

Exposures

Jasmine positions her tripod near the corner of 10th and Arch, the night air congested with the aroma of food being prepared for human consumption. Here, at the frontier of Chinatown—all lit up and dazzling on the other side of the street—I lean against a letterbox, my hangover nearly as ornate as the red and blue and gold leaf patterns sanctifying the Gate at which I gaze. Just as compelling is the shop window beside me in which a hundred sucking carp roil the murky water of a large glass tank from which they will be plucked, gutted, and filleted by the smoking Vietnamese who watch us from the kitchen doorway. They cook them, scales on, over coals in a sloppy kitchen into which we can see and from which comes not only the mildly appetizing fragrance of grilled fish, but the sour, muddy odor of gills, fins, and intestines snow-shoveled up off the floor and tossed into a dumpster in the alley separating the fish house from Abe's Book Bazaar. Though it makes me vaguely nauseous, Jasmine doesn't appear one bit bothered. She edges her tripod not fifteen feet from the bleeding dumpster and even asks a Vietnamese walking out a shovelful of guts to pose for a quick shot. Flattered, he smiles. Apron bloodied, hands bloodied, cigarette stabbing from the corner of his narrow mouth; hair pulled back in a long black pony tail, brow wrapped in a sweaty red bandanna, the guy mugs for the shot and then suggests we stop in and sample the carp. "Not tonight," Jasmine demurs. "Tomorrow night, maybe. Tonight is for making photographs." It strikes me that she's adopting awkward idioms in the hope that this will somehow make her better understood, but still there is that underlying comfort with strangers I find impossible to emulate.

Now she's once again all business. "Put on your jacket, Ruineux, and don't face the camera. I want you to look into the lights of Chinatown and think about the night the Vietnamese restaurant let us run a tab; when you and I were a novelty, marching down

this very street like we'd just conquered it, liberated it—astronauts returned from Venus to receive the adulation of the loveless masses. Wasn't it like that, Ruineux? No, don't answer. I'm not looking for a dialogue." Once upon a time, she must be thinking, he sensed (as I *know*) that life, like imagination, is a thing of the moment, a *process*. And that drew us together in a loneliness we could share; a loneliness that could sustain pleasure and keep us remote from our fears. She bends over her Praktiflex and peers into its odd prismatic finder, a device I can only liken to a toy periscope—though that's not quite it. I watch her reflection in the window veil the churning and try to remember if it were carp I'd eaten that night, a night not so long ago when Jasmine joked and teased with a waiter who'd adopted the name Thelonious, who told us he was "loose as a goose" because his father was away from the restaurant but if his father ever found out what a "bing-bong" he was he'd be out on his ass. No, it wasn't carp. It was a remarkable hot and sour soup loaded with shrimp and fishballs and clams into which Jasmine squeezed hot pepper sauce from a plastic bottle. "I hope you'll write about me someday," she said. "I'll burn in your pages." Even before we left the restaurant I'd begun casting her into imaginary cityscapes.

We strutted like conventioners all over Chinatown that night: light-hearted, loose, giving false directions to out-of-towners and spare change to street people whose authenticity we doubted. At a bar called the Ho Sai Gai we watched emaciated Korean women dance clumsily, self-conscious in their string bikinis and high heels, and Jasmine said, "Let's order drinks our parents would order." She had a Tom Collins and I had a gin bloody Mary and, as we sat sipping our drinks through plastic straws molded in the shape of slender bamboo reeds, Jas talked about the dancers. "They're trying too hard because they hate being up there. You can see it in the sadness of their smiles." Couples spoke quietly over candles housed in yellow, glass pineapples, paying no attention to the agonizing show. A few single men did slouch in the arc of stools facing the stage, but

only looked on out of politeness. Talking and laughing, passing bowls of food around a cluttered table in the back of the place, the proprietary family created a spectacle more arresting than the reluctant dancers, and as soon as we finished our drinks we beat it—out into the night.

“This is going to be a fifteen-second exposure,” Jasmine tells me. “You’ll have to stay perfectly still—again. Breath like you’re eavesdropping at a neighbor’s door and don’t you dare say a word. Become the quiddity of quiet, a statue, an ‘outcropping of rock on a Swiss mountainside on which grows the lichen of our shared desolation.’ A poet wrote that, I think, but I can’t remember which one. You used to write poetry, didn’t you? Whatever happened to that?” She checks the light meter, double checks the F-stop, recalculates the exposure time, screws in the remote shutter release: prepares to cast me in another sooty image—boots, jeans, leather—against the eruption of light and color: the Chinatown Gate. “O.K.,” she says, “Take a deep breath. Three, two, one, now.”

