

## Paintwork

Zane becomes animated in an attitude of loquacious concentration I've never seen him adopt before his paradoxically tattered canvases; paradoxical because savaged by his own hand, the same hand now laboring over the super-realist aesthetic with which his canvases shimmer. "So, like I was saying, you really ought to get that ball-peen hammer back." His apartment is alive with the buzzing of a half-dozen fans strategically placed to evacuate the fumes of paint and thinner. From time to time he scuttles around the West Philly apartment, checking the fans, his Mohawk ruffling in their wind. "Made by Zephyr Fan Company, Parma, Ohio," he tells me, wafting his stained fingers in the wash of cool air. They momentarily linger there, interweave with the red, white, and blue streamers he's attached to the fan's grille (to all the fans' grilles) that ripple and flutter in the artificial breeze. "Just like the appliance department at John Wannamaker's," he says, taking a can of WD-40 from a table littered with spent paint tubes and soiled rags; the black and white postcard, overpainted with green and red watercolor highlights, depicting a bearded Kirk Douglas aping Van Gogh in a cornfield populated by huge black crows in Hollywood's adaptation of *Lust for Life*; a half-empty bottle of Fresca; a number of brushes and putty knives showing various degrees of use; a John F. Kennedy half-dollar smudged with a purple thumbprint; a roll of toilet paper; a mason jar one-quarter filled with murky turpentine; a taco shell painted with the lifeforms of Joan Miro's imagination (a gift?); two bottles, one open, of ibuprofen tablets; and, at the same time curious and appropriate, nine clear marbles in which are suspended what appear to be plastic black ants. The WD-40 he applies to the pin-hole sized oiling orifice bored into the motor casing of the table-top Zephyr nearest the canvas. Zane bends and listens carefully as the fan oscillates from left to right and back again, then, satisfied, tosses the can of WD-40 back onto the table from which he'd plucked it and turns back to his work.

“Now, this canvas is made from human skin,” scratching his tattooed arm with the butt end of his brush. “It’s the latest thing: skin samples are taken from all kinds of famous people—television personalities, athletes, politicians. Hey, I’ve even heard a couple-three *artists* have prostituted their skin.” Eyes fixed on the canvas, his drawl lingeringly serves up every word with the same patient consideration he applies to his brushstrokes which, I’ve noticed, seem to come in mincing flurries of three or four following which come several more minutes of contemplation. I find watching him downright relaxing, a study in the application of craft, in the slow unwinding of an aesthetic wrought from the iron of color, light, shade, perspective. For his part, Zane never seems to mind the audience I provide him, though quite often the monologue accompanying his paintwork strikes me as surfeit imagery: the stuff crowded out of the canvas by his current preoccupation, or obsession. Sometimes I make notes of these sidebars of his and, when I hand them to him at the end of my visit, Zane, having recollected neither his imagistic riffing nor my dutiful stenography, is both astonished and grateful.

Zane tells me celebrities under contract as skin prostitutes command quite a price for the right to their cells. “The samples are grown in special cultures to dimensions specified by the artist. Processed and rushed by overnight courier, each of these things comes with a certificate of authentication from the Celebrity Skin Company of East Lansing, Michigan.” A few feathery passes in the lower right-hand quadrant. “These documents were developed with the aid of the American Kennel Association whose methods of ensuring pedigree are indisputably the best in the world.” *This* canvas, Zane assures me, has been grown from a sample offered up by Richard Milhouse Nixon, and he’s got the papers to prove it. I don’t question it.

But I do ask about the painting.

“Well, Jack, it’s like this. One day you find yourself gazing up at the day-glo yellow sign of the Rub Out the Word Bookstore; the one at 5th and South, not the one on Chestnut Street. You know they’ve got a belvedere on the second floor, overlooking the corner, where guys pretend to read while looking down the v-neck sweaters of the nubile who train it in from the

