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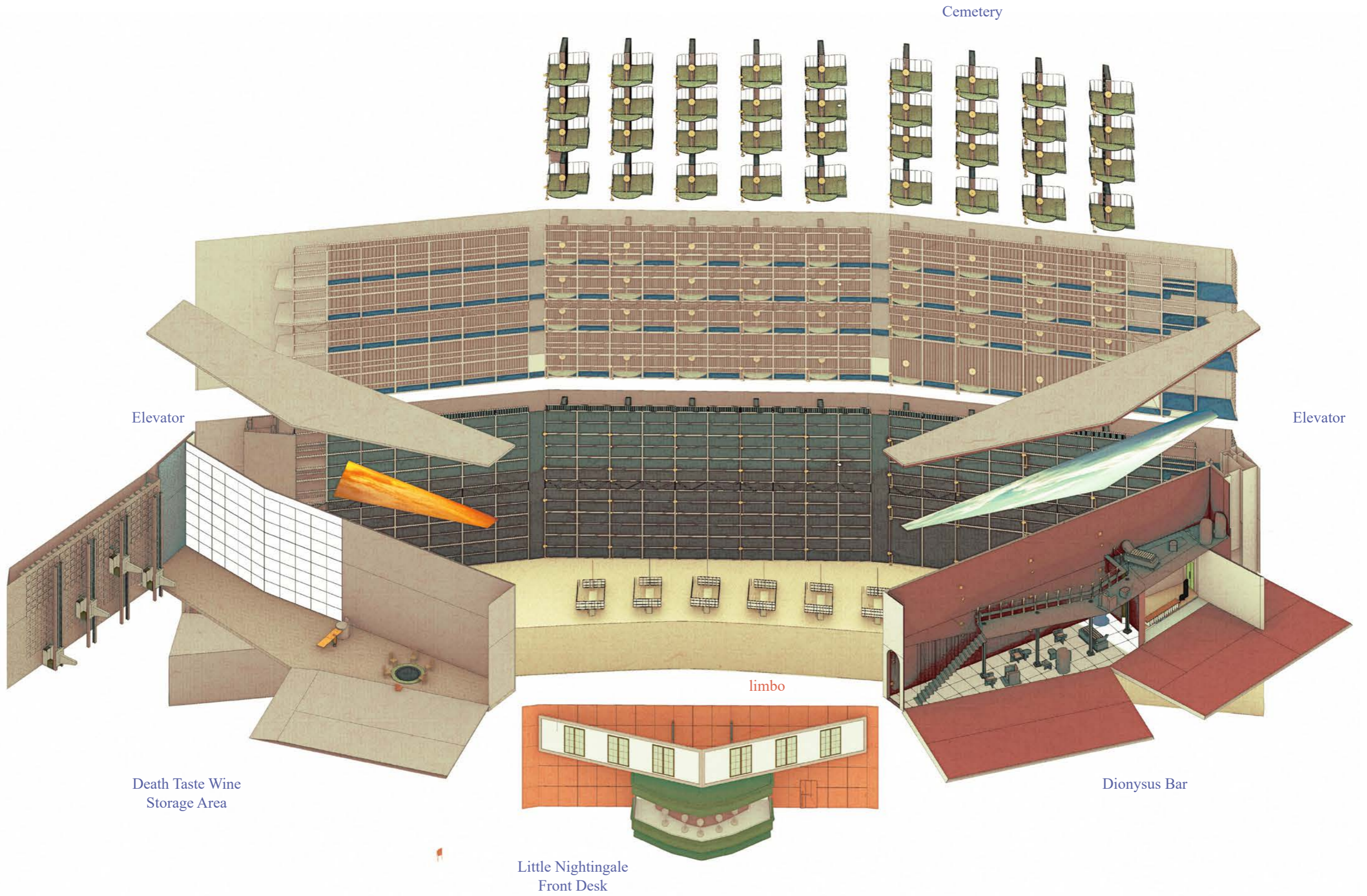
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QINU

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On the way to the Bar Cemetery, a recent online news item darted through my mind: the Bar Cemetery had launched a "custom tomb platforms for private gardens/living rooms/street corners" service. Memory flashed an advertisement—those once monolithic black revolving tombstones, symbols of absolute sovereignty and austere ritual in the face of death, were now spray-painted in soft cherry-blossom pink, serene lakewater blue, even vibrant lemon yellow. No longer confined to the belly of the concrete colossus, they scattered like seeds, appearing on manicured garden lawns, in lived-in living room corners, even on bustling street corners, becoming part of the daily landscapes.



CHAPTER I

The elevated bridge cut through the grey-purple twilight sky. Vehicles streamed past, dragging trails of red taillights. Beside the bridge piers, it stood—a spectacle cast from geometry and absurdity.

Flanking it were two towering, over-ten-meter-tall pale grey cement giants, shaped as pure, flat triangular cylinders, their broad obtuse angles coldly facing the clamorous road. They were massive, silent, windowless. Sandwiched between these two frigid giants was a structure, absurdly small and almost bizarrely triangular. Only about three meters high, its main contours were formed by dark green oak wood low enclosures and transparent low-reflection glass.

Its walls were painted in calm yet melancholic hues—pale warm yellow, midnight blue-purple—a perfect three-dimensional replica of the lonely little diner from Edward Hopper's "Nighthawks." Warm yellow light spilled through the windows cut into the slanted side facing the road, like lamplight in a painting luring moths.

Behind this miniature tavern was a suffocatingly vast, pure orange aluminum backdrop, stretching from the ground to the tops of the cement giants on either side, like a burning curtain. The thin aluminum panel moaned and flapped in the wind.

Inside the tavern, a dark red wooden bar followed its triangular shape with rounded corners. A group of silent people held drinks, seated on leather-covered high stools, their seats supported by bright stainless steel legs.

Spanning the top of this blinding orange curtain was a massive, elongated billboard, its shape perfectly matching the obtuse angles of the cement towers. It was supported from behind by black, angled iron brackets extending from the tavern's roof.

It was pure white, neatly lined with large, glowing wooden-framed "windows" – in reality, lightboxes radiating a stark, white glow day and night. These false windows were starkly conspicuous in the twilight, emitting a familiar yet subtly unsettling allure, like countless empty eyes gazing at the traffic flow.

On the vast orange curtain, hidden in the shadows where the miniature tavern met the right-hand cement giant, was a concealed door of the same color. Its seam blended almost seamlessly with the curtain's folds; were it not for the orange wooden door handle, it

LED light strips, focused taillight lenses with built-in refraction devices

high-strength C50 concrete, slipform monolithic pouring process

low-emissivity (Low-E) laminated safety glass, surface silver-coated to reduce reflection

eco-friendly matte latex paint, mixed with cool-toned mineral pigments

2700K low-color-temperature warm incandescent lighting

2mm anodized aluminum panel, sprayed with orange powder coating, fixed to the frame with screws

red-stained walnut wood, edges formed using solid wood cold-press bending technique

dark green artificial leather wrapped over high-density foam

dark green artificial leather wrapped over high-density foam

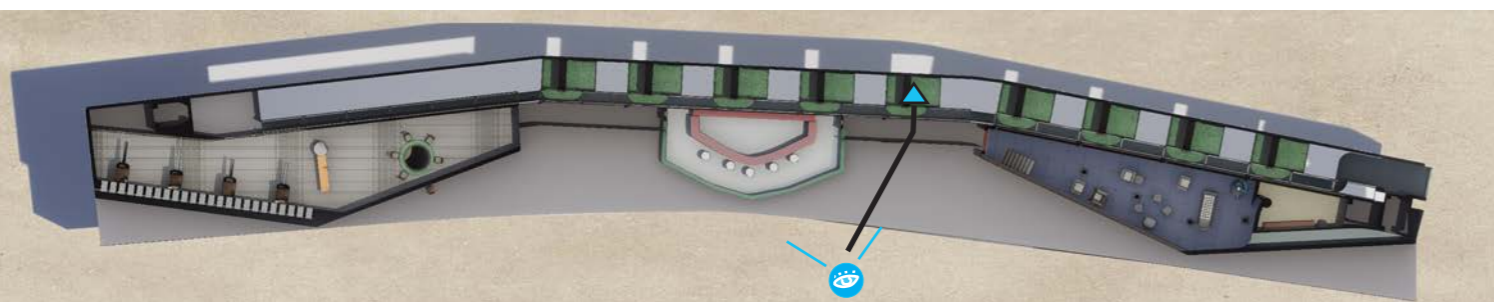
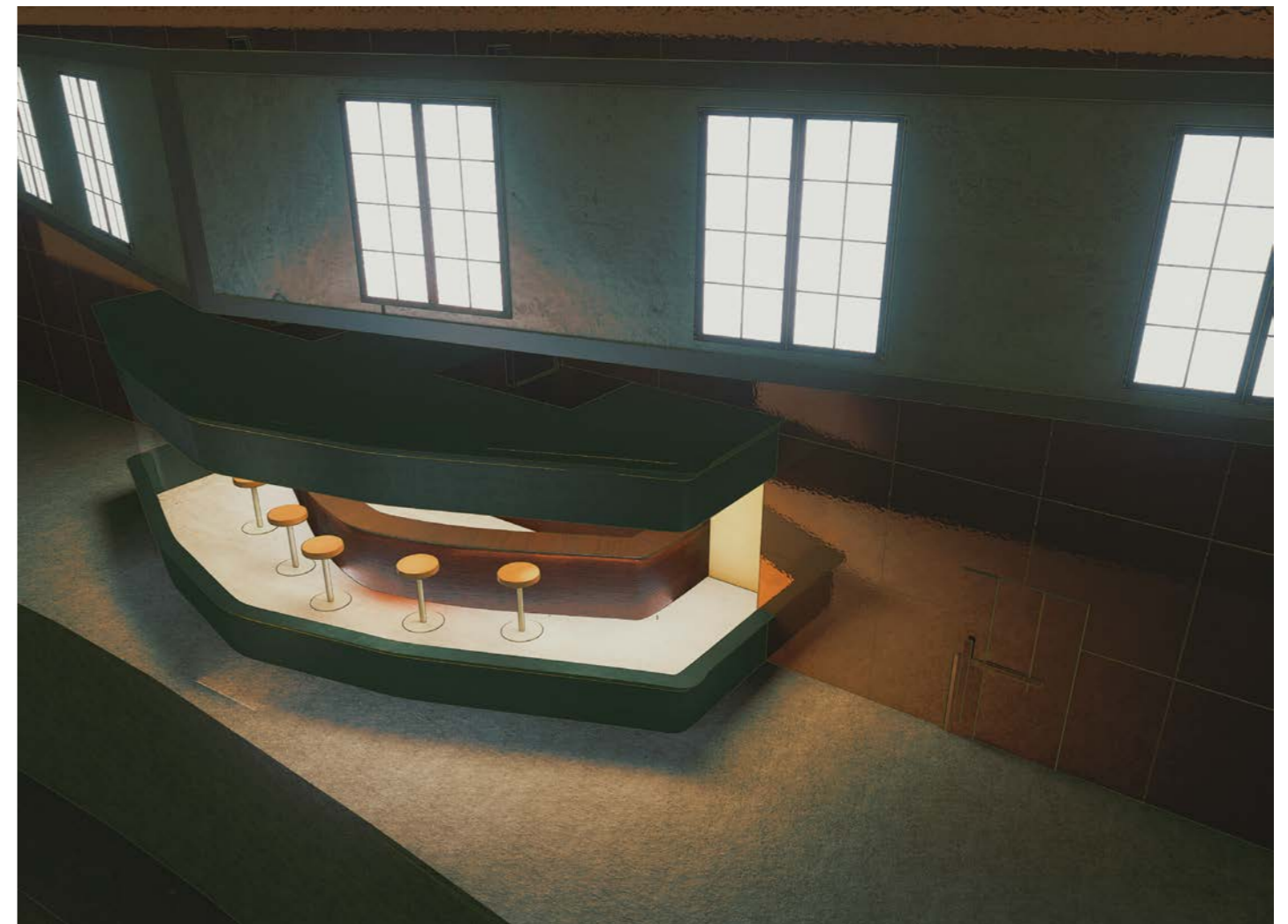
hollow aluminum alloy lightbox, covered in matte white polyester coating

hot-dip galvanized angle steel, treated with black anti-rust spray paint, bolted in place

pine frames enclosing milky-white light-guiding acrylic panels, with cool white LED strips inside

anodized aluminum panel door, same material as the curtain, filled with high-density soundproofing cotton, equipped with concealed floor pivot hinges, edges sealed with blind rivets

hand-turned maple wood, dyed to match the curtain, inset-mounted



CHAPTER II

Pushing open the hidden door behind that orange curtain, the hinges emitted a faint groan, like a long, drawn-out sigh. The air hung heavy with the scent of old wood, dust, and a faint, almost time-sucked remnant of distant sweet wine. Behind the bar, the black-clad bartender stood as erect as a statue carved by time itself, his seniority marked only by the advancing snowline at his temples. His pale grey eyes turned towards me, like winter-frozen lakes reflecting no trace of passing birds.

