

These recollections are metastasized into another tissue artifact. I can feel when one gets caught up in me, its black hooks and prongs stamping a shallow layer of my skin until it hums sorely in a continuous dull sheath around my body. I have thought, at the onset of the feeling in the past, that I could not physically soothe it without clawing through myself. I didn't know what I would find, but I shivered like there was an old man in me, right below the surface. If I bled myself he would seep out and dry onto paper his real voice, when, every so often, I felt him struggling to whisper through my skin an ink wash of some time out of sorts.

It came out that Jacky never had hair on his chest but in front of the late afternoon sun, the last day you saw him in daylight, standing by his car in the gas station parking lot, the sun painting his edges white and the down on his chest shimmering like its own worried breeze, the two of your broken magnets turning aimlessly around the asphalt and wind burned plastic. Jacky's car had coasted into the gas station in disgrace alighting two more held breaths in Barstow amidst the drift of folks who looked like they had been thrown into a plate window looking west, one hundred miles from Los Angeles. Men with fossilized comb marks in their hair stood against walls in the shade with a waxy hopefulness that came from greasy night sweats flash drying on their skin at sunrise.

Jacky took a room in the pale motel beyond the parking lot and leaving you there went back to the road and evaporated in the sun. Your aspirations were only to exist in the way that a house at the edge of a brushfire silently watches, into and across the edge of nothing and holding back a sea of life. You looked into the grasses erect in the cracks of the dry swimming pool and pulled tight the oil cloth curtains. Two curtains never block out the light like one can, and through the glow in their joint you knew the white sun fading to brown and waited long for Jacky to deliver you from Barstow. A real painting hung over the shared nightstand showed a monastic seashore, green light poached a wave lapped high and thin by an offshore breeze and in a second hand a crude swimmer was drawn out of scale with a marker. A shark fin and face bobbed inscribed with ink pen beyond the breakers. In motel after motel, days after nights, some lingering transgression has always happened before you arrive. The country wasn't nearly as big as you needed it to be for there to exist a virgin hollow unhaunted by this sad archaeology, and with just a gasp of air to surround it, forever entombed in a room would keep you from the geography contracting even tighter toward you.

You awoke in the locked room, lying between the two beds like a crime scene. Jacky sat in the vinyl chair under the window with his hair in his fingers and his thumbs in his ears. His shoulders, ringed by the stretched out neck of his tee shirt, were purple from the sun, in the dimness.

Before the sun came up you watched Jacky walk down the far open staircase and through the courtyard wall quickly into the parking lot through the curtains parted. The way the cold light through the insect screen clotted with hair of the desert's dead caused him to become transparent early morning sent you hiding into the spiral of the room, into the uniform conscience of the fluorescent light and you lay down in the shower compartment to wait for him to find you.

All time and light in the bathroom were stayed in panels of mirrored tiles meeting at plastic rosettes, pink marbled plastic surfaces like his tongue across the roof of your mouth reproduced to swim with you. In the unchanging context, Night and Day as a cadence slipped away and became Jacky and Alone. The room was a space capsule hurtling beneath the days, with Jacky flickering in and out partially as a man and also as the grayness that is before a man. Each time he returned to the room he wore the day as sediment on his skin. The sun had blown ripples of flesh and thick horny swaths the color of sausage casing over his body. You spent his first visits to the bathroom prodding his shell and running your fingers together over it in the fluorescent light, believing it wasn't real, confused with reflections of the peeling ceiling in the panoply of mirrors.

Jacky smelled like different things or scenarios when you faced him in the bathroom, him sitting in the sink, you leaning against the wall, the back of his head in the mirror behind him, and your face over his shoulder, then his face in the mirrored wall behind you, and on and on: the scent of pomade, leather, wet denim, a discussion beneath a street light, the desert dust on the elbows of a chino shirt, engine grease money and sweat. But he didn't speak. No words and no sounds but old ones hung in the stretch of days in Barstow in the motel room. A conversation outside of Amarillo in the car about how men might settle into fixed distances from one another hung across your skin as a vibration yet to reverberate back to the ear, plans for a memory in waiting, and the sounds of the air sucking through the car windows. *If we stopped now, and you got out here and I went on down the road, just far enough from you, and all of us went to the center of our own universes, this country would give us eleven acres to each separate man alone.*

Even as they change along their paths, lives freeze when they become concentric. They become hard to figure apart. You shaved your chest so that the way the smooth skin pricked beneath the gauzy tee shirt made you feel the character of sick and weak. You had an old responsibility to each other, but his burden to construct your deliverance back to life, beginning in your flight from Salina, had begun to ink those precious obsidian imprints that you saw in his eyes when he lost himself in the mirror endless as you flayed sheets of wrinkled skin from him. The two of you were separate people falling at the same rate. At some point in space things that are to diverge must meet the initial minute catastrophe. He drew you out of the room with your black eyes, lighter than a recollection, and he hobbled with his tight skin, a paper man, and you both got in the car. There was a low green cloud of light that wended its way around the motel buildings and the gas station from the dark. In his silhouette you could see his lips pulled over his teeth and the smoothness where his nose had been, and as the night air painted the car out of the city light you rolled down the window and felt coldness that focused your eyes in crystal. The mountains black against the luminous black sky barely distinguished themselves. The glow from the console just dipped Jacky's fingertips on the steering wheel in its green meniscus. You sat back out of the light. When you got out of the car you were shoeless in the gravel and the wind gently blew your loose clothes away from your body, the costume and setting of a child's night trauma.

*We aren't going to Los Angeles.*

You were shivering into a future that had no immediate past, as if you had slipped through your own skin like a last breath into the desert, a long leaking kiss over the weeks or months stalled out in Barstow. You and he faced the dark on the hood of his car in the night. Jacky's voice was silent above great deep breaths. You augured repose off of his tongue. It secretly whispered simple names for the memories of yours that he housed into a testament. It grew louder by indivisibly small increments as he slowly mouthed airy tendrils and your name, Jack, a hesitant filament blooming like a closed flower forward into future reminiscences. The name was emptily alien, as if it was the epiklesis that would summon something other than a person, the cool lunar breeze and the summer fog of stars. Jacky's voice never quite comes to the fullness of the moment. It echoes back to you the thought you just had, the chill you just stifled, from the silence of rock chasms and sand dunes in night. The words drift away with his footfalls turning from gravel to sand in flight across the dunes.

When you see him drawn like a sand figure against the sand cascades in the moonlight you follow. He crests a dune and disappears. From its peak you see the distinct depressions in the sand where he had tumbled and you run in lunar bounds down the sliding sand. You feel the world race and stop again beneath you. He breathes barely in dry creaks and the moon shown in his dry eyes like a foggy stain. The disrupted sand has begun to flow down the leeward slope to pool around you both and covered his

chest and legs and then flowed around his face and into his mouth and nose. You smooth the grave with your palm and steal his red car from the dust and were on the highway in very early morning, a bright summer morning. The vacant attentions of dry sweating blank back sides of valley ranges made you feel thin and oblique. You stopped where you could just breathe, in Tonopah, at a dry service station, and looked on a state road map pinned behind plastic near the road for some place hidden to camp. An old boy leaning on a bollard referred you to some public land off the highway. You rolled down the windows on the farm roads, the two lanes, that's what you did on those roads and you pitched Jacky's dome tent right next to his car.

