

In the hotel lobby in La Grange, Kentucky
the front desk clerk stuffs his handgun
down the back of his pants,
checks us out of our room
and wishes us good morning.
We are driving down
to Panama City Beach
to watch the waves become horizon,
though secretly I wish
we were visiting Key West,
froth of islands at the mouth of the gulf
where Bishop composed and Hemingway
drank and fought, where Wallace Stevens
stared out at the water until he forgot
about whatever insurance claims
needed filing in Hartford.
I like to imagine them tracing
the clouds with their eyes
all the way down to the water,
revising phrases in their heads.

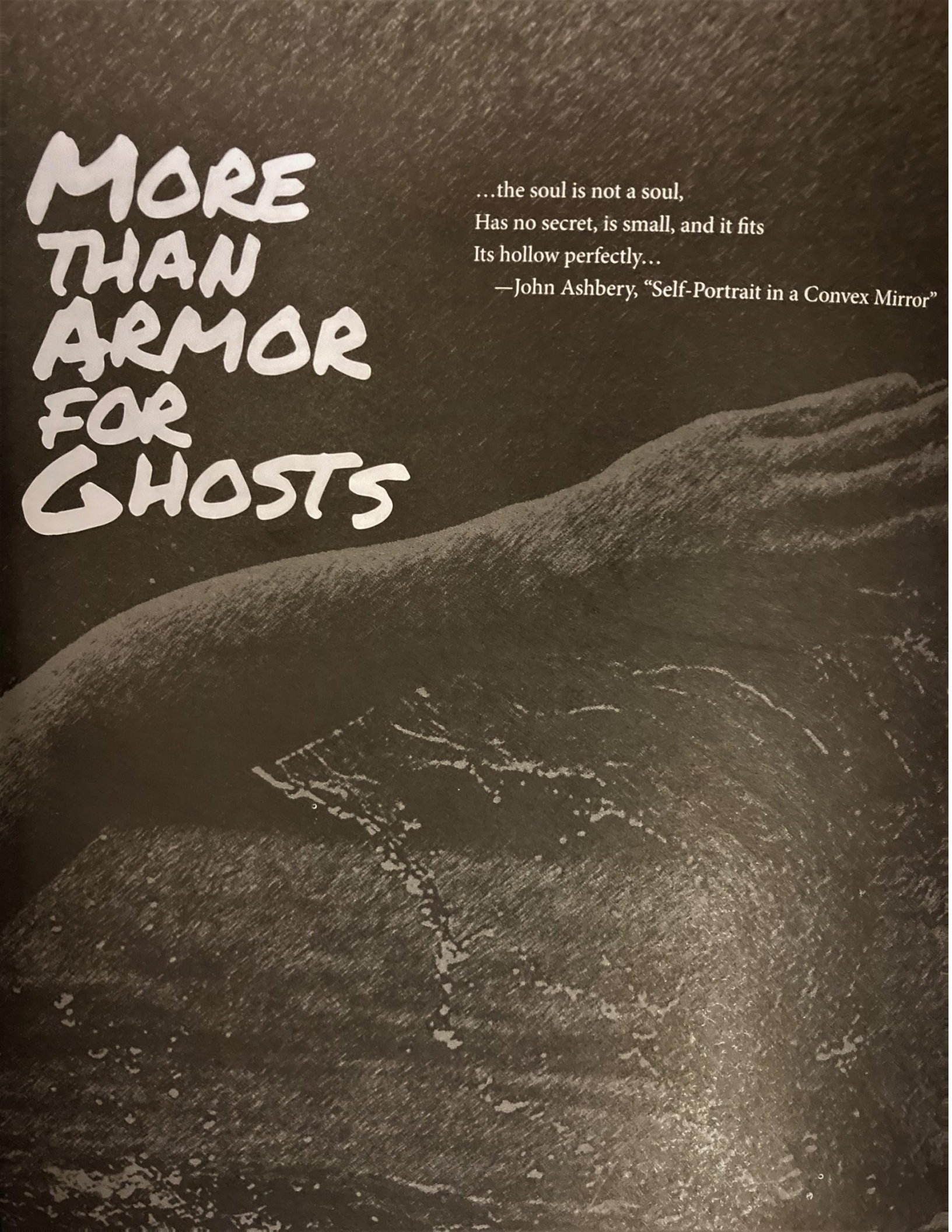
In the radiant heat
shreds of tire accumulate
like black lint on the interstate.
Along the roadside
dead armadillos lie
on their backs like large insects,
legs in the windless air.