"I've come to visit an old friend," my voice rang out with unusual clarity in the confined space, carrying the solemnity of a pilgrim. "Protagonist A. I'd like... to have a drink of the liquor he stored." The words carried a strange sense of ritual, as if the request itself were a spell connecting life and death.

Not the slightest ripple stirred in the bartender's icy-lake eyes. He gave only the faintest nod, a movement as slight as the tremor of a clock's second hand. "Follow me," he said, his voice flat and thin like metal foil worn smooth by time, stretching out in the silence.

He moved soundlessly around the bar, leading me towards the tavern's left side. Pushing open another equally unremarkable door, we entered the interior of the left-hand concrete triangular tower. It was utterly different from the raucous Dionysian inferno on the right. No deafening roar, no blinding electronic nebulae – only a near-sacred silence wrapped in immense space. The air was cool, permeated with the primal scent of stone and metal.

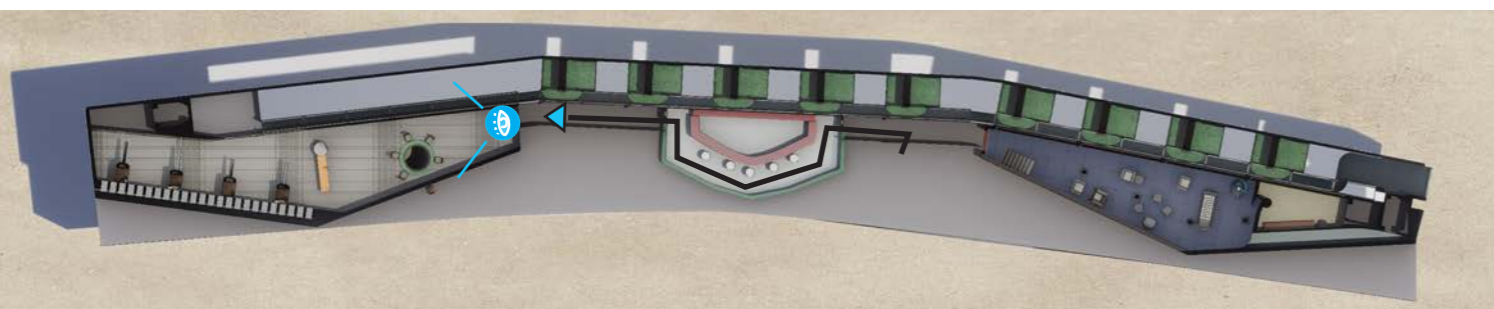
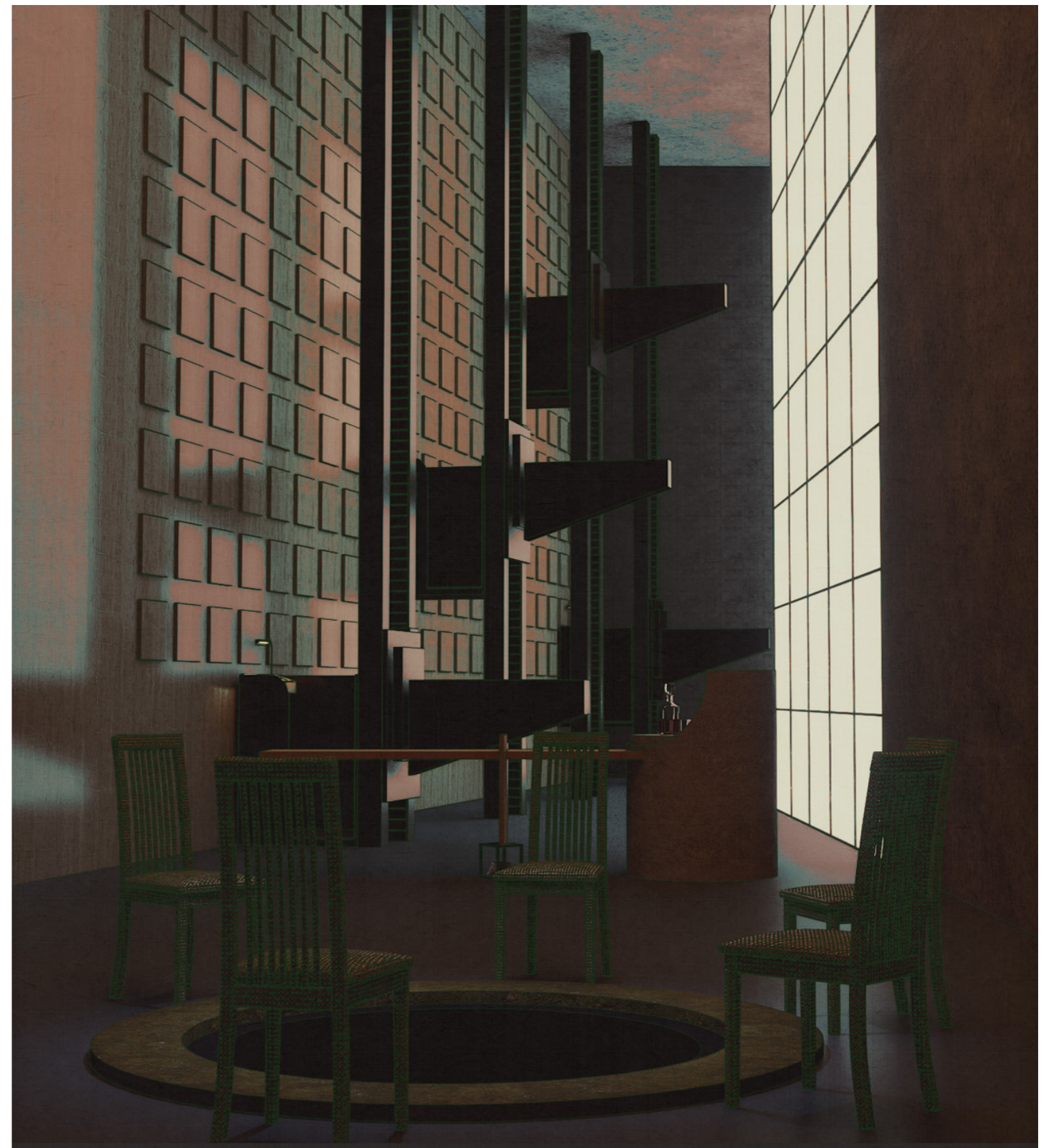
Not far from the entrance, at the center of the space, a huge black pit gaped in the floor, easily two meters in diameter. It wasn't a rough hole; its edges were smooth and impossibly deep, like a gaze piercing towards the earth's core. Surrounding this bottomless darkness was a ring of vibrant green grass, about twenty centimeters wide. The fresh blades shimmered with moist vitality under some unseen source of faint light. Outside the grass ring, six chairs should have stood evenly spaced, yet one was conspicuously absent. Instantly, the image of the solitary orange chair glimpsed outside the concrete cylinder slammed back into my mind – it hadn't been discarded, but precisely "transplanted" here! Its symbol of "absence" aligned perfectly with the vacant spot outside the grass ring!

My gaze traveled beyond this ringed area to the wide, obtuse-angled inner wall. The entire surface was clad in a single colossal slab of grey-veined marble, smooth as glass yet hard as bone. Across this vast stone canvas, countless small, identical square protrusions made of the same grey-white marble were evenly spaced – cabinet doors. Each cold, unadorned square resembled a densely packed niche in a modern columbarium, each bearing a unique number, sealing the last bottle of liquid left by the deceased here – their "taste of death." This was the Silent Cellar, a vertical library of the dead constructed in marble.

cultivated dwarf fescue sod

cast aluminum frames, polyurethane filling, fabric upholstery

Italian Carrara Bianco, water-jet cut, semi-polished finish



Directly in front of the cellar stood a peculiar, almost heavy-looking wooden table attached to a stone plinth. A server, clad similarly in black to the bartender, stood motionless as a statue beside it. Opposite the cellar, the entire long wall was a massive floor-to-ceiling brass-framed grille lightbox. It emitted a uniform, soft, yet intensely powerful sidelight, like a stage spotlight, falling precisely and relentlessly upon the grey marble cellar wall. It illuminated every cold, square door with pitiless clarity, as if silently reviewing these ranks of ordered death.

I approached the table and gave my friend's number to the silent server. My voice sounded unnaturally clear in the cavernous tower. The server took the small metal identity tag I offered, his movements precise as clockwork. He turned and activated an endearingly clunky old lift. Gears meshed, a rack groaned dully, and the lift slowly ascended, stopping precisely before a specific number. The server opened the cold, grey marble door and retrieved its contents – a bottle of simple design.

In the moments waiting for the cumbersome mechanism, my thoughts buzzed like wild bees. What could this old friend, who detested alcohol to his very core, who never touched a drop, have possibly chosen for posterity – for a drinker like me? Whisky? Vodka? Or some liquor he himself wouldn't even recognize? Or... had he ultimately compromised, storing a symbolic sweet wine? A thread of near-mischievous anticipation hung on my heart, mixed with reverence for the principle etched into my friend's very bones.

The ceramic bottle was placed in my hands. Cool and smooth to the touch. My gaze fell on the label – clearly printed were his name, dates of birth and death, and the name of the liquid within. Instantly, all speculation, all subtle expectation, froze solid. Of course! Orange Juice! This guy! In being disappointing – or rather, in being true to himself to an infuriating degree – he truly never had, and never would, fail to deliver! A surge of intense, absurd anger mixed with an indescribable, almost scalping wave of nostalgia rushed into my throat.

"What kind of bastard stores orange juice in a bar crypt!" I hissed through clenched teeth, the words bouncing with faint echoes off the cold stone walls, an accusation hurled at a friend's ghost. It held no real anger, only a profound, death-transcending familiarity, a helplessness and... understanding.

I asked the server for a wide-mouthed tumbler. The clear, sun-golden orange juice poured slowly into the glass, releasing a pure, vibrant sweetness. It seemed so incongruous in this stone chamber symbolizing death, and so... Qno.