You didn't have a fire or dinner. It was silent and the sun went down unceremoniously. Darkness in a tent is doubly dark. In the darkness you heard men talking without lights in the scrub, then drums and a fire glow arose, then you lay awake. You rolled out of the tent and put on his boots filled with sand, slipped out the tent poles and pressed the tent in a pile in his trunk, and rolled with the headlights off until you reached the main road and then even a bit longer, until you saw the first oncoming headlights far off.

You drove through your sleep for fifty blinking miles and slept in a tidy motel in Beaver, Utah filled with brown lamplight and stars over a dark parking lot. Planets hung blue in pairs above the horizon. You held the phone against your head and thought of calling his number in Salina and thought of wanting to speak aloud. Enveloped by the room you fell into the new distance from him, greater than the immediate miles of darkness you had unspooled, and slept with your feet on the wall.

You left in blue earliness. Through the curtain and the milky condensation the lamps still lit shown. You headed east. The landscape in daylight was too wide open for the red car and still morning you pooled your body into a room and sealed yourself up in at the motel with a vast parking lot in Green River. The sun and air were hot but they looked cold, they were clear and pure but you believed them dusty. It is easier to think everything else is corrupted and ruined. You pulled to the oil cloth curtains and leaned back in a chair in the enormous room.

You tried to nap. It was too early and regardless of the solid curtains and doubted lamps, it was too bright and you felt your white eyes on display. You lay on the floor underneath the table, held its wood cabriole feet and looked beneath the bed. There was a note stuck on the carpet. Someone had written *blood stains* on it. You found more notes around the room. Some described the things they were stuck to, others pieced together a history of deficiencies in the room's decor.

You had been in the room for hours without eating or seeing the sky and were impregnated with motel grog that you felt in the back of all of your senses: the back of your throat, the back of your eyes, the inside of your skin. Night woke you and you stepped into the arcade. You dialed Jacky's number from a payphone in a cloud of white light. A lantern hung from the wall above it that made your hands yellow. A different voice spoke. It had a southern accent, it sounded tired and ceramic, from a room full of hard surfaces, and narcotic, like the mouth and lips were gauze, all in one word.

Yes. And you hung up. You bought a bag of corn tortilla chips and a jug of orange juice and shut them back in the room.

You walked along the row of empty parking spaces outside the windows and around to a detached building with more rooms. It smelled like paint and carpet. Only a few lights were on in the double breasted hallways and they had red dimpled glass shades, like a pizza parlor dipped in night's blood, and each door, below the peephole, had a note stuck there with the same handwriting on it as the one in your room. Each one listed what was missing from the room. You read down the hallway until you could piece together a rather complete picture, from what was missing, of what embodied the minimum stage-set for running. The room stilled you in flight's cyclone. You never touched the bedside table, or turned on the television, but a blankness where it

belonged would have awakened an uneasy misalignment in your charade of wholeness. You wondered what was missing from this room while you got slowly sick on tortilla chips and orange juice.

In the morning you drove through Colorado, held by the mountains. Your upset stomach caught up with you in a mountain pass before Denver and when you sneezed in the thin heights you shat yourself and threw your underwear away in the pit toilet at a scenic overlook.

You drove through the tabletop of the country into central Kansas with Salina a flaming ingot that you knew was empty, but might smell of his memories, or the empty apartment you two ran from, and in a flimsy pact with the left lane of the highway, you determined not to be stuck in one geographic spot for longer than it took the sun to pass between clouds in the enormous sky, and stopped at dusk way off of the highway to camp at Tuttle Creek State Park. The campsite by the reservoir was quiet. Before setting up the tent you walked to the water next to the dam and skipped stones until your knees started to burn and then went back to set up his tent. The sky was plastered with a single cloud but the air was bright beneath the trees. There were two girls there. Their tent was already pitched and one held a guitar but didn't play it. They were about fifty feet from his car and they looked small. The wind was gathering into a mass. It filled the trees and the reservoir and hauled over the ground beneath the trees like a tide rushing. You cooked a can of pinto beans in sauce directly on the camp stove in the shelter of the open car door and when one of the girls asked you to join them for dinner you declined and crawled into his tent. It was dark and the wind had the greatness of an unseen bear. Wind in the dark, they are inseparable then. The tent leaned until its surfaces touched you in his sleeping bag and every time you and he camped in the cold he told you about camping in the Blue Hills outside of Boston, in the snow, and he slept in his underwear so that when he got up in the morning and put on his clothes he would have the warmth to look forward to.

*Whoever told you that just wanted to see you in your underwear.*

He thought he would die. The zipper didn't work on the sleeping bag. It still didn't. Kansas is the middle of the universe that everything swirls out of before contracting back into it. You could feel it being drawn into the earth. When the wind stopped the moon showed through the tent and you drove beneath it further east into eastern Missouri and morning sleep in a hot motel room with dead flies on the pillow and awakening you drove one thousand miles as it all fell away behind you.

In Atlanta all of the beige things look familiar. Things made you look familiar. You took an efficiency apartment and unpacked all of the contents of Jacky's car, including a large, wise-eyed brown cat asleep on its roof. You stayed inside during the day with no treatments on the windows watching people come and go. You saw a man beaten with a stick. You watched the sky with suspicion from the fifth floor of the brick building. The cat sat in the window the whole time, watching the stacked windows across the far leg of the cruciform building for other cats or watching back into the room with her tail curled into a hook at the end. The sound of her blood filled the room. A clammy motel grog whose pathology is the single room medicated the sunlight that happened into the apartment swelling your extremities and eye sockets like ice slowly splitting your skull open. You and the story were caught in each other like a lie that held you fast just beyond movement, and you sat in the apartment without patina.

On the far arc of your flight you took a job you could walk to, on the housekeeping staff at the hollow hung whale of a hotel downtown. Each midmorning you are in a wide basement hallway lined with doors. One of the doors would have led outside, but not one at either end of the hallway which were both occupied by elevator doors, one of which had brought you down, the other would take you with your cart already stocked of soap, towels, sheets, newspapers, pens, and blank Marquis stationery, from a painted berth scuffed to a blur on the smooth floor. The elevator only fit one person and one cart. You were far behind women in

line at the elevator door and waited for them to take their turns on the elevator before being taken up.

The double strings of doorways to the rooms on each floor are rent by a wide chasm described by the far arcs of slung circles that reaches all the way down through each floor. An entire wall of doors forty stories high is visible from every door on the opposing side. Women in grey chino dresses are stationed in degrees of foreshortening at their carts on several of the floors. Echoes of groups in the lobby become the buried song of sand inherent in the air of the chasm. Glass elevators bedecked with clear spherical lights sail like driverless cars.