suburbs on Saturday afternoons. So you look up, nod at what's bound to be a familiar face, groove on the day-glo sign creaking in the wind on rusted hinges, think about how it reminds you of Captain Beefheart's electrified clarinet, which in turn reminds you of Buffalo Bob's clown pal Clarabel. You pause for a moment, right there on the corner, the tourists eyeballing you as they pass, shopping bags full of trinkets, fashion, and potential erudition; pizza, baba ghanoush, and two-two-two mints in one flavoring their tired breath. You wonder what ever became of Double Doody and about the market forces and technological avalanche that drove the fluoroscope into obsolescence. Much like I once speculated on the fate of Bob Crane, as was my wont, before that evil suicide afternoon—you *still* haven't filled me in on the gore, Jack—when you shattered my illusions about Colonel Hogan. At your feet: constellations of chewing gum. New ones every day. You unfold your map of the corner of 5th and South Streets and begin to sort them out. There's The Suicide's Crude Noose. And over there is The Pedantic Copula. There, The Lucidity and Elegance of Form. And, this being your day of good fortune, just beyond The Lucidity and Elegance of Form, you spot the triad: Crumbling Landscape, The Dutchman's Fatal Accident, and, a bit further beyond these, almost half-way to the traffic-light standard, Meat in the Icebox. You go on like this. Five days later you're feeling epicene, yet hirsute, and at the corners of your mouth tiny postcards from the Banque Nationale de Paris dry into something having the sanguine toothesomeness of graphite powder. All the while you cast furtive glances at the pornographic novel you picked up at Rub Out the Word." Brush brush brush. Zane's eyes never leave the canvas. Absently, he fishes for the ponytail that trails off the back of his Mohawk. It has a way of creeping up the back of his collar and dropping in as he angles his head this way and that to inspect his work.

"OK, sport, so you bought yourself a book. What are you going to do now? Take in a movie? Say, you *do* know how to make a decision.

"So, you strike off down South Street flipping quarters in the direction of the teenage punkers who train it in with the nubile from the suburbs at 9 a.m., train it home at 5 p.m.:

regular as a whole-wheat shit. You think: Anachronisms? Then you pause in front of the window of the Armadillo Gallery wishing you had enough spendolitas to take a piece home with you. But you've got your pornographic novel. *Wives of the Saints*, it's called. You pop into Dobb's for a quick beer. You check your watch and decide you have time for another. You think: Man, this is living. You order a bag of beer nuts. Hey, why *not* live it up? You tear open the cellophane bag with your teeth and pour the nuts into your trap. You chew. You sip beer. You listen to Frank Sinatra on the jukebox. A babe walks into the bar, sunlight stabbing through the open door. She's got on a short skirt slit up the thigh. You cast a sidelong glance. Not bad. You drain your beer, leave a tip, pick up your book and make your way to the door. On the way out, you examine a poster for the band called Chaos of Two. You make a mental note: you'd like to see them.

“Out in the street again, you squint. Eventually, your pupils get used to it. The muscles around your eyes relax. Soon enough you're in the Theater of the Living Arts, tenth row, third seat in from the aisle. You wait for the movie to begin, listen to a piped-in minimalist composition. Before long, your internal chant drives the music into the background: My name is Jack Ruineux. The house lights dim. Your chant goes on. The movie hits the screen. My name is Jack Ruineux. And don't *you* forget it.”

Brush brush. Brush brush brush. Zane is “in the zone” now, face so close to the canvas I would have no trouble believing, were I told, his breath dries the paint as he speaks. And though my pen has remained poised on the surface of my notepad during his interlude, a stray fact gurgles up from a long-lost fifth- or sixth-grade earth science class and spreads out onto the page: *Potholes form whenever water becomes trapped beneath road surfaces. During freezing periods, ice forms, and ice occupies more volume than water—it expands. That expansion puts pressure on materials, including paved surfaces. When the ice melts, roads can be undermined. With frequent rains, and frequent thawing and freezing, potholes can blossom.* That was the word: blossom: a scientific metaphor. What blossoms in the pothole of Zane's imagination is

the sharp-edged tendril of a narrative cutting too close to the bone, yet so vibrantly naive I almost yearn to bathe in the psychic blood it seems destined to draw. Brush brush.

“On screen, an old man steps through the door and into the night. There’s something so startlingly familiar. He could be your dead grandfather ... or father. He stops on the empty sidewalk, cups his hands, then places them over his nose and mouth. He breathes into them and surprise animates his face. His eyes widen and you can clearly see the web of capillaries branching out from his irises, tiny blood channels that disappear beneath his heavy lids. The irises are gray—blue gray—and it occurs to you that Jasmine probably wasn’t joking when she told you your blue eyes sometimes fade to gray. You draw a deep breath and blow the pangs out of your stomach. On the screen, the man now moves his cupped hands away from his face and there is a closeup of his crooked scar, a sliver of white flesh against the blotchy, flushed complexion of his bent nose.

“The old man starts walking. He turns south off Locust Street onto 10th. At Spruce he heads east, scuffing along the red brick sidewalk past the renovated townhouses with their quaint gas lamps flickering soft light. Almost *too* quaint, you think: the lonely footsteps of a solitary figure, the tapping of his steel-tipped cane, the watching eyes through parted curtains, the worn marble stoops, the window boxes bulging with dry, faded marigolds.