African Teak, hand-planed with rounded corners, traditional mortise and tenon joinery
grey marble, cut and polished smooth

brass frame, milky white glass grille panels, high-CRI LED array inside

stainless steel, etched 1117

modeled on Prague archives, cast iron gears, screw drive, metal buttons, lamp, and wooden tray

ceramic body, marble-glazed finish, metal seal

screen printed

hand-blown amber glass, thick walls



"Absinthe!" I turned to the server, my voice sharp with an indisputable, almost cathartic resolve, clearly articulating the word. The tall green bottle was swiftly brought over. Its surface was cool to the touch, the deep green liquid within swirling slightly, releasing an intensely pungent aroma of anise and wormwood – like concentrated herbs and the whisper of death.

essential oil of wormwood, green anise and sweet fennel seed oil, high-purity grain alcohol, sugar cube, evaporated over flame

iconic green glass

The deep green, fiery absinthe was poured forcefully into the clear orange juice. The two liquids – the sweetness of life and the fire of death – violently collided, tangled, and swirled in the glass, forming a murky vortex. I thrust my index finger roughly into this chaotic whirlpool, stirring vigorously with a sense of ritualistic venting! The cool liquid enveloped my finger; the vibrant sweetness of the orange juice violently mixed with the herbal spice and high-alcohol burn of the absinthe, releasing a strange, conflicting aroma. The action felt like a direct, alcohol-laced provocation to the unseen, stubborn spirit of the dead, yet also like a clumsy, fervent toast across the void – Look, old friend, your juice has finally mixed with my liquor! Life and death, sweetness and bitterness, discipline and indulgence, achieved a noisy yet silent fusion in this murky liquid stirred by my rough finger. I lifted the glass. Under the uniform light from the lightbox, the liquid within took on a turbid amber hue, suspended with the absinthe's characteristic fine green wisps, like the unspeakable sediment left after life dissolves.

the 'louche effect' caused by essential oils like anise precipitating in water

Clutching the turbid, finger-stirred "offering," I walked towards the ring of chairs. Two people already occupied the other chairs. A middle-aged man in a rumpled trench coat was curled in his seat, cradling a coarse ceramic mug filled with a deep amber liquid exuding a powerful peat whisky aroma. The other was a silver-haired old woman sitting ramrod straight. Before her stood an exquisite stemmed glass holding a near-transparent pale gold liquid, likely fine cognac, which she sipped delicately. Not far behind them, a black-clad bartender paced silently. His pale grey eyes, like frozen lakes, calmly observed each mourner, like a shepherd watching over souls lost on the border between life and death. No one spoke; not even glances were exchanged. The scene instantly reminded me of a twisted, alcohol-soaked Maranasati meditation – not contemplating death through thought, but confronting its concrete, abyssal ringed form by sipping the liquor of the departed, engaging in a silent standoff with the inevitable on the edge of intoxication and sobriety.

stoneware, unglazed, hand-thrown

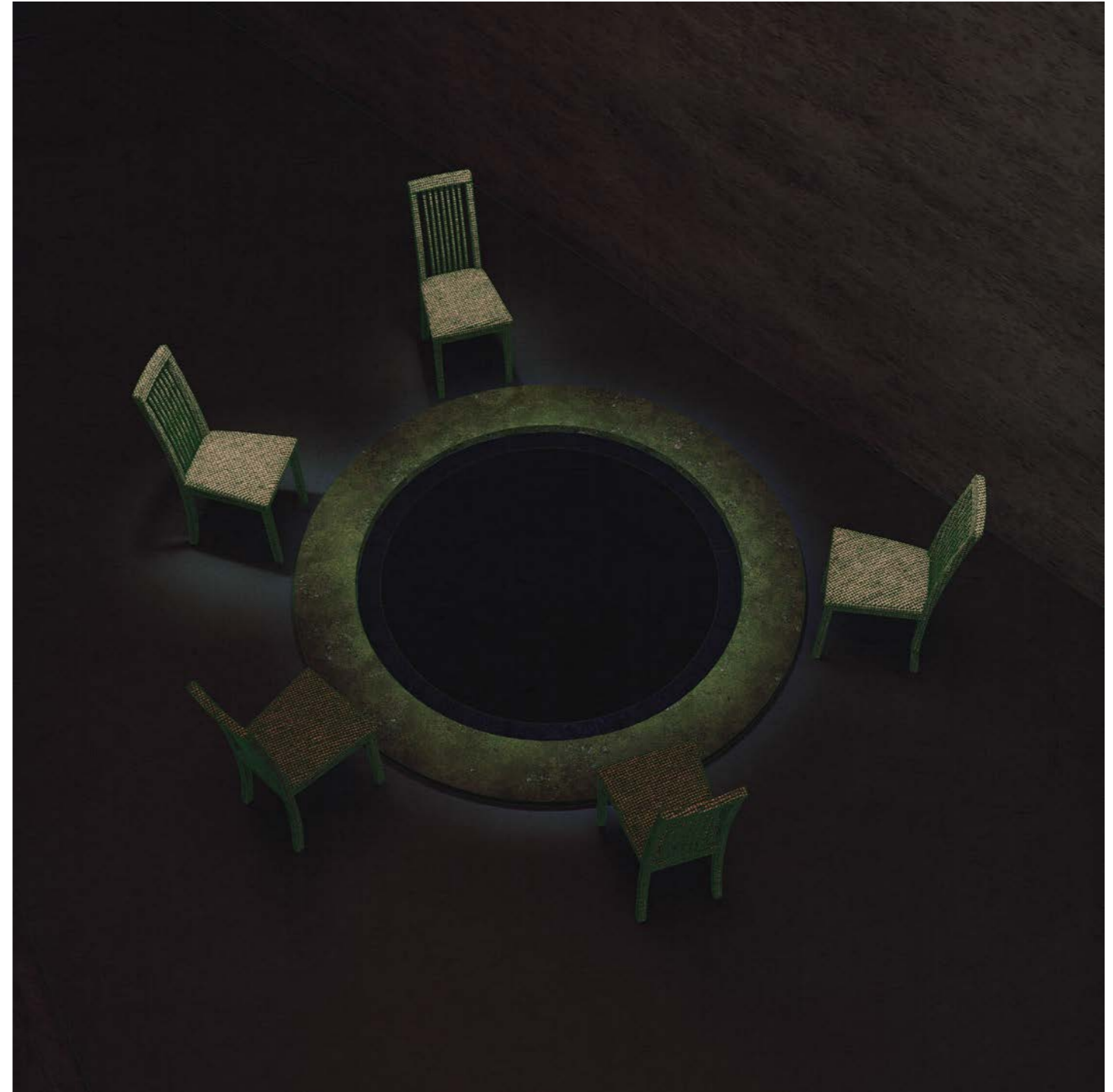
crystal glass, hand-cut

I sat down on an empty chair, the hard surface offering tangible reality. With effort, I bent down, untied the laces of my heavy leather boots coated in city grime, kicked them off, and shoved them aside. Then, driven by an almost reckless impulse to grasp something tangible, I placed my socked feet directly into the ring of vibrant green grass encircling the black pit. Instantly, a sensation of cool, moist, burgeoning life surged from my soles to my crown like an electric current! The blades were soft yet resilient, carrying a faint earthy scent, gently enveloping my feet. This vibrant pulse from the heart of the earth formed such a sharp, absurd contrast to the absolute void symbolized by the black pit before me! A long-forgotten, almost childlike relaxation, mingling with the tingling in my feet, washed strangely over my taut nerves. Life, in this moment, felt so concrete, so humble, yet so stubbornly present.

full-grain leather, Goodyear welted

combed cotton

cultivated dwarf fescue sod



I tilted my head back and took a fierce gulp of the mixed liquid! The flavor exploded in my mouth—the sunlit sweetness of the orange juice was instantly overwhelmed by a surge of burning absinthe! The intense, complex bitterness of anise, licorice, and herbs, mixed with the spice of high-proof alcohol, flamed across my tongue, down my throat, and into my stomach. Following it came absinthe's characteristic dizzying numbness, like a warm gauze gently settling over my brain.

The edges of my vision blurred slightly. My gaze, as if chained by invisible bonds, became fixed, irresistibly captured by the enormous black pit before me. It simply existed—smooth, deep, like a wound. It felt neither sorrow nor joy; it was simply absolute, objective existence—unavoidable, undeniable, impossible to truly fill with any words or ritual.

Unconsciously, a strange, almost sweet dizziness seized me. The black pit before me became so familiar, so... alluring. Its profound darkness seemed to hum softly, a womb-like summons promising rest. For a fleeting moment, a powerful urge surged from deep within—to cast everything aside: this murky drink, the grass beneath my feet, this heavy, weary shell, and simply lean forward, plunge into that eternal, all-accepting darkness. Like my nineteen-year-old cousin, on the wind-shaken rooftop edge two years ago. In those final seconds before his leap, did he too feel this fatal, intoxicating calm? Did he too see such a familiar, sweet destination? This thought, carrying an icy shiver and an eerie warmth, circled and amplified in my alcohol-soaked consciousness...

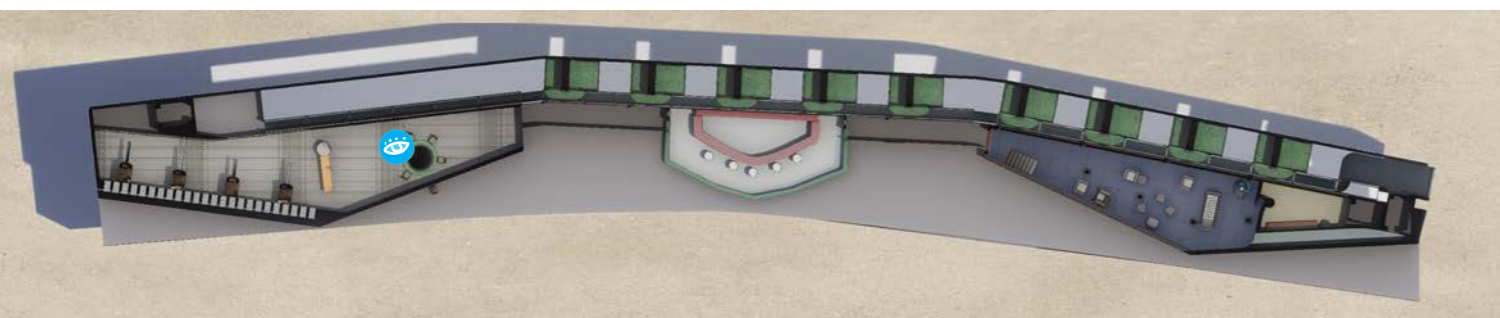
My consciousness drifted in the absinthe haze and the abyss's lure, growing murkier, as if about to dissolve completely into that dark sweetness. Just then, an icy hand, bearing undeniable weight, rested lightly on my shoulder.

I jolted violently! Like a drowning man hauled to the surface, my awareness was yanked back from the edge of darkness! The black pit before me regained its cold, objective, awe-inspiring form. I turned my head and met the pale grey, utterly placid eyes of the pacing bartender. He didn't speak. Only with the faintest, almost imperceptible movement of his eyes, he glanced at the half-finished murky liquid in my hand, then tilted his head slightly, his gaze directed towards the corridor leading to the inner elevator and the deeper burial levels.

Time to go. Time to visit the old friend. As a living person.

The realization hit me like a bucket of ice water, carrying the sting of sobriety. It meant I couldn't choose the shortest, most direct, most "sweet" path—leaping down, through this symbolic abyss, perhaps landing instantly on the level where he rested. No. To be alive meant abiding by the rules of the living, taking the detours of the living. I had to stand up, pull on these heavy boots, leave this seductive circular theater, backtrack through the bar, re-enter the orange passageway, wait for the elevator, descend, traverse the symbolic borderland of consciousness—the white sand—and finally reach his small platform marked by the black lace tombstone.

To be alive meant taking the longer way. The detours of the living.



The room sank into a viscous silence. Only the faint current hum from the incandescent bulb overhead and the unnervingly clear sound of my own breathing were audible.

*tungsten filament, spherical glass shade,
high light transmission, 40-watt, frosted
shade to reduce glare*

On the wall directly opposite the entrance, stood the door.

