**Badwater**

Philip Cioffari

Illusions abound here—

282 feet below sea level, the hemisphere’s lowest point:

the lake-like shimmer of the flats,

the false snow of rock salt and gypsum.

Only the salt pool’s reflection seems real—

the blue-grey stillness of the Panamints upside down

on the valley floor—and the isolation,

the two of us crossing the crusty hardpan,

hushed by unearthly silence, distance,

by what we see, or think we see.

But even here in Death’s valley, life adapts—

this small pool of water, nearly dry to the touch,

home for the bronze beetle

and the wiggling larvae of the soldier fly,

for ravens and ditch grass and pickleweed.

It is we who feel homeless, adrift

as dusk’s shifting blue.

Against a beauty so bleak I believe

I see us in the clearest light:

neither of us the kind

to settle down or be content

with what’s within our reach—

each mirage a temptation,

each new passion a risk worth taking.

Which is the greater illusion:

to treasure what we have,

or what we want?

At full-dark we marvel at the sky,

the infinity of light and wonder

only a desert night reveals,

and make love on the hard sand.

After, in the loose fit of each other’s arms,

we stare at that mysterious salt pool,

blacker than the sky it reflects,

stalled in its limbo of fallen stars.