

## III

**Kimono of Pity**

In general, there's nothing interesting to see: a block of Spruce Street in West Philadelphia lined with plane trees and the frumpy Chevys, Fords, and Chryslers parked beneath them. Though the sky is cloudless (except for the wisp of vapor forming itself into the shape of those fluted ashtray stands they used to park around the lobby of the Milner Hotel), there are few people trotting the walk. And not one of them trips over the slab that's been pushed up from below by vigorous roots. A station wagon, maroon, which if it weren't so bloated looks as though it might have been made in some industrial backwater (Bulgaria, maybe), wafts by in a cloud of chugging exhaust. Not surprisingly its bumper is held on with several twists of rope. A figure appears in the doorway of the apartment building at number 4529. Black jeans, heavy boots, white shirt with sleeves rolled above the elbow: it could be anybody. But it isn't anybody, this time. Naturally, it's Ruineux. Yawning, scratching himself, puffing dramatically on a cigarette as he scuffs out to the sidewalk, he pauses long enough to eye the mutt that's just popped onto the walk from between two of the parked jalopies. The mutt stops too, looking up at Ruineux, panting that lazy pant children often call a "smile" and which Ruineux, I'm sure, still does. Evidently the mutt, as mangy strays so often do, has appealed to Ruineux's sense of the cute. Good doggie. Throwing his cigarette aside, he bends down to pet the flea-ferry which responds with a sneaky lip-lick from which Ruineux recoils. Offended, he wipes the mutt juice into the shoulder of his shirt while doggie wanders off

happily down the sidewalk. If I didn't already have a headache, the thumping banality of all this would certainly give me one.

And now he's walking back into the narrow patch of grass between his dumpy building and the sidewalk. Sure enough, he bends down to pick the still-lit cigarette from the patchy sod, scrutinizes the butt before pulling off it one last drag. Then he tries to flick the butt away with the tips of his fingers, but it only backfires into his chest and catches on the lip of his breast pocket. Good god. Ruineux starts jumping around, slapping at his chest. Yes, he's burned himself, shaking the fingers of his right hand as what's left of the ember lies cooling at his feet. Doubled over, hands on knees, he pulls himself together before straightening up and sucking the welt on his right middle finger. Poor baby. But he's O.K. Smiling to himself, he picks the scorched filter from out of his pocket and flips it over his shoulder, wipes his fingers on his jeans, blesses himself (he does!), and scuffs off up the sidewalk toward Farragut Street. Behind him, a scrawny pigeon (skyrat, to him) flutters to earth shedding dirty feathers and god knows what all. The thing struts around, looks this way and that with its awful yellow eyes, then beaks the cigarette filter and swallows it whole. Disgusting.

None of this hasn't already been described to me by Ruineux on one occasion or another. Like on those nights we sit up trading stories and lies until the moon goes out or we nod off to La La Land. Sometimes Zane and I get together and compare notes. We're infected. I'm telling you Jas, he's got me painting his stories, Zane says, but in a way that comes off more like: That guy's driving me outa my nut. Ruineux's monologues have gotten so far under Zane's skin that his paintings are becoming little more than illustrations of them. Even had him playing out that Celebrity Skin routine. And the fans: for a while, Zane only thought "Zephyr" when beginning a new painting. "Who ever heard of the Zephyr Fan Company?" Yeah, I say, he's got the bombasts. Ruineux's phrase, it usually comes to me through the telephone receiver: I'm following giraffe

spoons into the belly of a fat man, Jas: I gots the bombasts. Said in that affected Okie gibberish fake dialect he can sometimes muster, the words either charm me out of my disappointment over a broken night out, or convince me he's following those spoons around the bend for good. Just let him go, I tell myself. Let him purge. Then, when it's over, he'll show up with a two-day beard, looking like hell and pleading for a bowl of cornflakes, but at least he'll be himself again. Or, sometimes beyond himself: downright giddy. Like the time I installed him in the bathtub, with bubbles even, a big fat cigar and a tumbler of iced Banker's Club in his fist. Kingly, he was his own jester as he lolled in the frothy water, repeating the word "diarrhea" which, evidently, amused him no end (to judge by his snorting fits of laughter). When he's calmed down, there's no shutting him up. Trouble is, I often find myself liking the residual bombast. It is, after all, him. A him I'm coming more and more to see not as self-pitying or, worse, self-exalting, but self-less. Maybe that's the point of the page after page of typer paper he claims to be filling. *Those* he's not too crazy about sharing, the pages that constitute that thing he calls his "*meisterwerk*," but he's almost come to love delivering a private oration now and then, me on hand to lend an ear. Lately I've even been challenging, winding him up like a tin monkey to see just what he can do without the typer in front of him. It's worth it just for the preface, the pacing around the floor, the pulling-me-in: "I'm a-gonna placate me some gods," he says. "I'm a-gonna exorcise me some demons." He has to make it a joke at first, no matter what follows. And the Ruineux rap that follows is like a shower of spent toilet rolls, some of which have taped to the inside of them a toy surprise, some of which are empty, some conceal a lewd thought, others a lofty aspiration, some this, some that. What a pleasure to peel the rolls open and swim around on a pile of cardboard corkscrews. It can be morbid, sensuous, embarrassing, arousing, and sad all at one time. And I like it. After a night like that I walk around for days, talking to myself and getting answers in Ruineuxese. Oh god, no need to gush, Jasmine!

Even more so than usual, Farragut Street is a mess. There's a heroic shabbiness, today; in the unevenness of the sidewalk, in the weeds and grass crabbing up from the cracks and fissures, in the occasional and the obscene: the large turd decorating the sidewalk on which he's almost stepped and which, he hopes to god, was deposited by one of the neighborhood *dogs*. Pyramids of plastic trash bags crop up here and there: the sanitation workers strike is in full bloom. And so is a mid-June heatwave: ninety degrees the predicted high. Perfect. With only one cloud in the sky, the afternoon sun beats down on his blond head and begins to sear the back of his neck. Ah, what the hell, he thinks. He likes it. Plenty of time to get sick of the heat, it isn't even summer yet. Roach weather's coming on, though, and with this strike their matchbox hotels will be booked solid. He thinks back, as he walks, to the handwritten sign he taped to the wall in the little alcove by the fire escape well: *Please do not leave your trash in the hall as it makes our already annoying roach problem even more of a dirty nightmare*. It did the job. Could have been any or all of them—the Korean family at the front end of the hall; Ernestine the alcoholic nurse's aid; Theona, who says she's a part-time student at Temple; Richard the Ruineux-don't know-what-he-does—any or all of them loading up that alcove with their trash. But they get the gold star. They stopped depositing that crap in the hall. Who cares? The roaches own that joint anyway.

Unlike his Vendig Hotel, to which the exterminators pay thorough and regular visits in this or that scenario he's tried out on me. Come to think of it, I wouldn't be at all surprised if the Vendig *was* exterminated more frequently than that creepy joint of his out in West Philly. Some fairly dignified looking blue-hairs walker their way out the Vendig's side door. They don't look the type that would put up with what I imagine they'd euphemize into *palmetto bugs*. And at least one denizen was deemed worthy of a delivery of roses carried right though that revolving door, the Vendig's main entrance. Or was it lilies? Whichever, the Vendig, like the people who seem to live there, has a

disheveled aspect the eccentricity of which is to convey a mannered decline while alluding to a latent dignity. Ruineux simultaneously declines to convey and alludes to a disheveled eccentricity. I've as much as *not* told him this once or twice, for variety. That either put the idea in his head that my patience with him was running thin or that I was feeling neglected, because on each occasion we ended up at the Marrakech, lounging on low cushions and indulging ourselves in the semi-darkness of a semi-private dining table: generally soaking up the semi-authenticity of the place. Sometimes I think one of his misconceptions is that the Marrakech is the *only* restaurant I like. It's the only restaurant he'll suggest (even when he doesn't think I've had it with him, or that I'm feeling particularly neglected). No matter, I love the Marrakech: slow self-indulgence is always the best kind and that place knows how to help you do it right. The *kefta tagine*, the roasted lamb, the lamb *brewats* are all enough to kill for. As is the smugly jealous frown Ruineux can't help when the waiter, invariably a dark-eyed Moroccan boy-toy, washes my hands between courses.

But I know he likes Vietnamese, so tonight I'll suggest the Lemon Grass. Sure, yesterday it was Marrakech this and Marrakech that, but I'm really in the mood for some hot and sour soup and I'm not about to settle for anything else. And spring rolls: we'll have to get the spring rolls. I'll pick up the Chinatown tabs we run, my treat tonight. Why not? We'll traipse all over the place like American Legionnaires and maybe I'll get Spudboy (that one's getting obsolete) to tell me the one he never finishes: that stupid story about the harelip, the beer nuts, and the bartender with the biggest schnozz in all of Philadelphia.

By now he's probably flashing his pass to the drowsy booth man and hipping his way through the turnstile at the 46th Street Station (which is really on Farragut Street). The escalator, broken for weeks now, is still out of order so he trudges up the forty-seven steps to the platform. Here and there, more or less randomly, "wet paint" signs have been

taped to the station's deteriorating iron walls, but it's clear to him that only a small patch of wall around each of the signs has been painted. He remembers, they're testing the paint. They've been testing the paint, "off and on," for two years. It's like that all the way up to the platform, little patches of fresh white where the color's supposed to be white, little patches of fresh blue where the color's supposed to be blue. When he reaches the platform, he walks several feet out along the wooden planking leading west, away from the sheltered portion of the station. On the stainless rail he rests his arms and surveys the stinking disaster. Rot and decay, more often bagged than not, six feet deep by forty yards wide by two thirds of a block long odors into the hot, viscous West Philadelphia air: a city-sanctioned temporary dump site onto which the locals are permitted to sling their trash for the duration of the sanitation workers strike. Skyrats comb this impromptu mesa, and he can imagine what's channeling through the crevasses below. Beyond the dump site, West Philly spreads out to the horizon. Thousands of sagging brick structures, soot-stained; crusty windows spilling tattered curtains; flaccid chimneys crumbling in arcs; neglected rooftops sprouting weeds and shrubs and antennas to which nothing is connected; attempted commerce, human endeavor, and, somehow visible from where he stands on the platform, shuffling feet worn white at the heel-end of sandals. Amazing.

Get to know us, Phil-a-delfya. Who came up with that anthem? He retraces his steps through the sheltered portion of the platform, feeling a bit sorry for the three Black Moslem women who've appeared there in combat boots and khaki djellabahs. Summer uniform. Or is it habit? Still looks aggressively out of place. And hot. On the other side of the platform now, several steps onto the wooden planking leading from the station's east side, Ruineux gazes out over something altogether different from the temporary dump. Sad, in a way, the abandoned WPVI building is a forgotten Mecca, its yellow brick an exhibition of the various schools, movements, and techniques of graffiti

offering no hints of its past as home to Dick Clark's American Bandstand. Pointedly maudlin, he indulges himself in a useless nostalgia for a life he never knew—why was I born too late?—and lights up his second cigarette: the one to make the train arrive faster. Superstition? He knows what he's doing.

He thinks: Right now she's padding around her apartment on bare feet in a silky flowered kimono. She'll glance at the clock radio once more before deciding she has time enough for another cigarette. From the milkcrate nightstand beside her mattress, she picks the orange box of matches on which is printed, in ersatz Arabic script, "Marrakech." *That* would be the thing to do tonight: break bread at Marrakech. When she opens the box and finds it empty, she'll whisper *merde ^ la treizime puissance* and start foraging around for another pack. Losing time, she skips around the apartment on painted toes, rifles through the top drawer of her dresser, scours the cabinets in the breakfast nook, the pouch pockets of her camera duffel: nothing. Giving up, she lights her Winston off the gas stove, careful to hold all that hair well away from the flame. Puff puff puff she gets the thing lit and draws deep. It tastes good, like a cigarette should. For several minutes she contemplates the contents of her closet, all the while nipping at the cigarette. Hugging her waist with her left arm, which makes a fulcrum on which she rests the elbow of her right, she poses the cigarette just to the right of her face when not taking a drag. The closet bewilders: too much of this stuff not enough of that; what the hell kind of wardrobe is this?

Always go with the old standby, when in doubt: black skirt, pumps, denim jacket. Color me coquette, I'm feeling infatuated with a certain trailer-bait vogue: no bra (ah me, never have really needed one), no blouse (let the jacket do double duty): if I don't play it self-conscious or bitchy, it'll come off as "disarmingly naive." This cigarette tastes like pencil shavings. Save my legs the shaving: wear jeans. No, forget about it. Too damn hot today. Shave the legs. Twenty minutes until he gets here, at least, and that's giving

the Southeast Pennsylvania Transportation Authority one hell of a lot of credit. Lucky if his train doesn't go off the track down in that tube, or fall through the rusty old elevated stretch. Still and all, better get in the shower. With my luck SEPTA's up to speed today, if only just to show me up for depending on its happy-go-lucky schedule.