A double-leafed, heavy wooden door [solid oak panels, 4cm thick, surface finished with multiple layers of deep green wood paint, showing areas of deliberate wear and age-related cracks, core filled with honeycomb lightweight material, fitted with vintage iron hinges and pull handles]. The panels were painted a deep, weathered green, the paint now uneven – deeper in some places, worn away in others to reveal the lighter wood grain beneath, with a few fine cracks. In the center of each door panel was an old-fashioned, spherical brass handle, polished to a high shine by countless hands, like two heavy, ripe fruits.

Suddenly, just as I stepped into the elevator and the green door began to close, my peripheral vision caught sight of several blades of wild grass on this symbolic, terminal, flaking chalk wasteland! They declared their existence with a humble, stubborn posture – a sickly pale green, yet stubbornly stretching towards the only light source above: the old incandescent bulb. Here, in this airtight stone chamber, on the threshold before the door leading to death's drafting table, they breathed silently, performing the tiniest miracle of photosynthesis. These nameless seeds, vagabonds carried in by some stray breeze or on the sole of a shoe, had taken root here, becoming time and oblivion's most silent yet potent protesters. This hint of humble green, amidst the flaking pallor and uneasy silence, brought a strange, bittersweet calm

—— life always finds a crack, even at the edge of oblivion.



Clutching the turbid "offering," I followed the black-clad bartender, like a fish swimming upstream, plunging back into the boiling inferno of the right-hand concrete cylinder. The intense aromas of alcohol and myrrh, combined with the constant, dull, beast-like heartbeat "thrumming" of the metal plates beneath my feet, swallowed me whole. Blood-red lights frantically sliced through the thick smoke, illuminating faces blurred by alcohol. Year after year, decade after decade, this Dionysian feast seemed never to cease, nor would it ever cease. The living still occupied, in drunkenly contorted poses, the pedestals and bases crafted from black marble, black plastic, and bright metal fittings – these thrones descended from heaven had long become the most absurd yet fitting backdrop for the revelry. Raucous laughter, intoxication, clinking glasses – the boundary between life and death continued its bizarre, fervent fusion and collapse amidst the clamor and the vibrations of the iron plates.

Struggling through the crowd, my gaze was involuntarily drawn to the familiar black marble slab. Upon it now lay an elderly woman in a shimmering black dress. Her hands were elegantly crossed over her chest, her posture serene, as if sunk into a deep sleep. Six or seven people stood or sat around her, mostly elderly faces, their slack skin gleaming with an oily sheen under the psychedelic lights, yet their eyes unnaturally bright with alcohol and reminiscence. They held glasses, chatting and laughing animatedly, their voices cutting clearly through the din.

"Ha! Remember how we sent old Qno off right here, just the same!" bellowed a white-haired man in a faded leather jacket, slapping his companion's shoulder vigorously, causing the amber liquid in his glass to slosh violently. "Remember? Our Maggie," he pointed towards the serene figure on the slab, his voice rough with affection, "even stuffed a salted olive on a toothpick into old Qno's stiff hand! Said he should take 'salt' for the journey, to ward off the demons in the Styx! Ha!"

A man in a beret with sunken cheeks chuckled beside him. "Right, right! And that curly-haired kid, the clueless one?" He squinted his bleary eyes, straining to recall. "Thought old Qno was just dead drunk and about to croak, squeezed in asking, 'Need any medical assistance?' Tch! Kid wasn't wrong though! But old Qno was dead by then! Ha ha ha!" Raucous laughter exploded around them, filled with naked mockery of death and nostalgic longing for past rowdiness.

The leather-jacketed man raised his glass towards the woman on the slab and the invisible specter of old Qno, his voice alcohol-roughened yet carrying a strange gravity: "Now it's our Maggie's turn! To Maggie! To old Qno! May they meet in the Styx and go skinny-dipping together! Just like when the coppers fished old Qno out of the Thames! Ha ha ha!" Laughter and the clatter of glasses erupted again. Amber and golden liquid splashed out, spattering the cold marble edge, trickling down, seeping into unseen crevices.

The god of wine awakens from death. The phrase flashed into my mind like a rusted bullet, striking me instantly. And here I was, clutching my mixture of juice and absinthe, this "offering," passing like a ghost through their raucous Wake for Maggie – a carbon copy of the one for old Qno. fateful absurdity! The image of the drunks standing beside the deceased blurred the boundaries utterly – time itself seemed drunk at this eternal altar to Bacchus, indistinguishable from past or present.

recessed RGB LED spotlights, anodized aluminum housing, frosted polycarbonate diffusers

natural Nero Marquina stone, water-jet cut and polished

high-density polypropylene molded and spray-painted black

aluminum alloy castings, surface anodized

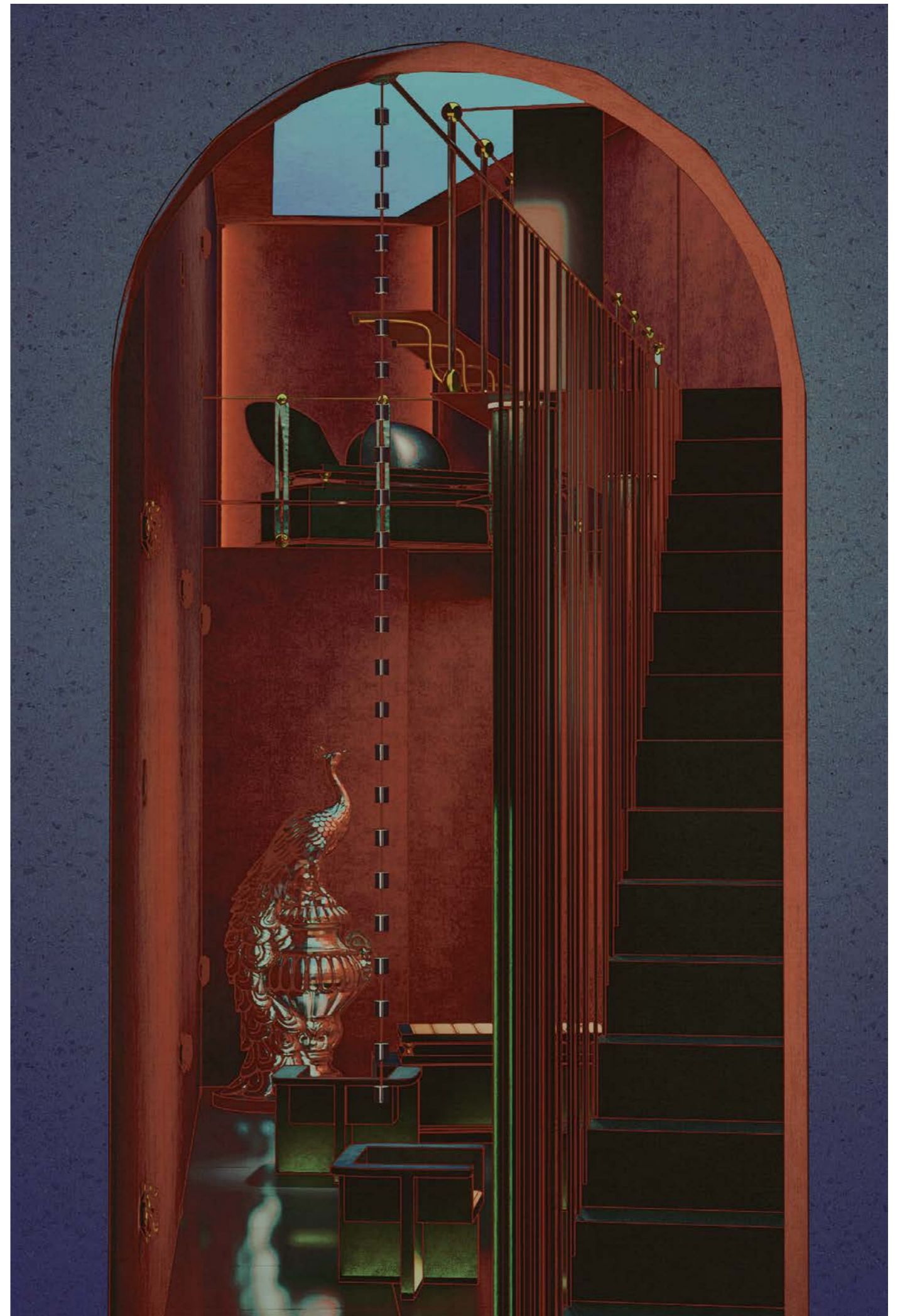
a single slab of Italian Nero Marquina marble

black polyester, hand-sewn with silver polycarbonate sequins, figure-hugging cut

lead-free crystal glass, stemmed, hand-blown

12-year-old single malt Scotch whisky, oak cask matured

pickled Sicilian green olive, skin dusted with salt crystals



CHAPTER III

Silently, the bartender guided me, like navigating through a clamorous fog, towards the subtly obtuse-angled curved wall at the far end. A hidden door slid open. The deafening roar of sound was severed as if by a blade, receding like a tide abruptly cut off, leaving behind a vacuum-like silence.

The clamor was instantly severed. Not faded, but absolutely, vacuously stripped away. All the deafening noise, the murky heat, the psychedelic lights of the bar were utterly cut off by this narrow threshold. Stepping across felt like leaving a boiling inferno and entering some forgotten, compressed space where time flowed strangely slow.

It was a cubicle, four meters square. The air was cool and dry, devoid of stained glass, lingering organ notes, or wafting incense – lacking any sacred sense of ritual. Its eeriness stemmed precisely from its excessive ordinariness and calm.

The walls were a patchy white. Old-fashioned bricks were laid with straight, uniform joints, thickly coated with flawless chalk-white paint. The ceiling was lower, also white, flat, and unadorned. The floor was bare concrete [industrial-grade self-leveling compound, surface ground smooth], its cool grey expanse unbroken, reflecting the light from a single bare incandescent bulb hanging from the center of the ceiling. The light fell with an almost sacred stillness.

Against one wall stood a wooden bench, roughly two meters long. The wood itself was thick, solid, its edges retaining natural, irregular curves, as if hewn straight from an ancient tree. Unvarnished, it showed the wood's original grain and color – a time-smoothed, warm light brown. Yet, supporting this substantial plank were several starkly sharp, bare stainless steel triangular brackets. These triangles were thin as blades, their points sharply angled towards the floor, exuding industrial precision and coldness, forming an unsettling contrast with the natural, warm wood above. Life and death, nature and machine, softness and sharpness, brutally welded together here.

At one end of the bench, pressed close against it, stood a solitary chair.

The chair was uniformly black, its design exceptionally simple yet conveying an extreme leanness and uprightness. The backrest was high, curving outward in an uncomfortable arc, unlike something meant for sitting. It stood straight up, empty now.

Following the bartender's silent gesture, I sat down on the middle section of the bench. The wooden surface felt cool and solid, imparting a steadying sensation. Yet, the moment I sat, an indescribable feeling seized me. My gaze was drawn, involuntarily and repeatedly, to that empty black steel chair. Though clearly unoccupied, it possessed a weighty, undeniable presence. It felt like a silent sentinel, an absent judge, a reserved seat. It occupied space, radiating an invisible pressure, seeming to wait for something, or to declare something. It wasn't fear, but a profound, breath-stealing solemnity – as if death itself, in the form of this chair, sat quietly here, waiting with me.

