Once I loved a man who was a lot like the desert, and before that I loved the desert. It wasn't particular things but the space between them, that abundance of absence, that is the desert's invitation. There the geology that underlies lusher landscapes is exposed to the eye, and this gives it a skeletal elegance, just as its harsh conditions—the vast distances between water, the many dangers, the extremes of heat and cold—keep you in mind of your mortality. But the desert is made first and foremost out of light, at least to the eye and the heart, and you quickly learn that the mountain range twenty miles away is pink at dawn, a scrubby green at midday, blue in evening and under clouds. The light belies the bony solidity of the land, playing over it like emotion on a face, and in this the desert is intensely alive, as the apparent mood of mountains changes hourly, as places that are flat and stark at noon fill with shadows and mystery in the evening, as darkness becomes a reservoir from which the eyes drink, as clouds promise rain that comes like passion and leaves like redemption, rain that delivers itself with thunder, with lightning, with a rise of scents in this place so pure that moisture, dust, and the various bushes all have their own smell in the sudden humidity. Alive with the primal forces of rock,

weather, wind, light, and time in which biology is only an uninvited guest fending for itself, gilded, dwarfed, and threatened by its hosts. It was the vastness that I loved and an austerity that was also voluptuous. And the man?

I went to visit him in his home deep in the Mojave one evening in late spring. We had met once, and several months later he called me up claiming that he was looking for the phone number of the friend who'd introduced us, kept me on the phone for an hour or more, and ended by telling me to come by when I was next in the vicinity, and so I did. We talked from the bright light of early evening into the darkness of the first warm night of the season, and the soft breeze itself was a delight to me, playing over arms and legs that no longer needed to be wrapped up against the night. We talked while the full moon mounted in the sky, words filling up the narrow space between us, as much a buffer as a link. Hours passed and then suddenly at my foot there was a wriggle of the soil. A kangaroo mouse emerged, a creature that I have never otherwise seen except fleeing at a distance. I put my hand on the man's shoulder to call his attention to this surprise, and we fell silent and watched the strangely fearless mouse do its work for a long time, then resumed the conversation more slowly and more softly as the creature continued to refine its tunnel entrance and the mound of gravelly earth at its mouth, indifferent to our presence. Bats swooped down and snatched invisible meals from the air, and coyotes began to howl, more of them, closer

and more persistently than I've ever heard before or since, a whole orchestra of drawn-out cries into the dawn.

With other men you get to know their families, with this unhurried man who seemed like a desert hermit, animals seemed to fill that place, and they were always around his home. Solitude in the city is about the lack of other people or rather their distance beyond a door or wall, but in remote places it isn't an absence but the presence of something else, a kind of humming silence in which solitude seems as natural to your species as to any other, words strange rocks you may or may not turn over. I have lived in other deserts, but I have never lived in one so alive with animals. Cottontails and jackrabbits and darting, bobbing desert quail were always nearby, and early in the morning I would see the rabbits dance with each other and jump straight into the air in play. Often a late-afternoon coyote strolled through the yard, a bobcat gave me a cool look there once, the neighbors saw a mountain lion in it, and many mornings a pair of roadrunners chased each other in the driveway.

On our second date he told me that when he'd woken up there was a rattlesnake outside, too cold to move in the early morning chill, so he had picked it up on a shovel and moved it into the garage, hoping it would go after the pack rat eating the wiring there. I was surprised and smitten by this response so counter to what most people hope for from snakes: distance. He had a passion for snakes, and on each of our early ren-

dezvous seemed to have another story to tell. One was about driving from the Mojave to the mountains on summer evenings, going slowly so that he could see the snakes who'd come out to bask on the asphalt that held warmth longer into the night than anything else, see them and pick them up and take them to safety. He had seen a gopher snake sit outside a rabbit hole and eat each of the young as it emerged, seen snakes making love, rising high into the air to twine around each other, and he seemed to run into rattlesnakes regularly. One day he came home and told me in the hushed tone I'd learned was tenderness of seeing a baby rattler no thicker than his finger. After that first rendezvous I continued my journey to my original destination, another desert where I would stay alone and write. A few days later, the longest day of the year, I was walking up a little dirt track when I remembered what I'd dreamed of the night before, a snake, and as I said the word to myself, I looked down and saw my right foot was poised to come down on a fat little rattler with a buttony tail, flicking its tongue and wriggling along.

