

SEVERAL
ATTEMPTS
TO ENTER
IN
'GIOVANNI'S
ROOM'
(1956).
BY JAMES
BALDWIN
(1924-1987).
THROUGH
'THE
POETICS
OF
SPACE'
(1957).
BY GASTON
BACHELARD
(1885-1962).
AND
OTHER
WHOLEHEA
RTED
THOUGHTS.



UNDEL

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"This book opens its readers to the titanic importance of setting in so much art from painting to poetry to fiction to autobiography. In 'The Poetics of Space', Bachelard reveals time after time that setting is more than scene in works of art, that it is often the armature around which the work revolves. He elevates setting to its rightful place alongside character and plot, and offers readers a new angle of vision that re-shapes any understanding of great paintings and novels, and folktales too. His is a work of genuine topophilia."¹

topophilia: " [...] investigations of the felicitous space, [...] the sorts of space that may be grasped, that may be defended against adverse forces, the space we love."¹

¹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. X, (foreword to the 1994 edition, John R. Stille)

DAVID'S MOTHER AS SPACE.

*"There does not exist a real intimacy that is repellent. All the spaces of intimacy are designated by an attraction. Their being is well-being."*¹

"My mother had been carried to the graveyard when I was five. I scarcely remember her at all, yet she figured in my nightmares, blind with worms, her hair as dry as metal and brittle as a twig, straining to press me against her **body**; that body so putrescent, so sickening soft, that it opened, as I clawed

and cried, *into a breach* so enormous as to swallow me alive. But when my father or my aunt came rushing into my room to find out what had frightened me, I did not dare describe this dream, which seemed disloyal to

my mother. I said that I had dreamed about **a graveyard**.

They concluded that the death of my mother had had this unsettling effect on my imagination and perhaps they thought that I was grieving for her. And I may have been, but if that is so, then I am grieving still.

[...] I remember when I was very young how, in **the big living room of the house** in San Francisco, my mother's photograph, which stood all by itself on the mantelpiece, seemed **to rule the room**. It was as though her photograph proved how **her spirit dominated that air** and controlled us all.

I remember the shadows gathering in the *far corners* of that room, in which I never felt at home, and my father **washed in the gold light** which spilled down on him from the tall lamp which stood beside his easy chair."²

*"[...] how can secret rooms, rooms that have disappeared, become abodes for an unforgettable past? Where and how does repose find especially conducive situations? How is it that, at times, a provisional refuge or an occasional shelter is endowed in our intimate day-dreaming with virtues that have no objective foundation?"*⁵

*"A house that has been experienced is not an inert box."*³

*"Space that has been seized upon by the imagination cannot remain indifferent space subject to the measures and estimates of the surveyor. It has been lived in, not in its positivity, but with all the partiality of the imagination. Particularly, it nearly always exercises an attraction. For it concentrates being within limits that protect. In the realm of images, the play between the exterior and intimacy is not a balanced one."*⁴

¹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 12.

² James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*, p. 17. (Part 1, Chapter 1)

³ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. VII. (foreword to the 1994 edition, John R. Stilgoe)

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. XXXVI.

⁵ *Ibid.*

moth.er /'mɑ:θər/

2. give birth to.

synonyms: have, bear, produce, birth, archaic be brought to bed of

"[...] in the most interminable of dialectics, the sheltered being gives perceptible limits to his shelter. He experiences the house in its reality and in its virtuality, by means of thought and dreams. It is no longer in its positive aspects that the house is really 'lived' [...]"¹

vir.tu.al /vɪr'kju:əl/

1. being such in power, force, or effect, though not actually or expressly such.

French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) elaborated the concept of virtuality as a proposal of that aspect of reality that is ideal but nonetheless real.

↑ FAR CORNER ~ NEAR WOMB

¹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 5.

NEW YORK VERSUS PARIS.

↑ The impression of immensity

is in us, and not necessarily ~~in the city~~.

"'You are an American?' he asked at last. 'Yes.', I said. 'From New York.' 'Ah! I am told that New York is very beautiful. Is it more beautiful than Paris?' 'Oh, no, — I said — no city is more beautiful than Paris.' [...] 'You must like Paris very much.' 'I like New York, too, — I said, uncomfortably aware that my voice had a defensive ring — but New York is very beautiful in a very different way.' He frowned. 'In what way?' 'No one — I said —

who has never seen it can possibly imagine it.

It's very high and new

and **electric**-exciting.'

I paused. 'It's hard to describe.

It's very **twentieth century**.' 'You find that Paris is not of this century?', he asked with a smile. His smile made me feel a little foolish. 'Well, — I said — Paris is old, is many centuries. **You feel, in Paris, all the time gone by**. That isn't what you feel in New York.' He was smiling. I stopped. 'What do you feel in New York?' he asked. 'Perhaps you feel — I told him — **all the time to come**. There's such power there,

everything is in such **movement**. You can't help wondering — I can't help wondering — what it will all be like many years from now.' 'Many years from now?

When we are dead and New York is old?' 'Yes.' I said. '**When everyone is tired**, when the world — for Americans — is not so new.' 'I don't see why the world is so new for Americans.' said Giovanni. 'After all, you are all merely emigrants. And you did not leave Europe so very long ago.'

¹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. XXXIX.



'The ocean is very wide'

, I said. 'We have led different lives than you; things have happened to us there which have never happened here. Surely you can understand that this would make us a different people?' 'Ah! If it had only made you a different people!' he laughed. 'But it seems to have turned you into another species. You are not, are you, on another planet? For I suppose that would explain everything.' 'I admit — I said with some heat, for I do not like to be laughed at — that we may sometimes give the impression that we think we are. But we are not on another planet, no. And neither, my friend, are you.'"¹



¹ James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*, p. 40, (Part 1, Chapter 2)

THE PICTURESQUE

"The side of a smooth green hill, torn by floods, may at first very properly be called deformed, and on the same principle, though not with the same impression, as a gash on a living animal. When a rawness of such a gash in the ground is softened, and in part concealed and ornamented by the effects of time, and the progress of vegetation, deformity, by this usual process, is converted into picturesqueness; and this is the case with quarries, gravel pits, etc., which at first are deformities, and which in their most picturesque state, are often considered as such by a levelling improver."¹



"He would then allow the structures of the material of the site to begin to structure his sense experience of sight. In this way he would begin to think like the site."²

THE PICTURESQUE OF PARIS EARLY MORNING TOWARDS LES HALLES.

"At five o'clock in the morning Guillaume locked the door of the bar behind us.