Were Ruineux here, would he join me in the shower? if I asked? if I didn't ask? Come on in, the water's great. Maybe I'd get him to shave these legs, down there with foam and razor, and warn him to be gentle but thorough and take it easy around the Achilles tendons and the backs of the knees. Don't press too hard on the inside of the thighs, either. It might just turn his head, knock a few of his cobwebs loose. What about the armpits? Maybe he'd like me to ignore them, though I doubt he has a fetish for armpit hair. No, I think he'd more likely make a fetish of the cleanly shaved. Yet he'd never come right out and *tell* me if he had a thing for shaved pussy and if he did—well, he'd just have to get over it. All in all I don't think he gives it much thought.

Opposite him, on the west-bound side of the track, I'll bet a high-school girl sits smoking while leafing through a copy of *Juggernaut*. Legs crossed at the knee, her saddle shoe bounces rapidly, up and down, on a nervous foot. Wound up like a top, he thinks. Yeah, this is more his speed: she takes long, flagrant drags off her cigarette, the filter of which is gradually reddening from lipstick. Red lips, black hair falling in teased curls, white blouse, plaid skirt, indifferent expression: she's a Catholic schoolgirl. No underclassman, he thinks. She sucks one last drag from the cigarette and then, considering it with puzzled disgust, tosses the butt down onto the platform. As it lies there, still glowing on the rutted wood, he imagines picking the butt from the platform and taking a drag; stealing a kind of vicarious kiss. It evolves: now he's on the bench beside her, pulling back the hair from her shoulder and brushing his lips over the nape of her neck just behind and below the ear. His lips travel over her throat and up to those full, glossy lips. Playfully, she pecks him with a quick, scooping kiss made mostly with

the lower lip. Then they embrace and smile, foreheads pressed together. There is nothing else. A Ruineux fetish for Catholic schoolgirls seems plausible enough, though not outrageously kinky. Still, it nudges the elbow of propriety, if only for its potential to somehow explode from the safety of clichŽ.

The westbound train pulls up on the other side of the track and the Catholic schoolgirl boards. Ruineux notices his own cigarette has burned nearly to the filter. Through the window of the train he can see the girl and watches as a bearded, middle-aged insurance salesman in an off-the-rack suit does not rise to offer his seat. Of course. The all-clear whistle sounds, the doors close, and the train bumps and screeches through the electric hum pulling it from the station. As he's only had a cup of coffee (and that on an empty stomach) since rolling out of bed, the sour reek of the temporary dump-site begins to work on him. The walnut-sized knot in his gut is slowly working its way up his throat while, from 52nd Street, the eastbound train approaches. He steps up to the track.

Fourteen stops on the Market-Franklin line separate Ruineux's neck of the shambles from mine. It's a ride I'm never too thrilled to make, but he seems to get a kick out of it. I don't blame you for taking the bus, he says. Then he offers some insider knowledge about the ins and outs of public transportation. If you *do* take the train, he tells me, and you want to steer clear of any ugly encounters, pack a book. It's amazing: all hell could be breaking loose on one of those sardine cans, but if you've got your face stuck in *Notes from Underground* or *Last Exit to Brooklyn* or *Confessions of the Golden Triangle* or whatever you're just another hand stirrup: mute, unnoticed, made invisible by the paperback talisman. Only works with books, he warns. Newspapers only invite disaster, as do magazines, so don't get on the train with a *Look* or a *Life*. Typical of him to drop a title like *Look* when he knows damn well the magazine's been out of print for years. It's one of those ticks of his that drive me crazy. Still, there's a charm to his etiology of the Market-Franklin, and a welcome whiff of the logic of experience. Sure

enough, when I have rattled over to his place by train I've taken his advice, packed a book, and experienced the eerie chill of invisibility. Maybe the thugs think I have a pistol stashed in a cutaway compartment behind a false page. Little do they know: all I carry is a length of heavy chain in the open pouch of my shoulder bag, enough to rip a face up good. I doubt if I'd ever have the guts to use it. Ruineux, on the other hand, just might, but he rides unarmed, bookless. I've never been the kind to stick out as a walking target, he says.

Not only are you the target, I've told him, you're the target shooter. Though (and this is what preserves him) a wild and lackadaisical shooter. Were he not, he would've gone the same way as the father a long time ago. Something breaks his aim, distracts those blue eyes that sometimes fade to gray; eyes that watched in not-quite-disbelief the father for whom he was named sling buckets of driveway gravel across the kitchen linoleum, round up the Ruineux litter for having neglected this or that chore (Ruineux doesn't remember the exact offense; hedges untrimmed? garden unweeded? wrought iron gate unpainted?). To each of the Ruineux kids he handed a rosary and then demanded they kneel on the gravely lino. A tottering menace, he loomed over them as their knees bit into lifeless prayers. The *craft*, husked a bitterly restrained Ruineux the first time he told me. The *craft* that went into that episode is something he'll never forget. No wonder the maudlin that glummed his childhood can still, sometimes, throw a blanket over his days. "You know Jas," he once said to me, "when I think back to the kid I was, I see a kid always dying, always coming up short, one way or the other, in his boyhood fantasyland." Playing war, he was the soldier mowed down by machine-gun fire, and his mind's camera was careful to capture his slaughter from all the morbid angles. Shooting baskets, he was the forward weaving his lonely way down the torn asphalt of a championship court to heave the finality of a 3-2-1 shot that thuds harmlessly off the rotted bankboard as the roar of the crowd in his head fades to a dejected chorus of moans

and then to nothing, not even a boo. The fullback fumbling on the goal line, the gambler who bet it all on the wrong sure thing, the thief caught in the act: he was hooked on the idea of a fall into some abyss from the catwalk separating hero from goat. When he tells me these things, his stony deadpan gives him away. But I play along and show him no mercy, even when all I want to do is gather that eight- or nine-year-old Ruineux up in my arms and convince him. You're getting nostalgic for the good old days again, I say, underlining my sarcasm. He takes it in stride and, aside from the occasional fall into a hidden mineshaft, brims with piss and vinegar (a favorite expression of *my* old man).

At 40th Street station, a severely dressed black woman is pacing back and forth, Bible raised in an evangelistic right hand, screaming, "Born in sin we must be born again." On the Bible, clearly visible, are embossed the obligatory cross and the words *Holy Bible*. She must be from the Radio Church of God, he thinks, remembering his initial flush of amused disbelief when first confronted by the neon cross and hand-painted sign announcing its Chestnut Street headquarters. She's *witnessing*: is that the word they use for it? Coming through the turnstile is a sprightly giant with a coat rack slung over his shoulder. He shoots the Radio Church of God a disarming smirk that sets her spinning an about-face on the square heels of her blocky shoes. Nun's shoes, Ruineux thinks. Coat rack is so tall, he not only has to remove the burden from his shoulder, but duck in order to board the train. On the train, in the seat behind Ruineux, one of the djellabahs that got on with him at 46th Street asks the other if they're really letting him carry that thing on. A shrug, Ruineux assumes, makes the other's response silent. A young girl, a toddler, drops her teething ring on the floor of the car and an older girl immediately picks it up and shoves it back in her mouth, quickly stifling shrieks that were about to fly from a grimace. Ruineux sighs. Human and other baggage safely on the train, the conductor blows his whistle and the car doors zip closed. As the cars pull away, he notices no stragglers on the platform giving half-hearted chase.

Now that the train's moving underground, Ruineux feels a bit better. He looks at his watch. He thinks: She's patting herself dry with one towel and has another wrapped around her damp hair like a turban. First she throws one foot, the left, up on the rim of the bathroom sink, then the right, drying, in turn, each of her legs. No great feat of trial and error produced that trick for keeping the turban in place. When finished, she throws the towel over the shower curtain rod, removes the towel-turban, flips it, too, over the rod, then bends at the waist to shake loose her damp hair. With the splayed fingers of both hands she rakes the easily picked locks before snapping herself upright in a way that throws all that hair of hers back over her bare shoulders. She has to fish it out from under her collar after once again pulling on the kimono. It must be a lot of work, that hair. Yes, Ruineux, it's a lot of work and don't be too surprised if I have it lopped off one of these lovely, summer, Philadelphia days. Wasn't it all I could do last summer, on the sixty-third day of ninety degrees plus, when I caught myself eyeballing an invitingly handy pair of fabric shears, wasn't it all I could do to keep myself from snipping it down to the scalp?

Only to myself have I confessed I keep the hair for him. Vanity is a thing I'll freely admit, but it's had less and less to do with my suffering this hair. It may just be I'm in love with the goof. *There's* a confession, though hardly a revelation. When I was a girl I couldn't be bothered with something so silly: there was just me, a Scottish hillside, my big rubber boots, and the dewy gorse. What a relief we're spared living out the dreams of childhood. Not even five years ago, when I ditched that eccentric dream of becoming a veterinarian (a vet!) because of my infatuation with the camera, I could sense life tugging me in directions independent of my plans, my will. I still can. There was a time I couldn't conceive of a Ruineux, much less conceive of falling in love with anyone like a Ruineux. And, five years ago, not once did I even come close to dreaming I'd be standing here in a so-so apartment in Northeast Philly, touching up my toenail polish,

sizing up my legs as I do; legs that carried me around the crummy little stage at Danny Boy's. How wonderful! For eighty-five dollars a night I cavorted and slunked, ground and bumped, titillated and observed, wrapped my legs around the go-go pole and watched carefully the watchers, flashed my bare ass and pitied. Exhilerated, anonymous, a thing in the eyes of the forlorn sportcoats who hung out in that joint, I ate it up. Now I'm the one making things, and with a feel for things. And the sportcoats beamed when I returned to Danny Boy's not to dance, but to snap them: those grainy black and whites I hung at the Armadillo. Ruineux was there, at the opening, though at first I had no idea who he was. In a whispered aside he spoke to me, and I think he might have referred to those prints as "portraits of the titillation connoisseur," or a "rendering of the gaze." But what I think he actually called them, now that I think of it, was "overboiled asperagus." Or something. The first time we met and already he was down with a good case of foot-in-mouth disease: Oh, *you're* the photographer. Yes, I'm the photographer. Well some *are* compelling. That was the way he relented, wasn't it? the way he granted my work was of some value while at the same time dismissing his credibility as a critic. How attractively deadpan he was when, at my ridiculous and infatuated request, he explained to me *his* gig. Why do I remember this now?

Headhunter? I insisted he was missing a bone through his nose and speculated that he must find my turtleneck a turn-off. Oh, I'd be surprised, he assured, of what turned him on and what turned him off. Headhunting ("those not in the racket call it 'personnel recruitment,'") he ranked highest among the turnoffs: unable to play the game, he said, like that colleague of his who found the whole business so exciting he turned it into a film noir role-playing game in which he was a Sam Spade, infiltrating corporations by phone, posing as this potential client, that executive, to ferret information that would funnel him to some talented suit with a big fat commission on his head. Ruineux just couldn't do it, didn't have it in him, wasn't much of a salesman. So he took

that projectionist job, as unlikely for him as headhunter, but the writing—no matter how specious—seemed to anchor him. And Zane (Zane!), that Sam Spade of headhunters, made a killing. Pergolisi, Giovanni, and Battista even rewarded him with a sex junket to the Philippines; the money for it, that is. I'm sure they'd have raised more than an eyebrow had they known to what end that bonus had been put. But, from dough to blow: he got canned, used company records to free-lance on the side. Amazing. Now a bartender ("gin jockey," he calls it) he paints on the side, hangs a show or two. So we all sit around together—me, Zane, Ruineux—and laugh that the road to our self-expression led directly through sales. A standing joke, but sometimes, when he's in one of his more darkly abrasive moods, Ruineux will look up from his beer and say, "What self?"

34th Street station went by without his noticing and now the train is already galloping toward 30th. He's heard there are people who live down in the tunnel, so he stares through his reflected face in the window, into the streaking black void outside the car, hoping to glimpse the spooked eyes of a tunnel person. Though he's never seen one, Ruineux just won't admit he's giving in to the Romantic kidney that lives to believe in such rumors. Complex 35, I tell him: another symptom. Seems to me I once saw a movie about some creepy goings on down in a subway tube. I've told Ruineux this, but he won't be moved by the insinuation. It's *possible*, he insists, for people to be living down there. Don't even get him started on UFOs. He's hopeless. Or, maybe, wildly hopeful. He won't let go of the kind of wonder that makes a boy turn over a rock and, when he finds out what's been crawling around beneath, there just aren't enough words for him to proclaim his discovery in terms that exalt what most of us toss off.

An idea that makes me curious to know what he may have written about me when I only half-seriously challenged him to do so; when I camped and teased: "Come on, Ruineux. I bet I could steam up a few of your pages." Forget it, Jas.