“At 5th Street, the old man turns south. Red brick sidewalks border gray cobblestone pavement. Everything glows orange beneath the halogen street lights. A wind kicks up rustling tattered posters glued to a wall at the corner of 5th and Lombard. The old man pauses in front of them. ‘Well, well. What’s this?’ he says. He reaches into his coat pocket and takes out a pair of rimless glasses. He unfolds them, puts them on. He reads: ‘Week of November 10th: The Enchanting Jasmine B.—Striptease and Ars Exotica. Only Philadelphia Performance. Trocadero, 10th and Arch.’ Tattered, washed out, the poster is composed in a style forty years out of date. Jasmine’s image is presented in a painting, not a photograph. She gazes out, defiant in her sequined gown, green eyes shining erotic, cigarette poised suggestively at pouting lips.

Her auburn hair is teased and wild. The gown clings to her, as if moistened by rain, offering a bold suggestion of the figure beneath. ‘Jasmine!’

“The old man pulls the knob off his cane. Attached is a slender, six-inch stiletto. He slips the blade under the upper left-hand corner of the poster and begins to peel it away from the wall. The perspective shifts. Now the old guy is scraping at nothing but the brick and mortar dulling his tricky blade. The camera lingers painfully on his efforts. Slowly, he comes to his senses. You feel relieved. He puts his cane back together, puts away his glasses, touches a hanky to the corners of his eyes, blows his nose. You smile as the old guy wanders off down 5th Street talking to himself: ‘You’re getting old, Jack,’ he says. ‘You’re getting old.’

“At 5th and South, the old man stops and nods to the mounted cop riding his beat. Where are all the people? you think. It’s just the old man and the cop. Snow begins to fall and the old man bristles against a cold wind. He looks at the sign hanging above him: ‘Locust Bar.’ It’s all so familiar. You feel as if you were there: booze-weary, slipping into dawn, spooked by the hush of Bainbridge Street in icy desolation. Blue shadows color the lonely store fronts. You’re ill-dressed, cold breath brittle in your cellophane lungs. Loose pages of the *Daily News* whip in swirls of stinging gusts—

““Hey, buddy, you want another beer or what?” The bartender intrudes on your daydream and eyes you suspiciously. You never really left, see? The bartender goes: ‘You alright?’

““Yeah, yeah,’ you say. ‘I’m alright.’ You tell him: ‘Sure, I’ll have another.’

“At the end of the bar, an old coot is winding up a joke: ‘So the harelip says to the bartender: your *nose*? I thought it was your *dick*, your nuts are so high.’ The old coot laughs, his buddy laughs, the bartender laughs, the babe in the skirt laughs.

“*You* laugh.”

Out here in West Philly, the sky opens like a vast blue umbrella, sometimes gray, that can distract me from its general air of physical corruption, the ghosts of 1940s suburbanites, the swath of vice that cut its way along the westward reaching arm of the Market-Frankford Elevated

to its 69th Street terminus in Upper Darby. It's a far cry from that portion of the city between the Schuylkill and the Delaware over which the umbrella of sky remains, at best, only partially open and even then is little more than ribs, shaft, and handle. Broken, unadorned, the citified ribs of sky spike down to catch you unaware in the narrow streets and, perhaps, it's this unexpected intrusion that leaves the citizenry agitated and prone to bottled inner dialogues pressurized by CO<sub>2</sub>. The West Philadelphia sky, however, its light pouring now through Zane's window to illuminate his canvas, catches every hissing thing that fissures in the hairline fractures of *la vie quotidienne*; gathers all up to cool and expand beneath its reassuring meniscus. Imagery and form pressurized, distorted, expanded: Zane's method: the pothole technique blossoming right here in a one-bedroom apartment on Baring Street.

"Jasmine," he says. At first I mistake this for an afterthought, Zane's one-word summation of the monologue he appears to have brought to a conclusion. Walking around him, however, gazing at the canvas, I find upon it no trace of her. Rather, and this startles, the canvas seems to have nothing to do with Jas and everything to do with *me*. And it makes all the sense in the world when Zane sets down his brush, pops a couple ibuprofen from the open bottle, plucks a warm can of Fresca from the case beneath his easel, washes down the tablets, and opens up.

Jasmine, Zane tells me, has been worried. She's been calling him. Over lunches and numerous cups of coffee at the Rub Out the Word Café, they've met to discuss the change that seems to have come over me, a change that's landed me in what they call my "bubble," or, sometimes, more elaborately—and, really, I have to understand the lighthearted spirit masking the truly deep concern with which this was intended—my "Iron Maiden on Wheels." Approachable, yet not capable of being touched, sometimes distorted by a pained, constipated expression, I seem to them always one layer removed; within myself; lights on—Jack not home. What ever happened, Zane asks, to the days when we'd hop the Broad Street Line down to St. Monica's and bowl a few frames in the community center basement? Tuesday Night Bowling was a regular tradition, especially during those months after Zane and I had lost our jobs as

