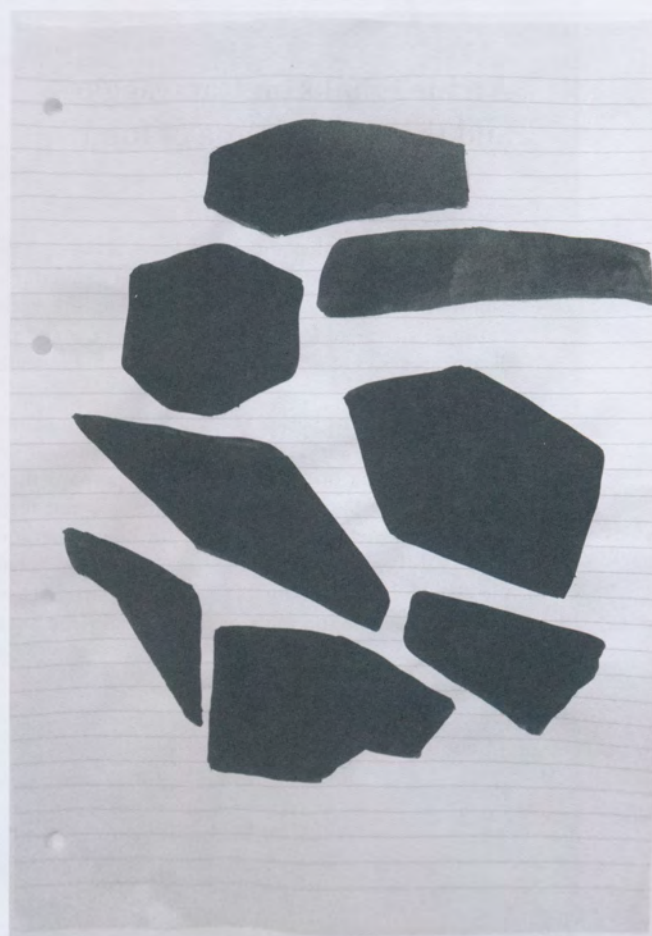
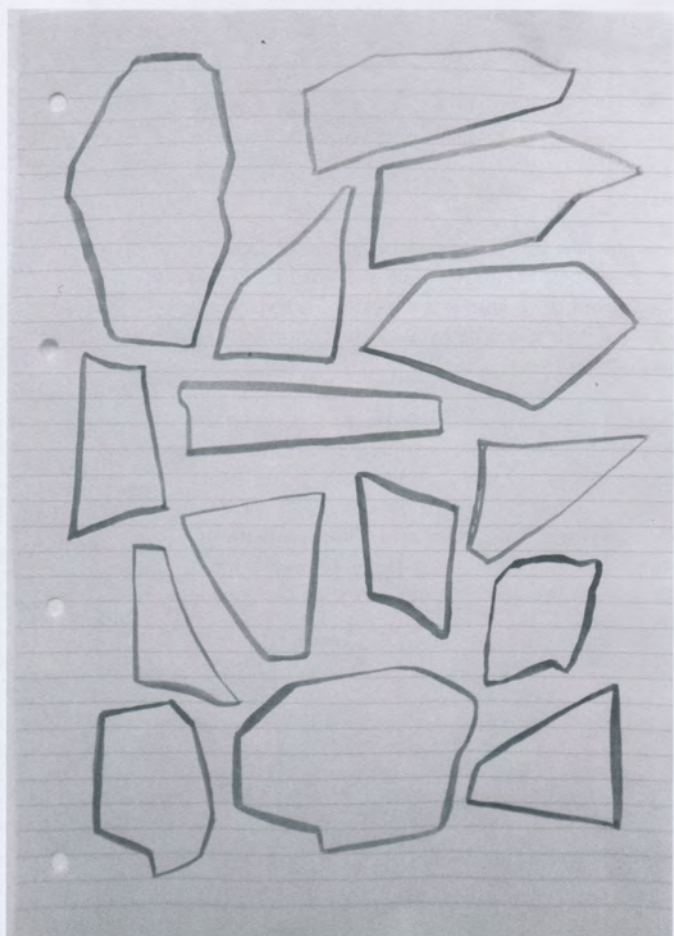




*An  
Incomplete  
Dream*

*Emma  
Talbot*

I don't know where my life is going. I am just moving from one thing to another, crossing the street between work and studio and home. I am reading things and making drawings and writing. I am fixing meals and washing clothes and going shopping. I have fallen in love, so I'm having a lot of sex and am probably bound up in all this sticky stuff like a fly in a spider's web, turning mushy. I'm trying to be 'in the moment' as my counsellor advises me. Mindfulness. Actually, I am trying to see less of her. She is becoming like the narrator to my life, making it feel like episodes in a box set. Especially because each session starts with a 'last time...' catch up.