I suppose I’m just left of center in a vertical frame, back to the camera, arms hanging loose at my sides, left foot posed nearly parallel to the bottom of the frame and right foot pointing toward Chinatown. The sidewalk is portioned off into concrete blocks of no consistent size and the uneven grid they form makes me want to create something Western, paint the cracks black and fill in the rectangles and squares with Internationalist school colors: red, yellow, blue, white, black: the primaries. As if at the height of my shin, owing to a trick of perspective, there is a splash of light, a puddle of light, diffusing from an outdoor lamp protected by a tin cowl that’s been stamped into the shape of a conical, straw hat. It gives the corner entrance to the Vietnamese restaurant, and its shiny marble stoop, an unnatural luminescence. There are the usual headlight effects from passing traffic (streaking blurs of gold that wash over the asphalt of 10th Street) and a repeating pattern of street lights tracing the sidewalk: orange stars growing ever more faint, suspended on inverted, tubular Ls that trail north up 10th, shrink to a vanishing

point behind one of the polished, burgundy columns of the Chinatown gateway. The column rises out of a concrete piling engraved with Chinese figures and as tall as the bus parked next to it. Busy, brash, flecked and spangled, alive with color, the photograph elicits a mood of confrontation: benign confrontation between my silhouette (dark except for the fingers of my right hand and a milky patch of flesh at the nape of my neck) and the vivacious palate in which Chinatown is cast. It was from this gaudy corner we fled that night, full of hot and sour soup, spring rolls, and the image of a brave mouse that skittered out from under our booth and through the dining room of the Ho Sai while Thelonious held his breath only to hiss his relief through the gaps in his large teeth when the thing, having been noticed by no one but Jasmine, Thelonious, and myself, disappeared into the wall. With us, too, was the image of the dancers, over whom we threw a kimono of pity. Jasmine's words: "Maybe they like it. Maybe, in their own way, they're star-struck. But I can't help feeling embarrassed for them. I can't help wanting to wrap them in a kimono of pity." I told her that had the ring of a book not yet published. She laughed and told me that it was.

Chilly, it was a November night and Jasmine hadn't dressed at all warmly. Walking south down 10th, away from Chinatown, she shivered even as I wrapped my arms around her, drew her against the thick wool of my tartan jacket. I'd offered the jacket up, but Jas refused, and so we walked, clumsy like that, tripping along in a kind of midnight picnic game; kept to the facades fronting 10th; ducked, now and then, into a doorway when a gust sluiced down the street or when we needed an excuse for a kiss against the surprisingly bitter night: embracing her, I pulled the collar of her denim jacket away from the nape of her neck, pushed aside her hair, and puffed warm breath down her back. Several doorways we visited like this. Our warming embrace was illuminated by the red, white, and blue DeVoren's Optimo Cigar store sign and reflected in the windows of the empty storefronts all along 10th until, in one of them, it became

complicated by caresses. There, Jasmine cut short my warm puffing and guided my lips to hers for a kiss that had nothing to do with the weather.

When we entered the Locust Bar, the moth-eaten tuque was covering the antlers of the jackalope mounted on the far inside wall—a signal that drinks were half-price. Cigar smoke hung like ectoplasmic ribbons, but we hacked right though: the barflies would have to wait for some other seance, or down a few more rounds, before they'd get a chance to witness the materialization of their demons. I ordered us coffee with bourbon sidecars and didn't so much as blink when I saw the bartender cut the dark brew—coffee which must have been evaporating to the consistency of roofing tar and acquiring, in the process, an aroma to match—with steaming tap water. Two trips I made to the booth in which Jasmine huddled, hugging her herself against the chill: the first with coffee and the second with bourbon. We toasted to the Pope and to Billy Penn, then poured the lingering drops from our shot glasses into our coffee. Returning to the bar, I ordered us a couple more: fuel for a spate of soppy toasts: to Thelonious, our Vietnamese waiter; to Bob Crane, gone to a stalag from which there will be no escape; to headhunting and photography; to the night that passes on the squalid, churning barges beneath the forbearant arc of Ben Franklin's bridge; to Professor Samuel H. Lingerman, Ventriloquist for All Occasions, whose daily performances of vocal illusion and voice throwing thrilled the thousands who flocked walked staggered tripped loped wandered for decades to the five-cent shows he presented at the so-called Lingerman Entertainment Bureau, 705 North 5th Street, right there next to the Greek Orthodox church, may he rest in peace, Amen. The last was Jasmine's, warming on the last few sips of her second Banker's Club sidecar. Carried away with the moment, I ordered an intemperate third bourbon and, raising the shot glass, launched into what I'd come to call, on such occasions, my French Poetry Moment:

*“À la Place de la Concorde
Je pense à la guillotine
Mais maintenant, il y un obélisque
Un cadeau bizarre
Un monument de la comedie de l’homme!”*

One drunk francophone even managed to turn himself in his stool long enough to face me and raise his glass for a hoarse “À votre santé!” And then the tuque came off the jackalope’s antlers to half-hearted groans of protest from the regulars—a signal for us to go. Warmed, riding the moment, having planned to hop the next bus back to my West Philly dump, we buttoned up and pushed our way back out the door.