*Housekeeping*, tinkles in an amusical glossolalic chorus that is followed by the opening of doors seen and unseen. You chime in and open a door. With the sheer curtains drawn the rooms weren't differentiated by views and the sun filled each room like packed cotton, old and still around the abandoned crescendi of the life that had been concentrated there. They never saw it respooled. Each room was different but the same, the same staged life with different human residue: a bed swirled in the vortex of a failed sleep aid insomnia, rafts of hair across the vanity counter into the sink from solitary dreams of woolen forest men, the smell of yellow skin and greasy cardboard, a bundle of furniture tracks to a toxoplasmotic bunker amassed against the immovable bedstead, the small turned back coverlet sheathing a sick child, and in the daylight and after the days all manners of a man's black stains, perfectly beneath ruttid furniture, still, flat and deep in an ashtray, and a sticky lamination awash across a bathroom floor in which you could see your face as you strigiled it into a bucket. It was pure and even and impossibly undisturbed, his footsteps in haemophilic blood are flooded by the thin uncollectedness of it. A black bloodletting to make space in his body to feel himself move within himself, for solid thoughts to float between his skin and flesh to know his extremities and introduce them to the rest of him. That much blackness poured out of one man would leave no man, but a beautifully perfect shell that could receive any man and transport him beneath the sediment of ages he cannot attain through rotten deeds that coat the back of his skin like the inside of an oven. It made you aware of a present future through the infinity of the reflection in its black promise. There was no trace of time after an act, no wallowing body, no lifeless eyes, no hurried nudity; those discoveries came under different titles. These outlines of a person are reduced to the significant peaks of habit in their briefly staged lives. Each one of the embalmed juxtapositions that you find as you straighten the disarray is the end of the act but before its resolution. You allow the static compositions to restore the travelogue interrupted by the person's departure back to your sunlit hypotheses about how they might have begun to be like you. But it is dust. The host of rescinded actions makes it impossible to unite cause with even the provisional end whence you had entered.

You were aware of your presence in the hotel, in the moving shape of its life, as large increments defined more by the duration of an action than your passage across the masonry of vast effects but noticed little of what grew to be a shrinking scale of efforts: turning over soaps, mitering the ends of toilet tissue rolls, or flicking a book of matches into a glass ashtray. When you were released from duty like an awakening newborn it was a consciousness without antecedent. You knew that it was part of a continuum by the familiarity of your body and the familiarity of the lost feeling, a familiar amnesia, but you emerged from the blackout only long enough to find yourself again in your room alone as the cat dreamed of running through clover in the black window.

There was no quantity to your efforts. Shifts would end abruptly in the same way every afternoon, with an empty cart, partway through some floor of the tower after an interminable tour of some number of rooms. You could see sparse clusters of people in the lobby down forty stories. You left your cart on one of the middle floors like a bier and watched it duck below the

guardrail as the elevator went down. In the basement passage a woman in a grey chino dress with her hair tightly pinned to the back of her head leaned with her palms flat against the block wall behind her. The fluorescent lights down the hallway were absorbed into the colorless paint. She watched you slowly pass as if she had been painted over and her flat eyes tracked you like those of a haunted portrait. An empty cart was stopped against the wall across from her and you scuttled between she and it. A wisp of air from the slot between the elevator doors fed out as the elevator shuttled past and was inhaled in the vacuum it left. Through a door you take stairs back to the lobby.

In the newly long days you find spots to linger in the lobby where clouds of visitors parted around you. They watch the distant edges of the lobby with a gaze that doesn't see anything but merely acknowledged that eyes can see. The flow of people rang the passage of time, not as they moved, but as they became new people who wore the carpet smooth between ballrooms, interstitial gathering spaces with tables, to small coffee smelling meeting rooms, to elevators and tapering up in laces to the room doors. In their intermittent absence the ghost of the trail would linger in the stain of white shirts in the air. After a final confluence into a broad low ceilinged panorama, they, as a species of time, would tick out of the register followed by what felt like the low breathing of concrete and the emptiness of light falling alone on carpet.

A face would shimmer out of the undulating groups and drift away on its own: a man with black spots in the corner of his eyes. Until you meet him, a man's face is a talisman. It shone out of only some of the groups as if it contained all of the secrets and causes of the trauma or pleasure of banality that digest life. Between undetected glimpses you passed through time like melting fat in the sand, less your initial form each day, but cooling into intermediate attempts at recognizability as you waited to see him again. You held your face out looking at him less than beyond as he returned to the concierge with his luggage. But each time there came those moments, when all the days invested in recalling that face, and all of its power to change you was unraveled, when it did not reproduce its dreamt-of charms at your request, or the anguish to which it was meant to be the cure persists even in its presence, and the bottom drops out of your past.

You took to following him when he broke loose of a group. From no point in the continuum of chambers and halls could you see the sunlight. The public elevators smelled of lotion. Several hotels were connected by interior passageways and bridges that drew a pattern just above the city but unrelated to it. Its geography as a whole was baffling. Paths that felt straight teased you by veering unquantifiably. You learned how to get from one to another strategically coordinating a suite of paths between them. You discovered and located all of the places he could be, weaving a net of connections tracing routes from one to another. But relationships suspicious already by the trickery of the passages were destroyed where you had doubled-back to a spot where you knew he would end up, but wasn't. The imperceptible deviations in transit were lost in the chase and you found yourself in spots separated from him by only short distances, although you knew of no way to get from one to the other without retreating to a far earlier landmark. The empty stretches between you, although certainly a continuation of the constructed terrain, and possibly accessible to him, had no geographic presence to you; you didn't know how to reach them at all.

When the nights caught up you set aside hearing aid and retirement information you were receiving in the mail. You start dressing like an old man, the way you had fabricated your insides. It was a disguise to force what had refrigerated in your skin to catch up to your aged flesh. There was nothing recognizable in your experiences. One thing passed the next and all of the days sat atop one another, obscuring their predecessors and drifting like a boat frozen into an iceberg, your hair and beard frozen into place around your blue eyes and peacefully toothy snarl. You layered on your clothes on a dim winter morning with longjohns, flannels,

sweaters, cowls, mufflers, gloves, a wide soft hat, and at midday on the swept bricks of the plaza downtown, sat in the crook of a wall where the sky drooped between the skyscrapers and was siphoned towards you and enswirled the bases of the buildings in the same soft oiliness of the cat fur bunnies that overtook your room. You felt like a pill in a bottle. You read your bundle of mail. It rattled in a voice with no body and fifty thousand hooked black legs. They reached out from beneath a white door to a locked room and began tickling down your throat, enough to make you smirk at first, but after hours in the cold they had filled your lungs and run scaly beneath your clothes. The voice didn't say anything, it just bore you down into the bricks. You looked up from the ground into the gentle sound of the rattling dry leaves, wanting it to sound like Salina's pollarded plane trees in breeze but it didn't. Your feet are blood heavy and heavy shod, and you fear about that the involuntary perpetuity of your circulation has been corrupted. One-footed pigeons swelled and stumbled across the bricks.

You make your way back into the belly of the hotel. The lobby is vacant, as if it were so vast that people did not even appear against its scale. Cold air sweeps in through an unseen vestibule with an ozonish timbre. You smell footsteps walking across a dry grass plain to a car as a thunderstorm sweeps across the highway. You are polarized by losing that short passage of time, living only before him and after forgetting him. You reached to your breast pocket, but inside you the black and gray blood flowed down your back from a pulp of an anatomy, into your legs and out of your head and suddenly the air upon you was filled with a drowsy salon of tingling black faces. From some nowhere inside of you visions slowly arise, first pastel petals to your eyes and then wallowing distant squealing lances pin through your stuffed ears and escalate as voices and sounds break through like you would have imagined regaining consciousness in cinematic replica. You slowly breathed, a crystalline figure locked in the thick fluid air that turned under slowly like a batter through gorges between glass castles in which you could see each inflection of time and posture of prop as you were trundled through the lobby to a service elevator. The wheels of the gurney exact and silent and the entire gullet of the whale hung over you turning as your attendants navigated its ribs and stays when you stopped turning began to turn for you as your breath spun circles in its steam structure.