In Luverne, Alabama, a woman
crosses the intersection on a riding mower.
Seniors scratch lottery tickets
at folding tables in the gas station.
The road we travel on
was named after a war
fought against an emotion.
Perhaps as long as it is felt
we have not won.
They stopped jailing poets

a long time ago. Even so,
the wars that most need fighting
use words as weapons—
our brief journeys enumerated.
I want to visit Key West
and order a drink on the beach,
near the ocean that pins us
to these sunny coasts
and search for a word to match
the color of the light,
to match the hope we share
by virtue of existing
for what happens
and for what does not happen
to take a recognizable shape, like staring
at a pattern in the clouds until
there are no clouds, only pattern.

In the meantime let the record state
that in Panama City Beach
as the afternoon wore late
the filtered sunlight streamed down
and turned the white
seashells to silver dollars,
a rich man's pocket
emptied centuries ago,
to shards of chain mail,
the beach a memory of some bloody battle
whose history the obdurate waves
erase and erase and rewrite.
Where the water meets the land
and all conversations begin to end
I joined the dissipating throng
as tourists wrapped in sarongs
folded up their chairs
and stumbled in threes and in pairs
up the gentle sand
back into the good night.





MORE THAN ARMOR FOR GHOSTS

...the soul is not a soul,
Has no secret, is small, and it fits
Its hollow perfectly...

—John Ashbery, "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror"

On one of his regular visits to the suburbs
he watches his granddaughter, barely three—
acquisitive, delighted, imperious, intent—
roaming her little world. Who she is, he decides,
has been decided more than it will be
by any history. At seventy,
bespectacled, disheveled, he
drinks his admiring juniors under tables,
plays squash for hours nearly undiminished,
delivers lectures on free will in Schiller,
stays out conversing until the wee hours.
Between them is the proof: to feel an age is fiction.
Years add to some placeholder just adjacent
to identity.

But all the troubled ways this means
spell trouble to the body. Before she died
he told his wife his great regret:
that all their lives together he had been,
beneath the talk, the touch, deep-knit
togetherness, still separate, still alone in some
pure way he could, beyond his senses, nearly taste—
a separation clear, appalling, true.
Reduced by then to whispers, she had whispered
as he leaned over the bed that every life
is filled all through its passing with its own
absolute privacy, distinct, inviolable.
It is the point we start from. We struggle, poor
swimmers from birth, toward a shore
of waving others, learning
to fling our arms just so,
to push through water to some more
tactile reprieve. This takes a life, she said,
and still is never so complete it needs
no doing. Something in us resists
what the main part hungers after—the other, yes,
but even too the self: some core unreachable
by all attempts to know: ageless, untouched,
touching only the nameless deep it seeks.

Now he wonders, watching his granddaughter
parade from room to room in her red jumper,
what these ruptures render us. Merely nomads,
maybe, guests unsuited to the foreign homes
we roam, or ghosts in flesh-hued coats
witnessing shrouded shapes shimmer and flare
from behind high windows.

He sips his coffee,
rich, bitter, opaque—and thinks that if
somewhere in some small unkempt nook
what we call the soul sits bored or half-awake
or doing crossword puzzles, it must dream
of its own lost body, the self that was itself.
Were one to lure it out, it would look askance,
embarrassed to have been so much discussed,
so little seen. Dimly recalling higher places,
burdens laid and lifted, it might turn to be
most wakened by this three-year-old in pigtails,
arranging her plush bears in rows,
crouched forward on her heels in singsong recitation
of a story not even she knows.

—TIM DEJONG