I was sitting on the tube the other day reading *The Satyricon*, a Roman novel by Petronius from 1st century AD. Granted, it's a novel of left over pieces, but even so, it's completely readable today. The main character's activities and obsessions aren't totally incomprehensible to me ('don't be surprised that painting is on the decline, when a lump of gold seems more beautiful to everybody'), especially as much of the narrative hinges on following a lover about. And it's still funny. The main characters are; *Encolpius* 'whose name means "In-Crotch", *Giton* ("Mate"), and a rival for Giton's affections *Ascyltus* ("Unshagged-out")<sup>2</sup>

There were originally over 20 books of *The Satyricon*, all that remains are fragments from books 16-18. This fragmentation is interesting to me, particularly as I have been thinking so much about how life isn't a rational sequence of things that make sense, it is a series of flowing fragments, snippets and repetitions. Not only life - the whole of time is. Paul Ricoeur in his volumes *Time and Narrative* said that narrative puts order where there was only disorder. Life effectively doesn't make sense, until you narrate it in retrospect. And are we really, at the point of the present, able to know what the meanings of current events are?

It was a chance meeting that got us invited to stay at the Villa Medici in Rome for a weekend. A couple of weeks later, we were on the plane from Stansted, looking down at the tiny clustered dots of light and turquoise swimming pools in the night time landscape of Italian villages and towns, as we closed in on Rome. At the airport we were met by a driver who took us along the Via Appia to Rome through backstreets and dual carriageways, past billboards for political rallies. The whole weekend we encountered political rallies and platforms, but like in a Fellini film when speech is obscured and spectacle enhanced, we were unable to engage with meaning, so these events sat visually.

Italian was not coming back fast enough.

*'Do dreams have a meaning as do the events of one's waking life? Yes and No. In waking events the meaning is, finally, always accessible to our intuition; in the dream it is there but irretrievable. For Fellini antiquity is a dream whose meaning has been lost, while still being*

*there and making its presence felt at all times.'* Alberto Moravia.<sup>3</sup>

The film *Fellini Satyricon*, (1969) was partly based on Petronius's novel, an episodic, non-linear series of fragmentary narratives that follow Encolpius, the main character, on an adventurous odyssey. Fellini said this film was the closest he'd got to making a science fiction, as well as a reflection on the time in which it was made: the end of the druggy, hedonistic 60s. Fellini used the depicted (painted) world of antiquity as a visual reference for his 'fresco in fantasy key';<sup>4</sup> purposefully retaining the sense of mystery that comes with incomplete descriptive images left over from the ancient world. The whole film is deliberately hallucinatory or dream-like and Fellini talked about either populating his film completely with the famous (Groucho Marx, The Beatles) or with the completely unknown. Both these proposals respond to the multilayered nature of antiquity and whether what survives can be seen to be the evidence of individuals - particular people we still know of (artists, Emperors, wealthy families etc) - or the completely anonymous, who have left their trace in history present but unattributed.

Our driver cut a back route through ochre streets without pavements (the warmth of the soft air, the closed walls, the cypress trees) and came out somewhere near the Colosseum. Moving through the city centre, the journey was full of places I recognized, rising up against the car window then falling away again. I begin to get my bearings. I hadn't been in Rome for 18 years.