Abandoning his search for the tunnel people, Ruineux is arrested by the spectacle of coat rack struggling to enter his car from the next car forward. Jesus! Cool air and the thundering static of the tube blast in through the open door, which rides back and forth on its ball bearings to the erratic movement of the car. Repeatedly it slams into coat rack's shoulder and the hooked burden he cradles in the crooks of his arms. The clawed feet are the last to come through but, naturally, they're snared by the car door's slicing mastication. Coat rack tries his best to manipulate the door by levering it with the oaken shaft, and succeeds, but does so just as the driver slams on the train's pneumatic brakes in his approach to 30th Street causing coat rack to lose his balance and stumble to his knees. Teething ring looks on with saucer eyes while Ruineux turns away out of embarrassment. From the rear of the car enters a SEPTA security officer, night stick drawn, who appears relieved by the slapstick sprawled on the floor before him. Nightstick holsters his weapon, hitches up his belt, smoothes his wiry mustache, and helps the bewildered coat rack back to his feet. All in a day's work. No problem. You O.K.? Watch yourself now. That's it. Take it easy with that thing. Don't want to hurt anybody. Having come to a stop, the train opens its doors to emit and receive. Burlap, thinks Ruineux. 30th Street station smells like wet burlap to him. It's an aroma he likes, so he closes his eyes a moment and breathes deep, wondering whether it's the damp from the Schuylkill River under which the train will immediately dip when it pulls out of the station, or the years of oil dripped down onto the road bed and absorbed by the ties, or the concentrated essence of subterranea. An oily smell, he thinks, like congealed blood and army surplus leather goods.

Ruineux can sense the car filling up and, when whistle blows and doors zip closed, he opens his eyes to a jostling assortment of bellies and crotches, buttocks and belt buckles, torsos and bosoms. All sway gently backward as the train pulls out of the station; all automatically right themselves as the train comes up to speed. Ruineux begins

to pick at the dirt and projector lubricant caked beneath his nails with the pointed pocket clip of his ballpoint pen. He thinks: She's stepping into her skirt now, zipping it up at the hip and snapping the fastener. Now she pulls on her denim jacket (nothing else?) and buttons it to the near inside border of modesty. She's beginning to realize I'm going to be late and, glancing at the clock radio next to her bed, decides 4:47 isn't too early for a "sundowner," so she pads over to the breakfast nook, grabs a tumbler from the cupboard, fills it with ice from the fridge, pours in a couple shots of Banker's Club, and tops it off with a few glugs of Coke poured from a plastic liter bottle. After indulging for a moment in the pause that refreshes, she returns the bottle of Coke to the fridge and jams the bottle of bourbon into the frost-choked freezer compartment.

Either I'm ready when Ruineux gets here, or I'm not; either he's on time, or he's not; either I wear the black pumps, or the black, canvas high-top basketball shoes which, when I was a girl, had to be worn with the rubber trademark disk peeled off if you wanted to fit in; either I turn the radio on now, or I dance (two sips and already lightheaded, Jasmine?) to my own music; either I go out of my nut one day, or see everything falling irrevocably into place on another; either Ruineux placates the pogo-sticking deities knocking around his rubberized pantheon, or I drag him around tonight from restaurant to nightclub to bar and back to this apartment, prompting at every step, dabbing the stains at the edges of his lips with the balled-up corner of my napkin; either I get him to look at me, or I don't. What is it Ruineux? Tell me about the filter you're using these days; what it highlights, what it mutes. Were it yellow, I'd yellow myself, assume the proper wavelength, a softened red, to get to where you are. If I thought a knock-down drag-out would do it, I'd lunge with sharpened talons, but it's not like that. Trouble is, he knows he's been one step removed, flattened out, out of sorts, detached. Not having completely lost his sense of humor, he can manage a laugh at my mention of the Iron Maiden on wheels in which he bumper-cars his way around. He knows, and he doesn't know a point

of intersection at which nostalgia, an un-nostalgiaed nostalgia at that, slipped through the membrane of his imagination on a chilly mid-November night on which a so-called Arctic blast caught us (well, me—he had that goofy tartan wool jacket of his on. Why not the leather?), caught us by surprise and we stood in the cold waiting on a bus to ferry us back to that West Philadelphia shitbox he calls home. That night he looked up into a fifth-story window of the Hotel Vendig and saw—what? His future, he claims.

The bandages had been off for two weeks and, though a bit crooked, pink around the slight, crescent-shaped scar trailing off the left side of its bridge, his nose appeared remarkably intact. Still sensitive, it may have been a bit more ruddy than usual in the cold air knifing around the streets, but there was nothing about it to suggest the violence with which Ruineux's nose had been booted out of joint: Humpty Dumpty the beneficiary of some skillful rhinoplasty. Sort of a celebration, it was our first night on the town since Ruineux's rapid succession of facial rearrangements: the first outside Bacchanal in an incident that exasperated and infuriated me even as it endeared me to what now seems a former incarnation of a Ruineux in the world, rightly or wrongly fumbling along with whatever glop came to hand; the second in the outpatient operating theater of Thomas Jefferson University Hospital, undoing the grievousness of the first.

Still flush with having flunked out of his headhunting gig (one of the lowest placement averages his boss had ever seen) at Pergolisi, Giovanni and Battista, amazed with having inflated some Kent State dabbling with 16mm projectors into an apprenticeship at the Olympia, cocky over having passed his motion picture operator's licensure exam, Ruineux beat his chest. A randomly activated Tarzan swinging on some sticky existential vine, he had no idea what the hell. Only vaguely dubious, I encouraged this attitude. It attracted me to him. He seemed goosed out of a glib acquiescence to the hand-me-down probable and into a yodeling acceptance of the absurdly possible. Even that night at Bacchanal, already two months into his stint at the Olympia, there were no

signs that the novelty had worn off. Elbows on the table, punching the air with his cigarette as he spoke, he unraveled for Zane and me, in great detail, the mysteries of the projection booth; explained, with animated confidence and rarefied zest how to thread the film through the Simplex 35 (you guide the print around the first sprocket wheel, lock it in place the with pressure rollers, test with your fingertips to make sure there's a snug fit between the sprockets and the sprocket holes ...), how to work the changeover so it's *smooth*, and how, licensed, he was in line for a full-time gig as a *motion picture operator*. He was ready to bail out of that under-the-table bartending experiment at The Kennel. It was engaging and I indulged him even those moments when his enthusiasm overpowered us.

Reeling to the staccato chink of The Toasters' rhythm and the salty, faintly sour bite of the cheap porter, I told Ruineux to go it alone when he asked me to dance to the ska. Ruineux dancing was something I'd never seen, and it was worth playing up a tipsy indifference just to get a load of him from a vantage at which I could take it all in, soak up not only Ruineux, but the teeming context into which he was about to jump. And there he was, Ruineux! dancing, *skanking*: thrusting his knees into his chest and swinging his arms as if sprinting the hundred meters. Sweetly alive, present, he was an unself-conscious gizmo uncoiling amid a jiggling black mass of lackluster downstarts who seemed snottily resentful that he should be enjoying himself. Even the bass player of The Toasters (a quirky, yet somehow slinky thing wearing what appeared to be burgundy pajamas) pointed him out to the rest of the crowd as, "ska-tologically speaking," the "rankinest ska-leton" in the joint. I had no idea, but assumed it was something good. For quite a while I allowed my eyes to linger on the happy spastic, then turned away so that I might return my gaze to the Ruineux exhibition refreshed—a cleansing of my eyes' palate. I forced my gaze to the smoke that swirled around the petrified blades of the broken ceiling fan, to the not-so-clever bartender failing to cheat a

leather jacket out of the full shot of vodka for a bloody Mary she was forcing him to mix from scratch, to Mac the midget (a dwarf, really, judging by his curious proportions) orating from his bar stool at the self-described guerrilla antiquarian (all six foot eleven of him, at that), Simon Dodd. *Those* two were a pair, enough to cut right through the rose-colored fog misting the perceptions I was beginning to form of the evening.

Mac's malevolent smirk, smoldering beneath the stubby brim of a cap not designed for a little person, was only interrupted by an occasional Old Nick grin over some remark he himself had made. With both hands he lifted mug to mug and wiped his beer-wet smirk on the indifferent sleeve of an impossibly tiny biker jacket. When not guzzling, he leaned on an elbow against the bar and let loose with a powerful belch or two between songs. Simon, smugly oafish and looming, managed at best an attitude of seasoned disdain which could either have been bona fide or affected to belie the fact he was having the best time of his life. A gigantic, putty-butted lizard given only to vegetative displays of interest or emotion, Simon squatted on his stool as if drugged, occasionally sipping a clear alcoholic drink with ice, lime, and swizzle straw. From time to time he would shove his horn-rimmed glasses back to the top of his nose, which he compulsively would wipe in the same motion with the heel of his palm. Word had it the pair wanted to be in the movies, a scheme conceived by Simon, the guerrilla junkster, but they weren't interested in Hollywood (which, more than likely, would have been equally uninterested in them). No, it was India that had captured their imaginations. Dodd, always on the make, always absorbing information and phenomena in terms of how it could cash-out, learned that Indian movies were notorious for an almost obligatory running gag in which a couple of bumbling, clownish American gangster types would wander into frame every once in a while, lurk in their fedoras and dark glasses behind statuary or ornamental shrubbery, cast sidelong glances, exchange weighty nods, and generally camp it up as some zany, abstract, and sinister American threat: it was a natural for the man-mountain

and the midget. They wouldn't *really* have to act, Mac *already* looked like a gangster, they'd be given no lines to blow, and, of course, merely by appearing together, they pulled off an incredible sight gag. All they had to do was get themselves to a Bombay soundstage.

Zane and I were both contributing to our happy ashtray as I explained all this about Simon Dodd and Mac the Midget, but when I nodded in the pair's direction, pointing them out (as if necessary) to Zane, they'd vanished. In the over-amplified din we hadn't noticed the melee breaking out, and my mortification was slow to register as we watched Ruineux being dragged past our table, into the street, by a mob to which midget Mac and Simon were staunchly attached. We threw ourselves into the bottleneck at the door, but once identified as allies of Ruineux, were corralled in Dodd's orangutan armspread and herded back in the direction of our table. Ska night at Bacchanal: The Toasters continued to toast for the jiggling jigglers, through whom we had to force our way to the side exit in a headlong rush to save what we could of Ruineux.

It's the night I most often return to, whereas Ruineux gets stuck on that other one, the one several weeks later. Hardly as eventful—a fleeting glimpse of a sallow old man in a fifth story window of the Hotel Vendig—but too close, he said, to an apparition poking around in the gas of dream, nightly becoming more solid. For Ruineux, the image in the window was a kind of premonition of what he will have been becoming. I told him he was full of it, that there's no stepping outside the moment to make a judgment like that. History, he told me: the grandfather's drunken half-gainer with a twist from the third-story window of a New York flophouse, the father's close-range target practice. So what, Ruineux? Pattern (of your own making)? Curse (equally a fiction)? Easy tools: they forgive you yourself. But even that forgiveness is an illusion. Every passing moment paints a new history and rearranges the palate of expectation from which the

future will emerge. All we can hope for is a submersion in the working out of things. And that ain't too bad.

Ruineux hasn't bought it yet, though I sometimes sense in him a loosening up that allows a vestige of the pell-mell Ruineux to filter through; like the afternoon he followed, on his day off, a family of tourists all over the historic district, subtly insinuating himself into each and every one of their home-movie postcards: Ruineux, the guy eating a pretzel while the kids cavorted on Independence Mall; Ruineux, the guy reading a paper on a bench in Christ Church Burial Ground while the tourist wife did a Crayola rubbing of the slab over Ben Franklin's grave; Ruineux, the guy absently picking his nose near the Eternal Flame honoring the unknown Revolutionary War dead buried in Washington Square; Ruineux, the guy haunting the periphery of all their memories of Philadelphia. Too often, though, are the times he shakes his head, takes my hand, and tells me, again, about the dreams and, even though I cut him off and start punching him in the ribs until he has to wrestle my arms away and kiss me, there's a sense he's holding out. But I can be patient. Maybe Ruineux's my *project*.

A project to tap into what flowed from him that night at Bacchanal, the night Zane and I hauled him up off the South Street sidewalk, examined him in the orange glow of the halogen streetlights, a glow that muted blood's crimson to an inky blue-black—is that what I'm buying into, Ruineux? Blood, sure: *that* flowed from you. But I'd braced myself for it in our rush to the street and wasn't at all surprised at the abstract expressionism steaming on the white cotton canvas of your sweaty t-shirt. But something else flowed from you, right through the broken nose, the swollen black eye, the jagged teeth. On the dance floor you'd felt a shove, and then a more violent second; from the perimeter, from the bystanders. The third, you'd privately vowed, would land that son of a bitch in the hospital. Tough guy. But that son of a bitch was no son, and thank god it was only a glancing blow that sent her reeling back into the onlookers, a half-dozen of

whom she pulled down with her to the sticky floor. And, oh yes, she was a popular one, a “scene queen.” You couldn’t have picked better, Ruineux. From among her punky minions came the most valiant to her rescue, dragging a ridiculous, limp you out the door and into South Street. No fighter, you collapsed to the pavement when they threw you up against that Ford, or so I’ve heard. So you’ve said. Foetal, you weren’t quite pathetic enough. Too low to receive their fists, you invited their swift kicks. One little person even left in pink welts the imprint of his tiny basketball shoe, the sole’s trademark diamond pattern, on the side of your face. Somehow you knew this, even as I fished the tail of your t-shirt out of your pants to mop the blood off your lips and chin. Maybe that’s when you got to me, Ruineux: cursing, trying to shove my hands away, spitting blood and shards of your broken teeth, admitting vehemently all the while what an ass you were, you gathered yourself long enough to look at me with a tired, broken, disgusted, helpless smile and, misting my jacket with a fine spray of spittle and blood, said, “It wouldn’t have been so bad if it wasn’t for that *fucking* midget.” I almost wanted to forgive you for the whole disaster right then and there.