11.5cm thick poured concrete, surface coated with matte grey wear-resistant paint, edges precisely sanded

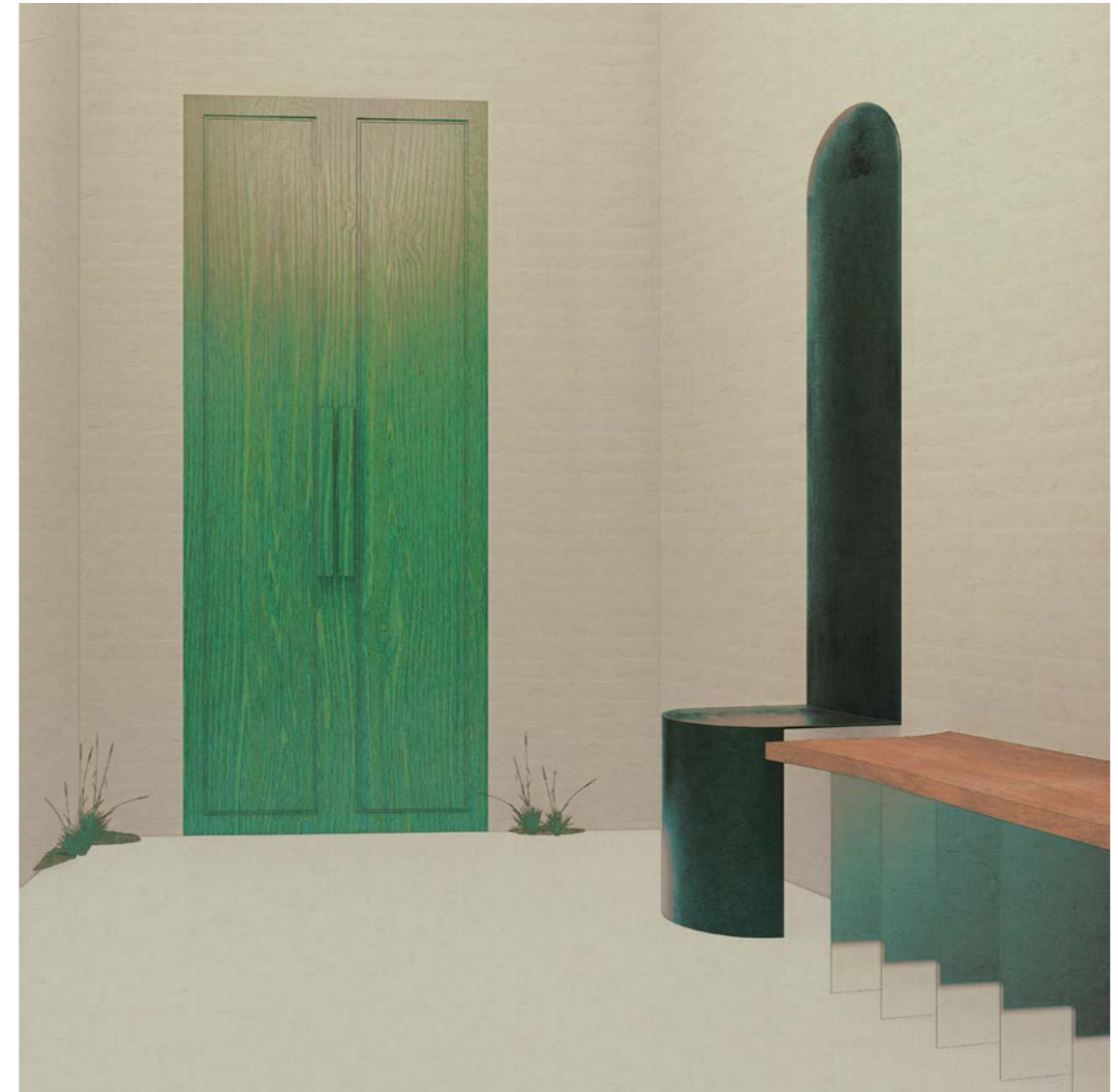
fired clay, standard dimensions, meticulously leveled

high-coverage matte latex, triple-coated, smooth and grit-free, warm color temperature, slightly powdery matte feel

solid oak plank, salvaged from old furniture, 4cm thick, naturally air-dried, unfinished, surface repeatedly sanded to reveal natural grain and a smooth texture

304 stainless steel sheet, precision laser-cut into triangles, edges chamfered, surface electrolytically polished, 2mm thick, highly reflective

cold-rolled steel tube welded structure, matte black powder-coated finish, overall sturdy yet lightweight



CHAPTER IV

The elevator door closed soundlessly behind me, sealing off all noise and light from the world above. Before me stretched a long corridor embraced by utter darkness – the white sand ground. The air was unnervingly dry, carrying a dust-laden scent mingled with ancient paper, lime, and the essence of nothingness.

coarse-ground silica sand

I followed the bartender onto the sand. Immediately, a unique sensation met my feet – fine, cold grains yielding deeply with each step, emitting a muffled "shhh... shhh..." as if treading upon the sighs of countless predecessors. Looking down, the sand was densely patterned with overlapping footprints, layers upon layers, varying in depth and clarity. New prints covered old ones, which in turn half-buried even older traces. Objects, discarded unintentionally or deliberately, lay half-submerged, catching faint glimmers like strange shells washed ashore by the river of time: a corner of a plastic lawyer's ID badge peeked out, the photo showing a prematurely aged face, stern and ambitious. A crumpled, edge-torn printout, partially unfurled, revealed a few lines of typed text: "...passion for climbing... Mont Blanc..." – an unfinished biographical draft? An unopened, garishly coloured condom wrapper. A thin, flesh-toned piece of silicone – on closer inspection, an unnervingly lifelike, scaled-down replica of part of a human face, captured by 3D scanning technology: closed eyelids, part of a nose bridge, the curve of a cheek – perfectly detailed yet utterly devoid of life.

Along one side of the sand corridor, individual workstations floated in the gloom, each encased within a suspended square wooden frame covered in yellowed Japanese paper [handmade kōzo paper, unbleached]. The light on the sand was so dim that these translucent cubes, glowing faintly with warm yellow light from within, stood out starkly. Through the paper walls came the muffled thuds of typing, the rustling of paper being torn or pasted, and the occasional stifled sigh, echoing faintly. No faces were visible, only the sense of captive wills on their isolated islands of consciousness, partitioned by paper walls, engaged in silent, futile, yet utterly inevitable labor – carving their own tombstones, wrestling with the Reaper.

*beech wood mortise-and-tenon joints
handmade kōzo paper,
unbleached surface electrolytically*

He straightened up, the movement carrying that familiar, thoughtful micro-pause. Qno! His signature, slightly unruly mop of curls shifted faintly in the unreal light. This silent shadow play lasted only a few seconds. The light within the enclosure seemed to flicker, and that familiar silhouette posture vanished, dissolving into the jumble of other shifting, indistinct shadows cast from neighboring enclosures, lost forever. Only my fresh footprints remained in the sand, overlaying someone else's faded trace, and the sudden, heavy ache in my chest, filled to bursting with memories, making it almost impossible to breathe.



Passing through this white sand ground – the shallows of consciousness – a solitary black cylinder appeared ahead, suspended vertically from the high ceiling. Just inches above the sand, it was sliced diagonally at a precise ten-degree angle, creating a smooth, inclined plane. A shaft of cold, pure circular light beamed vertically from the open end of the cylinder, casting a sharply defined, pale circle onto the sand below. From within the cylinder, a voice called out a liquor storage number. It sounded near, yet felt utterly unreachable.

poured concrete, surface coated matte black wear-resistant paint

Further ahead, the white sand ground abruptly ended. Beneath lay a dark abyss of unfathomable depth. On the steep rock face to the left loomed the massive grey marble cellar wall extending all the way down from the top-floor storage room! Countless cold, square cabinet doors were arrayed with perfect uniformity, like a honeycomb, or a vertical wall of death. Soon, a familiar black-clad server, riding the clunky old lift, glided silently to a specific number and precisely retrieved a bottle of "Taste of Death." His movements were mechanical, like components in an East European clock.

Spanning the abyss to the right, a narrow metal bridge was suspended in mid-air, leading to the opposite shore. On the far side, there were no tombstones, no platforms—only a full-height, immense vertical white lightbox. It emitted pure, uniform, blindingly intense white light, like a cold, square sun, or a colossal oil lamp luring all lost souls toward annihilation. That radiance was the far shore, the terminus, pure "nothingness," radiating an absolute, vertigo-inducing pull.

stainless steel grating deck, T-bar support structure, hot-dip galvanized finish

aluminum frame, opal acrylic diffuser panels, high-CRI 6500K LED arrays

I followed the bartender onto the narrow bridge. The metal decking groaned faintly underfoot. My eyes were involuntarily drawn to the pure white light across the chasm, light that devoured all vision. It felt as if my soul were being sucked towards it; my steps grew unsteady. Just as my consciousness threatened to dissolve into that luminous void, the bartender's flat voice cut through like a cold wire:

expanded steel mesh, diamond pattern, matte black powder-coated

“Mind the gap beneath your feet.”

I snapped my head down, wrenching my gaze from the light. The bridge deck had a clean break right at its center—a gap of about eight centimeters! Below the severed edge yawned the all-consuming dark abyss. Yet, arching over this symbolic chasm of separation and fall, extending from the metal edges on either side of the gap, were two small, exquisitely cast bronze hands. They reached across the cold void and clasped together tightly, firmly, in mid-air!

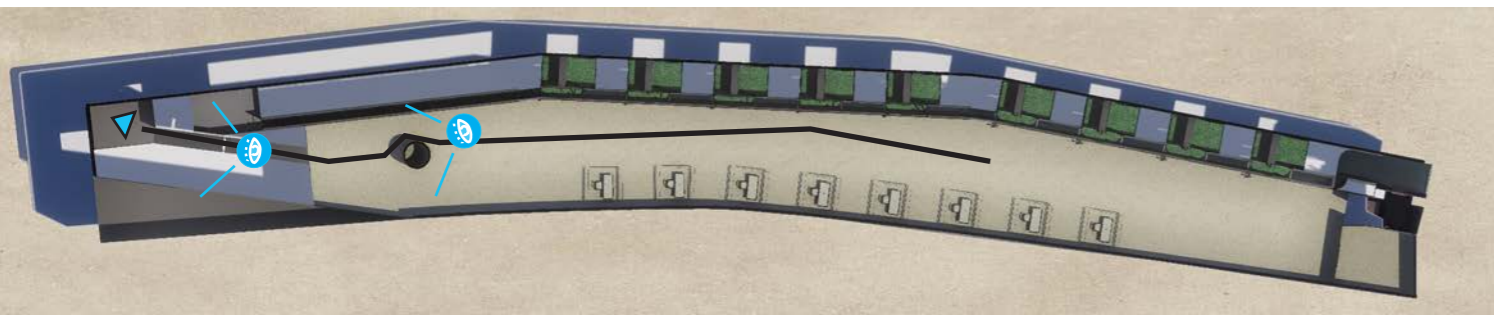
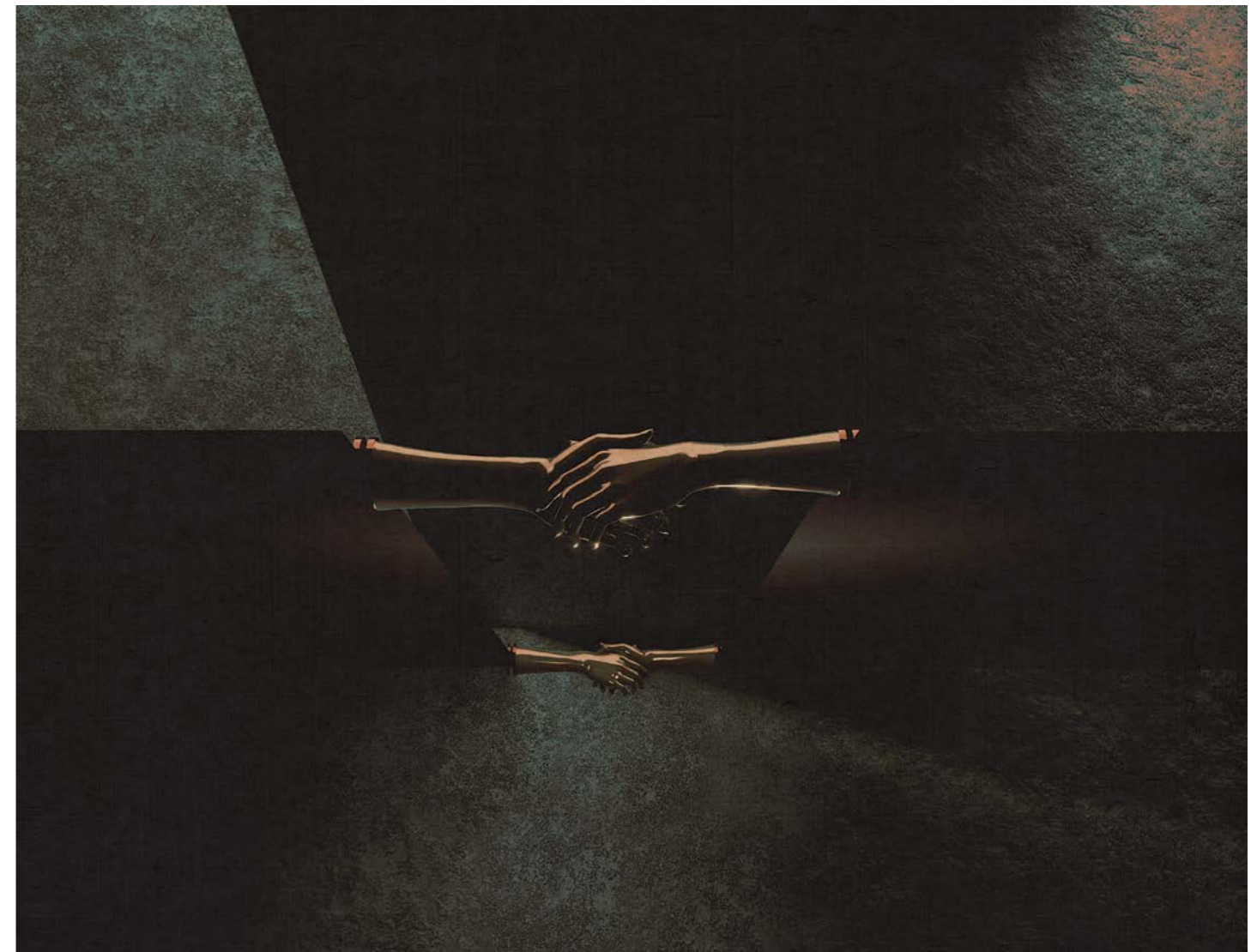
silicon bronze, lost-wax cast, hand-chased patina

