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Elsewhere in the Prado

Have you seen the dog, you said. Come see the dog in the hole.

I was watching a man being eaten head first, and it's hard to look away from that— Saturn with his own son's body hanging out of his mouth, staring back at me, unseeing. Staring starved and mad they are, those eyes, sick and ravenous, like he'll never be sated. You put a hand under my elbow and whispered near to me, and it was hard to take my eyes from him but also, frankly, a relief to get away. As if I'd been stuck with him too long at a party, and only really realised as you took my arm to steer me how devouring his eyes were, how I'd been up to my neck in that mad attention—

I brought you here, to this room full of faces: piggish, ape-like, bovine; grinning, gaunt, gaping, vacant; distended, hollow, delirious. Vast bodies in a Spanish landscape: swinging cudgels up to their knees in sea; spinning fates; eating their own children. And black hats and black masses and depravity; witches, devil-goats, worshippers; crazy pilgrims on a horrible camino, cramming on top of each other, desperate to be blessed or to make penance, veiled and shrouded stretching back and back and back into the dark country; an old couple gurning and gumming at their spoon; two women sniggering at a man doing god knows what in the dark of his trousers... and there at the end of the room, just waiting: a dog. Just a little dog's head peering up out of brown with a bright yellow sky large above him. Just a dog in a hole. How did he get there?

He painted these when he was an old man, I told you. Goya. He was deaf. His career, which had been so grand, was derailed by war and the mess that came after—he was investigated, for collusion, for obscenity; he got out of the city, he retreated to the hills, and he was very ill, he had... I think yellow fever, or one of the colours of fever... and when he got better, these paintings, these are what he did there. He painted them for his own house. Can you imagine? They are actually frescoes—they were painted onto the plaster, painted into the walls. When he left, he left them there, and they would have gone to ruin, but they were rescued from

the damp, later, taken off the walls and the bare walls went to ruin on their own.
That house is gone now.

I used to explain things to you, like this. This is the sort of thing I used to tell you. I don't know if you remember—I mean, if you remember how I used to tell you things at all, or if you remember specifically the story about Goya. This was years ago now and I doubt you do. You might remember the dog, at least.

*

I brought you here. I found the best plane tickets, I found a hotel, in the arty part of the city where the literati lived—because of course, that's where we should stay—Lope de Vega lived here! Cervantes! Calderon! Old friends with whom you share no history. We checked in, dumped our bags and set out again—or at least I assume that's what we did— that is the usual way of things. I navigated with my pull-out map, going east, our shadows short behind us. I led us to the tiled bar that we should eat at. A beer and a bite at the counter and back into the sun and we both wouldn't mind another drink now, or a little lie down, or maybe one followed by the other. A siesta, you said, not entirely joking, isn't that a thing one *should* do here? But it's art that we came for, I'd remind you; as if this were true for both of us. I came here to feel something. Something other than warm sunshine and a bit pissed and a little bit sleepy after lunch. Those are all nice feelings, you would have said. I couldn't disagree. But we have the rest of our lives to drink beer in the sunshine— Did I say that? What an extraordinary promise to make! It felt like it, then.

You might, you said. I have work on Monday. Let's go this way, I said, with an air of spontaneity, as if we were setting out on a meander and not a carefully plotted course.

Our shadows pulling a little longer behind now as we head out into the afternoon. Crossing the Paseo del Prado in the warm yellow light—yes, it was September— and the shade and the sound of the traffic and below it the shifting of the leaves; I expect it was like that. I may be creating. Are those trees deciduous? Are they cedars? I can't remember. I was never good at noticing, or at names for

these things. I remember the wide, shaded width of it. People have walked up and down this avenue for centuries, of an afternoon; it was a social fixture. I probably told you that, as we crossed it. After their siesta, you'd have said, pointedly.

The white forecourt cool and pale and clattery with cutlery and china. A quick coffee, probably, to fortify us; the smell of any gallery cafe. I'd collect a booklet and lead us through the rooms. You attentive as I point and talk and turn and fold the floor plan and hold it out in front of us, getting in right under your arm as I say okay so we're *here*— and that's the entrance *there* so we must be facing north— so, okay, let's go this way. Without our shadows now to lead or follow, no sun to give us compass. But I know just where we should go and what to see and what to skip. This is the sort of thing I know. You nodding and saying sounds good, with a squeeze of my shoulder, pulling me into your damp armpit, which I don't mind, which I like, the clean sweat smell of you. I remember.

You saying yep, sounds good, to whatever I'm suggesting, whatever I say we should do. You willing, biddable, wishing to please me, then; and me, wishing to be pleased, and wishing to be pleasing. To effect some conversion, as if by guiding you here I am giving these things to you: I bring you this virgin, this princess, this head on a platter. We linger in the Golden Age, of course, and pass quickly through most of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, too many wigs and gold buttons, too much lace, too many military jackets and tidy children, too static and lurid and frou-frou. I am brisk, through these times and spaces, focused on my floor plan. I'll know when I need to look up.

I am seeking something particular, now; I am a mad pilgrim on a mission. You valiant and attentive and flagging a little, even in the cool of these interiors. Come on, I said. We should see the Black Paintings.

In my mind if I try to make my way to this room now it is just around a corner, at the head of stairs, and quite difficult to find even with the floor plan, somewhere at the extremity of the building; and it is also in Goya's house in the hills where he lived as an old man; you are almost in the space he made these paintings for, when you go into it. These quiet spaces of deafness that have brought their quiet with them, and

their frenzy and mayhem and longing. And what fascinated then still fascinates me now, but it frightens me more now, also, when I think of them.

Look. It's just a dog in a hole, you said. You were whispering, which is something that most people do in these rooms, entering the hush of them. What is he doing? Is he swimming? Or drowning... maybe just stuck there, in a ditch, and no way back and no way up and out, no way up that incline.

Because it's like that, isn't it, sometimes; just dark mud that you're stuck in and blankness above, pressing down and stretching terribly upwards, so there's no climbing out from under it. There's this layer beneath that we're sinking into, that we are all the time on the point of being covered in, a mudslide of stuff pouring down. And then there's all the stuff above us that we can't see or reach, such a height of bright nothing. And in between, this tiny space for breathing that we have to keep our head up into.

I was about to say something of this sort and you said, Poor dog. As if he were just an actual dog, stuck there, waiting patiently, trusting us to pull him out, and not a metaphor made to serve my purposes. Poor dog, you said, and your eyes were shining, you really meant it. Just as if art didn't have to be *about* anything.

*

We came out into the street together and went back into the city; walking west in the autumn evening so our shadows went before us. Our shadows who have trailed around so many cities with us since, rippling down steps behind, slanting to peer around corners, keeping close and hunkering below us to stay out of the high sun. In that September light, giant-long and inclining together.

Maybe this is why I'm thinking of it now, because it's autumn again and I long to get away, away from the year's end looming ahead of me, brown and unassailable. Maybe this is why I am thinking now of Goya in his deafness, and his dog up to his neck in it.

I don't know why. Who can say how these things come to the surface. There have been other Septembers, other cities. Other paintings. Other dogs. But I'm

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thinking now of how you loved *that* dog with such a helpless sorrow; as if you would do anything in your power, if only you could, to throw him a rope, a bone, a biscuit; and how it made me stop and see that dog and love him, also— and you— and this is what I think of when I think of that particular trip to the Prado.

And now, it's evening and you're over there sitting half-listening to the radio, picking at a hangnail; and I want to say— do you remember the dog in the hole? And I want you to know what I mean by it, though I'm not sure I could tell you. Poor dog, you'll say, when I say it.