What is the message that wild animals bring, the message that seems to say everything and nothing? What is this message that is wordless, that is nothing more or less than the animals themselves—that the world is wild, that life is unpredictable in its goodness and its danger, that the world is larger than your imagination? I remember a day when he was out working and I was alone in his house writing. I heard a raven fly by in air so still that each slow stroke of its wings was distinctly audible. I wondered then and wonder now how I could give all this up for what cities and people have to offer, for it ought to be less terrible to be lonely than to have stepped out of this sense of a symbolic order that the world of animals and celestial light offers, but writing is lonely enough, a confession to which there will be no immediate or commensurate answer, an opening statement in a conversation that falls silent or takes place long afterward without the author. But the best writing appears like those animals, sudden, self-possessed, telling everything and nothing, words approaching wordlessness. Maybe writing is its own desert, its own wilderness.

There are moments of harmony that rise to the level of serendipity, coincidence, and beyond, and certain passages of time that seem dense with such incidents. Summers and deserts seem best for them. I remember lying in the shade of my truck in the Great Basin reading *The Divine Comedy.* As I finished the last lines of the Paradiso, when Dante approaches the light and is turned like a wheel by "the love which moves the sun and other stars," a car pulled up. The Franciscan father who ministered to Skid Row characters in Las Vegas and to the cause of peace in the desert stepped out, a comic saint with a thick Breton accent who seemed to have driven up straight out of paradise into that desert that resonated so much with Dante's tale. Or a time walking in another desert when I thought of the obsidian bird-point arrowhead I'd found in that area the year before, then recollected the creamy chert arrow-

head a man had given me since then, and with the latter picture in my head looked down to see its twin, another pale arrowhead with a wide base, a perfect match two thousand miles away six months later, so startling a coincidence that my sense of cause and effect was rattled for a day. Countless times when I traveled hundreds of miles to meet a friend who arrived simultaneously at our remote destination, when what we were looking for appeared unexpectedly, when two people spoke the same thought in the same words at once. Such moments seem to mean that you have surrendered to the story being told and are following the story line rather than trying to tell it yourself, your puny voice interrupting and arguing with fate, nature, the gods.

One perfect midsummer day three years after that evening I'd arrived in the hermit's life and he in mine, I had gotten up early in that shack whose back bedroom window opened onto one of the most spectacular views I've ever seen and whose kitchen window was up against a slope, so that as I filled the kettle I was eye to eye with a young cottontail, unafraid as I remained unseen through the glass, its eye a round black mirror for creosote bush and window frame. The yard was full of cottontails that day, and then I found a huge desert tortoise strolling up to chomp on the prickly pears, as though we had stumbled into the fable of the tortoise and the hare, whose dispositions I often imagined as the hermit's and mine, he so reserved, deliberate, patient, I so quick and high-strung. I told the neighbor

and the hermit, and they came out and, in the manner of men, let on that they had seen tortoises as big. Have you ever seen one bigger, I asked, and they fell silent, watching the creature open a beaky mouth and cut cactus with slow menace. That evening we went to feed the cats of an acquaintance who was away, and inside the house we found the three creatures stalking a mourning dove fluttering bloody around the big room. While I fended off the cats, he caught the creature. It vanished into his hands, and this seemed to calm it until we got outside. He raised his hands up and the dove flew into the last light, more alive than we'd hoped.

An idyll like that wasn't made to last. For a while it was forever, and then things started to fall apart. There isn't a story to tell, because a relationship is a story you construct together and take up residence in, a story as sheltering as a house. You invent this story of how your destinies were made to entwine like porch vines, you adjust to a big view in this direction and no view in that, the doorway that you have to duck through and the window that is jammed, how who you think you are becomes a factor of who you think he is and who he thinks you are, a castle in the clouds made out of the moist air exhaled by dreamers. It's a shock to find yourself outdoors and alone again, hard to imagine that you could ever live in another house, big where this one was small, small where it was big, hard when your body has learned all the twists and turns of the staircase so that you could walk it in your sleep, hard when you have

built it from scratch and called it home, hard to imagine building again. But you lit the fire that burned it down yourself.