They bridged the cold void, clasped together in the emptiness.

There was no exaggerated strain, no dramatic tension in the knuckles. The grip was steady, understated—knuckles aligned, palms pressed together—radiating a time-tempered certainty. The cold bronze material gleamed with a warm, ancient patina in the dim light.

Here, in this Limbo symbolizing oblivion, the design of death, and scattered fragments of life, squeezed between cold machinery and absolute nothingness, these clasped bronze hands anchored my reeling spirit like a fixed point in the dark. A will to bridge the chasm, to refuse separation, was eternally cast into this cold metal. This clasp was a silent oath, a mute resistance against the abyss.

So what if we are fools building towers on dunes.



CHAPTER V

Crossing the narrow bridge clasped by bronze hands over the abyss, stepping onto the platform seared by white light, I turned right and re-entered the metal embrace of the elevator. A slight sense of weightlessness followed as the car ascended, temporarily sealing the sand of Limbo, the phantom traces of discarded objects, and the lingering warmth of the bronze hands below.

The doors opened, revealing a transfer platform suspended in the void. Standing at the railing, my view plummeted like a cliff edge – down, down, further down! A vast vertical abyss mercilessly unfolded before me, bottomless, as if boring towards the earth's core. Into this sheer, cliff-like rock face, countless tiny square platforms were carved, like a honeycomb or a stepped altar dedicated to Death. Packed densely and aligned with chilling precision, they cascaded downward until utterly consumed by the endless darkness below. On each minuscule platform stood an identical, roughly two-meter-tall black monolith – serving as a tombstone shrouded in intricate, icy lace. Silent as enigmas, insignificant as dust, within this monumental vertical sequence, the trace of any individual existence was utterly obliterated, leaving only this endless, repeating formation of black rectangles proclaiming death's ultimate equality and obliteration. Cold, elegant white lighting seemed to remind one of the hearts that once beat within each black block below, and the connections to the world – connections the world attempted to maintain with copper roses [hand-cast brass, sand-cast and artificially patinated] – that death had brutally severed. A sense of suffocating grandeur and desolation, mixed with vertigo, seized me.

The black-clad bartender, a silent silhouette ferrying souls, guided me into a deep, narrow, and exceptionally dry rock passageway. The air held the subterranean chill and scent of stone dust. Footsteps echoed in the confined space, clear as a heartbeat. We stopped before a cold metal plaque – "1117".

The bartender gestured left. The seemingly solid rock wall ahead was, in fact, composed of countless tightly packed black elastic straps. I reached out, fingertips registering the distinctive coolness and resilience of rubber. With a slight push, my body passed easily through this yielding barrier, like stepping through a trembling black curtain of water.

One step through, and I stood on his small platform. Underfoot was artificial turf. The platform's edge was ringed by a slender black steel pipe railing, its top adorned with miniature hands each wearing a gold ring. Between the fingers stretched fishing line. In the platform's own dim light, the gold rings glowed with a faint, warm sheen, creating a stark, jarring contrast against the all-consuming black abyss below. Before me, the massive black rectangular tombstone stood silent, draped in cold lace, radiating an undeniable aura of finality.

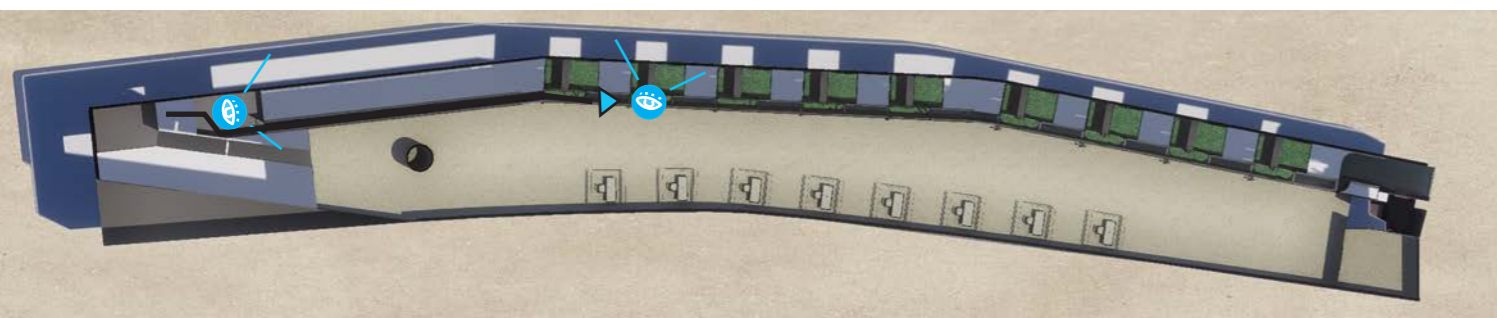
304 Stainless Steel, matte black powder-coated finish
hand-crocheted blend of cotton and synthetic thread

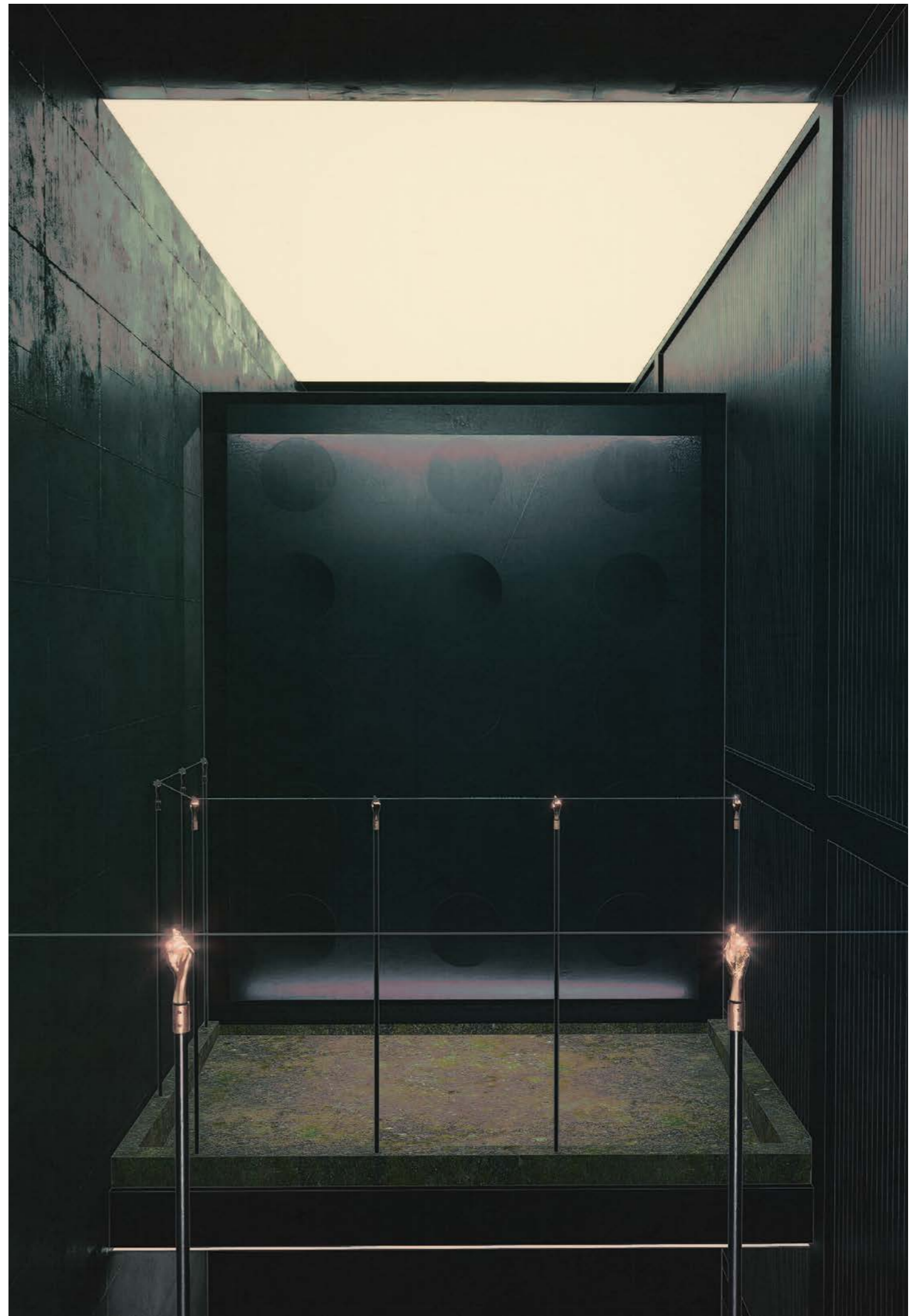
brass, laser-cut numerals with internal LED lighting

Cold Rolled Steel Tube, 25mm, wall thickness 1.5mm, matte black electrostatic spray finish, TIG-welded tops

925 Sterling Silver base, light gold electroplated finish

transparent monofilament nylon, 0.3mm





Death.

This abstract word now pressed upon me in such a colossal, heavy, cold, physical form. Primal fear, mixed with the sharp grief of my old friend's permanent absence, instantly seized my heart, making it feel too heavy to beat. The times we shared, his laughter, his stubborn aversions, the ridiculous juice he stored... all those vibrant fragments compressed, solidified into this lifeless black block? The thought was absurd, almost mocking! How did our dear, awkward, teetotaling old friend become... this thing? And the small hands with gold rings at the platform's edge seemed a silent reminder that he had once been part of this fragile network of connections.