The streets were empty and **grey**. On a corner near the bar a butcher had already opened his shop and one could see him within, **already bloody**, hacking at the meat. One of the great, green Paris buses **lumbered**

lum.ber /'lʌm.bər/

1. *move in a slow, heavy, awkward way.*

past, nearly empty, **its bright electric flag** waving fiercely to indicate a turn. A **garçon de cafe** spilled water on the sidewalk before his establishment and swept

it into **the gutter**. At the end of the long, curving street which faced us were **the trees of the boulevard and straw chairs piled high before cafes and the great stone spire** of Saint-Germain-des-Prés — the most magnificent spire, as Hella and I believed, in Paris. The street beyond the place stretched before us to

the river and, hidden beside and behind us, **meandered**

me.an.der /mē'ændər/

1. *(of a river or road) follow a winding course.*

¹ Uvedale Price, *Three Essays on the Picturesque*.

² Timothy D. Martin, *Robert Smithson and the Anglo-American Picturesque*.

"I scarcely know how to describe that room. It became, in a way, **every room I had ever been in and every room I find myself in hereafter** will remind me of Giovanni's room. I did not really stay there very long — we met before the spring began and I left there during the summer— but it still seems to me that I spent a lifetime there.

Life in that room seemed to be occurring *underwater*, as I say, and it is certain that I underwent a sea change there.

To begin with, the room was **not large enough for two**. It looked out on a small *courtyard*. Looked out means only that the room had **two windows**, against which the courtyard **malevolently pressed**, encroaching day by day, as though it

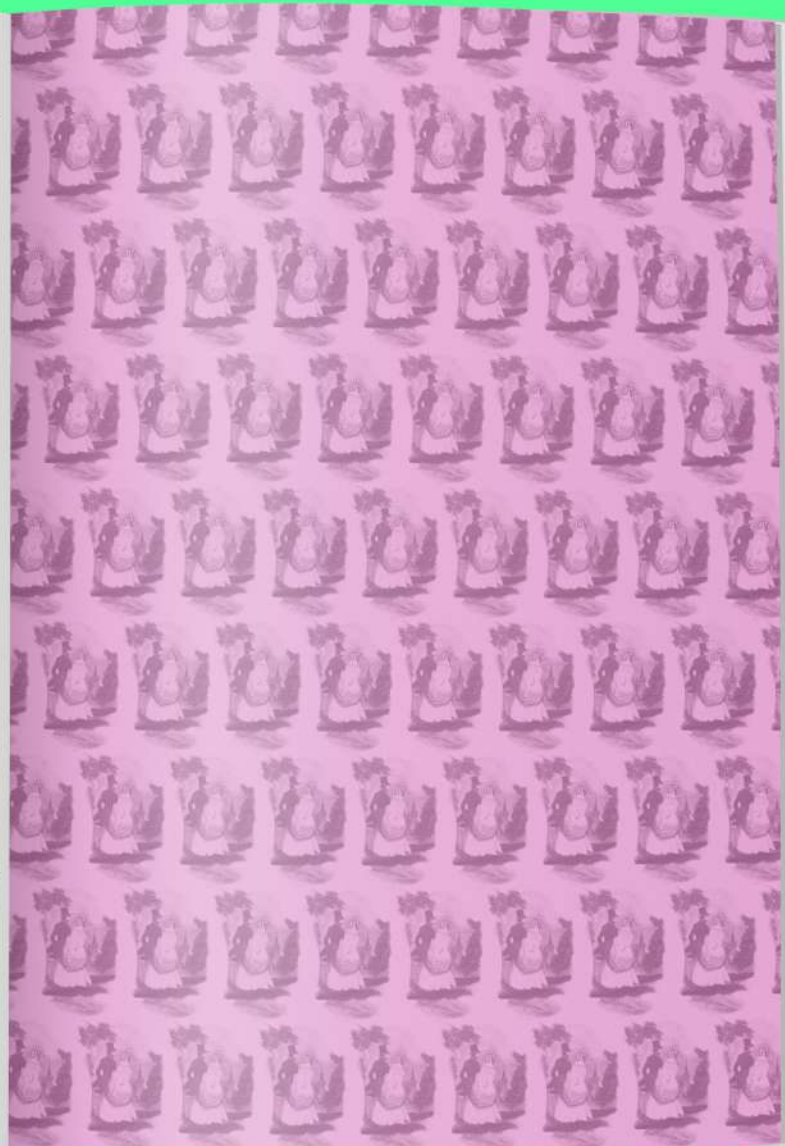
had confused itself with a *jungle*. We, or rather Giovanni kept the windows closed most of the time. He had never bought any curtains; neither did we buy any while I was in the room. **To insure privacy**, Giovanni had obscured the window panes with a heavy, white cleaning polish. We sometimes heard **children playing outside** our window, sometimes strange shapes loomed against it. At such moments, Giovanni, working in the room, or lying in bed, would stiffen like a hunting dog and remain perfectly silent until whatever seemed to threaten our safety had moved away.

He had always had great plans for remodelling this room, and before I arrived he

had already begun. One of the walls was a *dirty, streaked white* where he had torn off the wallpaper. The wall facing it was destined never to be uncovered, and on this wall **a lady in a hoop skirt and a man in knee breeches perpetually walked together, hemmed in by roses**. The wallpaper lay on the floor, in

great sheets and scrolls, in *dust*. On the floor also lay our dirty laundry, along with Giovanni's tools and the paint brushes and the bottles of oil and turpentine. Our suitcases teetered on top of something, so that we dreaded ever having to open them and sometimes went without some minor necessity, such as clean socks, for days. **No one ever came to see us**, except Jacques, and he did not come often. We were far from the center of the city and we had no phone.