headhunters for Pergolisi, Giovanni, and Battista and were padding our unemployment checks with under-the-table bartending jobs at The Kennel Club. Jas, fresh from having left the exotic limelight at Danny Boy's, would tag along and tell us how her boss at Rosencrantz Travel was going to make all the secretaries dress up like little Dutch girls—pigtailed, clogs, aproned dresses cut slightly above modesty-level—for a KLM promo. Zane talked about painting, he reminds. I talked about writing. Jas: photography. But the fact that none of us were doing any of it didn't matter. More of the grape! Now, Zane says, Jas is telling him I've become distracted, depressed, convinced I'm destined to live out some sort of self-fulfilling prophesy as a failed writer, at best; a ventman, at worst. What the hell's all this? He's constructed a theory that ties it all back to the suicide I watched from the window of my breakfast nook. Nobody, he says, can see something like that and come out of it unbent. You have to talk it out, man, he says.

Zane steps aside from the canvas and begins to screw the lids back onto his tubes of paint. An airbrush, he tells me, is what he really needs. With what strikes me as a studied lack of concern, he drops his brushes and putty knife into the jar of turpentine, then reaches through the open window to set it on the ledge. Making for himself an impromptu game he tosses, one by one, the tubes of paint into their appropriate pigeonholes on the trays folding out of the tackle box he uses to store his supplies. The unused brushes and putty knives, not offering the same sort of challenge, he places gently in the box's main compartment. Then he closes the fisherman's box, fastens its latch, and flops down on the chair in which I'd been sitting only moments before. I sit down, too, on the floor, legs drawn up toward me, arms folded over them, an elbow at each knee. My back rests against the section of wall below his window and, when I allow my head to drop forward so as to rest my chin (a failure: I only end up hooking my nose on my right forearm), my spine digs into the uneven plaster.

If I raise them, my eyes meet the canvas. If I close them, it doesn't matter: the canvas forms a screen between Zane and me. For several minutes we say nothing. There is only the buzz of the oscillating fans. And I almost come to believe Zane has disappeared—or at least



fallen asleep—but, when he brings down the heel of his hand on a roach moseying across the pitted hardwood floor, the rap falls like a call to order and I clear my throat. Having alluded to it earlier, I know what Zane’s expecting. He doesn’t have to ask. Sooner or later, he knows, I’ll get around to telling him about what I saw out my window that day, there in the courtyard: that ugly contortion of despair-made-man Zane himself might have witnessed had he stuck around. It’s a story he’s heard second-hand—and edited—from Jasmine, but the feature-length version is what he’s after. Part of me would like to indulge him but, ever since having confided in Jasmine, I’ve been even more reluctant to dredge that episode up. It’s left me with too many so-called issues I’ve yet to “work through,” not the least of which is that my telling of the incident—the story I made of it in answer to Jasmine’s challenge—left me more troubled than my experience of the incident itself. Detached in the face of that crushing self-slaughter, I feel the pangs these days of a latent panic, an anxiety surrounding my memory of the telling, a telling which, for me, has become entirely indistinguishable from the way things *must* have happened in that ratty courtyard behind my building.

The mind, I tell myself, fills in many gaps; has many ways of walling in, ghettoizing its more undesirable elements. Still, knowing this, I insist on wearing some Führer’s New Suit of (ir)rationality that allows me to be puzzled at my detachment in the face of horror. Or is it that I turn, on the mind’s lathe, enough truncheons to beat the Undesirable into the shadows? Does the mind engage in such thuggism against itself? Better start shooting off your mouth, Ruineux; dodge the mind’s nightsticks before they give you an answer.

“Our soft dirty faces,” I say, launching into a story, a memory, neither Zane nor I was expecting, “were lost in shadows cast by the brims of the Army surplus helmet liners we wore and, though we liked to pick out a blotch and call it a blood stain, we knew the liners never made it to Anzio or Iwo or the Bridge at Remagen. Earnest in our war games, Stewy and I kicked through the thistle and skunk cabbage, clutched toy M-1 rifles as we skulked beneath the shabby clump of trees in the undeveloped lots at the end of our dead-end street. The “woods,” we called

it or, in winter especially, “the Ardennes,” and in so doing made the place our Bulge. Warrior-explorers, we hacked away at the undergrowth, yet, though they wound labyrinthine, every new path we cut seemed to funnel us to another back yard. But it was the theater of our youth, a stage on which we could be grenade-hurling heroes, never mind our helmet liners made us more a kind of caricature of Madison Avenue advertising: cute Green Giant straw mushrooms (the ochre headgear describing an abstract mushroom cap) that could walk and talk.” I can only guess, as I’m telling him all this, at Zane’s now-and-then furrowed brow of concentration, appreciative nod of shared experience, or smirk of impatience. An audience of one I cannot see, he’s there for me only in a vague, Radioland way that lubricates my memory at the same time as it swallows my words. And if it *is* faint snoring I’m beginning to hear from the other side of the canvas, so much the better.