Even before the train comes to a stop, the dense cloud of passengers on the 15th Street platform scatters this way and that, jostling for position at the yellow safety stripe. Their most heartfelt desire, at the moment, is to attach their bottoms to a seat before the rush hour lemmings begin to pitch themselves at the train. They don’t think of themselves as the first wave of migration. Ruineux, reluctantly becoming an active passenger, sits tight for the moment and wonders at the seat left empty beside him. It won’t be empty for long. At 4:55, rush hour is only just coming to a simmer, but Ruineux anticipates a strategic relocation to avoid becoming walled into his seat by the inevitable onslaught of commuters. Likewise, throughout the car, a series of exchanges is taking place in the last moment before the doors open and the game begins: seats are occupied as soon as surrendered as the larger portion of the car’s contents prepares to spill through

its doors and rush to its connection with the Broad Street line. Ruineux, though remaining on the car, abandons his seat as well and works his way to a hand stirrup reasonably close to the door. Teething ring, sucking desperately at the pacifier, clings to the thigh of her teenage guardian who, in turn, grips a hand stirrup so tightly her knuckles are white. Coat rack, a look of apologetic anticipation preparing his face for the delicate but fervent pleading and maneuvering he's about to undertake, negotiates with several sympathetic, indifferent, or intimidated standees for a more advantageous spot. The djellabas stay put. This is not their stop.

As happens sometimes, there's a frustrating delay between the moment at which the train comes to a stop and the moment at which its car doors open. Not unlike, Ruineux thinks, the way a hockey referee will tease with the puck at those Flyers games, hold it temptingly over the ice until he's satisfied the two shovelheads squaring up for the face-off have not positioned themselves to unfair advantage. Inside the car there's a half-hearted murmur of disapproval while, outside, the lemmings cluster in ever-tightening knots. Bing! The doors zip open. Ruineux holds on. The first few of the car's passengers, taking advantage of the rift created by coat rack and his imposing weapon, step happily off the train into the fortuitous gap, which is then almost immediately choked by the crush of lemmings. Using their briefcases as shields, they bowl their way into the car and force those struggling to exit into a crabwise shuffle. Thoughtfully, the conductors hold up the train until quite sure it's reached capacity. Then, scanning the safety stripe to be sure it's clear of stragglers, they blow the all-clear. As the train slowly pulls out of the station, Ruineux catches a glimpse of teething ring, bawling, pacifier lying at her feet. Automatically, the guardian stoops to retrieve it and, after wiping it vigorously on the cuff of her blouse, reinserts the rubber nipple. It's the little things in life.

I wouldn't be surprised if he makes a note in that blue flip pad he carries around. Always the same style, same color, same brand, the top drawer of his dresser must hold a dozen of the things; all filled with brief sketches in his edgy script of what he sometimes refers to as "accidentals." Moments of the urban symphony not indicated by the key signature of Philadelphia, most often missed in the blinkered rush from one measure to the next, Ruineux scribbles them down and is freshly amused (or so he's said) each time I remind him about the place of accidentals in music. Music? There are no accidents in music, he says. No, these are just plain accidents. Only accidentally are they his to snatch. Not quite a random dipping of the ladle into the unwritten bucket of the city's history, these accidentals of his leap at him out of the corner of his eyes. But only when his eyes are tuned in. Too often, lately, he walks around fixed on a spot one block ahead of him, as if in this way nothing in his visual path can catch him by surprise: telekinetically focused, he's projecting a wake ahead of him into which nothing unexpected can trespass. To walk beside him, sometimes, is to be excluded. I often find it better to walk a few steps ahead, peer into shop windows, grab him, shove his attention toward some piece of junk or other, crowbar a comment or two out of him. That keeps him in it, but it's work. A species of therapy different from the storytelling games I cajole him into, it *does* seem to activate him. Lo and behold, I'll sometimes turn to find him scribbling in the blue pad. Still, he's a guarded connoisseur. These accidentals of his come to nothing. He keeps them mostly hidden from the light of day. Nothing more than brief postponements of history lost, they last only for the moment in which he sets them down, or for those rare occasions he fishes around in that junk drawer among the loose photographs, incomplete packs of playing cards, expired transit passes, cancelled checks, pay stubs, fortune cookie slips, and whatall to pluck one of those filled blue pads, to revive for himself a half-forgotten moment: *Two young people of the street homeless a*

*man and a woman he stoops to tie the laces of her shoes love.* And then he flips the notebook closed and tosses it back in the drawer.

Half-assed historian of the obscure or unnoticed, he was quick with the flip pad and ball-point pen the night, so he likes to think, on which he looked his future between the eyes. *Broken man in Vendig window left of neon sign burned down to Hotel end me:* it could have been something like that. What is it about that one? If only in his mind, there's no doubt he's worked accidental to natural in a key signature of his own invention. A single note worked into a programmatic movement, he's building off it themes that suck him down the throat of his own imagination. Nostalgic, even in his looking forward there's a looking back. If I've told him *once*.

A man got up to be Christ the Savior is pacing back and forth on the 11th Street platform. Over his shoulders he's slung a sandwich board which, on the front, reads "Minutes to Go." The back panel, Ruineux notices as his car drifts by in the train's slow deceleration, says, "Are you right with God?" Are you left with God? would seem the more appropriate question, Ruineux thinks. He's seen this joker before. With something like camouflaged forethought (though later he'll tell me he was acting on impulse), Ruineux edges his way toward the car's door and, when the train comes to a stop and the doors zip open, he's among the first wave shoving its way out and onto the platform. Stationary and serene amid the bubbling panic of commuters, Jesus is oblivious to the kid marking up the right-with-god slice of his sandwich board with a green magic marker. The angular, nervous figures of the hood's rock-cocaine gibberish alphabet spell nothing. Ruineux bolts up the steps taking two at a time.

When he emerges from the subway on the southeast corner of 11th and Market, the sunlight ratchets his pupils and forces him to squint. Then a bus growls by and anoints him with a discharge of black fumes. His eyes haven't even begun to water before a ventman appears, palm outstretched. So this is where they come from, Ruineux

thinks, sizing up the sooty apparition: a miracle of gravity condenses exhaust fumes, despair, lassitude, and the steam rising from tubs of simmering hot dogs into these shadowy castaways. Poof! There's another lump, snoring hurdle, or soul-ripping expression of raw need, whichever the case may be. Byproducts: one way of looking at it, Ruineux.

Though only a reflected sunlight dusts the afternoon facades lining the north side of Market, it's intense enough to prolong his squint and inspire a shifty narrow glance at the street vendor hawking four-buck sunglasses from a display table on collapsible legs. The hand in his face, which Ruineux has failed to ignore, still pleads for its quarter, a silent gesture in the swirl of coughing jalopies and honking pedestrians. Billy Penn can see none of this, still wrapped in his shroud of rehabilitation. And as if that were enough to grant Ruineux permission, he pulls from his pocket a crumpled five-dollar bill and hands it to the hawker of shades. Whichever pair you like best, Ruineux says, and the hawker, thinking they're for Ruineux, chooses the goofiest star-spangled, Liberty-Bell shaped conversation piece on the table. Keep the change. Everybody's happy: Hawker slips his dough into his pocket and Ruineux gets his moment's pleasure from a haphazard purchase, trying on the patriotic glasses before passing the joy along. Looking past the ventman's beseeching hand to the eyes that guide it, blue eyes burning cool from an asymmetrical Roquefort moon that's sticky with unwiped fluids in its craters and stubble, Ruineux slips the glasses into place, hooks them behind the ventman's doughy ears, snugs them on the thick bridge of his nose, and steps back in admiration. "Am I stylin'?" says the grizzled moonface, his mucose gurgle more assertion than question. Reflected in each mirrored lens of the spangled Liberty Bells is Ruineux's distorted noggin which he almost feels, to make sure it *hasn't* swollen up like some light bulb sprouting blond tufts. You're not a byproduct, he wants to say. You're not condensation of matter or a symbiotic complement to the collective bad conscience. You'll wear those Liberty Bells

to shade your eyes until they fall off or break, and spend the five bucks I'm pressing into your barked fingers on something even more unlikely. "Yeah, you're stylin'," is what he does, finally, say.

Across the street from him, the Hotel Vendig squats as if having a lackluster afternoon. Shading his eyes with his right hand, Ruineux glances up to the fifth story window and notices it's open: a bit of yellowed curtain spills out over the sill. Above the window and to the right, directly above the unlit neon which in the daytime, make no mistake about it, reads "Hotel Vendig," Ruineux notices a flagpole lancing out over the sidewalk. No one has bothered to drape a flag from the pole, and Ruineux plies a moment's consideration to the question: If the city pays someone to dress like Ben Franklin and wander around the historic district dispensing history lessons and the opportunity for some photographic shtick, why not also pay someone to dress like Harold Lloyd, dangle and cavort in a straw hat, specs, sleeve garters and suspenders from the city's bare flagpoles and mute clock towers? Of this brainstorm he makes no note, but he does shake his head, wipe the itch on his nose into the knuckles of his right hand, and attach himself to a cluster of pedestrians waddling officially across Market. The crossing signal reads, "Don't Walk." Everything is as it should be. Shuffling along in the impromptu herd he thinks: Right now she's beginning to wonder just *how* late. Bored, she'll pick up a brush and begin pulling it through her damp hair, fluff it with her free hand, bend down and to the right so that it falls loose and away from her shoulder, almost to the dusty hardwood. Then she'll bend down and to the left, again putting the brush to her hair. Moving like this, from one side to the other, her hair will slowly begin to dry. He's watched me do it.

Waiting wraps me in a straitjacket of time: sometimes I get anxious with the Hoodini itch, sometimes, like now, I submit. Slouched in a comfy chair, bare feet propped on window sill, sundowner in hand, ash tray on lap, late afternoon pouring over

me through the window, how could I think of escape? Ruineux will get here in his own sweet time and I've got nothing to do but blow smoke through my dream rings.

There he goes now, through the Vendig's revolving door. The elderly desk clerk, caught in the middle of blowing his nose, gives half a thought to rising from his seat, but figures Ruineux for a visitor and stays put. *They come and they go. This one looks harmless as the rest. If he needs me he knows where to find me.* Despite the heat, the clerk's got up in a makeshift uniform that hints at a nautical past, but you never know. Greek sailor's cap, surplus navy blazer with brass buttons and gold, braided epaulets, khaki pants, and a white turtle neck, he cuts himself a slanted figure of the vaguest authority.Flushed with the effort he's making to liberate his sinuses, his cheeks are shiny with sweat. Ruineux has already entered the elevator and selected his floor when, from a door leading off the front desk, there emerges the real desk clerk: a frumpy petulant-looking creep whose graying, mutton-chop sideburns are a perfect match for his check polyester. He makes a dismissive gesture of thanks for "minding the store," lifts Ishmael out of his seat, and leads him by the elbow toward one of the rickety sofas parked in the Vendig's lobby. Ruineux sees nothing of this. In the rising elevator, his eyes are following the antiquated clock-hand mechanism tracing the car's passage from one floor to the next. From the shaft above comes the screech of something in need of lubrication, each successive floor ticked off not only by the slow sweep of brass arrow past brass Roman numerals, but by a thumping jolt that plays itself out in a shiver of turbulence. This is a real ride. Ruineux is more than just a bit relieved when the car bumps to a stop at the fifth, when the doors scrape open.

For one thing, the hallway is carpeted. Like the carpeting in that West Philly dump of his, it would appear the original color was something like burgundy. Its repeating pattern of gold trapezoids is only faintly noticeable at the extreme edges and in the corners, the better part worn away into a murky track which here and there offers a

peek at the floorboards beneath. Having expected tiles laid on an angle so as to create a diamond pattern, maybe with black tiles erratic among the white, Ruineux finds the hallway drab and woefully up-to-date. Moving into it causes his flesh to crawl, turn inside-out for the six thousand phantom legs of a thousand thingies. The heavy fragrance of insecticide does nothing to reassure him. Like the agent added to cooking gas, its sulfurous edge is not without the strange appeal that had him sniffing at the cap of a Jerry can when fueling up the lawnmower in boyhood's garage. But what fleeting, dubious pleasure he finds in the insecticidal aroma is lost now to a more sensible feeling of nausea. Not knowing what else to do, he lights up a Camel, waves it in front of him as an acolyte might swing an ornate censer suspended from a delicate golden chain. This tobacco incense of his begins to cloud the end of the hallway nearest the elevator and fills his lungs with a friendly weight. Some of it, he knows, is absorbed by the bloodstream. Were the smoke truly a prayer it would be part of him now, a prayer slowly eating him alive from the inside out. The thought does not occur to him that the Surgeon General might issue a new warning: Repeated Incantations Over Consecrated Censers May Cause Cancer. That it doesn't is a shame because, were he to hatch such a bright idea, it might just make Ruineux forget how gloomy this hallway is beginning to make him feel. In any case, the cigarette smoke does mute the smell of insecticide. It works so well he only feels the need to smoke half, stabbing the long butt into the dirty sand of the ashtray just outside the elevator. It bothers him that the car's doors are still open, so he reaches inside and presses "Lobby." Much too slow to catch his arm, the doors scrape closed with a brittle clank. Behind them now, in the shaft, the elevator wires moan, ill-bowed strings of the largest cello Ruineux can imagine.