I remembered the first afternoon I woke up there, with Giovanni fast asleep beside me, heavy as a fallen rock. *The sun filtered through the room so faintly that I was worried about the time*. I stealthily lit a cigarette, for I did not want to wake Giovanni. I did not yet know how I would face his eyes. I looked about me. Giovanni had said something in the taxi about his room being very dirty. 'I'm sure it is.' I had said lightly, and turned away from him, looking out of the window. Then we had both been silent. When I woke up in his room, I remembered that **there had been something strained and painful in the quality of that silence**, which had been broken when Giovanni said, with a shy,



bitter smile: *I must find some poetic figure.* And he spread his
heavy fingers in the air, as though *a metaphor was tangible*. I
 watched him. 'Look at the garbage of this city,' he said, finally, and his fingers
 indicated the flying street. 'All of the **garbage of this city?** Where do they take it?'
 'I don't know where they take it, but it might very well be my room.' It's much more
 than they — I said — that they dump it into the Seine.' But I sensed, when I woke up
 and looked around the room, *the bravado and the cowardice*
 of his figure of speech. This was not the garbage of Paris, which
 would have been anonymous: *this was Giovanni's regurgitated life.*
 Before and beside me and all over the room, towering like a wall, were boxes of
 cardboard and leather, some tied with string, some locked, some bursting, and
 out of the topmost box before me spilled down sheets of violin music. There was
 a violin in the room, lying on the table in its warped, cracked case — it was
 impossible to guess from looking at it whether it had been laid to rest there yesterday
 or a hundred years before. The table was loaded with yellowing newspapers and
 empty bottles and it held a single brown and wrinkled potato in which even the
 protruding eyes were rotten. Red wine had been spilled on the floor; it had been
 allowed to dry and it made the air in the room *sweet and heavy*. But it wasn't
 the room's disorder which was *frightening*; it was the fact that when one began
 searching for the key to this disorder, one realized that it was not to be found in any of
 the usual places. For this was not a matter of habit or circumstance or temperament; it
 was a matter of *punishment and grief*. I do not know how I knew this,
 but I knew it at once; perhaps I knew it because I wanted to live. And I stared at
 the room with the same, nervous, calculating extension of the intelligence and of all
 the forces which occurs when gauging a mortal and unavoidable danger: at
 the silent walls of the room with its distant,
ARCHAIC LOVERS trapped in an interminable rose
 garden, and the staring windows, staring like two
 great eyes of ice and fire, and the ceiling which

lowered like those clouds out of which fiends have
 sometimes spoken and which obscured but failed
 to soften its malevolence behind the yellow light

which hung like **A DISEASED AND UNDEFINABLE SEX**
 in its center. Under this blunted arrow, this smashed flower of fight lay the
 terrors which encompassed Giovanni's **SOUL**. I understood why Giovanni had
 wanted me and had brought me to his last retreat. I was to **destroy this room** and
 give to Giovanni a new and better life. This life could only be my own, which, in
 order to transform Giovanni's, must first **become a part of Giovanni's room.**

In the beginning, because the motives which led me to Giovanni's
 room were so mixed, **had so little to do with his hopes and desires,**
and were so deeply a part of my own desperation, I invented in
 myself a kind of pleasure in playing the housewife after Giovanni

had gone to work. I threw out the paper, the bottles, *the*
fantastic accumulation of trash; I examined
 the contents of the innumerable boxes and suitcases and
 disposed of them. But I am not a housewife — men never can be
 housewives. **And the pleasure was never real or deep,** though
 Giovanni smiled his humble, grateful smile and told me in as

many ways as he could find how wonderful *it would have*
me there, how *I stood,* with my love and my ingenuity,
between him and the dark.¹

¹ James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*, p. 93. (Part 2, Chapter 2)

So "[...] this shiver we sense is no longer human fear; this is cosmic fear, an anthropo-cosmic fear that echoes the great legend of man cast back into primitive situations."¹

A la porte de la maison qui viendra frapper?
Une porte ouverte on entre.
Une porte fermée un anstre.
Le monde bat de l'autre côté de ma porte.²

At the door of the house who will come knocking?
An open door we enter
A closed door, a den
The world/pulse beats beyond my door



¹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 23.

² Pierre Albert Biot, *Les Amusements d'Anatre*, p. 217.

UNCANNY SUBLIME

the sublime:

"the 'uncanny', characterized by the feeling of unsettling ambivalence, a kind of fear originating in what is known of old and long familiar things."¹

dark corridor
clutter and disorder
with dismay, with relief, and *breathing hard*
claustrophobic
odd
with the unstated desire to escape the room

something strained and painful in the quality of that silence

'I must find some poetic figure.' And he spread his heavy
fingers in the air, as though *a metaphor was tangible*

But it was not the room's disorder which was **frightening**; it was the fact that
when one began searching for the key to this disorder, one realized that
it was not to be found in any of the usual places. For this was not a
matter of habit or circumstance or temperament; it was a matter of

punishment and grief

I stared at the room with the same, nervous, calculating extension of the
intelligence and of all one's forces which occurs when gauging a mortal

and unavoidable *danger*

the *terrors* which encompassed Giovanni's *soul*
a kind of pleasure

¹ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*.

But in addition to the intimate value of verticality, a house in a big city lacks cosmicity. For here, where houses are no longer set in natural surroundings, the relationship between house and space becomes an artificial one. Every thing about it is mechanical and, on every side, intimate living flees. 'The streets are like pipes into which men are sucked up.' (Max Picard, *La fuite devant Dieu*, p. 119).¹

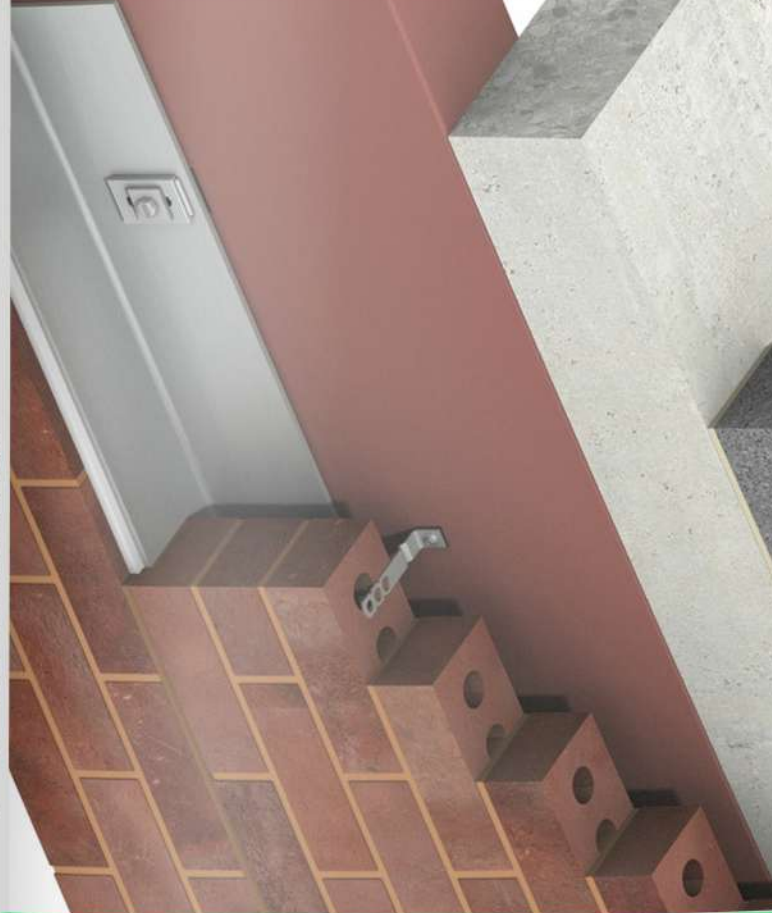
"When insomnia, which is the philosopher's ailment, is increased through irritation caused by city noises; or when, late at night, the hum of automobiles and trucks rumbling through the Place Maubert causes me to curse my city dweller's fate, I can recover my calm by living the metaphors of the ocean. We all know that the big city is a clamorous sea, and it has been said countless times that, in the heart of night in Paris, one hears the ceaseless murmur of flood and tide. So I make a sincere image out of these hackneyed ones, an image that is as much my own as though I myself had invented it, in line with my gentle mania for always believing that I am the subject of what I am thinking. If the hum of cars becomes more painful, I do my best to discover in it the roll of thunder, of a thunder that speaks to me and scolds me. And I feel sorry for myself. So there you are, unhappy philosopher, caught up again by the storm, by the storms of life! I dream an abstract-concrete daydream. My bed is a small boat lost at sea; that sudden whistling is the wind in the sails. On every side the air is filled with the sound of furious klaxoning. I talk to myself to give myself cheer: there now, your skiff is holding its own, you are safe in your stone boat. Sleep, in spite of the storm. Sleep in the storm. Sleep in your own courage, happy to be a man who is assailed by wind and wave.