A happy love is a single story, a disintegrating one is two or more competing, conflicting versions, and a disintegrated one lies at your feet like a shattered mirror, each shard reflecting a different story, that it was wonderful, that it was terrible, if only this had, if only that hadn't. The stories don't fit back together, and it's the end of stories, those devices we carry like shells and shields and blinkers and occasionally maps and compasses. The people close to you become mirrors and journals in which you record your history, the instruments that help you know yourself and remember yourself, and you do the same for them. When they vanish so does the use, the appreciation, the understanding of those small anecdotes, catchphrases, jokes: they become a book slammed shut or burnt. Though I came out of this house transformed, stronger and surer than I had been, and carrying with me more knowledge of myself, of men, of love, of deserts and wildernesses.

The stories shatter. Or you wear them out or leave them behind. Over time the story or the memory loses its power. Over time you become someone else. Only when the honey turns to dust are you free. I went away for the summer, back to the desert I had been headed for when I detoured his way the evening of the kangaroo mouse, all those years before. Heartbreak is a little like falling in love, in the way it charges everything with a kind of incandescence, as though the beloved has stepped away and your gaze now rests with all the same intensity on all the items of the view that close-up person blocked. Out in the small house in that desert one of the insects called walking sticks took up residence on one of the windows, and after I poked it to make sure it wasn't a stray bit of straw, I took to talking to it occasionally, so companionable was it. A spider with an image like a foolishly smiling face on her big white abdomen dwelt in the eaves over the door I passed through to write. Paper wasps built nests in those eaves. All around the little house Mexican grasshoppers flung out their wings, black, yellow, and scarlet, vivid like butterflies while they flew, drab again when they landed. Bumblebees landed on coneflowers that dipped halfway to the ground under their weight. Occasionally a velvet ant upholstered in red or yellow plush walked by, and black beetles with a forward tilt left tiny trails in the dust.

There were lizards in abundance, and when they climbed the screens of the windows, I was delighted as I'd always been by the azure stripes on the undersides of the species we always called bluebellies. They kept drowning in the horse trough under the drainpipe, where they would float pale and hapless like sailors in a Victorian shipwreck poem. In the distance was the celestial drama of summer thunderstorms, clouds assembling in vast arrays that demonstrated how far the sky went and how high, that shifted from the bundled white cumulus into the deep blue of storm clouds, and

when we were lucky, poured down rain and lightning and shafts of light and vapor trails like a violent redemption. It was as though the whole world consisted of the tiny close-up realm of these creatures and the vast distances of heaven, as though my own scale had been eliminated along with the middle ground, and this too is one of the austere luxuries of the desert.

In the fall, I went back to the city and began to compose a story in my head. I was already working on a book then, or I would have written it down. Now it is as decayed as a real book might be after being buried or abandoned, and when I think of the scraps that remain, I wonder what weather in the mind so erodes such things.

Alfred Hitchcock's film *Vertigo* is sometimes described as a love letter to San Francisco, though its subject is a romance between the protagonist, an ex-detective with vertigo, and the woman he's hired to pursue. The woman is supposed to be Madeleine, the heiress who married his college friend Gavin Elster. Elster hires the detective to tail her, and in a monologue cut from the movie says that when he brought her to San Francisco, "She was like a child come home. Everything about the city excited her; she had to walk all the hills, explore the edge of the ocean, see all the old houses and wander the old streets; and when she came upon something unchanged, something that was as it had been, her delight was so strong, so fiercely possessive! These things were hers. And yet she had never been here before. . . . She

possessed it," he says of her relationship to the city. "And then one day she changed again . . . and a great sigh settled on her, and the cloud came into her eyes. I don't know what happened that day, where she went, what she saw, what she did. But on that day, the search was ended. She had found what she was looking for. She had come home. And something in the city possessed her." She is supposed to be haunted by her Latina ancestress who died forlorn and mad, the betrayed mistress of a wealthy San Francisco man. The Madeleine in the movie wears a pale gray suit, has hair so blond it's almost white, drives a green Jaguar, is cool, mysterious, an elusive vision for the detective to follow.

