

EXTRACT: PAUL BECKER

What are they tattoos of?

They are drawn in detail, she says, and they seem to illustrate a series of images and scenes, perhaps interconnected, perhaps not. The woman we follow moves closer, runs her eye over each image then begins again with the tattoo on the left-hand figure's stomach. The image on the stomach is of an animal, a dog or a wolf, looking into the corner of a room, there is a drawing or painting on the wall. Almost a mirroring of the woman and the room we are in, a kind of *mise en abyme*. The tattoo would form itself into a real image.

We would see the animal's point of view?

Somehow, yes. The space we see would become real. Everything would become real and no longer tattooed. The animal would be concentrating: carefully watching the corner of the empty room.

That makes it sound more like a cat...

Certainly it is observant though it has no notion of what it is that it observes or why it guards the empty corner. Somehow it should be possible to inhabit the thoughts of this animal, inhabit its interior; follow the passage of blood through its body, while all the while its cells are thickening, contracting, binding, coupling, uncoupling. It yawns, pauses for a moment to lick a paw, claws drawn and then gives up its vigil. It begins a circumspect circuiting of the room. Its thoughts or feelings, whatever you want to call them, whatever elements they contain, they must be hard, cut sharp. It stops in

front of another painting, honing, eyes dab up and down, side to side. Then it waits again and watches. A single painted image in a room otherwise bare, a figure of sorts at this odd angle facing a white streak of indeterminate origins and attached to or settled upon the grey-formed edge of that from which the rest emerges. The wolf eyes it closer. Perhaps or possibly a trunk of tree, perhaps or possibly a trunk or torso, white sinew, intestine, muscle exposed benignly, painlessly to the air. A figure emerges as a kind of growth, a sprouting into space like a cosmic tumour. Closer still. Is that even a nose? (Imagine, at this, the wolf's teeth bared for an instant.) The figure or whatever it is in the painting has a neutral expression; it is quite placid, imperturbable, forever absent, emerging indefinitely, as long as the tree or torso remains. A painting of some benevolent parasite. The animal's eyes consider it, this, *it*, perhaps listening for the answering signs inside itself. Perhaps it does hear a response, something back within the deepest aspect of its brain. Distracted by an audible click, a deathwatch tap inside the joinery, behind the wainscoting. The animal goes back the way it came, looks around the rooms at the other images waiting silently for nothing, petitioning nothing. For now, it turns slowly, stretches and yawns and sits against the foot of the wall.