Resigned to the swampy plan gurgling in the back of his mind, he begins to move cautiously down the hallway. The numbering system isn't quite what he expected, but Ruineux can translate easily enough from 17E to 517. An unsatisfying silence fills the

hallway. This awful carpet, thinks Ruineux. There will be no dry click of stiletto heels. Absent, too, are the usual sounds, hints at the lives carried on behind the doors lining the hallway: the unflaggingly happy prattle of a television set, the urgent ring of an unanswered telephone, the lonely vibrato of Tommy Dorsey's trombone, the giggle of a weakly flushed toilet, the spittley whistle of an overfull teapot come to boil. Instead, there is only the hum of fluorescent tubes and whir of an a.c. system hard at work discharging micro-organisms. Maybe everyone's bit the dust, he thinks: Legionnaires' Disease. He runs a finger along the papered wall and is startled by the cool moisture, the rich condensation beading the pattern of mauve lilies. Examining his fingertip, he's struck by the faint watery smear: it's surrounded by a circular ridge, a corona of grime. He wipes it into the thigh of his jeans and continues along the hall, half expecting to be dripped on from above.

No different from the others, the peephole cut into the door of room 517 is set just below the three white-stenciled numbers. The door itself must have been painted to match the carpet, but is a bit too mauve; too mauve, even, to complement the field of lilies decorating the walls. At one time, the door frame's elaborate molding was as much a testament to the richness of the materials used in the Vendig's construction as to the craftsmanship now part of another age: Ruineux can see, at knee level, the dark polished wood through a thumb-sized chip on the frame. It's a deep chip and, when he stoops to pick at it with his thumbnail, a flake the size of a postage stamp snaps loose, exposing that much more of the artifact. He'd like to keep at it, unearth the entire frame this way, slowly, with his thumbnail, reveal the beautiful woodwork hidden beneath this awful mauve mask, but then what? rip up the carpet and install the tile? replace the fluorescent with incandescent fixtures? de-vein the building of its network of a.c. ducts? I suppose he already has renovated the Vendig of his imagination, an imagination that allows him to

fix certain elements in time's stop bath while allowing others to continue to develop. The darkroom in which he operates relies on a chemistry of malleable properties.

So it should come as no surprise to him (though it does), when he knocks at room 517, that the person opening up to Ruineux is attached to a face more familiar than he would ever have imagined. Eyes bulging in the convex lenses of his bottle-bottom glasses, the guy sizes Ruineux up with a startling brown gaze. The harmonica man looks none too pleased. Freshly shaved, there's a smoothness to his complexion. The neatly trimmed mustache, not to mention the sharp, gray tweed blazer; the red knit tie knotted in the oxford collar of his crisp white shirt; the wavy gray hair, white at the temples, pushed back from his forehead—everything, the whole package, lends to the guy an almost academic appearance. With the safety chain still in place, the guy smirks, inclines his head toward Ruineux, eyes him superciliously over those thick glasses, and says, "I've been noticing you *lurking* out there; out there in the street, when I'm doing the shtick. I've noticed you watching me among the faces that don't."

Ruineux, never having been very good with figures, makes two and two come out four. So it *is* him. Hard to tell, all cleaned up like that, distinguished. The eyebrows hinted at the harmonica man's identity, as did the specs, but without the getup, the engineer's cap, the Hohner stuck between his lips, who's to say? "I wasn't expecting you," says Ruineux. The non sequitur floats like a balloon of absurdity between them and tweaks the corners of the harmonica man's mouth into an exasperated smile. "May I come in?" he says to Ruineux. Tit for tat. Then, as Ruineux says nothing more, he closes the door quietly, politely. Ruineux hears the deadbolt click into place. Well what do you know?

Giddy, invigorated with the glee of someone who's had a titillating practical joke played on him, Ruineux starts back toward the elevator. My god, he wasn't expecting *him*. A mystery man, the harmonica player leads a double life. "May I come in?" mouths

Ruineux to himself. He grins. There's a skip to his step. At the elevator door, he stabs at the down arrow with the middle finger of his right hand; then two, three more times just to feel the pleasant sensation of the button giving way. Inside the shaft, the thumping, banging car labors up to him and, this time, Ruineux listens to the song of the elevator cables. He thinks of it now as the sound of the Vendig yawning. A bell dings when the car arrives and, wonder of wonders, the doors open on Ben Franklin, *the* Ben Franklin, the Franklin who daily saunters his beat around Olde City. Portly, flushed, absent, he's been caught mid-primp, fluffing the ruffled cuffs of his blouse where they flower from the sleeves of his doublet. Looking up through his wire-rim specs, he realizes he's been delivered to the fifth floor. "I suppose I'm here," he says to Ruineux, stepping from the car. "The fifth is yours for the taking," says Ruineux, bowing slightly, automatically, as Franklin moves past him down the hallway. An essence of unripe walnuts trails in his wake. Ruineux steps into the car, pauses a moment, then presses the button for the lobby. Were there someone to take his bet, he'd go triple-or-nothing on the hunch that Franklin is bound for room 517. The elevator doors close on the image of Ben Franklin sashaying along the worn carpet, swaying to an internal waltz along the fifth-floor corridor of the Hotel Vendig. Something fey about that Ben.

I doubt he ever would chase down his Vendig demons, jump them in an alley, rough them up. It's something I've hinted at, an advanced confrontation therapy, but Ruineux always brushes aside my suggestions, my reassurances, my attempts at ridicule, both tender and cruel. Easier for him, I suppose, to tether his future to dreams of a lonely decrepitude in the Vendig, or something very much like the Vendig; easier to risk dragging someone else down with him as he makes his inevitable a by-product of the arbitrary. Misery, after all, loves company. I tell him there's no pattern, then he tells me, again, about how his father was summoned to New York to identify the corpse of *his* father, the grandfather, Ruineux's "PŽpre." Delirious, that old Canuck pitched himself in

one of his drunken jags from the third-story window of a Bowery flop, leaving it up to his only son to wing back east and clear away his remains. By that time, Ruineux's told me, the son, Big Jack, had already begun guzzling hard in his father's footsteps, but only really saw the writing on the wall during that November visit to En Why City. After that episode, the essence of pine began to fill the Ruineux household and little Jackie was surprised to see Big Jack stay home from the mill so often to play all his old songs on the piano. Slowly, Jackie grew more and more used to it, even expected it, and hardly shuddered when he took a sip from the glass left behind at the piano. That was before the father's "early retirement." The rest I know too well for my own good, but lay into him despite the convincing case he makes. "Sounds like self-pity to me," I tell him. "Doesn't have to be you," I tell him. "Just as easy to succeed as it is noble to fail," I lie. (The nobility inherent in a fascinatingly orchestrated failure comes as cheap as the fleeting hard-on tweaked from accidental success.) There's no sense in making odds on success or failure, this life or that one. That he's fairly sure of the odds of one as opposed to the odds of the other, odds he can fix, is no guarantee he'll be around to collect on his bet. Sure enough, I'm not planning on hanging around for the kind of grand finale he has in mind. No one needs that. On the other hand, I've got my own ways of fixing the bet. I'm not without a certain influence. Sometimes I think I can shrink him down, lull him into a deep sleep, fold him in a blanket of quilted toilet paper and tuck him into a matchbox bed just so I can keep him safe a while; long enough for a good, healthy layer of dust to collect on the blueprint he's bought into; long enough for me to convince him he's sold himself a real bill of goods. Sometimes, even the thought of him is beyond my reach. Sometimes, like now, when each passing moment makes him even more late than I'd expected, so late as to make me start to believe he might not (won't) come, I'm sure that John Alexandre Ruineux is nothing more than a withered leaf blowing around in the wind of a rich hangover, a displacement mechanism of my very own that keeps me from

chewing my nails to the moons. Were he never to show his face at my door again, could I really prove I'd known the guy? I've got photographic evidence, sure. But it's nothing more than subtractive synthesis. Nothing more than stabs at a Ruineux, suggestions of a Ruineux, as artificial as the reddening sunset beyond my toes. Even more artificial than my yen for another bourbon and Coke.

If it's true, he's loitering at the corner of 11th and Market now, nipping at a Camel, doing what he can to ignore the lingering distractions of a rush hour beginning to wind down. Eyes fixed on the revolving door of the Hotel Vendig, Ruineux hopes to see speculation made fact. Though he's not sure exactly why he wants to see Franklin emerge at the harmonica man's side, the vague notion he has to follow them, should they come out together, is beginning to cross over to obsession. Hell, he's ready to follow either of them, separately, should they come out; especially the harmonica man. He's insinuated himself more deeply into Ruineux's imagination. After all, harmonica man *noticed* Ruineux. That's something, isn't it, to be noticed by harmonica man? singled out from the herd? Ruineux never tossed him a coin, barely came within earshot of the see-saw racket harmonica man lays on work-a-day slouch and puffy tourist alike. But Ruineux cocked an ear to his Hohner, grooved on its counterpoint to the wheezing and honking confusion of Market Street. Ruineux made a note in the blue flip-pad. In an erratic orbit around the harmonica man, Ruineux *lurked*, and then found him where he'd least expected. It's good he didn't really invite me in, thinks Ruineux. That would've killed it. (Nothing kills his interest like the rush to find out.)

On Market the shadows are growing longer, the knots of waddling pedestrians more loosely tangled. Traffic has subsided to the point at which he can hear jazz staggering out the door of the Sounds of Market record shop. Not bad, he thinks. The Dave Brubeck Quartet in 5/4 time. He counts to himself: one two three four five, one two three four five. Five notes to the measure and the quarter note gets one beat. A

syncopated siren, the music draws him slowly away from the corner to a slab of concrete nearer Sounds of Market even while, naturally, he keeps his gaze fixed in the general direction of the Vendig's revolving door. This watching game, however, he now embellishes with a counting game riveted to Brubeck's quirky time signature: one two three light change, one two three car turns, one two three scratch nose, one two three blow smoke. "Take Five," the number's called: it makes sense to him now. As I've watched him do on so many quiet nights, he falls into an attitude of concentration while listening to the music, his jaw moving ever so slightly as he clicks his teeth to the rhythm. Leaning close, I've actually heard him. He's pretty good. Somehow he manages a variety of effects and can modulate the timbre in surprising ways. So different, this, from the grinding that can sometimes wake me in the night; the grinding of his molars as he sleeps. Quietly violent, it makes me wonder about the soundtrack of his dreams.

Across the street the afternoon shadows begin to kiss the curb. And some of the store fronts, as if anxious to usher in the night, have flickered to life in a come-hither display of neon. Somewhere, popcorn is being popped, an idea that puts Ruineux off. As if that weren't bad enough, The Dave Brubeck Quartet gives way to Del the Funky Homo Sapiens whose uninspired rap complements perfectly the aroma of fake butter and oily corn. Ganging up on his senses, the unpleasant combination whispers "shoo!" in his ear and Ruineux edges back toward the corner through which just enough traffic is passing to drown the rap in the generalized static of Market. Though he stands there for several minutes, he's asked neither for a quarter nor the time of day, and the double-decker bus that rolls up to a stop at the red light is reassuringly bereft of passengers. Out of place, the big red gimmick opens its front door to admit a woman; a woman, Ruineux notices, striding rigorously to the corner, arms pumping, feet rolling heel-toe over the pavement—a woman dressed as if she were about to run a marathon. Ruineux, without trying, can clearly see the driver nod to this excess flourish of bouncing blond energy, validate the

transfer she hands him and, when the light changes to green, pull the bus away with a purposefulness seemingly tailored to the specifications of its only passenger.

Trailing only the slightest cloud of exhaust, the double-decker slips from the corner of 11th and Market to reveal the Vendig it had momentarily obscured. Ruineux pats his breast pocket, as he sometimes will, to make sure his smokes are where he left them. Then, as if in response to this secret gesture, the corner lights up with faulty neon. A faded belle looking out on twilight, the hotel struggles to recall its own name.

Squatting here in this geriatric corridor of the city, its ailing memory is betrayed by the faint, frustrated spasms of the electrified gas struggling to spell it out: Vendig. The best it can manage, however, is a nervous “endi” or sputtering “Vend,” nothing to write home about. An evening spell of forgetfulness, it will last through the night until the morning sun makes frivolous the hotel’s abbreviated neon identity tag. With daylight comes memory and, though faded and chipped, a painted sign will suffice for reality orientation: Hotel Vendig, corner of 11th and Market, Philadelphia, U.S.A.: America starts here.

Certainly a few people notice, though most pretend sophistication in the face of such a spectacle: a Ben in full Franklin regalia pushes out through the revolving mouth of the Hotel end. After him emerges a slightly stooped but nonetheless dignified gentleman, wearing tweed in spite of the evening heat, wielding with confident grace an ornately carved cane. Franklin pauses a moment to get his bearings, then turns to confer with his companion. Together, they set out in Ruineux’s direction, both bent slightly forward as they cut across Market at a surprising clip. Ruineux falls in several steps behind them as they pass, committed now to following them, tracking them down. With amused interest he watches as the harmonica man gestures ever more dangerously with his ornamental cane, forces several pedestrians to bob and weave out of the path of his embellished chit-chat with Franklin. Every now and then he strikes the sidewalk with the

cane's steel tip, hammering home some point or other. Ruineux wishes he were close enough to hear.