And I fall asleep, lulled by the noise of Paris."²

¹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 26.

² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

In Paris there are no houses and the inhabitants of the big city live in superimposed boxes. 'One's Paris room, inside its four walls—wrote Paul Claudel—is a sort of geometrical site, a conventional hole, which we furnish with pictures, objects and wardrobes within a wardrobe.' (Paul Claudel, *Oiseau noir dans le soleil levant*, p. 144). The number of the street and the floor give the location of our 'conventional hole', but our abode has neither space around it nor verticality inside it. 'The houses are fastened to the ground with asphalt, in order not to sink into the earth.' (Max Picard, *La fuite devant Dieu*, p. 121). They have no roots and, what is quite unthinkable for a dreamer of houses, sky-scrapers have no cellars. From the street to the roof, the rooms pile up one on top of the other, while the tent of a horizonless sky encloses the entire city. But the height of city buildings is a purely exterior one. Elevators do away with the heroism of stair climbing so that there is no longer any virtue in living up near the sky. Home has become mere horizontality. The different rooms that compose living quarters jammed into one floor all lack one of the fundamental principles for distinguishing and classifying the values of intimacy.

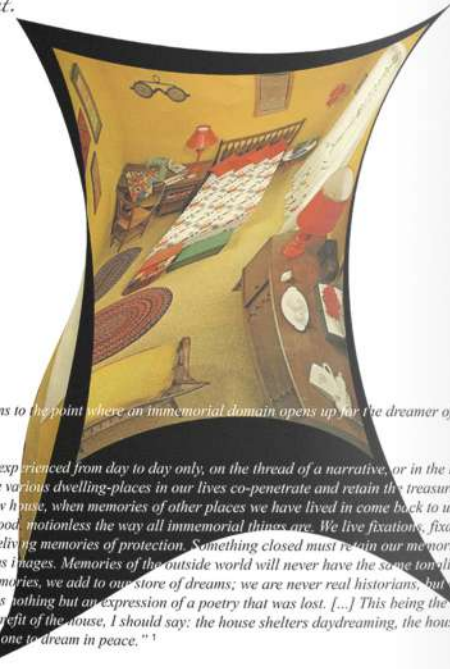


UNCANNY SUBLIME:

the daydream

day·dream /ˈdædri:m/

1. a series of pleasant thoughts that distract one's attention from the present.



"And the daydream deepens to the point where an immemorial domain opens up for the dreamer of a home beyond man's earliest memory.

"[...] Thus the house is not experienced from day to day only, on the thread of a narrative, or in the telling of our own story. Through dreams, the various dwelling-places in our lives co-penetrate and retain the treasures of former days. And after we are in the new house, when memories of other places we have lived in come back to us, we travel to the land of Motionless Childhood, motionless the way all immemorial things are. We live fixations, fixations of happiness. We comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection. Something closed must retain our memories, while leaving them their original value as images. Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home and, by recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams; we are never real historians, but always near poets, and our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost. [...] This being the case, if I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace."¹

"[...] the places in which we have experienced daydreaming reconstitute themselves in a new daydream, and it is because our memories of former dwelling-places are relived as daydreams that these dwelling-places of the past remain in us for all time."²

¹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 5.
² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

UNCANNY SUBLIME:

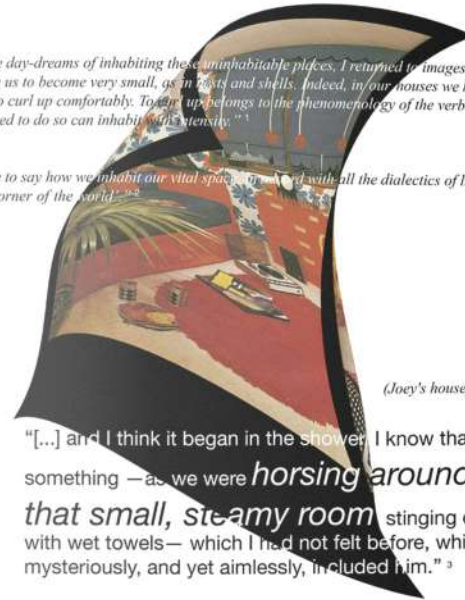
to inhabit

in·hab·it /ˈɪnhəbət/

1. (of a person, animal, or group)
live in or occupy (a place or environment).

"After having followed the day-dreams of inhabiting these uninhabitable places, I returned to images that, in order for us to live them, require us to become very small, as in nests and shells. Indeed, in our houses we have nooks and corners in which we like to curl up comfortably. To curl up belongs to the phenomenology of the verb to inhabit, and only those who have learned to do so can inhabit with intensity."¹

"We should therefore have to say how we inhabit our vital space, or deal with all the dialectics of life, how we take root, day after day, in a 'corner of the world.'"²



(Joey's house)

"[...] and I think it began in the shower. I know that I felt something — as we were **horsing around in that small, steamy room** — stinging each other with wet towels — which I had not felt before, which mysteriously, and yet aimlessly, included him."³

"And I realized that my heart was beating in an awful way and that Joey was trembling against me **and the light in the room was very bright and hot.**"⁴

¹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. xxxvii.

² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³ James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*, p. 6 (Part 1, Chapter 1).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8 (Part 1, Chapter 1).

about the communicability of the sublime (of the poetics of space)

"[...] drawers, chests and wardrobes. What psychology lies behind their locks and keys! They bear within themselves a kind of aesthetics of hidden things. To pave the way now for a phenomenology of what is hidden, one preliminary remark will suffice: an empty drawer is unimaginable. It can only be thought of. And for us, who must describe what we imagine before what we know, what we dream before what we verify, all wardrobes are full."

"Ultimately tautological and infinitely extensible, a description (like a riddle or allegory) knows no principle of structural closure or completion. It just goes on and on, coming to an end under the sign of an implicit 'etcetera', its never-ending declension of details creating a receding perspective of the whole."



"These virtues of shelter are so simple, so deeply rooted in our unconscious that they may be recaptured through mere mention, rather than through minute description. Here the nuance bespeaks the color."

"[...] For the real houses of memory, the houses to which we return in dreams, the houses that are rich in unalterable oneirism, do not readily lend themselves to description."

"[...] The first, the oneirically definitive house, must retain its shadows. For it belongs to the literature of depth, that is, to poetry, and not to the fluent type of literature that, in order to analyze intimacy, needs other people's stories. All I ought to say about my childhood home is just barely enough to place me, myself, in an oneiric situation, to set me on the threshold of a day-dream in which I shall find repose in the past. Then I may hope that my page will possess a sonority that will ring true a voice so remote within me, that it will be the voice we all hear when we listen as far back as memory reaches, on the very limits of memory, beyond memory perhaps, in the field of the immemorial. All we communicate to others is an orientation towards what is secret without ever being able to tell the secret objectively. What is secret never has total objectivity. In this respect, we orient oneirism but we do not accomplish it."

"What would be the use, for instance, in giving the plan of the room that was really my room, in describing the little room at the end of the garage, in saying that from the window across the indentations of the roofs, one could see the hill I alone, in my memories of another century, can open the deep cupboard that still retains for me alone that unique odor, the odor of raisins drying on a wicker tray. The odor of raisins! It is an odor that is beyond description, one that it takes a lot of imagination to smell. But I've already said too much. If I said more, the reader, back in his own room, would not open that unique wardrobe, with its unique smell which is the signature of intimacy."

"Paradoxically, in order to suggest the values of intimacy, we have to induce in the reader a state of suspended reading. For it is not until his eyes have left the page that recollections of my room can become a threshold of oneirism for him. And when it is a poet speaking, the reader's soul reverberates; it experiences the kind of reverberation that, as Muscovski has shown, gives the energy of an origin to being."

"It therefore makes sense from our standpoint of a philosophy of literature and poetry to say that we 'write a room', 'read a room', or 'read a house'. Thus, very quickly, at the very first word, at the first poetic overture, the reader who is 'reading a room' ceases off reading and starts to think of some place in his own past. You would like to tell everything about your room. You would like to interest the reader in yourself, whereas you have unlocked a door to daydreaming. The values of intimacy are so absorbing that the reader has ceased to read your room: he sees his own again."

1 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. xxxvi.

2 Richard Sieburth, *A Heap of Language: Robert Smithson and American Hieroglyphic*.

1 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 12.

PRISON.

"I walk up and down this house, up and down this house. **I think of prison.** Long ago, before I had ever met Giovanni, I met a man at a party at Jacques' house who was celebrated because he had spent half his life in prison. He had then written a book about it which displeased the prison authorities and won a literary prize. **But this man's life was over.** He was fond of saying that, since to be in prison was simply **not to live**, the death penalty was the only merciful verdict any jury could deliver. I remember thinking that, in effect, **he had never left prison. Prison was all that was real to him;** he could speak of nothing else. All his movements, even to the lighting of a cigarette, were stealthy, **wherever his eyes focused one saw a wall rise up.**

His face, the color of his face, brought to mind

darkness and dampness, I felt that if one cut him, his flesh would be **the flesh of mushrooms**. And he described to us in **avid, nostalgic detail**

nes-tal'jia /nɪ'stælʒə, nɒ'stælʒə/

1. a sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past.

the barred windows, the barred doors, the judas, the guards standing at *far ends of corridors, under the light*. It is three tiers high inside the prison and everything is the color of *gunmetal*. **Everything is dark and cold**, except for those patches of light, where authority stands. **There is on the air perpetually the memory of fists against the metal, a dull, booming tom-tom possibility, like the possibility of madness.**

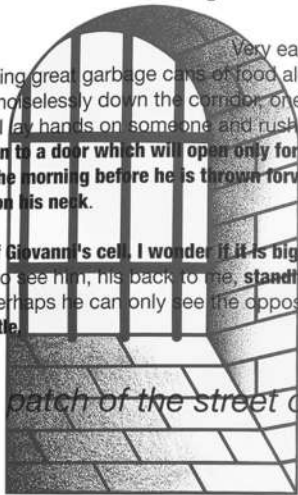
The guards move and mutter and pace the corridors and boom dully up and down the stairs. They are in black, they carry guns, they are always afraid, they scarcely dare be kind. Three tiers down, in the prison's center, in the prison's great, cold heart, there is always

activity: trusted prisoners wheeling things about, going in and out of the offices, ingratiating themselves with the guards for privileges of cigarettes, alcohol, and sex. **The night deepens** in the prison, there is muttering everywhere, and everybody knows —somehow, *that death will be entering the prison courtyard early in the morning.*

Very early in the morning, before the trusties begin wheeling great garbage cans of food along the corridors, three men in black will come noiselessly down the corridor, one of them will turn the key in the lock. They will lay hands on someone and rush him down the corridor, first to the priest and then to a door which will open only for him, which will allow him, perhaps, one glimpse of the morning before he is thrown forward on his belly on a board and the knife falls on his neck.