“That’s it,” says Jasmine, exposure made. I once again relax against the letterbox as Jasmine begins to break down camera and tripod. This modeling business, is seems to me, is not all it’s cracked up to be, but Jasmine was insistent as she shook me awake this afternoon, plying me with a sizzling glass of Bromo Seltzer in one hand, a hot, black coffee in the other, wafting each in turn beneath my nose, like varietal teas steeped from sticks of carbonate of ammonium, while at the same time nudging me in the side with her knee. Seems I passed out at the foot of her mattress and slept there on the hardwood, pillowless, in the clothes I’m still wearing. She wouldn’t allow me a shower, said I’d be “cuter” if I looked like hell, and, as I remember it, only half-relented, after suffering my slurred, confused plea—a plea smeared with hungover curses—when she let me paint my underarms with her deodorant stick. Assuring me she would come around to the Olympia at closing time (I’d hardly had a chance to wipe the crud out of my eyes, which were dark and puffy, ratcheted by the Banker’s Club to two pink slits) she shoved me out the door sticking a coffee in one hand, my boots in the other, and told me to hurry my ass up: it was five o’clock: I was going to be late for my shift. Did I take the Bromo Seltzer? I can’t recall wiping the salty white ring from my mouth.

Now, on the other end of the day, moving into yet another, the bells are ringing in City Hall Tower, bonging a full Westminster quatrain, and I cock my head to the southeast to catch the faint reply offered up from the recorded bells in Independence Hall: a duet sustained in dovetailing overtones rebounding through the baffles of narrow streets, it culminates with first one, then another, ponderous bong on hour one. A.M. And on his pedestal at the top of that municipal Tower—slapdash exhibition of civic architectural eclecticism that it is—as if weary of the attention attracted to him by the bell’s enduring carillon, Billy Penn stands shrouded in scaffolding and tarpaulin, not one square inch of the founder’s patinated magnanimity exposed to the pedestrian’s skyward gaze. I want to be alone, he camps from behind what looks, for the life of me, like some gigantic, austere, eastern European shower curtain; or the blind of the hunter-god, abandoned, camouflage fallen away, loose flaps rippling in the wind. It’s a three-year project, says the city, this reclamation of Penn’s image. And, though Jasmine says the end result will be something to inspire civic pride in those who feel it—a gleaming, burnished icon presiding over this birthplace of a nation—I’ve managed to sculpt a wish into the conviction that the crews up there are busy *not* reclaiming the romantic, but retrofitting a fusty old Quaker, jazzing the guy up: frock coat traded in for a paisley smoking jacket, ascot folded loosely about his neck, silk slacks tapering to slippered feet. In his right hand they’re installing a casually elegant pipe, perhaps of imitation ivory bearing scrimshaw testimony to the city’s halcyon days, mechanically rigged to maintain the steady emission of aromatic tobacco smoke for the general enhancement of Centre City and its environs. His left hand will be raised to the frames of his Ray-Ban sunglasses, pulling them half-way down the bridge of his nose to reveal an ironically raised eyebrow and the “are you kidding me?” look he shoots out over the metropolis. Gone will be the ridiculous Quaker hat. In its place: a pompadour swept up from the sides and falling in rakish curls over his brow. Grandmaster Billy Bill, His Coolness, will

forever M.C. the Philadelphia dance show and from the belfry below his feet will no longer come a bing-bong harkening to some metaphysical, umbilical link to London Town, but a hi-fi rendition of the anthem of anthems:

*It's time for rockin'
It's time for blowin' a fuse
Where kids are diggin'
The Philadelphia moves
Why don't you jump in?
Put on your rock 'n' rol shoes
It's the High-Philadelity
Bop Hour!*