The hospital is across the street from your apartment tower, beyond a yard where spinal patients in the day lay immobilized on gurneys taking in the sun to whiten the greyness of their eyes. Behind the yard from the street, and the water oaks that probably creaked in the night where the hospital stood in orange darkness, you sank into the mattress in a windowless private cell in the emergency room. The lights were dimmed and you were administered morphine directly into your IV port. It was a wash back to just beneath the surface, the spring at the end of the tether, and you felt nausea in your body rising and then felt your teeth loosen and your blood flow fully around them, covered in nerves and pulsing, as it warmed your mouth. The same warmth swelled from the walls of the room and you could no longer distinguish the sources or limits of the fluid sensations. Immediately next to you from out of brown pillowy shadows a man's hand towels at the corners of your mouth and his face, an archipelago of features partly arises from the thick old coffee of the dark, is traced by the sea green light of the equipment in the room. The features could belong to separate faces, each in the same place at different times in the dark, but when they pose or express, they do so together as a stranded family. His face diminished into darkness as if it was you that was sinking. The morphine made your skin roll in waves and as soon as it tingled out of you with the pricks of oxygen pixelating your flesh back from its beige flumes you were let loose walking the luring dawn in hospital issued booties.

As you step out under the sky you taste the bloody imprint of teeth on the inside of your lip as if you had bitten from the inside, and a swelling cut in your moustache that feels like a smooth burn. You carry all the layers of clothes they had found you

wearing in a drawstring bag that hung in your hooked finger and swung heavily. You wore only the broad soft hat, loose grey trousers, a worn flannel shirt buttoned in two distant holes, and the hospital booties. Everything lags just behind with you and your physicality as latecomers. You pass into each moment as its own history as if a crew of men are erecting the next follies just over the horizon as you approach, from one routine in a ghostly city to another in which you are the ghost.

It is terrifying in a silent way, like awakening in an open grave on a hillside, to open an apartment door in daylight having not had a night to deliver you. You lean your belongings against the wall inside the door and sit in the chair facing the blank wall perpendicular to the window and breathe in slow convulsions through your mouth while turning your head slowly from side to side. You arise through still waves of your senses as if you are growing from a smaller man inside, coming closer and closer to the skin in lessening muteness of the throbbing it transmits, but never quite to the surface. From the moment you collapsed in the Marquis, in an absence of sound and context, the chaotic aftermath slowly escalating and awakening about you has continued asymptotically approaching its previous fullness. After some hours you hear footsteps in the silence and a fingertip trace across the doorknob in the hallway and cascades of silent televisions down the hallway and trees aflame in the end of the day with wordless lullaby and when dark sets the not quite white wall you still face is brighter than the moon and emptier. Where it meets the floor is a straight line severing space. You notice the absence of the old cat and her striped stockings and her smile in profile and the messiness of your vision through her fur on the wing. She couldn't have escaped, but slowly disappeared, waiting for you to stop her.

You were afraid he would come to your door, open it and see you standing against the far blank wall, that you might meet him on too familiar grounds and be too revealed, so you escape on foot with the hospital booties under your shoes back to the hospital where, if they were dead, or confidential, or green in the indirect pallor of sickness and fluorescence, people leave their traces. Where they rotted and bled you let out a continuous thread of footsteps, barely lifted from the carpet and terrazzo, which your legs chased only to keep you from falling into nurses or propped up besheeted waxworks. The hospital was so large that the variables of shift, day, ward, and rotation, when you speckled upon their manifestations, presented you with an endlessly thinning cast of monochromatic figures to impress in the hallway with your distracted purposefulness. No one ever walked the entire length of a hall. They always found a door or side passage. Although your beard grew and was caught in your mouth and grew into your nose, you began to grow suspicious whether you had returned fully from the synoptic hinge or whether the fluorescent light and the continuous green tile of the long hallways absorbed you in a way that only deceived others.

You still slept in your apartment but never turned the lights on or walked there in the daylight. It was a dark secret. Your routes around the hospital swept outward over the days in the pattern of a masochistic jigsaw puzzler, from its tetherless core, windowless and still, the two-souled perpetual night of the morgue's environs, the heart of the hospital where bodies go into recirculation, to the steel doors of labs and private rooms with small windows all flanking wide intestines of hallways spinning out to the hospital's periphery, where hopeful and ruined people passed with whispers of confusion through consistently indirect sunlight carrying mimeographed maps of the hospital layout, to a wide loop around its periphery, where the sky and trees became visible between them few similarly dressed people gathered, some crying, others shuffling in small groups that seemed reproduced in each furrow as if they hung at the hub of a radial pattern whose empty spokes you flickered past.

At the far side of the complex, below a gravel embankment that rose up to a railroad track you found a steel door ajar at the base of a windowless cinder block wall. It filled your vision with a grain containing all people in rabid sleep breathing with a tenderly automatic squeak that had the irregular rhythm of code. You pushed open the door swimming into the room. Like the

space behind a waterfall, it was useless for anything but hiding. It had an electric verdant odor with aquamarine dampness in the air that was electric filling a space not much taller than a man erect but slouched keeping the man who occupied it, sunken there, partly burdening his knees on the geographic stains of the concrete but also back-assing the rhomboidal wooden crate that he rocked in a metronomic arc tasting the air with his eyes as if he was intently transcribing coded grave wisdom from the fluorescent lights. The same gaseous instructions divested you of bodily coherence. You were there, visible down your own frame, but the fluorescent light passed through you to the silver sunlight on the cinders. The movements that created his rocking sway were boneless, and although he was slender there was a cool gelatinousness to the thickness of his flesh that in that moment placed you in front of a dated studio photograph of an aspic molded salad in the dubious lighting of some childhood's brown kitchen. He faced the door, oily beneath unzipped coveralls and a soft brown hat. Black liquid of immovable viscosity doubled beneath him. Your skin felt a dusting of warmth like a paresthetic leg prickling out of tonic immobility whose awakening you owed to the proxy of his attentions. His eyes tracked from corner to corner of the room, across you standing there, with the light directly overhead aligned between you as the darting of the reflective whites of his eyes from side to side of his face. As his pupils crossed yours in interlocking tunnels connecting black soot stained catacomb territories, the purity of satanic introversion opened to you like a warm heaving throat inhaling the fog that was your body's material. When they passed you felt the terror again of corporeality, and it swelled again and again in the text of his gaze until you felt the power to step away, feeling the gravel and cinders in the arches of your feet and cleavage of your toes. So many secret places exist in each transposition of narratives, bricks fall loose, words are misprinted, the sun breaks through illuminating dusty passages where you might have passed entranced by normalcy, you stumble to the ground fortuitously, or terror turns off your logic, you pretend to have family secrets, and you fill the empty well that becomes a smear to others, sometimes a crease in the air, sometimes a tic on your face, but never a bearing on the compass of your intentions. You and they stumble into each others secret places and in them, seeing the eerie glisten of the skin's silent adhesive, you make your own secret place in its mystery where all the travelers are blindly collocated.