The bartender silently moved around to the back of the tombstone and pointed to a thick, hanging cord [4mm hemp rope terminating in a 4mm black iron chain]. I took a deep breath, as if gathering courage to confront the black monolith, and gripped the rope. I pulled down hard!

A low, intricate mechanical sound resonated. The massive black block, pivoting smoothly along an axis parallel to its wide face, rotated forward a full ninety degrees with an air of unquestionable authority. Shadows descended like a beast closing its jaws. Instinctively, I stepped forward, crossing the threshold. The world was instantly swallowed by the rotating black lid, cutting off the external gloom, the abyss's chill, and the faint glow from the ringed hands at the platform's edge.

The top opened, letting in light that instantly enveloped me. I stood within a four-walled space saturated in black, surrounded now, completely and gently, by the solidified fragments of his life.

On the left wall, pinned, was his signature blue-grey striped shirt. The fabric, rendered fragile and semi-transparent by time, resembled dried butterfly wings. The nails that once held myrrh were now rusted into dark brown scabs; the bitter fragrance long gone, replaced by the dust scent of old things. Directly opposite the entrance, on the back wall, sat a transparent acrylic box filled with uniformly mixed ash – his cremated remains, sentences clipped from newspapers that moved him, the residue of burned diaries – language and flesh achieving their ultimate, indistinguishable mingling here, collapsing into equal, silent dust. A transparent coffin for a speaker. The right wall was a collage of photographs: his mother's eternal smile yellowing beside a warmly toned Polaroid showing young us, arms slung over shoulders, standing beneath Wake's newly installed, psychedelic neon sign, our smiles blurred yet shining with untarnished brightness. Time folded strangely here. And the front wall, the "blank slate" baseboard he had reserved, was now unrecognizable chaos – no longer an invitation to emptiness, but a vibrant yet death-tinged relic: withered, curled dried flowers held tenuously by tape; overlapping, colourful postcards from foreign lands; scrawled words like "thx for the movie rec" and "miss u, bastard" piled atop messier scrawls; most jarring, a faded yet distinct dark red lipstick smudge in the corner, like a silent, ardent sigh. Beneath this cacophony of overlays, our old friend's handwritten words, bearing his final trace of stubbornness, emerged like a shipwreck from the depths: "Leave blank here, for your inscription. My impression, shaped by you. Only forbid pouring wine, I loathe it deeply." His prohibition had become the grandest site of collective defiance, the chaos precisely confirming his foreseen, remade "I".

cast iron gear assembly, lubricated operation

fabric, cotton canvas, worn and aged

iron, hand-forged, oxidized black, natural resin, brown, dried granules

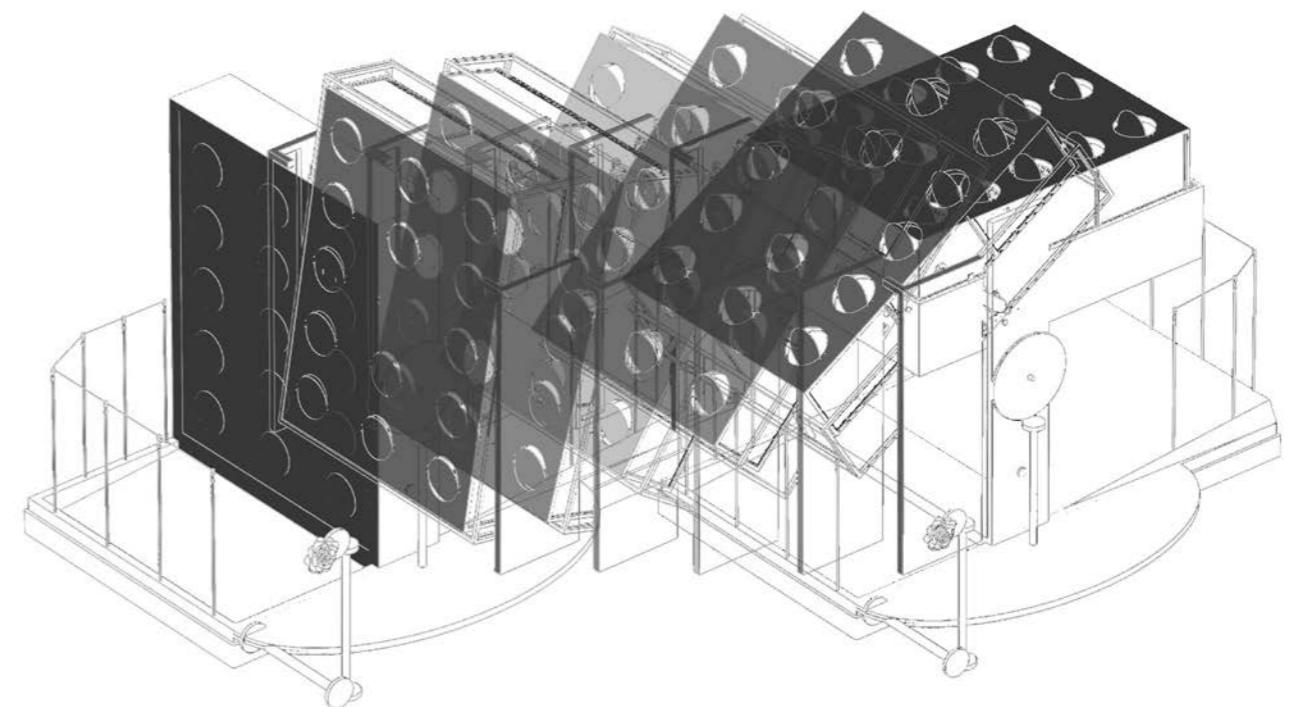
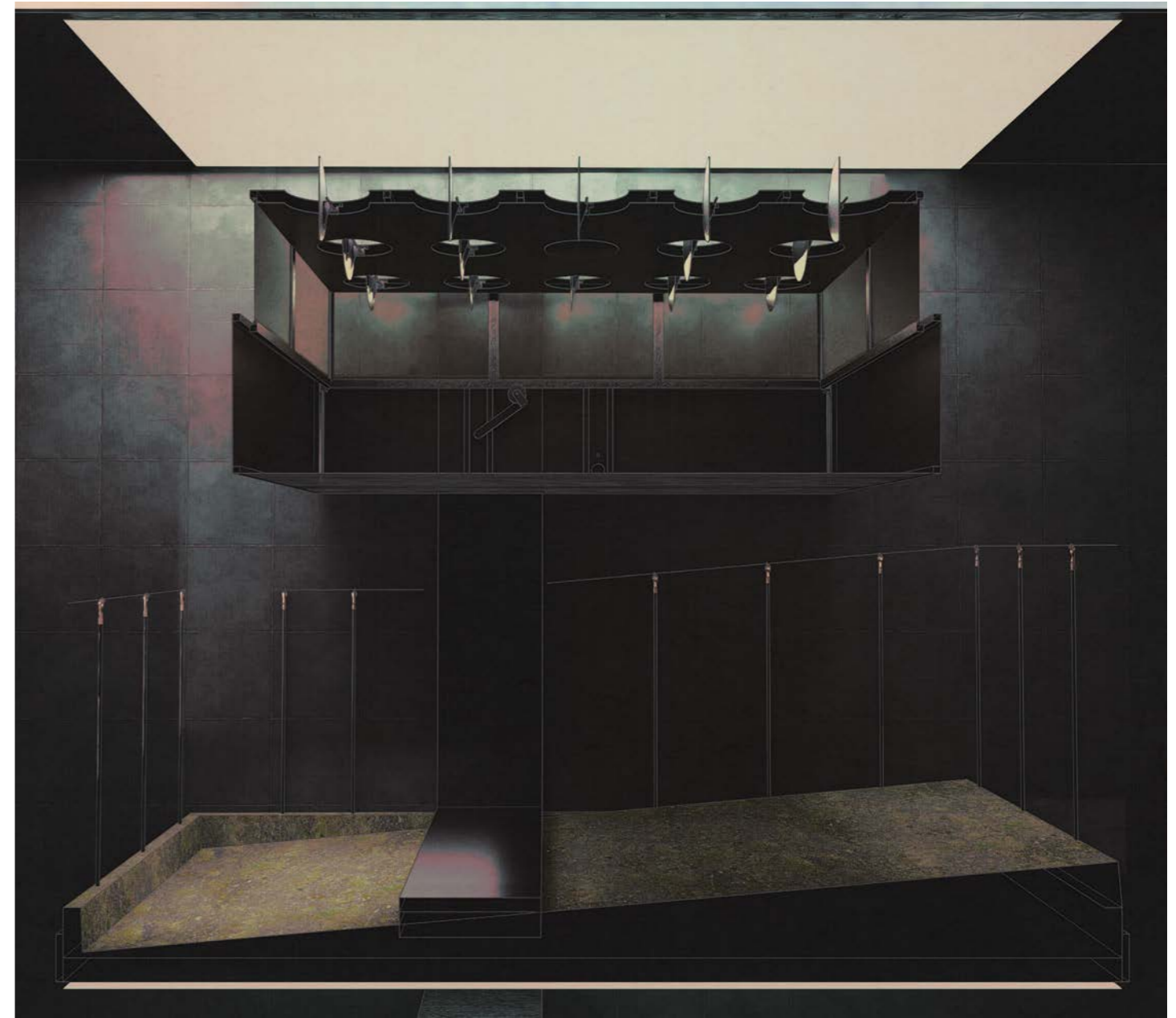
acrylic, transparent, industrial injection-molded

biological tissue, carbon-based, ash after cremation

newsprint, ink, old edition

cream-colored laid paper, hand-cut, ink still wet

silver halide paper, matte finish, slight warping



I held the long-turbid "offering." Green wisps settled in the liquid under the warm light. Alcohol hummed in my veins, vision slightly blurred. Looking around the small space, a strange feeling suffused me – this was no longer merely a display case for relics; this was him! These walls pinned with old clothes, holding ashes, plastered with light and shadow, covered by others' marks – this was the solidified territory of his existence. And now, I stood within it, as if standing at the center of his life, in the heartland of his memory. I could feel him in the air, in the fragile texture of the shirt fibers, in the summer sunlight captured in the photos, in the silent heat lingering in the lip print, in the absurd mockery of his trampled prohibition... He was here, silently, enveloping me like a warm womb woven from memory and matter. I was inside this small darkness, inside his life – imagined by me, scribbled over by others, finally solidified by death.

"Old mate..." I spoke softly, my voice unnaturally clear in the confined space, tinged with drunkenness and an almost intimate familiarity. "Look what they've done to you... lipstick on the wall." I swirled the murky liquid in my cup. "Your juice... I spiked it. Strong stuff. You were right, booze really isn't any good..." I tilted my head back, draining the last of the mixture – the cloying sweetness of orange juice and the searing burn of absinthe. Spice and numbness rushed to my head. "...but sometimes, mixed with something else, it doesn't taste so bad, right?" No answer. Only the faint electrical hum of the warm lights.

My gaze grew hazy, thoughts drifting. Light above? Something activated by the tombstone's rotation? Instinctively, I looked up, seeking the source. Tipping my head back, my gaze rose above the clutter of relics on the walls towards the center of the ceiling – not an open skylight, but a circular mirror !

