Mrs. Ramsay's Knee

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I wanted you to see the marble boy. 
So I gave you directions, for the bus from Florence to Fiesole, and a little trattoria for lunch, and afterwards a walk I’d taken once around the hilltop, and knew you’d like, with a view of the Arno and the bridges. It would be, we knew, your last trip.

In the museum, you took notes for me and made a sketch of the boy’s broken feet, the long toes of the paw with its nails, and the tail curling up in half relief, rising then several inches abstract in air. It wasn’t a snake but the tail of the lion snapped off, a jagged end of stone.

And that was all—just enough to know he was Heracles, not the man but the boy. He might have had a club in his hand, the skin of a new-slain lion slung over his shoulders. He might have pushed his head through to the skull to peer out the way we know a boy would do with a trophy.

So many things are made up in myth and history. I should stick to what you wrote: “right foot broken at ankle, all toes intact, left foot broken above the ankle, missing part of the big toe.” I would like to have seen the whole boy, his chest, the muscles of his shoulders modeled from the dark veiny seams of the marble, and how strong or soft the flesh of his hands, how much
the boy was already becoming the man.  
Some miracles happened, we’ve been told, 
at Nemea, the hero, smart and strong, 
and able to endure almost anything. 

It’s strange, we agreed, he survived at all. 
You sent me a postcard which I keep: 
“I looked especially carefully at the feet.” 
I’ve stared and stared at the feet, and in the air 
above the broken feet, and seeing nothing 
but all that you endured, I’ve tried 
in the empty light to see all that I’ve lost.