

PIETÀ

BY JOHN BARTON

*after George Platt Lynes' Marsden Hartley,
vintage silver print, 1943*

cold casts shade from us, penumbras immenser than we are, doubling us against the blankness of any wall we turn to locate behind us, our cast off doubles as they grow coupling us, coupling with us, ever calmer inside the changing frames we hope changing walls will tender us, Hartley two years shy of Pearl Harbour and the winter before he died, borrowing a tiny studio I sublet next to mine, to sleep and paint in when desire lured him to a flamboyant New York of mislaid youth (and a prostrate imagination) from Maine grey landscapes it snowed into his pensive eyes dissonance on Madison Avenue horning by him a soundscape he'd abstract, make silent, canvas a window with the shades drawn, palette turned private, dark and light a cipher to puzzling grief and joy, his paintings time capsules, and I loved what our apartness and fellow feeling echoed when drunk nomadic talk reconnoitred the last war, his war, and the German officer he had lost the picture plane his mourning sized to more than human scale not of a bloodied, unwashed body aloof as Carrara marble betraying likeness and a love, but in black distemper, a whitewash of patchwork symbols he liked to have warmed the coffin with, if how we're barred had let him

—chinstraps and epaulets, an Iron Cross, brave buttons longing to be unbuttoned, his man's age an acrostic of 2s and 4s billowed into illegible unconsummated folds of wind-roused colours his cavalry carried into battle—Marsden stuck sitting old-man old under my lights, face chalk above an alert bowtie and dated three-piece suit beaten eyes trained to brood past my shoulder knees wide in a canvas chair with arms he'd rest his own on, head rocking forward into a hand propped up, when asked, to hold it still, at sea in thought, cigarette half-mast, the mouth shut as I tried my settings, studio void of bric-à-brac the nimbus I wished to kiss about him a silvered evanescence above shoulders registered in dusk the slender man he'd once been I had him cast colossal and shadowy as cautions none ignore astringency of love not to be regained, my war ongoing, my AWOL assistant like his lieutenant killed far too early in a sortie, fleeing my lust for men he wore till it fit him not—on my skin his exposure an afterimage—blurry ambulance he drove blitzed by the Luftwaffe at El Alamein my lens in drilled, dry-eyed focus on this dazed confrère awaiting insight's flash, asked to look abstracted, but aching to invoke the young man in sombre civilian dress I posed unlit on his left a few feet back, a pietà we each longed to drape unwounded on our laps but could not, the same age, both of us, when they would die without us