

Eley Williams,
Attrib. and Other Stories

Scutiform

I have started wandering around the museum during my now vacant breaks. I have developed a little route or routine and make sure that I pass three specific works in a particular order. Each time I nod at them as I go past as if we are fellow, familiar commuters during a busy day.

The first exhibit is found on the ground floor. She has neither head nor arms, marble drapery sticking to her as if she has just escaped some frat boy's wet T-shirt contest. Her foot is resting upon a tortoise—he might have had races to run or hares' egos to deflate but the goddess is clearly having none of it. Aphrodite Ourania and her club-footed friend. I told you that I had been hurt before and that the experience had toughened me, made me uncaring. *Carry your shield on your back, or return on it* is my motto, I had

said to you having memorised the phrase when a previous partner said it to me. At the time I had been appalled and impressed at the pretension. I warned myself that I could leave at any time. You rolled your eyes then made a shape in the air with your hands, drawing an invisible line or cusp of something around me and then tapped the centre of my forehead. I had no idea what you were doing but I went with the touch and rocked a little on my heels. Shields can also serve as coracles. That same evening we swung by a screening of *Blade Runner*. During the bit with the Voight-Kampff test when the interviewer character says *You're in a desert, walking along in the sand*—you had reached for my hand in the darkness.

Tortoise shares the same etymology roots as *torture* and *torment*. I convinced myself that passers-by were laughing at us, that you could bear walking with such a squat, conch-backed plod. The shell is fused to the ribcage which holds the heart. Everything felt soft because it was split or calloused from moving too fast or fleetfooted, hermetically sealing over—I felt we both swallowed our heads into our body. The locomotion of tortoises is mechanical and lumbering. They are ludicrous fossilised meringues. Tortoises look like nothing less than those small brown upturned UHT milk cartons that everyone can pick up for free in the museum's

cafe but never do.

The second exhibit that I always make sure to visit when in the museum is titled *Young Neapolitan Fisherboy Playing with a Tortoise*. The figure is naked and wears a hat. Either I let my guard down or you got under my skin—whichever, I thought solely in awful lines of poetry during those days: *Let's lie here arm in arm, let's get lyrical, let's make psalteries of each other's inexpert mouths*. You were taller than me and in order to get anywhere I often had to lift my chin. That sounds more delicate than the action deserved—I had to crane my neck. I felt impervious and brave, wonderfully dunderheaded with love like the best of them and so many smiles started with you. I was idiot-beamy and bumble-gaited, could barely string a walk together let alone a sentence—I started waking up knowing that beneath the brickwork of my skin my heart had become built like a ziggurat. Our days were glossy and embossed. I remember this every time that I pass this second sculpture in the museum. The statue shows a boy tickling the tortoise's face with a reed. Postcards of this statue sell well.

The third exhibit is a small bronze god—"identified by notches on the ankles for the wings," can be read on the explanatory note nailed to the wall. The god looks miserable but I love the way that they are portrayed with hands

reaching out ("holding a lost object," states the caption, "probably a tortoise").

When the weather is good I take my coffee outside and watch the clockwork-footed tourists in the museum courtyard and imagine my exhibits—secure on their plinths or nailed into their display cases—watching me with their blank eyes through the windows. During the course of a day the shadows cast by their tough stony bodies must twist right around their fixed points. When the hour's right, the shadows might reach right across the museum's bare, bright, white floor.