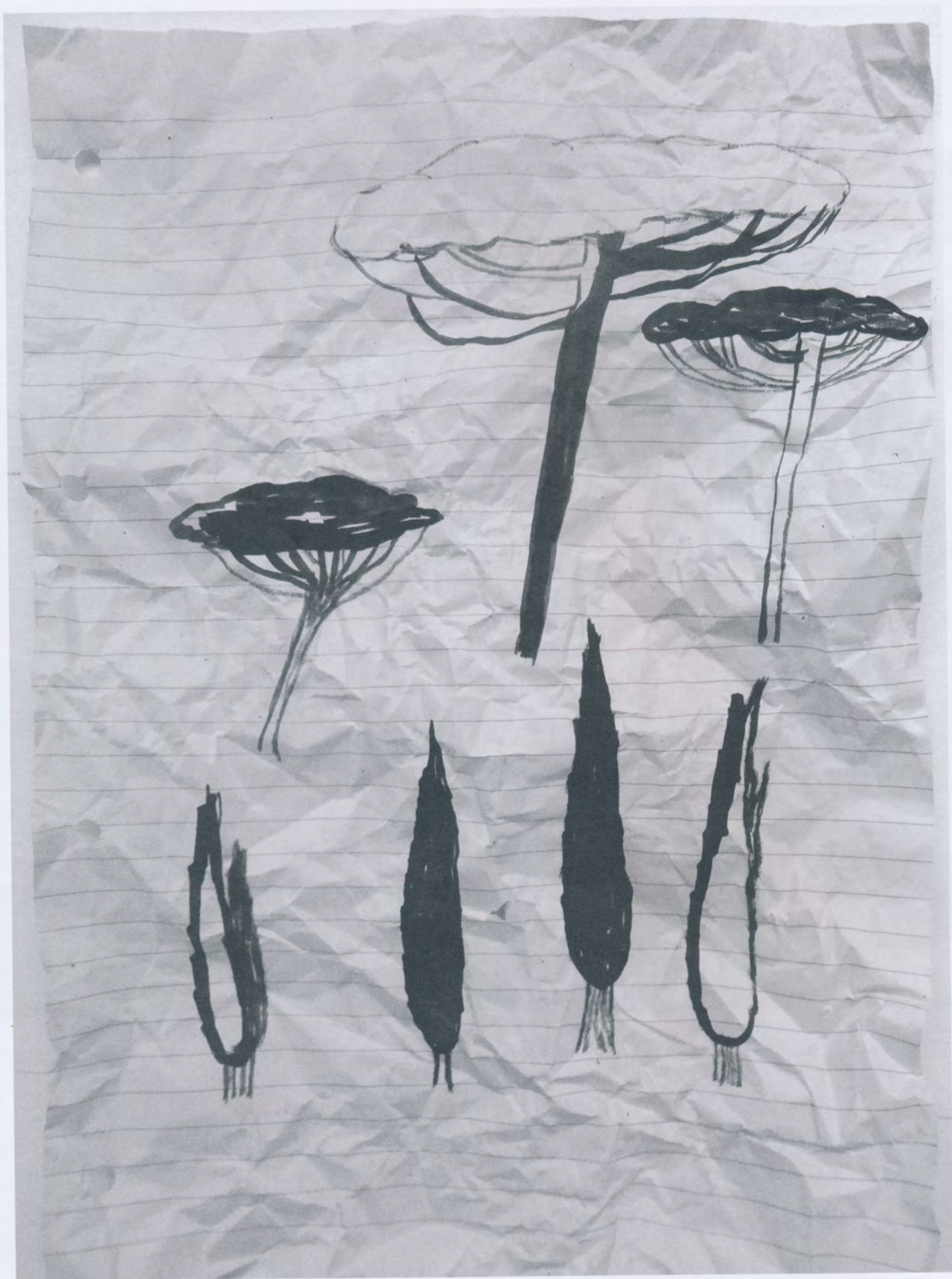
We pulled up at the Villa Medici. It's a huge monster of a place, looming over the city on the Pincian hills. An impressively forbidding-looking building, the lower walls slope outwards like a fort. A small door, in the middle of the huge wooden studded front door, opened mechanically and we stepped inside. The night-receptionist led us up a dark spiral stone staircase with scumbled walls. The words scuro and fumoso came to mind from nowhere. Balthus, the painter, director of the French Academy for 16 years from 1961, restored the villa. He had the walls painted like this. I feel like I am walking in a Balthus painting. It is theatrical. It is hard to detect what is authentic and what is staged. It seems we keep walking in circles into the dark. A labyrinth. We are taken through a painted salon to our own room.