Not that being out of earshot has ever been a problem for him. A creative eavesdropper, he's become an expert at filling in the gaps, supplanting the unintelligible whispers lost to the city's general din, the white noise he writes off as nothing more than a variety of silence. Where there's silence, he invents; for if there's one thing I've learned about Ruineux, he can't put up with silence very long. Dogging the steps of Franklin and harmonica, it comes as no surprise that a conversation of sorts percolates through the various membranes of his imagination to jangle the bonework of his inner inner ear and, as the harmonica man points his cane in the general direction of Billy Penn's statue, the one surveying the city from the top of city hall, there is no doubt he says, "That old Quaker appendage could never've imagined anything like *this*." Stopping dead in his tracks, he sweeps the cane in a gesture Ruineux imagines is meant to encompass all of Philadelphia. Not realizing he's stopped, Franklin continues on a few steps, then turns to see his friend staring, cane now a pointer, at the Hotel Vendig. Ruineux stops, too, and insinuates himself in the recessed doorway of an abandoned storefront. He can't help but notice the faded handbills touting Kiwi polish and Goodyear vulcanized heels that were never removed from the inside of the dirty windows: an admonishing finger pointed by the long-gone cobbler, driven out of business by a city more disposed to throw away their old shoes rather than have them repaired? May be. Meanwhile, Franklin has come up to the harmonica man and placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. Under the flat orange glow of the streetlight overhead, the two compose yet another of the city's passionate tableaux ignored by passersby in their determined drifting from here to there. "What is it, my friend?" asks the walking anachronism. There's an affected inflection to his voice that Ruineux only now notices

and, for the first time, he begins to wonder why Ben's still "in character." Surely it's beyond the hour at which the *touristas*' thirst for history has been satisfied.

"The Hotel Vendig," says the harmonica man, given over to an extemporaneous sulk, "is now the Hotel end. Just look: the neon. Pathetic." Ruineux watches as the old guy's lips draw out in a smirk. "Oh yes, once upon a time it was *something*, but now it's just a glorified shithouse for venerable old pensioned duffers, and junkies clutching at straws of respectability: it's only their prescriptions they're addicted to. Beyond my understanding why the joint hasn't been torn down already but, now that I know the inevitable isn't too far off, I'm learning some gratitude for the years I've had in that old girl." The harmonica man's head drops slightly forward, in an attitude of prayer, and Franklin's hand falls from his shoulder. After a moment, harmonica snaps to: "But, what the hell? A dump's a dump, right? Things make way when their time runs out, and the Vendig's out of time in more ways than one. Let's eat." Franklin places an arm lightly around his companion's waist and together the two make off down 11th.

They're tearing it down, thinks Ruineux, surprised at what he's heard.

Past Chestnut, past Walnut, all the way down to Locust where they duck into the Savoy Restaurant, Ruineux follows the two geezers. Pausing long enough for them to establish themselves in a booth, Ruineux steps slowly up to the restaurant's familiar window—seven panes long, three panes deep—and makes as if checking out the menu posted in the bottom left-hand-corner pane. Though he's only pretending to read, Daily Special Number 3 jumps right off the page at him: Liver and Onions. The old joke: what a way to ruin onions. Beyond the menu, in the third booth from the farthest wall, Franklin and the harmonica man ignore the laminated menus resting on the table between them and continue a discussion that began somewhere near 11th and Sansom. Harmonica man, it seems, is doing most of the talking. Franklin merely nods now and then, grinning, mouthing "yesses" (this Ruineux can clearly see), or "uh huhs," affirmatives

meant to encourage and which come with increasing frequency, quickening intensity, until the already flushed Franklin bursts out in laughter so violent Ruineux can hear it plainly on his side of the window. Trying the best he can to stifle himself, Franklin wrestles his laughter down to a mirthfully painful grimace and in so doing seems to lose his breath. With palms pressed against the edge of the table, Frankie braces himself, pushes into the seat's patched red vinyl, and throws his head back to draw a deep, deep breath. He holds it a moment, then lets go in an exasperated trail of sniffles and chuckles. Whew! Watery eyed, Poor Richard removes his wire-rimmed specs and draws from the breast pocket of his doublet a dingy handkerchief. He blots the corners of his eyes with teacup fastidiousness, then honks his nose clear for everyone in the restaurant, and Ruineux in the street, to hear. Harmonica, who's remained composed through Franklin's laughing jag, merely shakes his head as he gazes into his menu. By the time he looks up, Ruineux is standing at their booth, politely asking if he might join them for a bite.

Franklin, apparently the more game of the two, slides over in the booth and pats the seat with a delicately flamboyant, wristy gesture. "Always glad of a little extra company," he says. Ruineux slides into the booth beside him and, before he can get in a word of introduction, is confronted by a portly waitress in black polyester slacks, cream blouse, and a black smock-vest somewhat matching the slacks. Though her hair is done up in an extravagant bouffant out of which pokes the eraser end of a Ticonderoga number 2 pencil, though her eyes bat semaphore with exaggerated stick-on lashes, though her lips shine with Maybeline "Lush Pomegranate no. 9," there's an unnerving masculinity about her. Maybe it's the Adam's apple protruding above her collar, or the meaty, hirsute hand with which she offers Ruineux his menu, or the unattended hint at a five-o'clock shadow—or all in combination—that confirms Ruineux's suspicion that this waitress is a transvestite. "Here you go," she says, "and if I were you, honey, I'd watch out for the liver and onions." Ruineux thanks her and, just before she turns to collect the dirty plates

off the booth opposite, notices her nametag: Steve. A half-assed transvestite at that, thinks Ruineux as he watches her rattle toward the kitchen with a teetering armload of dirty plates, saucers, and coffee cups. He turns to Franklin and states the obvious:

“Quite a waitress, that Steve.”

Fingering the lip of his water glass, Franklin merely simpers and shrugs.

“They’re all a bit *fruity* here,” offers the harmonica man in his slow, petulant drawl. Once again scanning the menu, he lifts it right up to the tip of his nose, then pushes it a few inches away, focusing awkwardly despite the thick specs.

Franklin’s gaze remains fixed on Ruineux. “Now, Schube,” he admonishes, “the young man obviously has never taken respite here at the Savoy. I trust you’re not put off by the wenches’ attire?”

Schube? This guy could have any name, thinks Ruineux, but the name history’s reserved for him is Schube. Schube! What a name. There just might be room in the *meisterwerk* for a guy by the name of Schube. Have to switch him around though, shuffle the deck of this guy with those of the others I’ve known. Make a mental note, Ruineux thinks. (He’s left the blue pad at home.) Then he thinks: Wenches? “I suppose the polyester’s easy to clean,” he says, finally coming back to it. Schube.

Ruineux knocks a few sticky crumbs of what might have been apple pie from the laminated surface of the menu, then offers up an introduction. The hand he extends is taken up in Franklin’s easy, supple grip, shaken daintily, and released with an unmistakable, alarming caress. Flirt.

“Charmed,” says Franklin, dreaminess at odds with his late middle age.

“I’m sure,” says Ruineux. He can volley with the best when he’s in the mood. Frankie recoils in feigned offense.

“Well,” says the colonist, “the name really is Ben. Isn’t it just a *hoot*?”

“Oh my sweet Jesus,” groans harmonica. “You never give it a rest, do you?” Fed up with his crony’s flirtatious camp, he takes over the introductions. Ruineux listens with a curiosity tempered by skepticism as the crank winds into a suspiciously well rehearsed sounding dossier. Ben it is, but, and thank god for that, the last name’s not Franklin; not even close. Uspensky’s the name, an altruistic Franklin whose role playing is a labor of love compensated neither by the City of Brotherly Entanglements nor by the National Parks Administration. Given the so-called golden handshake by the University of Pennsylvania (started showing up for his history lectures in the Franklin getup, and that just didn’t sit well at all with the more conventional academics in the department), he took a shine to pacing the sidelines of Franklin Field, urging the football Quakers on to their usual mediocrity and, generally, making an exhibition of himself. Finally got banned from the games for an incident in which he managed to spirit several plastic garbage bags of toast into the stadium, distributed the slices among the student section and, somehow (though it’s not likely this took any great power of persuasion) managed to convince the students to foil the alma mater by hurling the stuff onto the field at the verse beginning: “So here’s a toast to Pennsylvania.”

As for harmonica, Schubelmeyer Hannet’s the name. (And what a name.) Lived all his life in this dump. “And I use the word ‘dump’ with genuine fondness.” Like Ben, who he sometimes calls “Frank,” sometimes “Ski,” he’s a retired academic—Temple, classics; though his retirement occurred under entirely more conventional, less “folkloric” circumstances. “And yes, that’s me on the corner with the spoons and harmonica. I, too, am perfecting a role; though one connected with a different sort of history altogether. It’s research, you see. I’m at work on the memoirs of a street person who never existed; a mythology of the dispossessed, so to speak.” He goes on to describe the project in more detail than Ruineux cares to hear and in language so luridly commercial—teeming with words like “audience,” “marketability,” and “hot”—that

Ruineux believes none of it. He's met this type before. And when he's in the mood to let nothing go to waste, he sees in them an angle to be worked.

In spite of Ben's unwelcome attentions (he is, after all, a harmless old loon), Ruineux finds himself at ease with the preposterous circumstances. He even samples a bit of the snuff Ben offers, true to form, from what appears to be a fancifully engraved silver pillbox, and sneezes with good natured relish. Orders are taken, things are brought forward and eaten, droll repartee is engaged in with Steve the waitress, and comments are passed by harmonica man (Ruineux can't get used to thinking of him as a Schubelmeyer) and Ben about this or that patron with whom they are familiar. Dripping and bland, the food heaped onto their platters comes only in various shades of brown, but Ruineux digs in anyway, shoving forkfuls of the stuff into his mouth: the liver and onions with which he's substituted steak fries and gravy for the suggested mashed. He thinks: She's given up on me by now, finished sundowner number three, maybe dialed my number on the off chance of finding me home. Six, seven, eight times the phone rings before, patiently and quietly pissed off, she lays the receiver on the hook, collects herself, and sets out from her apartment to catch the Market-Frankford into town. Maybe she rings up Zane first, arranges to meet him at the Rub Out the Word CafŽ, or the Marrakech, for what just might be a washing of the hands, the springboard for a bar crawl to celebrate the exhaustion of her patience. I've tried many times, I know; maybe just this once more. Half-way across some kind of tightrope, I'm getting a feel for the parasol waggle, the workable umbrella of balance, and taking my circus training from two Punchinellos losing their punch with every word, every gesture, every mouthful of slop they grind into a bolus. That I can laugh at them is not quite enough to justify throwing Jas over tonight for whateverthehell I'm onto here, but still I'm compelled to follow through, lie through my teeth, smear myself with the old headhunter body paint as I never quite managed to do when on the make for a suit and the promise of a juicy commission.

Worn and overextended, my patience with Ruineux could give out at any moment, but not this one. Zane's offered a shoulder to bawl on, and though I doubt I'll take him up, I will accept his reassurance that Ruineux doesn't pull this crap to be malicious and that, wherever he is, he's not only alright, but most likely thinking of me. I'll even manage to convince myself that I've been gifted with clairvoyance, that this little fantasy with which I've been amusing myself while waiting for the goof is the grand actuality of fact. It just could be. I see him so clearly now, mopping up the gravy on his plate with a folded piece of white bread, fitting half of it into his mouth in one bite. Sure enough of himself to talk with his mouth full, his shirt stained, he launches into his headhunting rap for harmonica and Ben, feeds them a line they're in no position to dispute, even suggests the two pensioners might do well to consider plying their university-enhanced mentalities to some headhunting of their own. "Phone work," he says. "The client never sees you."

When Steve drops the check on the table, Ruineux's surprised to see harmonica man snatch it up, slide out of the booth and, cane in hand, head straight for the cashier. Slow on the uptake, he turns to Ben who's whispering arithmetic, estimating the bill and figuring a passable tip. From a change purse cut to resemble a miniature carpet bag, Ben draws four ones, fans them neatly on the table, and gently urges Ruineux out of the booth with his shoulder. "Dinner's on us," he says, cutting off the protest Ruineux had no intention of making. No sooner are the two out of the booth when Steve appears, greasy rag in hand, thanking them and cooing "goodnight" as she rakes away the debris.

