in the room of a
building which itself was

modelled on the temple
which this was a model of
then like some
avenging god i thrust my
hands in through the

columns toward the
temple's inner structure
where there was i knew a
golden statue of athena
but against my wrists

the columns closed like
cliffs and what i found
inside was instead a box
smooth impenetrable
nondescript

Y

on approach i saw
something like a fossil stuck
there in the wall a pale form
the faint

impression of a shell

these are casts of the
frieze marbles my guide
said here for us to
touch

i reached out a hand
to the cast

to the shell
and found undulating lines
like

the inside of a clam

a horse my guide said
its mane

that's what you're
touching

my fingers moved and found
the horse's muzzle then its
teeth straight and bared
here my guide said
tapping the cast

to your left there's a
man
my right hand
stayed with the horse
while

my left reached sideways
some distance to find a
face in profile a head
of curly hair round bumps
like grapes

i cupped the curls in my
palm and with my right hand
stroked the horse's mane
in my ear my guide
appeared

come they said and
led me to another cast

this man he's wearing
quite a splendid cape it's
clasped

just at his neck and billows
out around him open to
reveal

well he's wearing
nothing

underneath stark
naked

with a careful finger i
traced the raised outline of
the cape

another kind of shell
pleated at the bottom

then i found his head
and face

roughly eroded ran
my fingers down his neck
around his shoulders and
over his chiselled abdomen
 too shy

I skipped his groin and
touched instead a strong
sinewed thigh and a foot
turned outwards braced
against a rock

intimacy
 yes
and with it shame
 i felt them both as i
approached

the cast made contact my
hand outstretched
 i was conscious of
who was behind me
watching

conscious too of what they
might presume whether
they knew that
these casts were for
touching

not things to be looked at
only

as if to approach a
sculpture with hands
outstretched

was to out myself as deviant
either by volition

a vandal

or by tragedy
blind

look my guide said and
nudged my hand towards a
raised line

a rearing horse they
said

and that's his front legs
kicking rampant and if
you follow that leg to the
hoof you'll find they
chuckled

well

it's hard to say
whether the hoof's passing
before the caped man's
groin or

connecting with it

the perspective is
cheeky it allows for
ambiguity
laughing

i touched the hoof thinking
of the ancient sculptor who
rosy cheeked chiselled this
encounter between man
and horse

he felt no shame i presume
only mirth at setting this
joke down in stone

tack

tack

bits of marble flying and
phidias at his shoulder
eyebrow raised

my countryman who
brought

these sculptures here he
did not do the dirty work
himself i presume did not
grasp the chisel wield the
hammer

tack tack
prise the marbles from their
setting no
but i wonder if he ever ran his
british

hands over mane
 cape
right thigh
 hoof
i like to

think he did and secretly
and at the witching hour
 picture this
 darkness a
pale slab

leans against a wall he
appears candle in hand
approaches the marble a
goldish glow he sets
the candle

on the tiles straightens
looks about him and
 not knowing quite
what to do
 he reaches out

δ

my guide led me back
to the main gallery and up a
short flight of steps where
we found ranged along the

back wall a series of broken
figures

these are the
pediment sculptures my
guide said or some of

them at least they were
removed from above the
east entrance to the temple

i asked which of the
figures most caught their

eye and they took me
without hesitation to the
sculpture furthest to our
right

it was a horse's head

life size mounted on a plinth
and that was it

so weird to see it like
that we thought a three
dimensional horse's head

chopped off neatly at the
neck just below his jaw and
balanced so precarious
on the stump

for just a head he

seems so alive my guide
said his eyes are wide open
and perfectly round they
look like they're straining
almost popping out from the

sockets

i took a step back to
get a better view

the muscles in his
cheeks i said they're taut
and his mouth's open as if

he's gasping like he's at
the end of a very long
journey

 yes he looks almost
desperate my guide said

the veins standing out on his
face the bulging eyes the
sculptor has really captured
him a candid snapshot not
flattering at all this poor old

horse of all the sculptures
we've seen today of all the
ones we weren't allowed to
handle this is the one i
want to touch just to

give him a hug stroke his
little nose

 he looked shattered
we agreed and it was
interesting too we said how

the body language of the
animals here the bulls on
the frieze for example or
this horse they were easier
to read than the human

figures or the gods with
their blank expressions the
serene countenance
divinely impassive it was a
relief to be honest to have

such a feeling of empathy for
that big horsey face

for some time i had
been aware of a dark shape
hovering near us as we

spoke not too close a few
steps behind as if they were
waiting for us to finish i
turned towards the shape to
ask if they wanted to stand

next to us but before i could
the stranger chipped in
i agree they said he
looks completely exhausted
they had a low toned

voice their accent not
british if i had to say difficult
to place
it's a shame i said we
just have a bit of him here

this head a kind of battle
trophy and his body lost or
destroyed somewhere
along the way
ah the stranger said

there was never any body
this horse is complete in
fact as we see him here
he's part of the pediment
scene this tired horse

tucked away in the corner
imagine the stranger said
we're standing before the
entrance to the temple and
we look up to see this line of

sculptures high above us
as if on a stage we see
athena in the middle
emerging from zeus' head
dionysus to one side and