And he follows her to the foot of the Golden Gate Bridge where she throws herself into the waves, to the California Palace of the Legion of Honor out at Land's End in the city's wild northwest, to the overgrown little cemetery at Mission Dolores, up and down the streets of downtown, so that the plot is a fiction but the film is an evocation of real places, all familiar ones to me, though here seen before I was born. He goes with her to a redwood forest where one of those crosscut redwood logs becomes a map of deep time—she points to tree rings from the nineteenth century and says, "Here I was born" and "here I died." Finally they go to another outlying mission where she leaps to her death from the bell tower before he, afflicted with vertigo, can follow her up the stairs. While recovering from his subsequent breakdown, he meets a brassy salesgirl from the elegant Magnin's department store downtown and,

struck by her resemblance to Madeleine, dates her, dresses rather than undresses her, and forces her to come closer and closer to becoming Madeleine. Torn between love and judgment, she gives in. Finally, when Judy has the same pale hair, the same gray suit as the first woman he had followed and recklessly puts on a necklace that woman owned, he realizes that she was Madeleine, or rather that Madeleine never existed, that he had fallen in love with a scheme to cover up the murder of the real Mrs. Elster who was pushed from the tower that he, with his vertigo, could not ascend. The plot was concocted by Elster when the salesgirl was his mistress, but she was discarded afterward and is being discarded in another way by the detective determined she become someone else, someone dead. When he realizes the ruse, he forces her to return to the railless bell tower platform where Mrs. Elster was pushed to her death and, startled by a shadowy nun come up behind them, she backs up and is dead again.

Vertigo is an intricate tragedy, sometimes compared to Shakespeare, though it might be closer to *The Great Gatsby,* for part of the detective's desire is for her apparent aristocracy, her cool-colored evasion that he follows to the edge of death, the unreachable that for Gatsby is the green light at the end of Daisy's dock and for Gatsby's author is the irrecoverable past, the orgiastic future, the famous fresh green breast of the continent itself. There are Parisian novels in which love of a woman and love of the city become the same passion, though a lonely one in which wandering, stalking,

haunting are consummation, and real communion is unimaginable. The same might be true of *Vertigo,* that Madeleine becomes what one of San Francisco's bad poets once called "the cool gray city of love," but neither hero nor heroine seems to much notice the places the camera caresses and probes. Told from the man's point of view, *Vertigo* is awash with romantic fog, but from the woman's perspective, it's about being forced to disappear—not from the top of a tower, but in everyday life as two successive lovers make her into someone else for their own ends, a common enough tragedy.

Most crabs come complete with their own shells, but the asymmetrical bodies of hermit crabs are usually described as soft and vulnerable. They take up residence in the shells of snails, whelks, periwinkles, and other hard-shelled creatures, and their body curves within the new home, a set of internal limbs holding onto the shell while big external claws find food and defend the crab from the outside world. The hermit crab: grabbing on one side and clinging on the other. Eventually the creature outgrows the shell, and thus comes the risky moment called the molt, when the crab is between shells. Sometimes it investigates a new shell before it molts and if the shell doesn't fit, slips back into the old one; sometimes it chases another crab out of a good-looking shell or eats a dead creature to empty out its shell. They are scavengers crawling the floor of the sea. Male hermit crabs often drag a female around by her claw, fighting off rival suitors, until she molts. Only

when she is between shells can they mate. Their tiny young are borne along on the current until they reach a stage when they drop to the ocean floor and must quickly find a shell for protection, and thus begin adult life. Many love stories are like the shells of hermit crabs, though others are more like chambered nautiluses, whose architecture grows with the inhabitant and whose abandoned smaller chambers are lighter than water and let them float in the sea.