In the breath of a cloud of tottering tittering finches breathing the air asqueak you stumbled through long grasses divided and you rose again into yourself from where you and he had been with a conversation whose constellation was footsteps and voicelessly and without trail or immediate history to grasp you were deep inside the hospital again, through a spatial warp like a coin operated billiards table and you sat in a ganged row of beige fiberglass chairs outside, or inside, a windowless metal door, where you were unable to move from the black, skinless, magnetized posture that trussed your limbs in stung obdormition. When you can no longer sustain it alone, a passage must open in the story so that causes like births, deaths, chance encounters, and pandiculated admissions could continue to transpire as you loitered without feature. It took this context of mutability and deathlike stillness matching yours to dislocate the centrality you felt fixed around you in order for other events to briefly unfold prior to your reintroduction.

From a crouch of a fire stair John enters the hospital cafeteria like a paste extruded into ajar coveralls with paste still for hair, taking a lidded plastic glass of thin orange juice from a chilled cabinet, alights at a too large round table the color and texture of souse, where two ample women in scrubs beam. From the distance he could be seen with his arms speaking like a puppeteer to draw out voluminous shrieks, moans, exclamations, through the undulations and ripples of the womens' squinting bodies. Also he spoke, with a singularly human distraction, in words that, from where the gallery sat around the perimeter of the hall, arrived in concussions on the antimicrobial air that blunted the nuances of the tale or fragment which had the women rolling out glee from the

cavities of their legs and sucking his full excrescence of words from the air in their tremendous gasps. He held court. Daily immemorial and onward daily they danced.

Only in the shifting identification of each moment is there something greater behind and lesser ahead, and not in a connotative sense, because the crispness of resolution and focus can be seen as a crowning attribute of a trajectory only if it is kept in motion, and only from a distance, and assuming it has a constant center. Now you moved again, vastly. Being spun outward from a drain, again on smooth feet, you arc'd into the cafeteria in cosmically expanding radius, to a table by the wall, and sat facing in the direction of your travel, at a barely acute angle to the wall, which, in repeated ellipsis, was dotted with telephones along its entire length. The mysterious dark planet of your own cloaked innards shares, in its overwhelming struggle against clawing yourself open for them once to glisten like your damp eye in the light, the latent desire to pick up a telephone after months of mute shallow breathing, in which you indulged yourself with the device nearest your chair which you drew to your ear, and as you breathed into it John looked across the room and its now empty flat of fatty flat tables. While the faces of his charges unendingly howled, four short tones, or one echoing, like the yawn of air being pressed out of a boot, and a distant receiver, all phones reach into the distance, uncradled to a familiar voice, which all telephoned voices became, facelessly, demanding in a brisk but unaddled cadence, *Who is there with you?*

John, the man in the coveralls, walked toward you in the din that once again rose, with the silent corporeality of a single body meeting itself, like the cat walking her back legs toward the front until she was seated, and without asking he was at the table. He sat with his back to the room and his knees touching yours.

*You cleaned rooms at the Marquis,*

*Yes.*

*Or you were here in the hospital a while back, one.*

*Yes, both.*

*Are you feeling better?*

*Bit by bit. But the last step...*

*Tell me... a sinister silence, you feel...*

*That...*

*You...*

*See two worlds at once, or see the single one from two different vantage points, and, the sea rises...*

*You are...*

*Coasting closer and closer toward the horizon, but...*

*You know you...*

*Won't be able to breach it...*

*Because you...*

*Know the point where it began, but not whether...*

*You...*

*Went downward or upward.*

*From...*

*Death Valley. The end of where silence overlapped with solitude,*

*Where you...*

*Left him to die.*

*You...*

*Need to know...*

*Which side of the horizon you are on. His eyes black again, distant. You have to prove it to yourself. We have to go, somewhere at least, everyone will go somewhere, and we have to go somewhere different. You haven't noticed the space widening around you, the vastness of the holes where people had been? People are settling like dust, or like rain and lighting reaching the ground, or the way bursts of energy expire, but I can't go alone, not over that edge into my own country, not like the rest of them.*

Beneath the black ocean you swam toward the scent of the buoyant sky, the moon or pale, and with your lungs collapsing into the tightest curls of diminishing breaths, you touch the bottom.

*He didn't go anywhere, he's still right there.*

*Is this the darkness you remember that night?*

*You can't remember darkness.*

The lights of Las Vegas like knives in the side view mirror pulled out of your black flesh into brown breath and you and he were in the flying darkness buttressed by the last house in the sprawl, draining away itself in the paws of desperate coyotes, where there are only your voices across the highway of night teleportation. Arriving back in yourself you hear your own voice with the slowness spoken through a stopped up ear, of distant thunder that isn't thunder, and new cats of your thoughts sleep with their legs jutting out in a posture that would stiffen or paralyze a man, with their paws over their faces in the most minute ring of a being, all the love that any human could give in their most tender dying looks, and feeling the car still moving, you know it is hours before sunrise as headlights begin to linger but never arrive like unspoken words you know he is saying in the dark. His mouth couldn't hypnotize you in the dark, yet in the headlights like the edge of a written word without a center, words don't need to complete themselves to linger with you, or control you.

*You'll see. Nothing out here. Then it will be over. You'll see. Then you will go back. Without what you remembered.*

Your hip was sore from sitting through the night. Darkness to darkness, no light, Atlanta to Death Valley, one long night drive, miles dripping into you and distances contracting, the universe grows smaller, but unrecognizably changed until you move through it again, and for miles, or minutes, the lights of Stovepipe Wells loom joining the mountain-masked gibbous moon in describing the dunes to you with lines for the first time, rather than sounds when they sang in the dark, and you choked inside, where lost landscapes hold stronger sway over the memory than photographs or names, in the dark star fog where those sands had shifted over Jacky, you saw in the length of your fingernails in the moonlight the ends of a man clawing his way out of you.

The car glowed green in the motel parking lot. John took a room, it was still hot from the day long ago. You turned on a ceiling fan's stationary spin and the wildly contained air conditioner and slept like a hum or vibration while John sat in a vinyl chair

picking at his scalp and tracing his hairline, still a stranger, where you are at night with others, until day plying wide the window to accept the desert panorama birthed John into himself, as you saw him, in this setting, for the first time since the room below the hospital, as an unselfconscious body, a silent tenuous infrastructure belonging to your chapter, and a bridge of sorts, across the sand, or over the night. As he slept with his throat arched two ravens strode across the low wall of the arcade outside the window with their beaks inquisitively opened.

When it is full reared morning, for the first time in so many turns, with breath and with fresh emptiness that allowed the dustless air of the valley breeze to swell within you, as you pulled open the black door of the shadow motel room, John awoke.

*Let's find him. We start at the bottom.*

The lowest point, Badwater Basin is white death endless, the moon and sun in the sky together, no more alive than anywhere else. The shadow of the east wall of the valley inked a cool wash between the etherous damp past full of people, swarms, hiding in vast communal groups divided by windows and curtains and these walls, and the white hot present, with eleven acres to a man and drifts of dead moths. You stepped into it with salt crunches and whether mirage or memory, you summoned the dozen or so people you could visualize. All the years were silent, but here a physical sound that you couldn't hear but felt like a pressure at the back of your jaw, an inconsistent daylight silence muffled by the entire valley of captured air that slid like a sheet of paper onto a stack from one distant end to the other tangibly. In the immediate binary of the landscape and you, you feel your flesh abstracted into more salt and sky. You could hear your heart and stomach in your ears, and in your swelling fingertips fighting the vacuum around you. John watched you shimmer. Beneath the tumescence your thoughts spoke the used-up words of a removed third man expanding within you. The character spoke inside separate reflections that were clearer to you than your own thoughts that you tried to assemble parallel to them because this was the place where tangents of lives were scattered. They swept down the continental divide and now you ran together with this one. As you stood baking in the flat sun John's shadow nudged your feet.