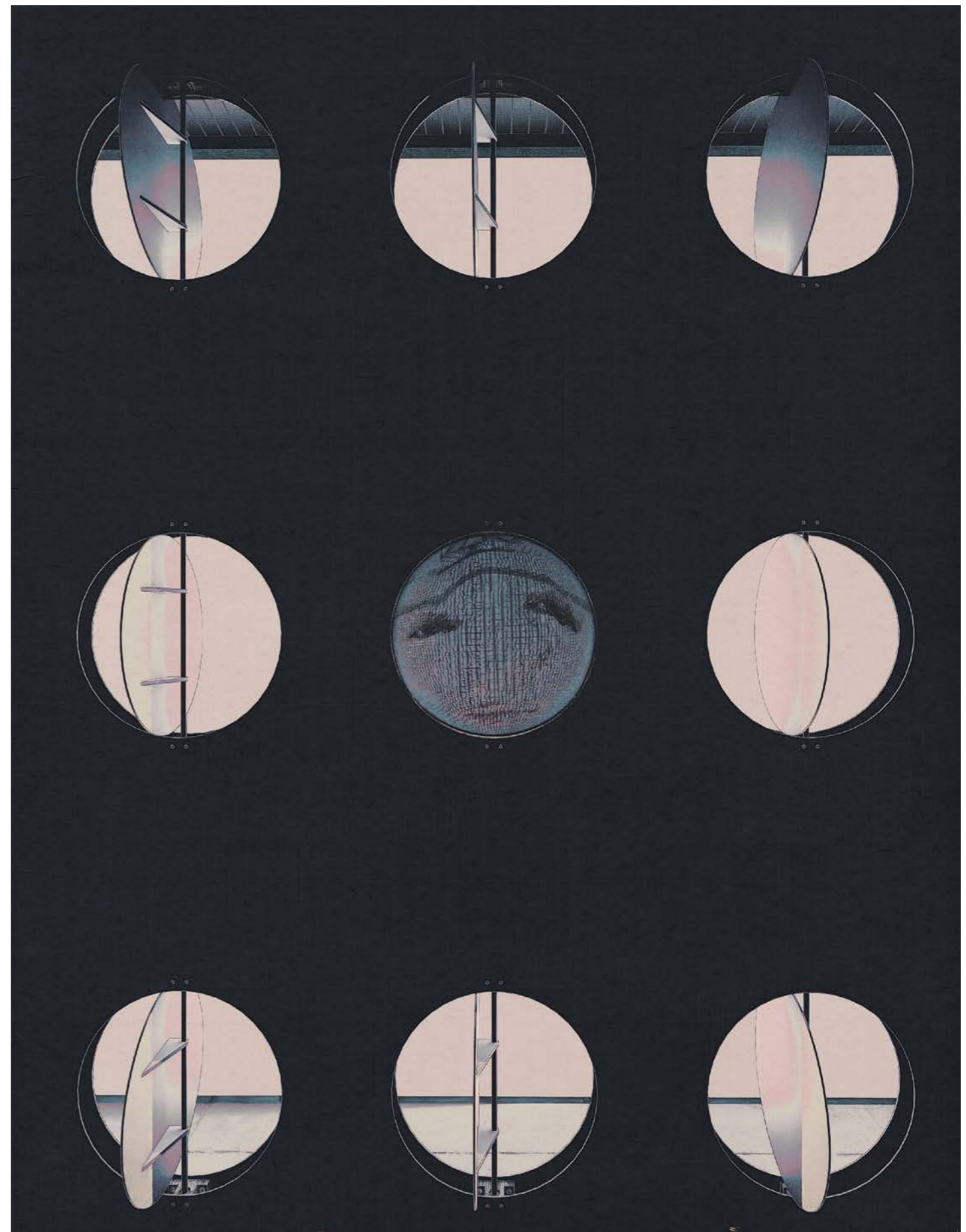
A mirror!

Its edge wasn't perfectly smooth, bearing the slight undulations of hand-casting, like solidified mercury. The surface clearly reflected my face at that moment – cheeks flushed with alcohol, eyes dazed and unfocused, a bitter, self-mocking twist to the lips, hair disheveled, sweat beading at the temples. This face, under the warm yellow light, surrounded by walls pinned with old clothes, holding ashes, plastered with memories, seemed so jarring, so alien, and yet so utterly real!

Boom!

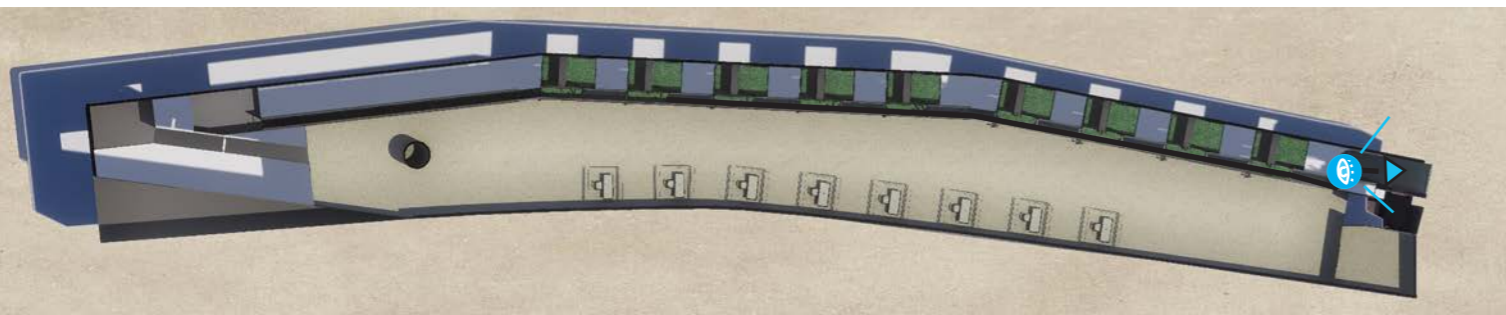
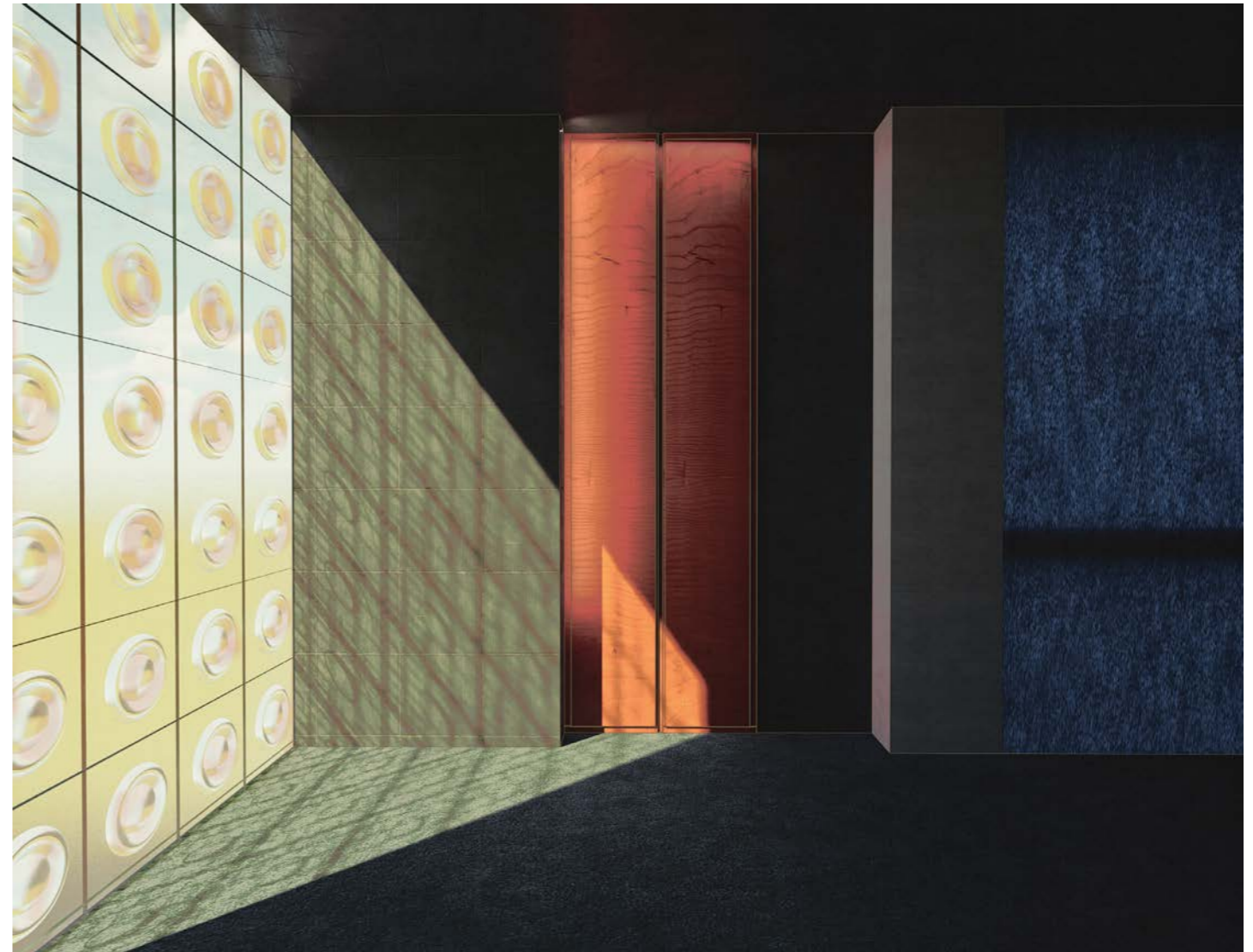
All sensations – the cold sand, the absurdity of discarded objects, the warmth of the bronze hands, the search for my friend's shadow, the burn of alcohol, the embrace of the walled memories, the internal monologue and dialogue – were sucked into an invisible black hole in that instant! All illusions, remembrances, whispered conversations with the dead were brutally interrupted, reclaimed, compressed by this cold mirror! Only myself remained. This face reflected in the round mirror – alive, drunk, bewildered – was the sole, undeniable reality within this black box. Death was theirs. And I was still here, gazed upon by my own image, filled with this fleeting, living dizziness.

Float Glass Substrate, 5mm thick, back-coated with vacuum-deposited aluminum and silica protective layer, circular cut 40cm, brushed brass frame



CHAPTER VII

In the end, I left nothing on that scribbled-over baseboard. My throat tightened, fingertips turned cold. In a state of sober daze, I pulled the rope inside the tombstone. The mechanical sound resumed. The massive black lid slowly rotated back, lifting, admitting the external gloom once more. At the platform's edge, the miniature hands with gold rings came back into view, appearing minuscule yet fiercely persistent against the backdrop of the abyss. Like a sleepwalker, I followed the bartender, silently passing back through the curtain of elastic straps, traversing the narrow passageway, descending once more in the elevator, crossing through the still-roaring, life-and-death intertwined Dionysian inferno, and finally returning to the tipsy warmth of the central triangular tavern.



CHAPTER VII

I approached the bar, ready to leave. The bottle of stored orange juice sat like a quiet taunt. I turned to the bartender behind the counter, his hairline now a receding snowfield, my voice hoarse as if hungover, yet carrying a barely perceptible resolve:
"That... could I store one more thing in his niche?"
The bartender's grey-white eyes turned to me, the frozen lake unrippled.
"Not juice," I added, fingertips unconsciously tapping the bar. "...a bottle of Sherry. Oloroso. Sweet enough."
The bartender paused in polishing a glass. He stared at me. In those grey-white eyes that seemed to pierce time, having witnessed countless life-and-death dramas, a ripple passed – infinitesimal, almost imperceptible, like a tiny pebble dropped onto a frozen lake. Then, he gave the faintest nod, his voice still flat, as if stating the most ordinary fact:
"Certainly. Someone once stored gravy."

*pan drippings from roast meat,
long-simmered bone broth,
emulsified butter, toasted flour
(roux), red wine or ale, salt,
black pepper, fresh rosemary,
fresh thyme, fine fat globules,
gelatinous molecules*

