

1.

If you see clean, smooth grooves in Death Valley you will know that a possessed boulder has recently passed through. The Sailing Stones are massive bodies of dolomite and syenite; Over immeasurable stretches of time, they glide in different directions without intervention, leaving long tracks in the desert floor visible even to airplanes flying far overhead. The force that pushes the rocks, or the speed at which they travel, is unknown. The impressions left in their wake, deep and even, are the reasons that earth scientists recognized them to be traveling at all. They are monumental agents, mute and persistent.

I sought to write about absence, mourning, about abstraction, the suchness of a thing; These ideas were never intended metaphorically, but now they cannot be anything else. I will write a detective story in the tradition of Raymond Chandler or Agatha Christie, both admired for their productivity in a genre that is a search for things gone missing. There are two rules I once heard for writing an effective short story, mystery or otherwise: 1) show, don't tell; 2) create a character who is in need of something.

Here is a detective story I wrote about Sailing Stones in the six-word, penetratingly blank style of Ernest Hemingway: Despite prior impression, subject appears still. Better yet: Shadowless objects defy cause and effect.

2.

There are many classifications of metaphor: mixed metaphor, root metaphor, cognitive metaphor, submerged metaphor, destructive metaphor, therapeutic metaphor, frozen metaphor. In absolute metaphors, light is truth; Conceptual metaphors conceive of life as a journey; And in an extended metaphor, all the world's a stage. But best of all is the dead metaphor, in which a metaphor is not understood to be in use at all. Its "death" is the result of having been applied too many times, its meaning progressively worn dull in the process. Falling in love is such a metaphor, as is being turned on. Managing to be both ubiquitous and extinct within language – and while avoiding metonymy – a dead metaphor is invisible (though never empty) precisely because of its effectiveness to describe and personify, making it arguably the most alive of all; the opposite of a dead language, buried by a lack of practical application. This promise: Assigning an article (the tenor) to describe a feeling (the vehicle) so astutely that they might one day bleed into each other is quite moving, and strikes me as a profound achievement of rhetorical expression and its capacity for emotional understanding.

This comes as a relief: Metaphor does not prevent us from seeking “true” recognition but rather acknowledges our experiences to be relative and conditional, and thereby unable to be “found” in the first place. It yields while resisting, an ontological tool that provokes connection by acknowledging the very limits of its threshold. Have you ever pretended to be blind in private? The desire to attempt whole awareness of our surroundings through partial experience is not dissimilar. In the moment of willed blindness, we enact the amputated condition of metaphor itself.

3.

My mystery story is a psychological thriller in which the protagonist seeks a lost photograph that will presumably afford him his true identity after a recent trauma has dislodged his memory. I demonstrate his yearning in steely prose, unfolding and refolding it piece by piece. The story splits cleanly on the second page: multiple versions of the narrator travel to different landscapes in search of the same clue. Though the narratives diverge, in each he encounters a shadowy foil and falls madly in love with different women, having the kind of sex that allows him to momentarily see in black and white. He never relents, but is always deflected. In the end the main character encounters the clue. It was directly behind him the whole time like his own shadow in natural light.

*Je est un autre / I am someone else.* Rimbaud wrote this line when he was a teenager. Translated by Lydia Davis, it qualifies as an intimate metaphor, which is to say the words are poignantly stated but economical in means. I believe in its tightness. Can you imagine exercising such overflowing restraint?