You two returned to the car and you felt again as if you were leaving someone out there in the white or the black, bodily only a whisper inaudible. But unable to breathe deeply, and scrambled with your involuntary mind, the man instantaneously formed inside you, unnamed. When you name a man, or the thought of a man, he is quickly as whole as the mystery of the earth's center. Where he first lay continued to sink even as you left it. And as if it were easiest, the man thought about death, or its opposite, white death, a forever sustained brink. Life wasn't its opposite, it was part of it, it was a changing surface upon which death also existed, but what he thought about was the rut in which he neither lived nor died, but sustained, and looking at terrain-level across the salt flat, let the beige sky happen to collapse all times into one faintly pulsing rhythm.

*Do you feel anything yet?*

*Not here, just to speak with your voice.*

John drove north, up out of the flats, back toward Stovepipe Wells. As he drove it grew closer at a rate faster than that at which you traveled. Then at the sand you proceeded alone on foot and the scenes passed slower after the rush past of the whole basin in an airless wind through the cracked car window. From far out in the sterile dunes John's car glittered. You measured the shadows of the dune crests against half-buried plant scrawls trailed by wind prints to mark the time as the sun set. It dangled across the axis of the valley, still high enough to burn white and compounded off of the dunes' sand floor, tightened your skin. You'd dig after sunset.

Your features feel like applied dry cakes that crack when you twitch. Fissures ran deep into your sinuses and into your mouth and throat and your breath sizzled as it leaked in and out of your hot sieve of a head. The low sun's rays slowed in the air and battered your skin and features with a more throbbing deep heat that softened what had become dried and crusted of your appearance. John is moving closer to you in calculations of distance and emotion that follow the mathematics of panic and anxiety. He stops next to the car calmly running his fingers through his hair into the night.

As dark soaked the valley, on the lee side of the highest dune, somewhere far from where he was swept beneath, you scrambled to dig through the sand for Jacky and digging to plunge your hands, where the third man swelled into your fingers, into the coolness of the sand just beneath the surface and let him be drawn out of you. The hole remained a shallow dimple as much as you dug. You reach the cool sand and more hot sand from the side of the dune slides in to erase your progress. Like a magician theatrically sending a pulse of magic energy through an auditorium you held your hands fingers splayed into the shallow hole to transmit this man from Badwater into the sand. Their voices remained silent beneath the sliding song of your tumbling potter's field. Like dreams of the passive suicide the sand sea protects its interments by grinding them beneath the tumbling waves of abrasive mountains, destroys their geometry, takes the reins of their orbit, and loses them. The dunes creaked. If this was the dark stretch of road where you lost Jacky then, it wasn't now, even if the sand were to unfurl the peaceful grimace of his white teeth broken through the sunburnt scab of his face. You hung over the hole staring for something materialize, Jacky, the departing man from Badwater, separate from you. Your face, digits, hair, and pronouncements of flesh slide away like wet dust on glass into the hole with the quiet pat of folded laundry. The fingers and empty eyelids reached and glared from the hole toothlessly. John honked the car horn extorting you out of the sand.

You walk slowly through the sand listening for sidewinders. The dome light of the car shown in the complete darkness like a city as you crested each dune rolling towards the road. The green smoke rose to tie across the Milky Way in the sash of a foggy icon that you could only see by looking briefly, then away, so that your mind could tease its image out of the apparent emptiness. You rose again slowly up the last windward slope and his face, malevolent or tormenting in the distance, was bored with the long, dim shrug of his intentions. It was all too ordained to awaken his lust and sour saliva. Out here where you could see things coming for hours there were no black thrills in the geometric inevitabilities of your choices. He couldn't be moved beyond the languid narcosis of his fated gaping pupils tracing the edges of your clothes, translucent with the rising phosphorescence of the sand. You brushed the pants of his coveralls with your knuckles as you got into the car. His shoulders and the puckered gray seams remained pressed against the back passenger side window with their folds still as he continued watching the eastern wall of the valley. His hands and head were lost beyond the reflective glass. When the moon dawn feathered a blue tide over the profile of the Funeral Mountains John's suit pulled away from the glass and you could see the valley faintly washing toward you beyond the glass, beyond your mucus green and run down face as it began to tumble past you like viscous ocean swells as John drove back to the main road and then south again, back down where the moonlight began to pool as it crested the mountains like a scalpel or its own reflection in black bile.

A moment later, an instant, John pulled you from the car at the head of a prie dieu of a parking lot below Zabriskie Point and ushered you down beneath the moon's blade again on scratched trails further and further below the badlands. He was out in front of you with his arm thrown back and his fingers around your forearm.

The exposure of the blue night for day was held in the spongy runnels of the formations where shade became shadow and the bruises on you both became sunken pits and the sky, showing like a torn pennant out over Badwater Basin at the outlet of this lowest wash was the deepest afternoon blue without context over the dim canyonette. The large gravel turned under your feet and you leaned against the steeply sloping wall to breathe through the sand and phlegm. Your breath crackled. John faced the opposite wall. It was too quiet for love. He picked pills off of his laundered coveralls passing time and you watched hypnotized in the blue glow as his shoulders tensed forward and then fell backward as he ran falling his heels racing toward you until his back pressed against your chest and his ass against your pubis and his heels ground into the large gravel by the sound. The back of your head yielded slightly into the soft sedimentary wall and stopped, then your face began to yield to the back of his head, your chest to his back, and your burned soft flesh opened like the glistening tongue of a shimmering mollusk being folded open and wrapped around its own crumbling shell until it slid into John with oily force until he ground against the wall and not Jack any longer and his heels had dug through to the crusty mud below the gravel.

The valley swelled with early morning when he scrambled up the back side of the point and over to the car. He felt something like burning salt water rushing in a torrent down the back of the inside of his ribcage, a blood waterfall in a tired grotto and he felt dizzy on the asphalt. His extremities tingled when he sat down in the driver's seat; his heart hung inside him like the moon in ink.

There are long blank roads inside of his body enough, that before the same full dayswell, he coasted into a motel parking lot in Amarillo. A long, low, alone affair again, or for the first time, for in this ink he existed only in the secondary orbit of Jack, drawn by a blue fascia against the cloudless Texas sky, compressed the bank of motel rooms into a trace of cells that transient rogues could only sit or lay down in.

He took a room. The sheet at the top of the bed was folded over the rayon blanket like a tourniquet bound across a sleeping child. All the turned down sheets of every morning stopped here in meaningless indexes of passing life, stopping to be shown all at once on a single bed. Dim yet sunlit motels are the places a new man runs to because they are furthest from the immaculate deed, physically, and closest to his territory of nascent corruption. They are undoubtedly stages or scenes where some former version of him has left something for him to find, but only its shadow or its code, composed of the memory of the room and how to use it, within a memory that he has never formed, or the teichoscopic scent of a recent meeting in this room that heaves his chest. This room is dying a laminated death. The door was turquoise and when he looked just away from it the color flickered like burning salt.

