

Cristo Velato

Giuseppe Sanmartino, 1753:
Museo Capella Sansevero, Napoli

ENGLISH

*almost as if the covering makes
his limbs appear more naked and exposed:*
its cling accentuates the flesh, defines
the ropes of sinew, straining ligaments;
reminds us that the bones are shallow-set.
Circling the slab, sunhats in hand, we feel
like real mourners. All week long we've viewed
parades of statues. Eyeless papal busts,
blank Joves, castrated heroes, little boys
asphyxiating geese, encrusted saints
in vestibules, *pietà* on *pietà*.
We've seen plaster contortions in Pompei,
prostrate against the ash, figures obscured,
expressions still discernible. We've seen
God's lavish houses and their many rooms
bristling with Christs in separate agonies,
their heads loose over craggy ribcage moans
and wounds to move our grandmothers to tears.
My grandmother just died.

Two years ago,
a month before her ninetieth, she was here,
soaking up sun and pecking at cannoli.
Old age was one long gap year, every shelf
a trove of souvenirs; she lived for kitsch.
She'd been to more cathedrals than I know
the names of: Marys, Peters, Sacred Hearts.

Somewhere in Leicester she's laid out to cool,
pearls at her breast, her lapis veins subsiding:
bright webbing in her wrists, her backs-of-hands.
This Christ is webbed as well.

His varicose
collapse of arms and legs makes him appear
less son of God; more, simply someone's son.
Down the swathed thighs, the calves, toward the toes,

the veins stand out like tubers through the sheet:
a livid subway map, a river's forks;
veins, vines, *vino*, pulsing a sacrament
as potent as last night's full-bodied red.

Directly underneath, in the *Càvea*,
the two *Macchine Anatomiche* –
marvels of science – grin from their vitrines.
Skeletons wreathed in faux capillaries,
taking their form from decades of dissection,
the grisly couple's frizz of ventricles
models the miracle of circulation.
They're not the only venerated bones
this side of the piazza: down the street
a subterranean cathedral packs
its walls with human rubble. Blackened skulls
are decked in lace and plastic rosaries,
small change, toy cars, tiaras, ticket stubs,
as if the mere accoutrements of life
might trick them into it.

Well – death is kitsch.

Besieged by tourist booths I quash the urge
to buy her something garish. Misaligned
religious statuettes, misshapen masks,
fridge magnets printed upside-down: a wealth
of treasures for her mantel-shrine of tat.
Out in the square, beneath a crown of spires,
gelato drips and sizzles on the flags
and pigeon droppings ossify. *I am
the true vine*: dying people want the world
to nurture what they've seeded, whether it's
a Word, a Faith, a Church; or seventeen
descendants – *no, not Catholic, just bored* –
blood is the most enduring souvenir.
I stop and ask the vendor what he sells.
Forgive me, I don't speak the language well.