“Tired of pushing it out of his eyes, Stewy pitched his helmet liner on the ground. Something flat and rigid beneath the carpet of moldering leaves sent it skidding and, falling to his knees, he began to pry from the dirt an old piece of plywood. As he did, dozens of surprised potato bugs, a loping daddy long legs, and three crazy, red centipedes scurried, loped, zigzagged for some new cover beneath the shadow of what we now could see was some kind of sign. Stewy fought with the board while I smashed at the insects with the butt of my M-1. Their milky carcasses I tried to scrape off, but only succeeded in smearing them into balls of dirt that clung to the wooden stock of my rifle toy. I ended up using the sole of my boot to brush the muck away, then propped my M-1 against a sapling, the barrel resting in its only crotch to form an awkward tripod. Meanwhile, Stewy’d freed the hunk of plywood from the ground and we set about brushing away the clinging leaves and dirt.

“Excavations and discoveries of this sort frequently interrupted our wars, the most inconsequential junk stealing the thunder from a flanking action on Piper’s SS tank corps, an assault on a German artillery installation in Bastogne, a firefight near Cologne. Or the time we were the victims of the Malmédy Massacre and merely lay there in the snow for half an hour

trying out the various contortions of death until our teeth started to chatter and give us away. There were stray items of soiled clothing: orphan socks or the occasional and titillating pair of lace-edged panties; the broken hammer we used in a makeshift game, the object of which was to hurl the head and broken handle through a rotted 50-gallon drum from a distance of about fifteen yards (we played until the drum was little more than a jagged pile of rust); disappointing boxes and trunks, because empty, and equally disappointing girlie books, because welded into an unperusable, papier maché mass by rain and sun. Occasionally there were little piles of children's feces that both disgusted and fascinated, or the skeletons of rabbits who, we assumed, couldn't outsmart the neighborhood cats. Then, too, there were 'forts' and lean-tos constructed by kids from neighborhoods on the other side of the woods whom we didn't know, but whose intrusion on our shadowy world warranted a for-real attack: a sacking of the forts, and, once, with an aspirin bottle filled with charcoal fluid and some matches snatched from who knows where, a torching of the enemy lean-to.

“Striated where moisture had caused the outer ply to warp, the board, which was raw with rot on one side was, on the other, painted white. Over the whitewash, in swirling strokes of blue, were words that appeared to have been written with a brush too large to have done the job neatly. MINUTES TO GO! it said, letters sloppy and quick, perhaps slapped down urgently. It bore the mark of a sign maker whose hand still shook with the excitement of having smashed every clock and watch in his home, of having burned calendars and photographs, any reminder of the notion of time; a cleansing fire set hastily, perhaps in the barbecue pit. He singed his fingers doing this, no doubt (we were convinced it had been a man), and only then noticed the dead skin flaking away from his cuticles, the gray hairs on his knuckles, the torn, yellowed, ridged fingernails that revealed to him the ultimate timepiece: the human body. Dismayed, self-immolation occurred to him, as did sleeping pills and Dewars scotch, as did rollercoaster rides on Coney Island and apricot preserves spread over a Sunday English muffin. Of none of this could

we be sure, and most of it is mortar between the bricks of memory, but I've often wondered about the maker of that cryptic sign.

"I took off my helmet liner and smoothed back my sweaty hair. Looking up into the trees, I noticed, hovering in their highest, most delicate branches, a bicycle tire that had been flung there to burn a tired "O," a forlorn zero against the blinding afternoon sun. Geometric in the twining limbs, it was an artifact of a giant's frustrated ring toss, a target inviting rounds fired from our homespun slingshots, our bamboo lances, or, simply, the rock nearest to hand. I felt sad looking up at the thing, or so I remember feeling sad, so I claimed the sign for my own. That was something. Proudly I marched with the thing, right down Lyle Drive, balancing it on my helmeted head.

"What the hell is this?" said Antoniozzi when I slipped through the hedgerow with the cruddy hunk of wood. 'Minutes to Go!' I shouted. I wanted him to have the sign: he should hang it in his greenhouse above the flats of plum tomatoes and Hungarian peppers. Towering above me, Antoniozzi puffed at the cigar jabbing out the corner of his mouth, fingered the gray stubble under his chin. Then, his face widening to an uneven grin, he reared back laughing so hard he started to choke and had to spit the cigar out onto the ground. 'That's a good one!' he said, catching his breath. 'That's a good one.'