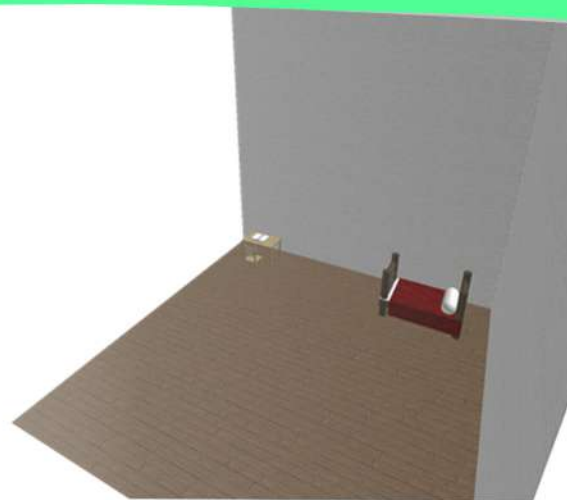
I wonder about the size of Giovanni's cell, I wonder if it is bigger than his room. I know that it is colder. [...] I try to see him, his back to me, standing at the window of his cell. From where he is perhaps he can only see the opposite wing of the prison; perhaps, by straining a little,

just over the high wall, a patch of the street outside."



1 James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*, p. 121. (Part 2, Chapter 3)

2 *Prison Window* by Duncan X.



"He was silent for a long while. Then: 'You do, sometimes, remind me of the kind of man who is tempted to put himself in prison in order to avoid being hit by a car.' 'That —I said, sharply— would seem to apply much more to you than to me.' 'What do you mean?', he asked. 'I'm talking about that room,

that hideous room. Why have you buried yourself there so long?'

'Buried myself? Forgive me, *mon cher Américain*, but **Paris is not like New York**; it is not full of **palaces** for boys like me. Do you think I should be living in Versailles instead?' 'There must, there must —I said— be other rooms.' '*Ca ne manque pas, les chambres.* **The world is full of rooms, big rooms, little rooms, round rooms, square ones, rooms high up, rooms low down, all kinds of rooms!** What kind of room do you think Giovanni should be living in? How long do you think it took me to find the room I have? And since when, since when —he stopped and beat with his forefinger on my chest— **have you so hated the room?** Since when? Since yesterday, since always? *Dis-moi.*' Facing him, I faltered: 'I don't hate it. I, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings.' His hands dropped to his sides. His eyes grew big. He laughed. 'Hurt my feelings! Am I now a stranger that you speak to me like that, **with such an American politeness?**' 'All I mean, baby, is that **I wish we could move.**' 'We can move. Tomorrow! Let us go to a hotel. Is that what you want? *Le Crillon peut-être?*' I sighed, speechless, and we started walking again. 'I know —he burst out, after a moment— I know! **You want to leave Paris, you want to leave the room,** ah! You are wicked. *Comme tu es méchant!*' 'You misunderstand me.', I said. 'You misunderstand me.'" 1

1 James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*, p. 126. (Part 2, Chapter 3)

ABOUT GIOVANNI'S VILLAGE IN ITALY

"I have told you about my village? It is very **old** and in the south, it is **on a hill**. At night, when we walked by the wall, **the world seemed to fall down before us, the whole, far-off, dirty world. I did not ever want to see it.** Once we made love under the wall. Yes, I wanted to stay there forever and eat much spaghetti and drink much wine and make many babies and grow fat. You would not have liked me if I had stayed. I can see you, many years from now, coming through our village in the ugly, fat, American motor car you will surely have by then and looking at me and looking at all of us and tasting our wine and shitting on us with those empty smiles Americans wear everywhere and which you wear all the time and driving off with a great roar of the motors and a great sound of tires **and telling all the other Americans you meet that they must come and see our village because it is so**

picturesque. And you will have no idea of the life there, *dripping and bursting and beautiful and terrible*, as you have no idea of my life now. But I think I would have been happier there and I would not have minded your smiles. I would have had my life. I have lain here many nights, waiting for you to come home, and thought **how far away is my village and how terrible it is to be in this cold city, among people whom I hate, where it is cold and wet and never dry and hot as it was there,** and where Giovanni has no one to talk to, and no one to be with, and where he has found a lover who is neither man nor woman, nothing that I can know or touch."¹

"I left my village **one wild, sweet day.** I will never forget that day. **It was the day of my death,** I wish it had been the day of my death. I remember **the sun was hot and scratchy on the back of my neck as I walked the road away from my village and the road went upward and I walked bent over.** I remember everything, *the brown dust at my feet, and the little pebbles which rushed before me, and the short trees along the road and all the flat houses and all their colors under the sun.*"²

¹ James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*, p. 149. (Part 2, Chapter 4)

² *Ibid.*, p. 150. (Part 2, Chapter 4)

refuge /refuʒ/;refuʒZH/

1. a condition of being safe or sheltered from pursuit, danger, or trouble.

precarious /pre'keəriəs/

1. of the not securely held or in position; dangerously likely to fall or collapse.

"The hut can receive none of the riches 'of this world'. It possesses the felicity of intense poverty; indeed, it is one of the glories of poverty; as destitution increases it gives us access to absolute refuge."¹

¹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 33.

² Drawings from *The Poet to Home* by Fred Lynch.

³ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 32.

"And because of this very primitiveness, restored, desired and experienced through simple images, an album of pictures of huts would constitute a textbook of simple exercises for the phenomenology of the imagination."¹



ABOUT PARIS TO DAVID AFTER GIOVANNI.

"The days that followed seemed to fly. It seemed to turn **cold overnight**. The tourists in their thousands disappeared, conjured away by timetables. When one walked through the gardens, **leaves fell about one's head and sighed and crashed**

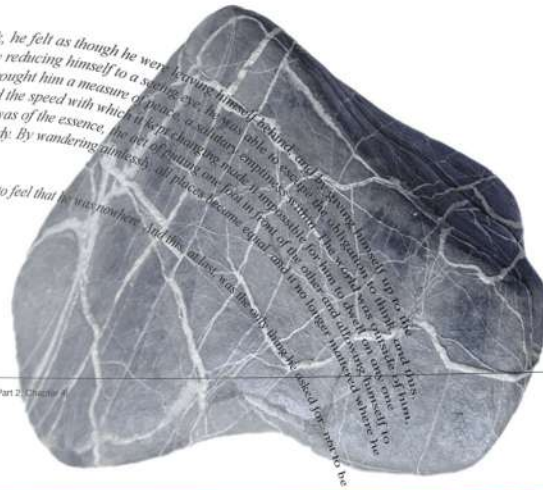
beneath one's feet. *The stone of the city*, which had been **luminous and changing**, faded slowly, but with no hesitation, into simple **grey stone** again. It was

apparent that *the stone was hard*. Daily, fishermen disappeared from the river until, one day, the river banks were clear. The bodies of young boys and girls began to be compromised by heavy underwear, by sweaters and mufflers,

hoods and capes. **Old men seemed older, old women slower.** *The colors on the river faded*, the rain began, and the river began to rise. **It was apparent that the sun would soon give up the tremendous struggle it cost her to get to Paris for a few hours every day.**" ¹

"Each time he took a walk, he felt as though he were leaving himself up to the movement of the streets, by reducing himself to a single eye. He was able to see more than anything else, brought him a measure of peace, a variation, emptiness, which he was able to feel in front of the colors and all things, where he followed for very long. Motion was of the essence, the act of seeing one foot in place became equal and two larger, multiplied, where he follow the drift of his own body. By wandering aimlessly, all places became equal, for not to be was.

