

## **In the Palazzo Altemps**

by Michael O'Mahony

Maybe it was the lunch of sausage, twice-cooked chicory, apple pie, and a half-litre of white wine. Or maybe it was the heat. But in some moods everything is sexy. I was one of the only people in the Palazzo Altemps. It is sparse and sleepy. It isn't air-conditioned. The sweat dripped from me as I looked at the looted Egyptian kings and peered at a bull. Afrodite, bent over with folds in her stomach and strong arms and full breasts, pulled me into a room. I walked around her and looked at her body. How else to say it? It was hot, I was turned on. I looked at her thighs and between them. I felt the stir. I left the room.

A relief of Afrodite in another room was drawn kind of oddly. Idealised, but she didn't look it. She looked like a woman without a bra lifting her arms up and her tits falling to the sides.

In a far corner was an ancient statue of a poet. I looked at him. A poet, with the respect a poet deserves, at last. There was a spiderweb on his ear. A spider sat in the centre of it. I thought: that spider must be very quick and crafty to beat the cleaners. I blew on the web. The spider was dead.

Even grumpy small-headed Julius Caesar was kind of hot for a second.

A small wood-panelled family chapel off a main room. Ornate dark and gold vestments hung over the altar. They were Saint Charles Borromeo's, a Borromeo-Medici-Altemps cardinal and towering Counter-Reformation figure. Borromeo was so spectacularly austere that someone once noted—admiringly—that his civic reforms made Rome \*no longer a place to enjoy oneself or make a fortune\*. His vestments were made of leather and covered with gold. At the moment I walked in, a soft golden box of light framed this garment almost exactly. I sat on a pew, wiped the sweat from my forehead with my T-shirt, sneezed, and looked at the vestments. Where did the light come from? It was the sun, reflected off the wall of a neighbouring building, through the window in the main room, angled perfectly through the chapel's door, and delivered diffused and glowing to the altar. The sun, the hour, the wall of the house next door, the window, the doorframe. All agreed: yes, this is the beautiful thing.

Downstairs a giant male torso stood alone in a room. It started at the shoulders and stopped a small stretch below the belly button. It was only torso, all torso. It reminded me of a dream where I encountered what was, in the dream, the most essential human-type life form: a pathetically vulnerable kidney-shaped piece of pink matter that breathed and thought. He was the brother of a girl I was dating. Like the brother, the torso was essential. But it wasn't vulnerable, it was strength, muscular, steady. And I wanted it. I wanted to put my hands on it. I badly wanted it.