"Antoniozzi seemed cued in to a joke I didn't get, but I had to laugh myself, if only at the spectacle he created. So much of what I remember about him was like this; his laughter or amusement over something I'd done, was doing, was planning to do. A grandfather figure inviting me to join him in his backyard puttering, in the horticultural alchemy with which he occupied his time in the "greenhouse," the architectural idiosyncrasy of which inspired the scorn of neighbors who never quite succeeded in convincing the municipal powers-that-be to force him to tear the thing down. We planted snap peas and dug a horseshoe pit—and sanitized soil by boiling it in a 50-gallon drum over a fire made with logs hewn from the dead apple tree he'd finally chopped down. 'I'll tell you what, Jackie,' he said. 'We'll hang the thing up in the

greenhouse just like you want.’ And then he sent me away with a basket of tomatoes and zucchini, things he’d grown, telling me to take it home to my mother. ‘She’s a good girl,’ he said, and it struck me as odd he should think of my mother as a girl.

“When I got home I found my mother bent over the kitchen sink, silent, holding a pot and scrub brush above the soapy water. ‘Go see your father,’ she said, not bothering to turn around.

“‘I got some zucchini from Mr. Antoniozzi,’ I said, pleased at the sing-song.

“‘I think he’s upstairs,’ said my mother.

Could it be that there really was a broken gin bottle in the guts of father’s spinet? or is this the embellishment of a mind once again seeking to mortar the gaps in a wall of fading memory? without having to try too hard I can see myself alone in the living room of boyhood, gaping at the piano. So many nights I’d watched my father sit at it after dinner, staring at the page of sheet music, smoking his cigarette with gravity and concentration, sipping from the glass he kept parked next to his ashtray. It wasn’t as if he were studying the music—the songs he played were never the “Lamplighter’s Serenade” printed on the dusty manuscript that sat open on the music stand for as long as I could remember; so long it seemed no different to me than one of the frumpy doilies mother set about the house under lamps or ashtrays or candy dishes. I could never be sure what he was thinking as he sat there smoking but always, after five or ten minutes, he would spring to life and start banging away at the galloping series of tunes he kept stored in his head, elbows seemingly pumping out the words as he sung those old songs of his in that hoarse, tired voice. But now the piano’s lid was thrown open, broken off its hinges; wet glass clinging in the rows of piano wire; felt-covered hammers broken like teeth in the skull of some extinct musical beast. A familiar aroma filled the room and, as I stood there, twisting pine trees and burning juniper bushes began to grow right out of the spinet’s gaping mouth. They burst through the wire with awful pings and twangs, cracked the cheep wood out of which the spinet

was slapped together. The trees dripped tar onto my tongue that stung my throat, gave off fumes that made my eyes burn as their branches smashed out the windows and bored through the ceiling into the rooms above. Plaster fell and the whole house shook and I was afraid, but even my fear couldn't overcome the curiosity that compelled me to dip a finger in the teaspoon of liquid cupped in an arc of broken bottle, to touch the finger to my tongue. I remembered, then, a livingroom carpet game played with father. "Roll over," he'd said. "Come on, Jackie. Roll over boy!" I laughed and obeyed, a family pet, and marveled that father could make his words smell like the stuff mother used to mop the kitchen floor.

Frightened, picking my way over the twisted trunks of juniper and scrub pine, careful not to step on the broken glass, I started creeping up the staircase of that old white frame house of ours. Half-way up the stairs, I saw what had never been rubbed away: a streak of father's blood on the papered wall. It made me remember the musty night my brother'd slugged father, shoved him into a chest of drawers so hard it crashed to the floor. I locked myself in the bedroom that night, sat there in the dark. Mother flew around the house screaming, "Just like your father, Jack. You're just like your father." Out my window, I could see Claire sneaking a cigarette in the back yard. "He hit me, Jean," I heard Father say to Mother as he thumped down the stairs. I was still watching out the window when my brother ran out of the house, suitcase under his arm. He jumped in his car, drove away, and that was that.

---

"Tracing that ridge of blood with my finger," I say to Zane, wondering, now, just how much of the grotesquerie playing out in my mind has filtered into what I've been telling him, "I remembered that night my brother fled the Ruineux nest, and I shivered. On my knees, still thinking of it, I climbed the stairs like an acolyte, held on to the bannister, edged my way to my

parents' room. Unbelievable, how much it dappled the walls and carpet, spattered the window and bedspread—the blood, and all the rest. Somehow, one of my mother's perfume bottles had been broken and the whole room stank of it. He's dead, I thought. Rising, I crept to the corner of my parent's bed and peeked over. There, on the floor beside the bed, one arm lying to his side, the other, Colt loose in its fist, the silent pistol still raised toward the horrible, bloodied mask, father lay dead. Horrible and dead. I can't remember how long I stood there, gazing at him, dust glinting in the sunlight that flooded the bedroom window. It was a policeman who led me away, I think.