On his best walks, he was able to feel that he was nowhere. And this, indeed, was the only hope he could find, anywhere." ²



¹ James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*, p. 156, (Part 2, Chapter 4)

² Paul Auster, *City of Glass*.

*"And so, faced with these periods of solitude, the topoanalyst starts to ask questions: Was the room a large one? Was the garret cluttered up? Was the nook warm? How was it lighted? How, too, in these fragments of space, did the human being achieve silence? How did he relish the very special silence of the various retreats of solitary day dreaming?"*¹

*"At times we think we know ourselves in time, when all we know is a sequence of fixations in the spaces of the being's stability—a being who does not want to melt away, and who, even in the past, when he sets out in search of things past, wants time to 'suspend' its flight. In its countless alveoli space contains compressed time. That is what space is for."*²

¹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 9.

² *Ibid.*, p. 8.



"We lived in Brooklyn then, as I say; we had also lived in San Francisco, where my mother lies buried, and we lived for awhile in Seattle, and then in New York — for me New York is Manhattan. Later on, then, we moved from Brooklyn back to New York and by the time I came to France my father and his new wife has graduated to Connecticut."¹



HOME

"[...] there is ground for taking the house as a tool for analysis of the human soul. With the help of this tool, can we not find within ourselves, while dreaming in our own modest homes, the consolations of the cave? Are the towers of our souls razed for all time? Are we to remain, to quote Gerard de Nerval's famous line, beings whose 'towers have been destroyed'? Not only our memories, but the things we have forgotten are 'housed'. Our soul is an abode. And by remembering 'houses' and 'rooms', learn to 'abide' within ourselves. Now everything becomes clear: the house images move in both directions: they are in us as much as we are in them [...]"¹

abide /əˈbaɪd/

3. (of a feeling or a memory) continue without fading or being lost.

synonyms: continue, remain, survive, last, persist, stay, live on

'the memory of our parting will abide'

antonyms: fade, disappear

archaic: live, dwell



¹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. xxxvii.

² *Yellow House with Apple Tree* (1910) by Gabriele Münter.

"I was thinking, no doubt, of our nights in bed, **of the peculiar innocence and confidence, which will never come again**, which has made those nights **so delightful, so unrelated to past, present, or anything to come, so unrelated, finally, to my life** since it was not necessary for me to take any but the most mechanical responsibility for them."²

"I looked out into **the narrow street, this strange, crooked corner where we sat**, which was **brazen now with the sunlight and heavy with people** — people I would never understand. **I ached abruptly, intolerably, with a longing to go home**; not to that hotel, in one of the alleys of Paris, where the concierge barred the way with my unpaid bill; but home, **home across the ocean, to things and people I knew and understood; to those things, those places, those people which I would always, helplessly, and in whatever bitterness of spirit, love above all else**. I had never realized such a sentiment in myself before, and **it frightened me**

I saw myself, sharply, as a wanderer, an adventurer, rocking through the world, **unanchored**. I looked at Giovanni's face, which did not help me. He belonged to this strange city, **which did not belong to me.**"³

1. James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*, p. 110 (Part 1, Chapter 2).
2. *Ibid.*, p. 5 (Part 1, Chapter 1).
3. *Ibid.*, p. 112 (Part 1, Chapter 2).

about a sailor by the American Express Office:

"He seemed, somehow, **younger than I had ever been**, and blonder and more beautiful, and he wore his masculinity as unequivocally as he wore his skin. He made me think of home — **perhaps home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition.**"¹

ir·rev·o·ca·ble /ɪrɪˈvɒkəb(ə)l/

1. not able to be changed, reversed, or recovered; final.

synonyms: irreversible, unalterable, unchangeable, immutable, final, binding, permanent, carved in stone; peremptory



"Yet it was true, I recalled, turning away from the river down the long street home, **I wanted children. I wanted to be inside again**, with the **light**

and **safety**, with my manhood unquestioned, watching my woman put my children to bed. I wanted **the same bed at night and the same arms** and I wanted to rise in the morning, knowing where I was. I wanted a woman to be for me **a steady**

ground, like the earth itself, where I could always be **renewed**. It had been so once; it had almost been so once. I could make it so again, I could make it real.

It only demanded a short, hard strength for me to become myself again."²

1. James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*, p. 100 (Part 2, Chapter 2).
2. *Ibid.*, p. 112 (Part 2, Chapter 2).

"Life begins well, it begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of a 'home.'"²

"When we dream of the home we were born, in the utmost depths of reverie, we participate in this original warmth, in this well-tempered matter of the material paradise. This is the environment in which the protective beings live. We shall come back to the maternal features of the home. For the moment, I should like to point out the original fullness of the home's being. Our daydreams carry us back to it. And the poet well knows that the home holds childhood motionless 'in its arms':"²

Maison, pan de prairie, ô lumière du soir
Soudain vous acquérez presque une face humaine
Vous êtes près de nous, embrassants, embrassés.³

Home, patch of meadow, oh evening light
Suddenly you acquire the almost human face
You are very near us, embracing and embraced.



Would you rather go to Italy? Would you rather visit your home?' He
said. 'I do not think I have a home there anymore. And then: 'No. I would
rather go to Italy, perhaps, after all, for the same reason you do not
want to go to the United States.' 'But I am going to the United States.', I
said quickly. And he looked at me. 'I mean, I'm certainly going to go back
one of these days.' 'One of these days.', he said. 'Everything bad will
happen in one of these days.' 'Why is it bad?' He smiled, 'Why? You will go
there and then you will find that home is not home anymore. Then you will
be in trouble. **As long as you stay here, you can always think: One day I
will go home.**' He played with my thumb and grinned. 'N'est-ce pas?'
I said. 'You mean I have a home to go to as long as I don't go
there?' He laughed. 'Well, isn't it true? *You don't have a home
until you leave it and, then, when you
leave it, you never can go back.*'"¹



¹ Some substitutions have been made for Bachelard's citations: every 'home' originally appeared as 'house'.
² Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 7.
³ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Les Lettres*, p. 11.

