

Alvin Coffey

—California, 1849

E. Hughes

“The pro-slavery element...of [the Fugitive Slave Law]...enabled them to bring their slaves into the State, work with them in the mines, and return to the south and back to slavery with their Negroes”

—Delilah L. Beasley

We walked a blighted trail in the late of summer
despite the indigo dead littering the path.
Mr. Duvall, my ailing master rode horseback
while I walked beside, sure to maintain pace
through prairie, through the arid Great Basin
then over the granite Sierra Nevada.
The paradox of life struck me on that expedition—
the way tragedy could arrange itself beside
the glory of a meadow of marigolds and zinnia
so perfectly ocher the field seemed engulfed
by flame; within the burn, a woman and child taken
by cholera and dehydration, leaning and vanishing
in the shadow of an overturned wagon—. How I pleaded
with the gods that I be seized too by the splendors
of demise, its power to alleviate me of this prevailing state
of being. We endured the arduous journey, made
our way through the amber hills of the Sacramento
valley. In the mines, I beat the rock for the dust of gold—
grasping what manumission would cost my body,
my breath. Three hundred dollars short of freedom
Mr. Duvall sold me back south. And I began again that
journey, that cruel constellation of return into bondage,
the way memory recalls and reopens the fathomless

wound.