I had seen *Vertigo* on the big screen again a year or so earlier, and one scene captivated me. In the first scene, the detective almost falls to his death, the incident from which he derives his vertigo; in the second he's at the home of an old friend. She lives in an apartment with drawings and paintings hung everywhere but the windows opening out onto sweeping views of the city below, makes her living drawing lingerie, and calls him Johnny while everyone else calls him Scottie. While he lounges, she chats with him and sketches a "revolutionary uplift" bra designed "on the principle of the cantilevered bridge": body as a vertiginous landscape, breasts a Golden Gate Bridge to jump from. Midge has hair almost as blond as Madeleine's, though big glasses, a sensible bob, and her nickname ensure she won't seem seductive. But her voice is like vanilla ice cream and when the detective complains about the corset he wears for his injured back and wonders whether many men wear them, she replies smoothly, "Quite a few." He sits upright and demands, "Do you know that from

personal experience?" and she laughs and changes the subject.

Though she's full of what the French call *jouissance,* an erotic joy, she doesn't exist in the French novel from which *Vertigo* was adapted. An American screenwriter made her up. Most who write about the film seem to forget that it's she who broke off her engagement with the detective, as that initial scene reveals, and the screenwriters and director themselves seem to forget it in later passages when she becomes a far more conventional character with a sad, defeated devotion to Scottie. E. M. Forster wrote that novels have round and flat characters, and the flat ones are usually the minor figures, but *Vertigo* is a film with a paper doll Tristan and Iseult sliding across the foreground and this round figure making one startling appearance. She is an invitation to go in another direction than the tragic one of the film, for though the movie is in love with San Francisco, she is the only character who really seems immersed in the city's possibilities, and though the protagonists are driven in pursuit of pleasure and satisfaction, she seems to live amidst them. I began to tell myself a story—a novel if I wrote it down—about Midge.

When I was nineteen I wrote a play, badly. A woman hired a detective to find her vanished mate, and all the scenes took place in her room. The detective, through his investigations and conversations with her, comes to believe at various points that the missing man never existed, because she's mad or because she's invented the story to seduce him, or that he himself is one way or

another that man and is mad himself. "Lost and Found," I called it. It was about yearning, about deception, about how she used the tale of having lost something to find something or to define something. Other fictions ran through my head at various times, and I would elaborate on some stories and characters for years, but they weren't what I was here for. Nonfiction seems to me photographic; it poses the same challenge of finding form and pattern in the stuff already out there and the same ethical obligations to the subject. Fiction like painting lets you start with a blank canvas, though as I began to turn this version of *Vertigo* into a story I called "Slip," I remembered what kind of truth fiction has: of the universal principles and the telling details, the minutiae that can add up to stories if you build characters around them. (In essays, ideas are the protagonists, and they often develop much like characters down to the surprise denouement.) In "Slip," Midge was just a childhood nickname for a woman called Margaretta and the detective a childhood sweetheart she outgrew.

She moved through a city I knew already, the city of the San Francisco Beat poets and artists who were the subject of my first book, and whose *annus miraculis* was 1957, the year *Vertigo* was made, years before I was born. Hitchcock's was a portrait of a closed world, a sort of Freudian strait of blind yearning, but the city was wide open with other possibilities at the time, the first flush of an era of hallucinogenic drugs, esoteric spiritual traditions, experimental film, a wilder, freer poetry meant to be spoken aloud, collage and assemblage art made from the very rubble of the old houses being pulled down, engagement with the mystery of everyday life and sometimes with politics—people building up communities in which it might be possible to make another culture, another art, another era. Margaretta seemed to come into the movie out of this other world, and it's she who knows the owner of the antiquarian Argosy Bookstore who can tell the detective the history of the city. City with the Buddha Bar and the bar called Li Po in Chinatown, where the streetlights have oxidized bronze dragons curling up them, with the alleys south of Market named after nineteenth-century prostitutes and the houses sinking down because of soft ground and earthquakes, so their lintels are level with your eyebrows, with all the crests of all the hills that lift you out of the urban grid to see the ocean, the bay, and the hills across the water, with the evening fog tumbling over itself eastward past the streetlights, with in those days the jazz on Fillmore and the decrepit amusement park with its fun house and *musée mécanique* and hall of mirrors out at Land's End, near the Cliff House and Seal Rocks that show up in so many old photographs, this city edged in by wildness and opened up by imagination, whose poetry moves through that movie.