Pushing out through the Savoy's heavy wooden door, Ruineux and the man who would be Franklin find harmonica man in mid-pace, tapping the sidewalk with the steel tip of his cane, humming a tune as incomprehensible as the Hohner selections he bleats on the city's busy corners. Up a tree of imaginative memory, he is, the barefoot youth he sometimes likes to invent, one full of pubescent girls kissed in leaky rowboats, adrift on foggy ponds choked with lily pads and surrounded by tall green. It's rare these days for

him to dream this idyll beyond a kiss, but oh those letters he used to send to the glossies reserved for men's entertainment! Those were the real classics, a sheaf of them tucked between the sagging mattresses of his Vendig bed, within easy reach for those moments he feels the urge to fan the flame of recollection for salad days so long-gone they could just as easily be true as not. Returning from his daydream, he springs to an easy unmilitary attention at the sight of his old friend and the young fresh fellow, this Jack character, the *lurker*, the roamer of the Vendig's hallways, the interpolator at other folks' dinner tables. Shouldering his cane, he meets them in the middle of the walk, salutes, and growls, perhaps remembering some innocent childhood game, "Corporal Hannet reporting for duty, sir." Annoyed pedestrians play it safe, edge along curb or storefront in sudden, careful detours around this eccentric knot in the sidewalk. Ruineux, feeling somewhat awkward, thanks the two for the dinner and company in hesitating words that telegraph the exit he's about to make, but before he can explain his previous engagement, the one for which he's already much too late, Ben places a shushing finger to his lips and, cutting him off, says, "But, surely you'll join us for a tankard or two? 'No' just will not do for an answer." Looks like there's no playing for less than all-or-nothing, thinks Ruineux, even as Ben takes his arm and the three make off down Locust. Sandwiched between a harmonica man on his day off and an ersatz Benjamin Franklin, Ruineux musters a necessary resignation as they lead him down the street and strike up a singing game of call and response spurred by the Hohner king:

"Oh, I'm a cranky old Yank"

"in a clanky old tank"

"on the streets of Yokohama"

"with my Fujiyama mama"

"singing those sweeto beato"

"flat-on-my-feeto"

“Hirohito blues!”

The moth-eaten tuque is securely in place over the antlers of the jackalope mounted on the far inside wall of the Locust Bar as the trio wander through the door—a signal that drinks are half-price. Cigar smoke hangs in ectoplasmic garlands over the heads of the barflies who greet their old friends with boozy cheers and catcalls: “Hey hey, Frankie baby! Yo Schube!” Happy Hour is in high gear. Ruineux, poor baby, needs a drink in a way he never has, so he bellies up to the bar and orders three Wild Turkeys (Ben, and maybe even the real Ben, would surely approve) and three pints of Betz lager. As each drink is poured Ruineux passes them back in turn to Frankie and the Schube, then settles up with the barmaid and turns to face the raised shot glasses of his new amigos. “To our noble benefactor,” says Ben. Ruineux acknowledges the toast, raises his own shot glass, but only downs half to the others’ bottoms up.

Falling in with the animated prattle of Messrs. Uspensky and Hannet, Ruineux keeps to himself a kind of back-line rhythm of thought and speculation. Time surfing, he thinks, as Franklin hoists a toast to David Bushnell, the originator of submarine warfare who once demonstrated his insidious vessel, “Bushnell’s Turtle,” in a Schuylkill River war game known mockingly as the “Battle of the Kegs.” Ruineux lifts his mug. Time surfing is what this feels like. Hanging ten in time’s pipeline. Aware that a wicked undertow lies a heartbeat away, wiping out for him just could mean abandoning these two characters. Either ride the wave out or run the risk of having my face shoved into the unforgivingly hard bottom of an ill-considered moment. Nothing here but instinct and managed surrender: the overwhelming power of the wave makes the idea of control little more than a delusion. Respect the forces of nature, of which time must surely be one, and let the wave push me along. Sure, make the balance-keeping adjustments, but don’t fight the wave. You never know: there just might be a shore waiting at the end of the ride. A nifty game, an unconventional sport, I’ve paddled into the surf of a guy whose

hobby is putting on the airs of a street eccentric, and another bent on impressing the image of Ben Franklin on the brotherly lovers. That paddling gestured at control, but only positioned me for the wave to take over. Pluck, wit, skill, luck—these I just might have. Still and all, it's the pipeline now, the time wave superseding my will.

Kowabunga.

Schube, loosening up, buys another round and the toasts continue, some lugubriously pat (“To the unknown souls, those colonial heroes, planted beneath Washington Square”), some decidedly obscure (“To Rosalita!”), some fractured (“Down the hatch, for while we imbibe in the Locust Bar’s warm embrace, there can be no doubt we live … live in nothing other … than … than clover”). Franklin’s, that last one, shouted above the whoops and cheers of the barflies and the excited voice of a play-by-play on the TV behind the bar. And while the old guy is certainly holding his own, there can be no doubt, as he himself keeps putting it, he’s “in his cups.” Sliding heavily into a booth just abandoned, Franklin sighs contentedly and braces himself against the wall’s thin, carved-up paneling. Ruineux and the Schube follow, plopping themselves in the seat opposite; Schube against the wall, directly across from Ben, Ruineux to the outside, his left foot sticking out from under the table. Turning to Ruineux, bumping out the saloon doors of a fun house called Deductive Reasoning, harmonica smoothes the trim bristles of his mustache and says, “Somewhere, there’s a woman; a woman you were to meet this evening. I know this.” Exaggeratedly, and with a vestige of ridicule, he sniffs at Ruineux, cups his hand in the air above Ruineux’s shoulder and draws the air to his nostrils in tiny draughts. Not unlike a gourmet, thinks Ruineux, who can tell if he’s achieved the proper balance of seasonings in the fine sauce he’s preparing by its familiar aroma. The old guy pauses a moment, taking it in, then declares, “Van Cleef et Arpels. I know that cologne. I also know you’re not likely to have purchased it. It was the woman, the woman you were on your way to see. A gift from her, no doubt: a fragrance

far too subtle for a young guy like yourself to have chosen—if you'd choose any at all.” The guy's a regular swami, thinks Ruineux; a Sherlock, or a variety of “Dr. Mento” from those traveling carnival midways now long gone. It's downright creepy. He goes on: “You remembered to wear it tonight, for her, but you're here with two old coots instead. Far be it from me to jump to any hasty generalizations, but I'd say you're a bit barmy. And I'm not altogether sure I ought to feel comfortable in your company, what with the unusual interest you seem to have taken in me; with your having *tracked me down* to the Vendig. A nice piece of detective work, that. Now you have me cornered. You've dined with me (and at my expense), we've exchanged rounds of drinks, you've stood up a woman whose company one might well imagine is a hell of a lot more compelling than that of an old has-been like me and, now that you have finally pinned me down, I turn out nothing so much as the harmonica man you expected. What a disappointment I must be for you, a sham of a harmonica man, a pensioned academic on the make for a myth I can sell.” Schubelmeyer raises a loose fist to his mouth and primly clears his throat. Ahem.

“Phillies 2; Tigers 1,” whispers Franklin as if passing along a savory tidbit of inside information. “Top half of the 5th.” His eyes, as they've been throughout Hannet's speculation, are fixed on the television set built into the wall behind the bar. His non sequitur is so jarringly mundane Ruineux wipes his nose and wonders if he isn't coming down with narcolepsy; if everything Hannet's just told him were nothing more than the byproduct of a momentary blackout. Or maybe it's his back-line riffing. Could be. At a loss, all he can manage, at first, is a familiar, absent refrain: “The Phillies have a way of snatching defeat out of the jaws of victory.” It gets a polite laugh out of the rhinestone colonist, and a sort-of nasal groan from harmonica Hannet. Then, covering, or testing, with a stagy shake of his head intended to give the appearance of rousing himself from a lapse of attention, he turns to Hannet and says, “Yes, Van Cleef et Arpels.”

“Used to wear the stuff myself,” says Hannet, concentrating on a speck of white grime stuck to the lip of his pint glass. He picks at it with the nail of his forefinger. “There was a woman who bought me gifts.” Freeing the speck, he lifts the glass to his lips and takes a long and indifferent slug. It leaves a few glistening beads of ale in his soup-strainer, which he immediately wipes away with the back of his hand. “So long ago, now, I remember nothing, not even her face.” Then, reconsidering, “Her hair: *that* I remember. Long and thick, she used to pamper it with olive oil, and nothing relaxed me so much as watching her brush it out.”

A disgusted round of boos rises above the bar’s susurrant hubbub, and Franklin dutifully reports the Tigers just scored two runs on a ground-rule double to take the lead. As if already resigned to a Phillies’ loss, and in perfect fair-weather form, the barmaid turns down the volume of the television set and hands a few quarters to one of the regulars at the end of the bar who, knowing the routine, wanders over to the jukebox and makes his selections. In no time, Sinatra’s voice is laying a smooth warm blanket over the Locust. “A consolation round seems in order,” says Franklin, rising. From his doublet he pulls the miniature carpetbag before he bellies up to the bar hailing, as he does, “Annie” with boisterous compassion. He strikes up a conversation with her Ruineux can’t quite overhear, but which is strangely animated compared to the torpor into which he’d fallen while seated in the booth. Either paranoid or self-important, what Ruineux thinks, when he glances up at Franklin out of the corner of his eye, is, They’re talking about me.

But what about Hannet? What he’d like to tell Hannet is that tomorrow he’ll hit the snooze bar three, maybe four times when the clock radio, tuned to the station he hates most, screams a new day into those big ears of his, ears prone to collecting wax: the legacy of his father, as he likes to assert when excavating the rich topic of ears. After he drags his ass out of bed, the first matter of business will be to put some water on the boil

for tea, a beverage he turned to when his coffeemaker went on the fritz and about which, subsequently, he's been either too cheap or too ambivalent to replace. By the time he's taken a pee and splashed his face with a few handfuls of water, the pot will have come to a boil and, for a minute or two, he'll stand at the stove heroically dangling a tea bag into a steaming mug, fighting the urge to sneak back to his bed for a few more winks. It's like that every morning, he'd like to tell him, lying through his teeth. Most of his nights have nothing to do with sleep. Or maybe he'd like to tell Hannet that *some* mornings, when he hears the Market-Franklin El pulling into the 46th Street Station, which is really the Farragut Street Station (Ruineux never tires of pointing out this trivia), the screech of wheel against rail as the train comes to a stop makes his eyes well up with tears. For what, he does not know. It just happens that way, sometimes: as if allergic to his own heart, he feels himself coughing it up, but not quite spitting it out. It catches there, at the back of his throat, making a grotto of his chest that fills up with unbent paper clips. But such moments pass. When the tea's brewed, he'll pour in some milk and, if there are any lying around that West Philly dump of his, a couple teaspoons of sugar from the pre-measured packets to which he helps himself whenever he stops for lunch at the St. George.

These are the kind of things he'd like to tell Hannet, the essential banalities, but instead he says, "I had no idea it would be you at the door when I knocked, but I wasn't surprised. I have these dreams: dreams in which I sit, old and alone, on a broken-down bed in a room in the Hotel Vendig. No friends, no *amiga*, no health—hope blinking out with each passing moment. In these nightmares I'm burdened by endless plots and scenarios incubating in reams of typing paper stashed away in cardboard boxes. I've bolted up in my bed at night, screaming about that fusty old dreambed on which I force myself to cascading memories about who I was and what I'd been—all the things that molded me into that bent, solitary old man." Yes, he lays it on thick with that dream

routine of his. Then: "Though I had no idea, I saw you in your window one night and the image you created spilled into everything. The you I saw was so close to my vision. In it, I saw for myself an inevitable outcome. Through it, I saw everything else. Then you appear at point-blank range, the harmonica man who isn't, so much at odds with the construct I'd fabricated around the you of my dreams. You come along and insert another prism between the world and the eyes of my already refracted imagination. I overheard you telling Ben the Vendig's scheduled for demolition, and it just might be. It just might also be you swung a wrecking ball of your own this afternoon, in one blow pulverizing the architecture I'd composed of a man, a window, and the Hotel Vendig. I stood for quite some time as the dust settled, looking into the opaque, everything I could dream funneled down to a tiny white chip of mortar I did my best to will into an invincible city-state of solitude that somehow would not, one day, slip into decay. I guess a guy holds on to what he knows. Now, none of that exists. Today, you demolished that city and tossed it over the edge of the world. Or at least made plain its grid so that I might have a look at the Possible. Look, I'm looped. I'm not sure, anymore, what the hell I'm talking about. Just understand that my finding you this afternoon had nothing to do with lurking or tracking you down. It was an accident. For me, a happy accident."

If only it could be that way: he'd get up from the table now and, not bothering about the round with which Franklin's returning, say his goodnight and come tracking *me* down across the clean, white space of his newly razed city. As it is, Ruineux stays put, perhaps just barely comprehending what he's said to harmonic Hannet, most likely doubting he's said anything at all.

Carrying it on a tray supplied by Annie, Franklin shuffles back to the booth with the fresh round—three shots, three ales—places the tray on the table, and begins distributing the drinks. "You've been missing out, Ben," Hannet tells him. "Jack here's

been telling me all about the projectionist trade.” Forgoing a toast, he reaches directly for the shot glass of bourbon and tosses it back. Ruineux does likewise: when in Rome ....