“Later, when the ambulance left, its red light was flashing, but its siren was silent.”

Having let loose with this *dissecta membra*, I begin to experience the acute pang of disappointment over once again discovering just how exaggerated are the claims made for the restorative powers of catharsis. Yet, even though the walls of Zane's apartment—not to mention the tattered canvas baring his unfinished work—close in on me like a garbage truck, the sun slicing through the window reassures as it warms the back of my neck. Zane, perhaps a bit puzzled over this unexpected suicide, one having nothing to do with the one outside my apartment window; a suicide about which he knew nothing, about which I'd never before spoken, except to Jas (and then in only the most elusive terms), Zane rises from the armchair, shrugs a shrug that looks more like a flinch, shakes his head in a way that's not quite a “No,” not quite a “Shame on you,” and sits back down. “Man alive,” he says, finally, the irony of his words failing to occur to him. Then: “Fathers.” Claustrophobia gurgles for a moment in the funnel of my throat as I draw upon the sun's comfort to steel me in my battle against the canvas, my effort to force back the narrowing walls. Eventually, the choked, stifled, panicky sensation gives way to the relative comfort of mild embarrassment, and Zane rebuffs the apology I manage for having been so stupid as to subject him to the fidget-making voodoo of the intensely personal gut-spill. Convinced that it's done me some good, and moved that I should share something so dark, hushed, gelid, he gets up and actually insists on a hug! So, I get up and give Zane his hug;

a brotherly thing involving much back-slapping and serious-for-a-moment reassertions that each of us is “the best, man.” It culminates with a high-five handshake, then we each crack open a Fresca. Savoring the Fresca’s saccharine tang, I allow my eyes to wander over the unfinished canvas.

Though it’s really a matter of conjecture at this point, I imagine my image will be submerged in some kind of heavy, functional architecture—a parking garage, maybe—laced with steel girders and thick pipes that creep up the tarnished brick and bend, here and there, at right angles. In one of the city’s hundreds of testicles I’m captured, mid-stride, emerging from behind a wall around which a concrete exit ramp curves: slipping through the vas deferens along which is carried a sperm of aluminum and fiberglass, rubber and steel: an opening-out toward the bottom of the frame from a point just left of center. From structures such as this technology fertilizes the ova of the city with ejaculations that percolate liquid horn blasts, sirens and untuned engines. Redolent of carbon monoxide, the ejaculate flows freely from this complex of concrete slabs and columns encasing, no doubt, skeletons of I-beams and reinforcing rods. If a faint, dotted line were added, bisecting the image on an angle running from the top left corner of the canvas to the bottom right corner, it would describe a border along which can be seen a subtle gradation of color—from the oxide brown of the lower left portion of the work to the amber surrounding the ceiling light fixtures that appear in the near-extreme upper right-hand corner. Swirls of soft shadow trace the exit ramp curve on which, in mid-stride, I’m depicted. They alternate with grainy smears of red-brown. Together, these effect an appearance that the surface along which I’m walking is not the concrete exit ramp of a parking garage, not the vas deferens of an enormous testicle, but, rather, one of the luminous rings of Saturn. Suspended there, my image is little more than a shadow, but enough detail remains to discern the rolled sleeves of my shirt, the buckles glinting in the dark smear of my boots, and the leather jacket hanging loose



(scraping the concrete, as a matter of fact) in my left hand. My silhouette contrasts starkly with the illuminated wall of yellow brick against which it's foregrounded. Owing to bulky support structures bearing the weight of the parking decks above, the amber light strikes the wall indirectly and seems to accent the recessed lines of mortar which appear as sharp dark grooves scored perpendicular into the soft yellow brick. Curiously, against this careful pattern of masonry, there are faint, semi-luminous amber lines that describe no particular pattern and which very well may have been drawn on with chalk, a chalk now fading; dulled, perhaps, by auto emissions. Two rectangular columns and a beam supporting the parking deck above combine to form a post and lintel. It frames this section of wall along which runs a large red pipe that appears to emanate from behind the column at the left and which cuts along the wall to a point exactly half-way between the two columns. An elbow joint directs it downward to a point in the wall two feet above the curb of the exit ramp at which point another elbow joint, complicated with a large valve that's been chained and padlocked in place, directs the pipe into (or through) the wall. Still discernible along the extreme left border of the piece, which has been left mostly in darkness, is the frame tubing and chain-link grid of a fence separating the interior of the garage from a poorly lighted alleyway. In this darkened zone, attached to yet another heavy, rectangular column, is a green directional arrow pointing to the left—as if indicating my silhouette striding along the exit ramp.