¹ James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*, p. 126. (Part 2, Chapter 3)



EXECUTION: *THE SUBLIME AS TERROR.*

"Joseph Addison embarked on the Grand Tour in 1699 and commented in 'Remarks on Several Parts of Italy' that 'The Alps fill the mind with an agreeable kind of terror'. The significance of Addison's concept of the sublime is that the three pleasures of the imagination that he identified: greatness, uncommonness, and beauty, 'arise from visible objects'—that is, from sight rather than from rhetoric. It is also notable that in writing on the 'Sublime in external Nature' he does not use the term 'sublime' but uses semi-synonymous terms: 'unbounded', 'unlimited', 'spacious', 'greatness', and on occasion terms denoting excess.

[...] Kant—keeping this line—held that the sublime was of three kinds: the noble, the splendid, and the terrifying."¹

"The experience of the sublime involves a self-forgetfulness where personal fear is replaced by a sense of well-being and security when confronted with an object exhibiting superior might, and is similar to the experience of the tragic. The 'tragic consciousness' is the capacity to gain an exalted state of consciousness from the realization of the unavoidable suffering destined for all men and that there are oppositions in life that can never be resolved, most notably that of the 'forgiving generosity of deity' subsumed to 'inexorable fate'."¹

¹ Sublime, Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia

"Outside my window the horizon begins to lighten, turning the grey sky a purplish blue.

I have packed my bags and I have cleaned the house. The keys to the house are on the table before me. I have only to change my clothes. When the horizon has become a little lighter the bus which will take me to town, to the station, to the

train which will take me to Paris, will appear at the bend of the highway. Still, I

cannot move. On the table, also, is a small, blue envelope, the note from Jacques informing me of the date of Giovanni's execution. I pour myself a very little drink, **watching, in the window pane, my reflection, which steadily becomes more faint.** I seem to be fading away before my eyes — this fancy amuses me, and I laugh to myself.

It should be now that gates are opening before Giovanni and clanging shut behind him, never, for him, to be opened or shut anymore. Or perhaps it is already over. Perhaps it is only beginning. Perhaps he still sits in his cell, **watching, with me, the arrival of the morning.** Perhaps now there are **whispers at the end of the corridor,** three heavy men in black taking off their shoes, one of them holding the ring of keys, all of the prison **silent, waiting, charged with dread.** Three tiers down, **the activity on the stone floor has become silent, is suspended, someone lights a cigarette. Will he die alone?** I do not know if death, in this country, is a solitary or a mass-produced affair. And what will he say to the priest?

Take off your clothes — something tells me — it's getting late. I walk into the bedroom where the clothes I will wear are lying on the bed and my bag lies open and ready. I begin to undress. There is a mirror in this room, a large mirror. I am

terribly aware of the mirror. Giovanni's face swings before me like an **unexpected lantern on a dark, dark night.** His eyes, his eyes, they glow like a tiger's eyes, they stare straight out, watching the approach of his last enemy: the hair of his flesh stands up. I cannot read what is in his eyes: **if it is terror, then I have never seen terror, if it is anguish, then anguish has never laid hands on me.** Now they approach, now the key turns in the lock, now they have him. He cries out once. They look at him from far away. They pull him to the door of his cell, the corridor stretches before him like the graveyard of his past, the prison spins

around him. Perhaps he begins to **MOAN,** perhaps he makes **no sound.** **The journey begins.** Or, perhaps, when he cries out, he does not stop crying; perhaps his voice is crying now, **in all that stone and iron.** I see his legs buckle, his thighs jelly, the buttocks quiver, the secret hammer there begins to knock. **He is sweating, or he is dry: They drag him, or he walks.** Their grip is terrible, his arms are not his own any more.

Down that long corridor, down those metal stairs, into the heart of the prison and out of it, into the office of the priest. He kneels. A candle burns, the Virgin watches him.

Mary, blessed mother of God, dull and white and dry. I see it in

Mary, blessed mother of God, they lift Giovanni. **The journey begins.** They move off, **toward another**

My own hands are clammy, my body is **dull and white and dry.** I see it in the mirror, **out of the corner of my eye.**

He kisses the cross and clings to it. The priest gently lifts the cross away. Then they let him pause for a moment to urinate — all that, in a moment, will take care of itself. **He knows that beyond the door which comes so deliberately closer, the knife**

is waiting. That door is the gateway he has sought so long out of this dirty world, this dirty body.

It's getting late. The body in the mirror forces me to turn and face it. And I look at my body, **which is under sentence of death. It is lean, hard, and cold, the incarnation of a mystery. And I do not know what moves in this body, what this body is searching for.** When I

trapped in my mirror as it is trapped in time and it hurries toward revelation. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. I long to make this prophecy come true. I long to crack that mirror and be free. I look at my sex, my troubling sex, and wonder how it can be redeemed, how I can save it from the knife. **The journey to the grave is already begun, the journey to corruption is, always, already, half over.** Yet, the key to my salvation, which cannot save my body, is hidden in my flesh.

Then the door is before him. There is darkness all around him, there is silence in him. Then the door opens and he stands alone, the whole world falling away from him.

And the brief corner of the sky seems to be shrieking, though he does not hear a sound. Then the earth tilts, he is thrown forward on his face in darkness, and his journey begins.

I move at last from the mirror and begin to cover that nakedness which I must hold sacred, though it be never so vile, which must be scoured perpetually with the salt of my life. I must believe, I must believe, that the heavy grace of God, which has brought me to this place, is all that can carry me out of it. And at last I step out into the morning and I lock the door behind me. I cross the road and drop the keys into the old lady's mailbox. And I look up the road, where a few people stand, men and women, waiting for the morning bus. They are very vivid beneath the awakening sky, and the horizon beyond them is beginning to flame. The morning weighs on my shoulders with the dreadful weight of hope and I take the blue envelope which Jacques has sent me and tear it shakily into many pieces, watching them dance in the wind, watching the wind carry them away. Yet, as I turn and begin walking toward the waiting people, the wind blows some of them back on me."¹



¹ James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*, p. 179. (Part 2, Chapter 5)



"Now it's now. And now, it's now. See?
[...] And now, it's now. And now, it's now.
Now is now. And now is now. And now is
now. So that's time. But what about
space? Because they're always together,
so now we're here. And a while ago, we
were somewhere, but soon we'll be there,
because now we're here. And now we're
here. And now we're here. And now we're
here. And we will be there. And now is
here. And now is here. And now is here.
And now."¹

¹ *Embers* (2015), (movie)

