

*Quote, Naturalis Historia*

But what does the soul consist of? Which material? Where is its consciousness? How does it see, hear, and feel? How does it employ the senses, and what does it have to offer without them? And where do they live, these many centuries of souls and shadows, and how many are they? It is nothing but the childish lies of dumb mortals who greedily desire to never die.

*Pliny the Elder*

It is beyond doubt that man breaks down the food he ingests by way of heat, which is to say by way of the fire inside his being. But which faculty extracts the gainful matter and transmutes it into the flesh and fat of the human body while the useless matter is discharged? This cannot be by thermic powers alone. A portion of porridge sewn into a pig's belly, then heated, is not noticeably affected. Only a power that exists in life, though not in any of life's singular components, seems capable of splitting food into its useful, transmutable parts and its unavailing redundancies. Here,

the word soul comes to mind, particularly its ability to reign over matter and categorise its instances. But how does one imagine a soul that lives detached from the body, no longer able to perform its office through the body, from which we can only assume it derives its own nourishment?

*Pliny the Younger*

I remember clearly the experiment with the porridge in the pig's belly. My uncle asked me if I did not agree that one portion of the porridge would turn into shit, the other into pork. I said yes, solely to humour him, although my inherent good sense suspected otherwise. The porridge-stuffed belly was laid out in the sun for a few hours on a hot day. When we cut up the belly again, the porridge was unchanged. Not until now did I realise what the experiment was truly about.

*Quote, Naturalis Historia*

And to think that among thousands of human beings there exist no two indistinguishable examples, and yet only ten features or so constitute our countenance.

*Pliny the Elder*

My face – ten or so features – appears to stare at me *from the depths* of the Corinthian bronze mirror. As though immersed in a basin filled with blood and water. It is staring at itself. I am staring at myself as though from the depths of a basin of blood and water, and I am staring at myself in the depths, and on. It is so simple and inexplicable. My face watches me watch it, watches it watch me. A description of my face would never evoke more than a summary of its parts and the same is true of any memory of it. Only when the face lies here before me does it amount to a fully-realised assertion, a sign that can be interpreted but not determined. A poem trussed in its own limping metre, from the glossy scalp to the chin's bumbling echoes down the neck. To think of it this way, from the top down,

my face is a crash, a collapse. The tip of my head is pointed and from this tip the flesh cascades, gathering in pouches over the skull, whose orifices it seals over time, finally plunging over the chin with an abruptness that reverberates down the neck where the crash is repeated in ripples until the body, my trunk, begins. Like ten eggs broken on the point of a spear, so oozes the flesh. One could also view it from the bottom up. From this perspective, the head strives upwards into a peak from its wide root. But this ambition is misguided. The vast bulk of flesh has no potential for sprouting, it has congealed in the attempt and now just hangs there, grape-like clusters of hopeless blobs dangling from my person. A smile, or any attempt to lift this resigned flesh, only makes it swing. Protuberans, probolos, pondus, pinguis. Old Plinius. Where are my features? They are stuck in the motions of the flesh, its attempt to climb and all too sudden, all too pointy a culmination, its piecemeal, flaccid defeat. If I were to interpret my face as it watches me and I watch it, it would be like this: a striving to raise unwilling flesh. A striving misguided from the outset. And so lies my face before me, caged in the mirror, and I, caged in the face, hidden from my sight, staring at the inevitable collapse; that is my face, and the balance between hope and defeat I inhabit. And I am like a murky mirror, caged within a face, now caged in a murky mirror. But as long as there are still openings to the world, there is hope. My worst nightmare, recurring since childhood:

my face is terminally sealed and has no openings to the world. I am resigned to an inner world that can neither be sensed nor described. After fumbling for a long time, I find a sharp tool. I try to prick holes in the flesh, carve eye openings, nostrils, ears, mouth, but the knife, or whatever it is, only digs at the bone-bed. The skull, the flesh encasing it, is sealed. In Germania, I have seen the top of several soldiers' skulls drilled after a blow or a fall to ease the pressure of the amassed blood. Some died, some recovered. I have heard of people who lived for twenty, thirty years after such a procedure. Sometimes I long for that opening. An opening in my head, not turned to the vile world of man but to the sky.

*Pliny the Younger*

Two days after the last day he saw, his body was found intact and uninjured, still fully clothed and seeming more asleep than dead. They dug him from the ash and layers of pumice covering him and made a wax imprint of his face. I have since had a mask cast in bronze from the model, and it hangs right here in front of me in my study. It is a calm and harmonious face, a face at peace with itself, having allowed itself to fall and sag. All the furrows of the face are deeper than he permitted them to be when he was alive. To claim it smiles peacefully would be an overstatement, although in its sunken jaw I sometimes see an idiotic grin pasted upon it. Not a grin directed at me or the world at large, but at

something taking place only behind closed eyelids. And true peace, I believe, is not in the so-called peaceful smiles remaining on the lips of old men, dead after years of ills and anxiety. That kind of smile is full of resignation, and expresses nothing but willing defeat. True peace is found in an idiotic grin like the one I glimpse from time to time in the cast of my uncle's face. Calpurnia often asks me to have the face altered – have his eyes opened, his jaws lifted, his brows made to frown a bit – to make him seem awake and warlike. Possibly remove a few double chins, and adorn the forehead with wavy locks in the style of Alexander. She finds it inappropriate to display one's ancestors in their dozy death rattle. But, so far, I have resisted.

*Quote, Naturalis Historia*

That which the Earth buries and conceals in her depths, that which does not readily come to light, that is what kills us and drags us to the underworld.