The overall effect is one of quietude. It belies the hiss of hydraulic brakes on 10th Street, the blast of jets cruising their parabolas into Philadelphia International, the shouts and laughter of agitated drunks, the sobs of abandoned lovers, the streams of urine staining walls couched in shadow, the slap of high-fiving hands. Only hinted at is the internal chatter of two million minds, the reflections of headlights riding the walls of claustrophobic apartments, the blinking red warning lights on the pinnacles of office towers, the young woman on Chestnut Street who drops a handful of change that quarks all over the sidewalk as if only to enjoy stamping them

into stillness with her sneakered foot. Or what about the young man on Broad who stoops to tie his sleepy child's shoe? And the harmonica man: he must be taken seriously.

Follow him after the office blue and sharply creased pinstripe have all bunnyhopped away in their nurse-white athletic shoes to the busses cars trains in which they slumber or compute toward home and hearth. The harmonica man will undo the padding from his thigh, fold it with love, and stuff it deep into the pocket of his stained trousers. From the soup can he will pour coin and paper into a small woman's purse, a "pillbox" he's rescued from the dumpster behind the Saint George Diner on 7th Street. Into the breast pocket of his sooty jacket he'll slip the Hohner and the spoons, but only after having wrapped them in a surprisingly crisp and clean handkerchief. Then, with a sigh of resigned contentment, he'll pick the milkcrates off the sidewalk and start up 5th Street past the Liberty Bell, where it rests in its plexiglass sepulcher. In Sansom Alley he'll stash the crates in a niche against the Lafayette Building, cover them with protective layers of cardboard against the oily offerings of pigeons. Hands in pockets, a pillbox full of coin slung over his shoulder, he'll shuffle up to Arch, to the section in the brick wall surrounding Christ Church Burial Ground that's been knocked out and replaced with a wrought iron picket that allows a view of Ben Franklin's grave. There Liadov scratches with his Glinka's detached fake leg, reaches through the iron bars that separate him from the coins pitched to Poor Richard. With whispered wishes, the Russian fumbles with the plastic (still bundled in Glinka's raggy sock and the vestige of her shoe), works the coins from the memorial slab toward his blunt fingers. Propped against the Christ Church Burial Ground wall, Liadov manipulates the prosthetic rake, a croupier of destitution, while his old girl, Glinka, plies her half-a-leg against the conscience of the stray passerby, the wayward after-dark sightseer, the soft touch straining to make out the inscription on the tomb. The harmonica man will offer them half his take and tell them: "Tonight, at the Delaware, you'll sleep. With something in your gut, lying soft on a municipal bench, the river will cradle you and sing you its lullaby. Lost in moondreams, you'll be, hovering above the withered shadow of Camden, the tugs and freighters, the motor boats

bumping over night wakes, the lights of the high-speed train gliding the arc of the Ben Franklin Bridge.”

So much phenomena this image implies.

---

“Alright, says Jasmine, “you can move.” The time-exposure has been made and already she’s breaking down her tripod, returning the Praktiflex to her duffel. A comfortable languor informs her movements as she rearranges the contents of the bag, holding momentarily one object, then the next, in her upturned palm, savoring its heft. Ruineux, she must be thinking, will appear as nothing more than a shadow, even after a twenty-second exposure: a mere suggestion of the human floating in a muted, shadowy spectrum of grainy, oxide-brown and tarnished gamboge. A silhouette walking through wan light, Ruineux is a silhouette in his own imagination: identity and history a cool star in the universe of myth into which he’s projected himself. I can’t touch him.

She folds up the duffel, fastens the snap, and throws it over her shoulder. The tripod she leaves for me. As we exit the parking garage, she puts an arm around my waist and we head off down Mole Street beneath the halogen lamps. There, in the grid of Philadelphia, we pause beneath a tall Victorian window in which glow neon signs of red, blue, and green: Psychic Advisor. Palm Reading. Tarot Cards. “You were on Mars,” she says, perhaps referring to my torpor in front of the lens. She lays her hand against my face. “There’s something more; something impossible.” Her palm is warm against my cheek, fingers reading its topology with petite, questing caresses that sigh. Meeting mine, her eyes do not search: they are answers. On the breath that butterflies between our lips flutter the unasked questions. Bringing her other hand to my face, she strokes softly with her thumb my lips and the tip of my nose. “I never dreamed of nights like this when I was a kid,” says Jasmine. “The nights I dreamed of sparkled with

moon dust on a Scottish hillside; me high-stepping through dewy gorse in big rubber boots.”  
She drops her hands and rests them on my hips, gives a playful squeeze. And, for a moment, the future seems to me impossibly, optimistically dim.