Of course there had to be a plot and a new center of gravity for a story with her at the center rather than the periphery, and *Vertigo* gradually faded into background for this other story. She told it backward, from

her position as a painter with a daughter sometime in the 1960s, back to her childhood growing up with the detective the boy next door on the San Francisco peninsula when it was the Valley of Heart's Delight, huge orchards and small towns, not yet Silicon Valley. Slip, her prim mother telling her that a slip is something no one sees you wearing but that changes the appearance of what everyone sees, satin slips with the hedgerow landscapes of flowers and leaves in the lace next to the skin. Slip, the lingerie she drew as architecture, as the equivalent of drawbridges and gates and walls in that great age of girdles and foundations and garters and corsets, and a defloratory love scene where she was shocked not at his nakedness but her own overprinted with all the marks those straps and seams and buckles leave in soft flesh, the ghosts of garments. Slip, Judy a lingerie model as well as a salesgirl at Magnin's and Margaretta crossing paths with her in the course of drawing that lingerie while Judy talked on about herself, Judy letting slip what kind of an affair she was having and with whom and the decision Margaretta made to stay out of it that might have been the wrong decision. Slip, small drawings, paintings, letters, telegrams, receipts, and postcards falling out of the pages of a consignment of books at Argosy Bookstore, an autobiography inserted as page markers into those books, and Margaretta tracing them for the owner to the nephew of the estate they had come from. Slip, the painter whose career had trickled away during his internment in a prison camp for Japanese-Americans in the Second

World War and the paintings that included the landscape of the camps and the Sierra. The nephew became her companion in exploring the possibilities, a poet editing copy at the *Chronicle* while she was a painter drawing lingerie for a downtown department store, two people slipping from their original vocations into the dressing up of words and bodies. Slipping in, slipping out, slippery.

There are people for whom there is only one sun in the sky or darkness, and there are those who live in a night filled with stars, was her opening line, more or less. In a bar telling a ranger she was having an affair with, *As for nature, I am in love with the elemental forces, with fire and water, with gravity and evaporation and the properties of light, and there's as much of that in the city. It's in the way cream curls down into ice coffee and cigarette smoke coils up and the ice cubes in this drink are melting. I remember swinging in the backyard when I was a girl and scaring Johnny who lived next door and was just enough older to think he could supervise me, jumping off at the crest of the arc and coming down with my skirt billowing like a parachute.* She seemed to take pleasure in everything, to have a diffuse sensuality spread throughout the tangible world, in marked contrast to the protagonists chasing a conventional notion of satisfaction forever postponed. And so I gave her gravity, that sensation children pursue relentlessly, again and again, swinging, spinning, cracking the whip. I remember a motorcyclist telling me about the infinitely subtle ways racers use their bodies to turn at high speeds and the incredible pleasure of

those acts. Gravity is about motion, weight, resistance, force, the most primary experience after all the touches on our skin, of being corporeal. And so it may be that gravity is a sweet taste of mortality and our strength to resist it, a luxuriating in the pull of the earth and the pull of muscles against it, in the momentum the two create, and in how close you can cut it, just as sex for women has the twin possibilities of procreation and annihilation.

The movie is about fear of gravity and ascent; I made both pleasures for her. She lived on the upswing as everything in *Vertigo* was falling. Mostly I gave her set pieces about the sensory world, and it's those I recall. *As for the grid of this city, the orchards on the peninsula had already taught me the pleasures of geometry, of the way you moved so that the diagonal lines through the plum trees disappeared and were replaced a minute later by the straight ones, and when you drove by, each avenue flashed by in a moment before the next one emerged from the crowd of trees, and I loved the way you could see the near trees swing by much faster than the far trees, as though you were on the outside edge of a circle rather than at the center, as though the center of the world was always near, but you swung on its periphery like a fly on a turning record, even though the road was straight. Perspective lessons, like in drawing class, though that's not a rule they taught us.* And of a man later, *I don't remember his face but every man who touched me made one gesture that never quite came to an end; I can feel the forearm of one across my belly as he swam up behind me in a lake, the rough kiss of another on my palm, and sometimes I think that there might be some device like the X-ray machines they use to look at your feet in the shoe stores that would make these indelible impressions visible, a series of marks, the opposite of bruises, across and around me, and I went through the world dressed in those experiences, we all do.*