all these other gods and
nymphs around them the
whole scene framed by
the sloping sides of the
temple's roof

but where the sloping
roof meets the outer walls
there are these awkward
corners tight angles where
no sculpture seemed easily

to fit but instead of leaving
them empty the artists
created a narrative to fit
those awkward corners and
this horse's head nestled in

the right hand corner of the
pediment the sloping roof
passing diagonally just
above his head this
exhausted face is what they

hit upon

because actually the
pediment is more like a
cinema screen than a stage
this horse was harnessed to

a chariot driven by selene
goddess of the moon who
was visible on the pediment
to the left of the horse's
head and she and her

chariot are inclining down to
the right like a plane coming
in to land so in other words
she was in the process of
disappearing from the frame

down below the pediment
and out of shot

that's why we only see
the horse's head peaking
just above the frame

because his body which
we can't see which no one
ever saw not now not then
the invisible body of this
horse is out of shot below

the pediment

and that's not all the
stranger took a few steps to
the side then turned again to
face us

on the other end of the
pediment to your left as
we're standing now nestled
in the other awkward corner
there was its mirror image

another horse another
chariot but this time they're
rising up piloted by the sun
god helios and so this
pairing was a metaphor for

dawn the sun rising on the
left and here on the right
the moon dipping down
below the horizon below
the frame created by the

pediment

and all this was
happening twelve metres
above the ground

this whole cinematic

scene high above the
heads of whoever was
visiting the temple

 and it was in glorious
technicolour too don't

forget because the whole
scene would have been
painted all of the figures
dazzlingly vibrant a riot of
colours almost gaudy in its

execution

 they were painted? i
said i thought they were
just bare marble like we see
them here

 no no they were
definitely painted in fact
all greek sculpture was the
stranger said a note of
triumph in their voice

all the sculptures on
this temple the people in
the frieze the fearsome
centaurs there and here
on the pediment all the

gods athena zeus
wearing brightly coloured
clothes their hair painted
skin tones painted their
eyes painted but over time

the colours faded of course
and disappeared

it's hard to believe i
said in this gallery all the
blank marble the pale faces

the sandy walls

yes the stranger said
in this space it's not easy to
imagine helios' golden
chariot rising with the dawn

the sky behind him washed
in pinks and blues and
down here by the moon
selene's silver chariot
submerged in glossy night

it was the theatre of it
all the stranger said the
performance of it how
much like cinema it was
these sculptures moving in

and out of view the
pediment teeming with
motion a triangular window
to another world and these
glorious beings emerging

from the building rising out
of the marble descending
below the horizon and all
of it inspired by the beating
of drums the tooting of

pipes the invocations of
the poets and the tramp
tramp of feet sounding
before the temple
 the whole thing

resonant and alive this
incredible scene that's why
people love it why we're so
proud the low toned
stranger said this temple

this pediment and this
horse's head just
imagine how it was
 the stranger looked
away and we followed his

gaze out to the muted gallery
to the blank walls to the
dark shapes flitting past us
 i grew up in athens
they said a small smile

rounding their voice

i grew up with the
temple in sight on the hill

and every day as i
walked to school i'd look up

and see it between tall
apartment blocks the
temple up on the hill its
empty pediment the whole
thing ruined pillaged half

destroyed but i loved it
i love it still that ruined
view i find it romantic
somehow

the stranger paused i

felt them step closer to the
plinth and so i gestured
forward with my cane
towards the barrier finding
it with a clang like bronze

i've been in london for
a decade now the stranger
said their voice quieter
more pensive than before
i notice i'm embracing

certain things there's a
willingness to accept to
integrate you know get in
line don't make a fuss
but being in this

gallery i feel i see again the
pieces of the puzzle
these ones here and
my own
and yes

i remember that
in athens growing
up we spoke a
lot about what
happened

ε

we left the museum
passed through the double
row of columns went down
the steps and out the black

iron gates onto the wet
pavement

it's funny my guide said
as we walked towards the
station this stuff about

description and displacement
athens london
well for me
thinking of athens it brings
up a lot

we stepped into russell
square and navigated the
fountain it was turned off
and around it a new fence
had been installed

we got to the lights and
waited

it's a sad thing really
my guide said someone i
knew lived there and we

would speak all the time
and most mornings she would
get up to walk her dog before
work and because of the time
difference this could

be as early as four in the
morning for me

so instead of calling
she would leave long voice
notes while she walked

and often she would
wander on the hill there quite
near the temple with her dog
or if not near the temple then
in the big park that surrounds it

is there a park that surrounds
it? i don't know i
never visited athens i
can't say
but she'd send me

snippets of her walk and
in between telling me about
whatever had happened the
day before or her plans for
the day ahead she would

describe what she saw
the row of olive trees
that ran along the street there
and in the summer the olives
on the pavement they fall

when ripe so many so
plentiful

it's a blessing she said
and laughed the dog snuffling
in the undergrowth in the

background of the message
yes for that time we
were apart was it months?
it seemed longer i felt i lived
with her in athens in a

strange way because every
morning i woke to her voice
notes and descriptions
and for years after
whenever i was at work or on

the bus here in london and
i saw what time it was i'd add
two hours to make it athens
time her time a habit
i've only recently got out of