

52. On Being Fat in a Thin World

Michelangelo could have used me for the sibyls of his Sistine Chapel. Ruben might have made me immortal, instead of the strawberry blond who now graces his canvases. The native Hawaiians would have dethroned Queen Leilani to place me in her stead. Yet in the thin world in which I live, I cannot be a beautiful woman.

Being fat shapes the mind and the heart just as surely as being female or being black, not because being fat is significant, but because others think it is. And eventually so do we. Being fat makes us neuter. No one imagines that we might be romantic, perhaps even passionate. Shrouded in dark colors, all crumpled in on ourselves, we hide the bodies too big to be beautiful.

When I graduated from high school, Twiggy was the model of the year, her curveless body an ideal my thinnest friends could not approach. I had always described myself as “chubby” or “pleasingly plump.” At eighteen, a navy blue hulk, scrunching my lonely way through life, I realized I was “fat,” and “fat” was oh so ugly. I would have been ugly all my life, had I never visited Italy.

I arrived in Italy in the company of skinny boys and slender girls. I ignored the whistles, knowing full well they could never be meant for me, nor need I fear the infamous Italian pinchers. My thin friends had little luck hailing a cab, until suddenly one screeched to a halt in front of us, the driver jumped out, took off his hat, and bowed chivalrously to me. Though I knew no Italian, I understood what his “elegante” meant and that it was meant for me. In Italy, for the first time in my life, I was beautiful.

Even today, I am surprised at the impact of that one moment. I could never have been beautiful, not even to myself, without Italy. That sincere, gracious gesture has been an enduring Valentine. If I smile and walk with head held high, wearing bright red and flirting with assurance, it is because I carry the memory of a forty-year-old compliment. Although today I must live, day by day, in a thin world that never entertains the possibility of beauty, jumbo-size, I move through that world shielded by a moment of traffic-stopping Beauty.