*The Satyricon* is so ancient, it is fascinating that it still speaks to us 2,000 years later. This, in turn, is perhaps the key to the fascinations of Rome itself. The fact that these literary remains are translated and exist in our time, like worm-holes into the ancient world, is similar to the presence of remains of buildings, sculptures and tombs that lie all over the city. The notion of the past being present in Rome is extended by the idea that the spaces between remaining fragments can be conceptually filled in and broken things can be conceptually reconstructed to tell us more about what Roman life was like. This is essentially a contemporary archaeological and historical project, contrasting with the Romantic notion that at-



THINGS  
EXIST  
IN  
SPACE  
AND TIME  
in a more permanent way  
than WE EVER do

WE'RE  
JUST  
MORNING  
TIL  
NIGHT  
long  
weekenders



taches a kind of deserted melancholia to the idea of ruins and 'the classical landscape as a locus of decay'.<sup>5</sup>

Byron, in the fourth canto of his poem about his travels through the Mediterranean, *Childe Harolds Pilgrimage* (1819), writes anxiously of the state of Rome as a place fragmented, where the everyday is enacted over the site of the crumbling and lost past. He sees Rome as a confusing marble wilderness and understands the past's incompleteness as a loss:

*Come and see*

*The cypress, hear the owl, and plod your way  
O'er steps of broken thrones and temples, Ye!  
Whose agonies are evils of day --  
A world is at our feet as fragile as our clay.*

*The Niobe of nations! there she stands,  
Childless and crownless, in her voiceless woe;  
An empty urn within her wither'd hands,  
Whose holy dust was scatter'd long ago;*<sup>6</sup>

The next night, a little drunk, we walked hand in hand through the gardens of the villa. I wanted to see the sculptures of Niobe and her children, set in their hidden lawn with beds of acanthus and a little stream running through. Balthus had the plaster copies made of the group of Greek statues that the original owner (Cardinal Ferdinando de' Medici) took with him when he left Villa Medici, and arranged them himself in a tableau. Niobe's 14 children, except the one that cowers under her cloak, were killed as a punishment for her pride. The idea of this grouping is that they have all been turned into stone. Their poses are melancholic and striving, they spin away from the large central figure of Niobe like ballet dancers, stretching and posing in classical agony. They are all the more creepy when you see the luminosity of their moonlit bodies in the darkness of the garden at night and the two of you are alone.

*The Satyricon* is described by Alberto Moravia, the Roman novelist, as 'an open novel – a series of events and adventures without a beginning, middle or an end; without a story, and internal structure'.<sup>7</sup> He compares Petronius to open writers such as Henry

Miller or Céline and states that one could add whole chapters to Petronius's, Miller's or Céline's work 'and not damage it at all'.<sup>8</sup> By this, he surely means that one could add further episodes and adventures, rather than attempt to fill the gaps in between. He also explains the 'picaresque novel of ancient times'<sup>9</sup> of which *The Satyricon* is an example, '...demanded that the narration pass with ease and agility, without order or logic, from episode to episode, from subject to subject'.<sup>10</sup> He describes the open novel as descriptive of the street, the crowd, incidents and the unexpected. By extension, the open novel can act as a recorder or satire of our experience of the everyday, of people passing by, faces and attitudes, encounters.

In the opening credits of *Fellini Satyricon*, Encolpius is seen against a wall of graffiti. Both the book and film serve to remind us of the permanence of low life in the everyday, the exchanges and relationships between people, the humour and intrigues that spin stories and weave between formal structures.

'Walking through Rome' I remind you 'is like walking through a labyrinthine haunted house. Each piazza is another room and the streets dark corridors between. Ancient monuments are apertures into another time. Time layered over time, fragments left – discarded partial histories.'

'The corners of baroque buildings are covered in rusticated quoins to hide the brutality of the facing edge' you say, and point them out to me.

We link arms.

'I love the tradition of *passaggiata*, the evening stroll, where people walk out on the street, to be looked at and look at each other.' I say 'It's a parade of now, with the looking and looking back, it's the flow of the present through the backdrop of the past.'

*Vedere e farsi vedere* (see and be seen).

I am talking in my sleep again.

1. Petronius, *The Satyricon* (Penguin Classics 2011), page 74

2. Helen Morales, 'Introduction', *Petronius, The Satyricon*, (Penguin Classics, 2011), page XV

3. Alberto Moravia, 'Dreaming Up Petronius', *The New York Review of Books*, (March 26, 1970), page 2

4. *ibid*

5. Christopher Woodward, *In Ruins*, (Vintage 2002)

6. Byron, *Poems Selected by A S B Glover*, (Penguin 1985), page 170

7. Alberto Moravia, 'Dreaming Up Petronius', *The New York Review of Books*, (March 26, 1970), page 2

8. *ibid*

9. *ibid*

10. *ibid*