A very long and unadorned desk is beneath a mirror in the corner, next to the bathroom door. He sits with his chest pulled hard against its flat front and elbows and forearms on the desk with palms flat. Then it is cold. A full body of a breeze arises from the bathroom door like someone stepping into the room and cinches around him. It starts at the tips of his fingers. Then a ring of coldness circles the knuckles where the fingers meet the hand, and the feeling in his fingers, the presence of the fingers, stops registering. He sees across his arm that they are there, but slowly they are something else, an indescribable difference, both from the table they rest upon and the hands that they fan out from. The coldness then cuffs his ankles below the calf. He could recognize in the elasticity of the cold sheathing him that he was not plunging into its grip, but sliding out of bloody warmth through the sphincter of afternoon's meridians across his body into the empty room. He is not first born into air and arms, as a man is, and perceiving the fullness of life as drowning in humors and the wash of space like ooze when the eyes are constantly released from

parallel, that brings warmth outward to the skin and across the senses in a womb of age, he believes true birth, onto plastic and into hot shade with its cold blood, to be Death quickly. The lack of sensation washes over him, not in a wave of numbness that is recognizable in each region of his body dislodging, but in the cancellation of that relationship in the tissue of mind.

The cold cascade ran further down from within his chest, behind his lungs, of the breaths he hadn't breathed, from days before we recognized him turning liquid, and like liquid can never find in nature, somewhere for unmixed repose was unrealistic, or the feeling that his body is too full with cold blood that makes his fingers swell and his skin taut and dappled like black pudding. There are no sharps, no stock ballpoint pens at the long desk in the room, but he knows the only way to sleep or move is to bleed out of himself the cold dead blood settling in his feet, legs, and groin. He went into the bathroom to break a glass ashtray into daggers on the tile floor but found a small thicket of rusted pins and slender nails on the window sash like brown dark writing to be deciphered. He sat on the toilet and pushed the most slender pins into his perineum and raphe, and the small nails into the undersides of his thighs, and left them all there as clarity like fire lit his flesh. He had no drive to escape from himself but to sustain a raging stillness, like the mindfulness of death in dreams of immolation can welcome the being early to eternity as it lives on with the cold peace of its secrets. Eyes open, he traced his finger around the entered flesh where clotted blood found the powder of rust kin and when he pulled the lances one by one but quickly, the collars of blood remained bound to them and dripped reddening into the toilet bowl, at first marbled with the immiscible blood clots but quickly a solid opaque form in the bowl that he let grow long as it could from the rush beneath him, not overflowing but rising high enough as the apertures scabbed to radiate a coolness on the undersides of his thighs and testicles. He looked down between his gray legs. There was a black sky where the blood in the toilet formed half of a red egg-shaped stone cleft to a flat surface.

He relished the throb of healing; it was a beautiful product of pain, where the hallucinations of trauma taper into the living so gradually that the senses communicate in the narcotic language of hypnagogy. The room lost focus and walls bent far to a high plain of skin colored grasses that smelled like sweet youthful breath, and in the brown chafe of a shadow across the base of the wall he felt arising the terror that in his short life he had already made some enormous irrevocable mistake that was even now escalating towards the forfeiture of his freedom and past. He couldn't admit in silence what it was, although part of the terror was knowing that it was an act that was finite, elective, fresh, and forgotten in the summations of matter.

As if tied to the chair, listless and alone, he listens. A muffled voice makes plans through the wall. A shower runs with ropes of scalding water. A fan in a box below the curtain lays embalmed behind aluminum foil and cellophane tape. His arms peel away from the vinyl arms of the chair. The funereal pleats of a drawn curtain behind the desk drool the light from all skies through their inverted hoods. Unable to create a context external to his instincts, he flowed down into those days as they happened. Before and after are guesses. They happen outside of him, in other people. A phone, tan with square gray buttons, loses its cord coiled with a soft skin of dirt twirled about previous fingers, below one red light.

He slid, weakened and dessicated, out of the smooth and dry sheath of a tomb into the moonless soil of placeless night. There was murderousness to setting the door shut, the sound killing a week-old dream, in which each name and face was still young. He couldn't be young and old together. One always watched the other from some point in time. He was old in the dark. He looked old if he couldn't be seen. His voice struggled to ride little bits of air that leaked out and fell uselessly into his new beard. A gravel and dust yard vast and upswirling like steam even in the black fell away from the overhanging blue roof and then to a glowing

cloud island beneath an old pole light. He couldn't gauge the distance in the dark as he walked. Halfway between the motel room door and the pole he ran for the light and stood within its volume. The motel and even the darkness beyond it disappeared and around the frontiers of the light's space a living wicker was described in the warp and weft of bats in ambling flight, their mousy sheen shown green like a waterspout of phosphorescent diatoms lifting you above the sea in their escape. A bat would intermittently loose itself from the edge of the light and dart like a sword through a basket into the cloud to catch a wilting bug. A bat came tottering unstopably toward John's face until its sonar read him and it stopped to turn in midair, its snout lolling before him and its leather wings air-braking and he called out, the first noise, the only shout I hear, from the edge, just in the darkness where he can't see me and I wait a moment before pressing my face into the light, while he regains composure, breath, and decides if he should run back to the motel, which he can't see through the light.

I said: *Are you OK out here?* It didn't come easily. Words don't, off my tongue, sometimes lately I feel like they take my last dry breath when I whisper in bed, and I choke. *I heard you cry out.* I'm not used to hearing voices like that out here, just night or sand washing from one side of the valley to the other. This is where I ended up from the final millions of contracting gyres. *My room is right out beyond there.* I can't see it either, but I know the drab green eave line and the row of beige doors appears when I step back out of the light. The fan and air don't work. *I have a bottle of wine.* He staggers. I kept him in front of me and guided his paces by gently blooming the pentagram of my fingertips outward from his spine. Death Valley, empty but for me, seems to have gotten closer to everything, where I saw the edges of it rise up to chew the moon began the edges of another final tract where the decaying orbit of the deserts and plains and nations and highways around it tightened us in with distant rumbles and fogs of brown light slinking below the horizon but not moving. The other side of the light might be the whole rest of the world tonight, all equidistant from the motel. All the rooms are dark. I wondered if anyone lived differently where they ended up.

John was walking almost completely at my urging now. I could not see the end of my arm but I felt him at my hand. When we reached the room he staggered, his arms hung lower, and his jaw gritted in the heat and silence.

*Look at the ravens.* Those two swollen ones wheeling around the eave of the motel.

I dig the soaked cork out of dangerously old wine with my dry finger. We drink from glass tumblers with thick odd bases that divert glimmers that run lost and diminishing on dry surfaces. The wine is hot. John sat propped up by the pillows from both beds leaned against a headboard hung on the wall above the far bed. He wore small worn feminine canvas shoes. The room was not fully dark. The light in here is black with another person. I can see the ceiling in white shade like a thunderstorm on the highway arises endless from mountain to mountain of the valley and beneath it, not on the earth, but in the purely luminous darkness of day. That light reveals every follicle on my hand and arm and here every windsmoothed line on John's face and neck but with no color or depth beyond the shade of the perimeter of the room and John was a black chiaroscuro that in my silent moments sometimes takes the form of a black mountain. I look at him to try to wrap myself around him.