“Projectionist?” Franklin takes a temperate sniff at his overfull shotglass, even licks its lip with feline curiosity before, pinkie daintily extended, placing it to his lips. In a single motion he raises his elbow and tips his head to drain the bourbon, dribbling a bit down his soft chin as he does. A bit careless now, he wipes that chin, those chins, with his sleeve and, woozy, steadies himself against the table. Gripping its edge, he carefully lowers himself back into the booth and resumes his position against the wall. Ruineux, himself feeling “in his cups,” watches the spectacle of a besotted Ben Franklin stabilizing himself, burping into his pasty knuckles, and wonders under what sort of blackout he’s been operating to have missed the changeover so badly. Certainly they’ve shared more than three rounds, his Timex having marched steadily beyond 11 o’clock to twenty past the hour. Just to be sure, he asks: “How’d the Phillies do, Ben?”

Collecting himself: “Soundly drubbed, Jack. The magistrate, even as we speak, must be notifying their next of kin. The Tigers’ batsmen struck mighty blows in the top of the 8th, six of their company touching toe to plate.” Cradling his hand around the base of his pint glass, Franklin betrays no intention of lifting it to his booze-ruddy gob.

Soundly drubbed, thinks Ruineux. Somewhat sobered by incongruity, Ruineux sips his Betz ale and feels the greased barbell of history press down onto the back of his neck. “Tell me about the booth,” slurs Ben, but all Ruineux can think, at the moment, is of a wheelchair-bound teacher dubbed “Old Ironsides” by the kiddies, and the history she made them learn by rote until, repeating to himself their names, their places, and their dates, Jackie Ruineux began to walk along a rarefied pathway, hand-in-hand with the purple shadows of the founding fathers. Paternal comforts and reassurances radiated from those woodcut portraits, the ones that gazed up at him from the texts: fixed mythical expressions of essential command, stately determination, and charitable

understanding. Not once did he dare, like Stewy, for whom history was nothing more than a lost hour out of the day, embellish a forebear with an irreverent Fu Manchu or Beatnik goatee. These were, after all, family portraits. "History," says Ruineux, recalling these things, his face a tabula rasa of alcohol and loss, "was something so real to me, when I was a kid. Hell, even when I was more than a kid. When I ended up in Philly, I wasn't surprised: the move was less random than I liked to believe. But all that history, once so alive for me, became vague when I realized I could walk right up and feel the coarse bricks of Independence Hall. Or caress the Liberty Bell's crack." Franklin smiles at that, perhaps thinking it a pun. "Isn't it strange we can walk a path trod by the *real* Ben? or Jefferson or Washington—the whole bunch?" Harmonica Hannet shrugs. Franklin listens with bleary eyes. "You'd think I'd wolf down all the history this city panders. Like you, Ben: you haven't lost the fire. But the love I used to enjoy for the mythology called history went right down the shitter the closer I got. Walk around the stage set enough and the magic of the screen disappears. Touching it, all this stage set adds up to is an unlikely frame for everything passing through it. I almost feel, sometimes, like I have to 'act' my way around town, pantomime my indifference for the gawking tourists, assume my 'cool air of sophistication.' It's tough: we shrug off so much, hold onto so little. And now I'm shitfaced, to boot." Ruineux takes a greedy slug of his Betz. Hannet, perhaps sympathetic, if not quite following this outburst, places a hand on Ruineux's shoulder. Taking another swig, Ruineux swallows hard, then knocks the glass back down on the table. "The booth," coming back to Ben. "The projection booth. It's like this: I exit the stage set and find myself in a skull within a skull."

Never having truly left the booth, as if he ever does these days, Ruineux falls silent while a machinery in need of no lubrication whirs and grinds, throws an image on his tattered screen in which, orange and dusty, the October sun lays its arthritic fingers across the shoulders of the father, Big Jack, who stabs beneath a bay window at the

packed earth. There, alongside Ruineux's white frame house, he plies the dirt with a hopelessly dull shovel the splintered handle of which first shines, then frays, the palms of his Sanforized work gloves. Sweat darkens the band of his crumpled slouch hat, and the flannel beneath his armpits. A ball of it drops from the tip of his nose, but does precious little to soften the dirt he curses. Rose bushes, he must be thinking. I'm burying the goddamn rose bushes. *Rosary* bushes is what they are: you sweat and bleed their beads, digging their puny winter graves. I'm a friggin' grave digger every October: regular row of three foot ditches you fill with dried-up, spiny vines; a few pathetic pennants clinging to the dormant stalks; ruined blooms. They ain't fragrant no more. Lay-in a shroud of peat moss and hope to hell it's enough for a May resurrection.

Watching her husband, from the bay window, the mother holds her infant son. "Look at Daddy," she says. Jackie struggles in her grip, then shakes his arms and begins to laugh, his first, baring his soft gums and drooling into his stained bib. A new pleasure. The mother laughs, too, ecstatic, proud that her little man can laugh. She eggs him on with tickling fingers, then, opening the window, hoists the child like a trophy and calls down to the husband. "Get a load of *him*," she says. "He thinks you're a *riot*." The father lays down his shovel and looks up at his son, flushed with the pride only a father can know.

"You want me to call you a cab?" says Hannet, gently shaking Ruineux by the shoulder. Ruineux answers with a diffident wave of his hand: thanks, but he can make it. Make it where? Without so much as a good-bye, he gets up from the booth and pushes his way out into Locust Street. "Van Cleef et Arpels," Hannet calls out as the door slams closed behind the wobbling Ruineux.

Bless that old fruitcake for pointing him in the right direction. Should Ruineux show up at my door, I'll be here—floppy on bourbon and Coke, but here. Perhaps is an awful word to use, but *perhaps*, should he show, and I have to believe he will, perhaps I

won't make him sit, drinkless, through an hours-long rehash of all the agitated speculation he's caused me tonight: the fairy tale born of petulant anxiety: the punchline-free shaggy dog story blossomed from cuttings of his self-absorbed negligence (no doubt he'll attribute his abandonment this evening to a spell of the bombasts), frustration with the character flaws caused by complex 35 (it just ain't cute no more, Ruineux), and—I don't know—*vexation* with the patient schmuck I become sometimes when pushed to the limit by that goofy bird. Schmuck I am, Ruineux. I'm still waiting, so come on baby: keep wandering along 10th Street. You'll eventually make it to the Market-Franklin.

Sucking in the cool night air, he tries to will himself to an even stride. He thinks: "Van Cleef et Arpels. Jasmine." Very good. Then he shuffles along a couple more blocks, all the while thinking, "...."

At Black Horse Alley, that insidious slit between the Milner Hotel and the nameless shambles into which has been tossed a ratty novelty shop called "What's Up, Doc?", Ruineux spots an opportunity and, stamping his boot to shoo the rats scouring over the rancid cobblestones and fermenting dumpsters, ducks into the alley for a quick piss. Unzipping his fly, wishing he'd remembered his blue pad, he fishes out his dick and, as his stream spats against the Milner Hotel, thinks: He could have any name, but the name I reserve for the guy who gets himself up as the harmonica man is "Schubelmeyer Hannet."

Just enough light filters in from the street to lend to his stream a lapidary sparkle. It so absorbs Ruineux he forgets to allow for the backwash splashing over his boots: they're shining with his tepid piss by the time he shakes off the last stubborn drops. Relieved now, if not happy, Ruineux zips himself up, turns, and steps unsuspecting into the dull crack of a silvery chain. Reflexively, he cowers, touches his hand to the nose he fears is broken, blood puddling in the cup of his palm and streaming over his wrist. Not

daring to look up at his attacker, too stunned to plead, “No,” he doubles over and braces himself against the Milner, then sinks to his knees. Spitting blood into the puddle, the making of which had only moments before aroused in him an acute though fleeting sense of pleasure, he does manage a surprisingly desperate “Don’t,” a hacking “Please.” He’s aware of the wind-chime ringing of the chain as it dangles in a loose grip. And he’s afraid. “I’m reaching for my wallet,” he says, shielding his face with his left hand, plucking billfold from pocket with his right. He flips it at his attacker’s feet. “It’s yours,” coughing.

The wind chime comes down hard on the nape of his neck.

What’s this? So surprising are the cockroaches, Ruineux stops on the sidewalk to watch them. Woozy in the tear-jerking swelter, an afternoon of life so sourly humid as to allow for the possibility that sumac bushes and scrub pines really can grow sideways out the walls of the crumbling line of abandoned and boarded-up houses fronting the El, he lowers himself, genuflects to the vermin roiling on the uneven walk. Slow, tentative on the hot concrete, they probe his arid landscape with graceful feelers, press the glistening shells of their fat bellies to the ground or into the backs of each other. Over what the roaches crawl is a matter for speculation, but for the moment Ruineux is content with hovering, afloat, as in a zeppelin, above a cockroach Franklin Field. The curious passing on the opposite side of the street shoot startled looks that, were they wordified and typed into some kind of legal court document would, in and of themselves, be sufficient to secure Ruineux a cozy niche in the Commonwealth booby hatch near Byberry. Ignoring them, Ruineux surrenders to the compellingly repulsive, and mouths the appropriate euphemism: “Palmetto bugs.” The words hang above him (or so he imagines) in a smoke-signal Morse: a warning to the casual passerby that the to-ings and fro-ings with which their quotidian days acquire structure either chip for them their very own shard from the granite of Anonymity, or buff their rented square footage of that holy and

monumental block. Some days can only be reduced to a palmetto bug anonymity. Of this Ruineux is convinced.

On knees and elbows now, he leans forward, pebbles and grit digging in where the bone is close to the flesh. The blood still drips, sure, but no longer flows from his facial rearrangement. An orientation toward night or day, up or down, asleep or awake, is a distant drum along the Amazon of consciousness. Not even the question of hot or cold occurs to him, never mind the shivering.

Similar in shape to the flattened-out crown of a penis, their large cockroach heads are easily discernible from their cigar-butt abdomens. Two eyes, dull black pearls, dot an ivory field bisected by a brown stripe. Straining, he can see the mandibles twitching at the mouths of these sewer giants. Were he to come home one night and find such a soldier guarding the section of tile footing his toilet, he would run to the breakfast nook and, finding himself out of insecticide, reach for the bottle of window cleaner: *that* stuff freshens as it kills, often with greater speed than the real McCoy. Maybe a dozen times he'd squirt the roach which, contrary to popular wisdom, would not go belly-up but, rather, merely slump to the floor as if bemoaning a cockroach funk, its noodly feelers limp in the puddle of ammonia. Not wanting to touch the thing, Ruineux would grab a piece of paperboard, scoop up the carcass, deposit it in the toilet, and flush. Then he'd wipe away the excess ammonia, cleaning the floor around the toilet and the underside of the bowl as he does: two birds with one stone. That a boy, Ruineux. If you ask, I will call you Bwana.

But this is no toilet. Black Horse Alley is the name of this place, yet it's so much like the shadow of the El. Ripe with the aroma of sour milk and relit cigarette, the alley stinks of a sanitation workers' strike. It could just be the bugs. Or blood. Perhaps it's cockroaches he's bleeding, a *cockroach blood* mixed with cockroach snot dripping from the busted up center of his face, flopping wet and viscous to the sidewalk, but scrambling

to congeal and try out its prickly new legs. Plop. Plop. Plop: the pool grows then roils just below his face which, slowly, sinks into the cobblestones. Still on his knees, his ass juts skyward, toward Orion (though Orion can't be seen, stars lost as they are to architecture and the halogen glow by which folks navigate the night). Holding this pose, Ruineux shifts a bit more of his weight to his left elbow as he extends the forefinger of his right hand. The nail appears to have been caked with black grease, but most of it Ruineux has scraped away, maybe with the pointed pocket clip of his ballpoint pen.

Right before his eyes, a drop of this cockroach blood domesticates itself and the friendly critter creeps right up to Ruineux' extended finger. With gentle strokes of its feelers it touches him, and a tingle runs finger-to-spine. The feelers graze the blond knuckle hairs, and Ruineux has to bite the inside of his cheek: it tickles. For a moment, slippery panic imposes itself on him in the form of the leaky dumpsters and soiled shadows of Black Horse Alley, not to mention the ringing of a distant clock-tower bell that recalls to him the brutal glint of a silvery chain. He tries to concentrate on a single lit bulb affixed to the brick wall behind him, its comforting yellow blur, but this light, he realizes, enters only through one eye, the left. Afraid, he touches the right eye to make sure and finds it not missing (thank the lord for small mercies), but simply swollen shut.

On his finger now, the cockroach makes continual adjustments with its nervous legs. And though part of him realizes this insect is nothing more than blood, Ruineux, slowly and with care, raises his finger to his face, cockroach riding in the saddle of his knuckle until its feelers graze his lips. Softly, he kisses the animal. It tastes to him for all the world like asparagus and vinegar. Or is it rust he tastes? As he sets the cockroach down, shakes the blood from his finger, curtains flutter at the windows of consciousness. Too early, he knows, but he has to force the next changeover. This is a scene he could never get used to; the lighting's all wrong and the sound-track sizzles like an eighteen-wheeler on sharp gravel. Go ahead, Ruineux. Take your spot at the control box between

the Simplex 35s. You've shown me how to do it so many times I'm sure that now, when you really need it, there's no way your own peculiar magic of the booth will let you down. *Do it right and no one in the house will be wise to the changeover.* It'll be *smooth.*

Outside, there is lightning, and the first heavy drops begin to patter the window sill. A gust of wind blasts through the open window, shaking the candlelight and animating our shadows on the wall. Ruineux watches as I undo the silk cord of my kimono.