There's not much more I remember of this book that seemed so complete in my head at one time, though I couldn't bring myself to write one word down, not wanting to start unless I could finish. Plot, character, dialogue seem mostly to have vanished as anything more than broad outlines. I know she and the editor wandered the city and its bars, went to the artists' parties, argued about vocations, and finally went into the mountains. The culminating excursion began as his desire to recover the poems he had buried in a tin at Manzanar, the bleak Second World War prison camp in the eastern Sierra for Japanese-Americans with the wonderful view of the highest peaks. By the time they arrived, though, he had recognized that his vocation wasn't going to be buried in the past. A couple of mountaineers they had met in a Big Pine diner invited them to go up nearby Mount Whitney with them, the highest point on the continent between Mexico and Canada, and they pulled out of Manzanar to take up the invitation at the last minute.

Tiresias's strange destiny began when he saw two snakes making love in the wilderness. He struck them and was turned into a woman as a result. Seven years later he came upon another pair of coupling snakes and

struck them again to regain his manhood. Because he had been both a man and a woman, the gods asked him to settle an argument about which gender derives more pleasure from making love, and when he declared in favor of women, the annoyed Hera blinded him. As compensation, Zeus gave him the power of seeing the future, and he became a famous prophet. Or, in another story, he was struck blind for seeing Athena bathing, but in apology she took the snake from her breastplate and had it clean his ears with its tongue, so that Tiresias would understand the language of prophetic birds. It's Tiresias who tells Oedipus what crimes he has committed and is committing, who brings that cycle to its end with Oedipus's blinding and exile, and it's *Oedipus Rex* where he makes his main appearance. This prophet who sees despite his blindness, while Oedipus is only unseeing, blind or not, is much more interesting than Oedipus, whose world closes around him claustrophobically so that the stranger he kills is his father, the queen he marries is his mother. Tiresias's story isn't a tragedy, a knot of character untied only by death and exile, but a romance traveling through a terrain with the amplitude to include animals, gods, strangers, transformations. The word *romance* once meant this kind of questing journey—"usu. heroic, adventurous, or mysterious," says my dictionary. This older meaning suggests that romances in the other sense—"(3): a love story"—too should move through place and desire. Comedy, said Aristotle, ends in marriage, but since marriage is something other than an

end, romance in one sense or both is what continues on afterward or it too lapses into tragedy. Margaretta—even Midge, unmodified—is the Tiresias of *Vertigo*.

I sent them up Mount Whitney, but what did they see? I hadn't been up the mountain at that point. I have since. Going the usual way, you walk up from a road high on the eastern side of the slope. The view to the east, behind you as you toil uphill, gets bigger and bigger. Around ten thousand feet you look across the wide valley between the Sierra and the first range of the White Mountains. When you've risen for an hour or more, you see over the range to the next one, and the desert landscape keeps getting larger and larger, until you're looking across basin after range after basin into the distant depths of Nevada. You realize that no matter how much terrain you cover there's far more than you ever will. Mountaineering is always spoken of as though summiting is conquest, but as you get higher, the world gets bigger, and you feel smaller in proportion to it, overwhelmed and liberated by how much space is around you, how much room to wander, how much unknown. All day you have been toiling uphill looking into the slope, on trail, switchback, in pine groves and above them, and the view behind you has gradually enlarged to the north, the south, the east. Sometimes birds, trees, the rocks underfoot draw your attention to the nearby, sometimes you are looking straight into the steepness ahead, but a turn or a pause lets you see the vastness in those three directions again, an infinite cloak of air wrapped around your back as

you proceed. Finally, about thirteen thousand feet above the sea, you reach not the summit, which isn't so dramatic a change, but the crest. Whitney is only the highest point of a long ridge. As you step up to the ridgeline, the world to the west suddenly appears before you, a colossal expanse even more wild and remote than the east, a surprise, a gift, a revelation. The world doubles in size. Something like that happens when you really see someone, and if that's so then it has something to do with why everyone in *Vertigo* keeps falling. There wasn't any falling, any tragedy, at the center of "Slip," just moving on into this vastness.

The Blue of Distance