As John is drinking, as he fills with wine his features become soft, recognizably liquid, with the flat shimmer of quivering exposed fat, as he is slipping from borrowed momentum into the faint consciousness that belongs to his body. In the corners, those aren't shadows, they just aren't anything. John is becoming incapacitated, almost not able to lift the tumbler to his mouth and wine runs down his neck. It happens quickly, like a river becomes the horizon. I listen to the ravens clicking in the bark of the pinyon as their beaks draw in distant sleep through the immense bowl of early morning. John whimpers, and looking into the brown darkness

blindly calls out with the offkey moan of a downed cow that sees your shadow, Death.

I continue to talk to him from the tea leaves of the furniture. The way it is arranged with everything facing inward keeps us from being anyplace but where the room is. If I had a child out here, I would want it to be ugly so it knew that only I loved it. At night in the room when it was home it would feel secure like this was the only place on earth that it really existed and I would hold it in my arms as it was able to sleep and not want to wake up, when I would leave it to the world again. I would have to, so that home meant something. I describe the daylight, *amidst the sky, or within the fullness of the sky, held like a soup in the valley, the air was sometimes still, like when we were watching the sun set over the Panamint Mountains from against the base of the Funeral Mountains. There is no breeze and the colors of the sky and the richness of the atmospheric perspective back down the valley to Badwater Basin stayed tight against my body and packed my ears like gauze.* It might be a valuable thing for me to summon, when I am feeling closed in by his breathing, that spot in the violet haze, somewhere named Death, somewhere silent, somewhere in a shack of silver boards where I homestead with an open window to taste the heat.

Did you notice that everything has spiraled into this singularity, where you and I and the few others in a Brownian quiver try to occupy the same space, that we have shed more of the paranoia that drove us to withdraw into our own chambers of geography, maybe enough to let you flicker into mine, *have you lost those feelings, have you come here that way?* When people started disappearing I remained silent. I didn't want to give them the words, because I didn't want the people back or effigize them; I wanted to press them away. Still the memory of these words was something human left in me that I didn't want, a structure that had meaning only through its relationships, and as the words became unctuous, and slid past each other, or drooped, and lost their friction, or attraction, they weren't words, or the echoes of conversations, but the passing of time alone, the unblinking afternoon sky, when the sand in the wind falls away and the empty air so inscrutably erases my recognition of my self as some thing apart from it, some thing eternally in motion that appears indivisibly still, like sunlight, so that I can just quietly pass into the paper white sand in a prolapsed breath, and completely animal, only alive, not dead, and only recognizing that. It is hard to slap yourself back into this kind of consciousness. I think I had stopped being completely human. Human was a look passed from one to another through the day, like a yawn. Now there are less of us, and with less space all the time, our acres of desert contracting, all in one breath I need to be human again.

So, it was a struggle to recognize what I saw under the lamplight out there, you apart from a cloud, apart from light, sharing my footsteps for the desert's pure sake. I could only reason that we were on a collision course, or asymptotic intertwinement, because we were the last in the contracting of space, by choice, or by ignorance, or silence.

John burbled and rasped like a dry rain and I spat wine into the toilet. It sank like ferrous blood and I went back and took steps around the bed, walking closer and closer to test his edges. As the universe expands, and we are separated, we find ourselves with less and less space between one another. Around the fall of craqueleure oil cloth curtains, *do these always come in this color,* or is this the pallor of something drained of color, the grin of day slips through like the connotations I can read from the edge of a mouth, like a leer with no tone and the days grow noticeably longer and, in their length, bedimmed to the point of trickling through a continuous milk of fireless opal. It invades the room in a creeping gelatinous disease. I don't think it is dusk or dawn, but two totalities together in stalemate. I could smell his clamminess and the stippled concussions in the brown heat that came from each pore as it tingled out of corporeality. He had beaten me to the center where the world had constricted too tight for his body or

the deeds that contrived to encircle his short role. The broken ceiling fan and air conditioner kept him frozen like a wound up fist. I yelled out an animal plaint to him, then quietly, to the room, *your voice, just to keep from being lost in the other voices, sounds like one other than your own.* I won't be animal. In the animal's terror, when I breathe my blood through a gash I will breathe it slow, with clarity and reflection, like a human. The vortex doesn't open and swallow us. These nights are a great collection of prolapsing pores that unfold the parts of him that were not meant for this world into the dry desert of my voice and eyes, and like each other man diminishing, he passes to me a hand and a sigh from his own doubted orbit to mine still afire and I take his hand, where I begin to descend toward the valley floor and the decorated tomb and I throw open the drape slowly like a coroner's sheet, but we cannot fit through the door together. Then his face was white and his arms went white and he was luminous out of the dark. I pulled up the cuffs of his pants and his legs were black. Not black skin but the black of not there, of unused ink, and the sheets were black and had no folds as they became the distance of the room's corners spreading up into the ceiling at the walls and then inward to the center of the room over my head where it hung like a waiting cascade behind black ice, and it didn't creep as I watched but replaced each spot I looked at except through the window at the blue night sky and John's face and hands.

I rolled John face-up onto a rollaway cot and tied him to it with towels around his chest, waist, knees, and ankles with his arms by his sides. I tipped the cot sideways and he hung there like wet paper and I pulled it through the door on its side across the arcade sidewalk, the legs of the cart dropped out over the curb and the moon reflected off of the chrome frame, and upon everything else it soaked and remained. I stopped at the edge of the sand parking lot where the immense salt flat exposed like the moment of a photograph under the moon stretched in all directions endless white riven by the wheel ruts of the cot. The cot leaned you forward slightly, but still prone, as if you were either lurching slightly into the past along the wheel ruts, or always at the precipice of falling backwards to the ground which you could not see. He lay there drugged like a fraud. The pyramid of light from the open back door of the room continued to show on the moonlit earth making it impossible to see much beyond where the pale green met the impossibly cerulean salt sprawled out ascian beneath the gurney meeting a black mountain range and a brown sky. In either direction the mountain range ran uninterrupted and the flat landscape reached.

The sky above the black mountains was black too until a certain point in the barrel vault of the valley which began to give way to the sky of the sun and turned white with the moon still eased into it like a watermark, until they both hung there together without moving. I could leave him and started walking but nothing changed and he, on the cot, stayed equidistant from me as if the salt beneath my feet were unchanging and he, like a stone in the damp, trundled across with me as the terrain conveyed and we merely turned in place, balanced by our symmetrical eccentricities. I sat again, on the edge of the cot, and dipped a corner of the nylon quilt into the water in a small crater open beneath the lips of salt and dripped it onto his mouth which had blistered and gone translucent so that the shades of his teeth and knobby tongue creaked toward the brine visibly, although his mouth couldn't open. I dressed all of his parchment skin with the salty water, and a rain like vinegar from the unchanging white sky let reflections of he and I show in each other's dry eyes, and gave me more brine as it collected in the crater, to keep his lips damp enough to speak if he chose.

We tasted salt on the part of our tongues that tastes salt.

Say these things, say *gently Death, let me fade into the next aspect of my composition, let me never know whence I came, let your inevitability never be assured by visions of your touch on me, let this edge just grow transparent, let it stop in the*

*middle of an affirmation.*