“Just a couple more,” Jasmine says, handing me the tripod. We head south on 10th, Jasmine’s gaze wandering over this or that, composing shots, series: a study of aesthetically dinged-up trash cans; the appearance of the letter Q on various commercial and municipal signs; closeups of the manner in which different curbing materials have worn, over the years, on the cobblestone streetcorners of Olde City; the shoes of Vietnamese rockabillies. She’s taking it all in, mind at full purr. I, feeling suddenly a pea-brain by comparison, can only fall back into recollection, observing that, whereas, on that chilly mid-November evening she was ill-dressed in short black skirt and denim jacket, tonight she’s overdressed: thick new blue jeans, much too large, cinched at the waist with a western belt notched to its slenderest and trailing off in an excess of leather that hangs to mid-thigh and which is tipped with a stainless steel ornament. Folded and rolled, the pant legs puff out at her ankles where makeshift cuffs abut her ankle-high mechanic’s boots. Billowing around her torso is a heavy cotton shirt that once must have been worn by a service station attendant. Navy blue, it’s tagged with an appliqué above her left breast that says, “Herb.” She’s rolled the sleeves to just above her elbow in a way

that echoes the refinements she's made to her jeans. Humid, the air still seems thick with last night's rain and, from time to time, Jasmine reaches back and lifts her hair away from her collar in the hope that a breeze might cool the beads of perspiration gathering there. Sweat becomes her, I think; and I watch, absorbed, as we move along 10th Street. A drop of it pools at the tip of her nose and drops, pat, to blot a tiny shadow of wet just above and to the right of "Herb." Fluid and loose, her gait is girlish, a far cry from that November night when, having pushed back out onto this very street from the Locust Bar, we headed up to Market to catch the bus over to West Philly. Arms folded tightly across her chest (in the manner of someone who's been bound in a straitjacket) Jasmine's stride was snaky and brisk. The sharp click of her stiletto heels on the sidewalk created a syncopated counterpoint to the liquid rocking of her narrow hips, hips I could feel working in time with my own. In the storefront windows I caught sinewy flashes of leg that gave me the impression, with every step, that she was kicking at the air in front of her. I held her close, my arm so far around her waist that my hand came to rest on her swaying abdomen, and as we walked together, silent, slow, Jasmine rested her head on my shoulder—"tenderly." It wasn't long before we reached the bus stop opposite the Hotel Vendig.

Turning west at 10th and Locust, spores of recollection triggering an allergy of nostalgia for which no analgesic has yet been found, I glance over my shoulder at the Locust Bar's dim sign: a hand-painted job illuminated from either side by two bare light bulbs of insufficient wattage. Why, I wonder, haven't we managed to bump into our own ghosts tonight, ghosts tripping north against our south, as they rush to 10th and Market to catch a late bus to West Philly? I want to ask Jas if we can chase them down, check in on the jackalope, raise a few of the-dogs-that-bit-me in toasts to Wilhelm Reich (and the legacy of his deadly orgone radiation); General Chuck Yeager (who Jasmine once dubbed "Inventor of the Helmet" during a lazy and distracted monorail tour around the

Philadelphia Zoo); or even Rasputin (not the Evil Monk, but *our* Rasputin: Zane's late pet gecko: so fond he was of stalking the cockroaches and posing for us on the spackled walls of Zane's apartment). Yes, Rasputin. I remember several rare and wonderful occasions when, we like to think, he was taken with an artistic impulse and, for an hour or two, crept onto and so modified one or another of Zane's canvases. But I can see it's of no consequence to Jas whether or not the jackalope's antlers are dressed in the Happy-Hour tuque, or even whether that quaint custom still exists: tonight is for making photographs. Stifled, I am, Jasmine's contented taciturnity having stuffed an un-baked Idaho potato down my throat; or, rather, having plugged the conduit linking lips, tongue, and brain. I can almost taste the oily soup of language backing up into my mind's porcelain basin, and so start rooting around for the equivalent of an empty coffee can with which to bail the fetid backwash. But where, once full, dump the can? Were I another me, I'd stop right here in the middle of Locust Street, stand on one leg, cock my head to the side, and hop up and down shaking the words right out my earhole. They'd form a chunky puddle on the asphalt that would congeal into an alphabet pancake capable of replenishing the nibbles and pecks taken off it by the rats and pigeons. Nourished on this semiotic cake, gifted, they'd no doubt commence to drive the citizenry nuts, out Doolittle Doolittle, accost unsuspecting passersby to burn their ears with a slippery loquaciousness further tainted by their status as vermin: rats and skyrats crying on the shoulders of weary Philadelphians, souring their compassion with boorish monologues encrusted with an insidious, some might say beguiling, self-pity.

On the northeast corner of 11th and Locust, Jasmine lays down her bag and I hand her the tripod. One by one she telescopes its legs and fixes each with a twist of its locking ring. Then she takes the Praktiflex from her bag and attaches it to the tripod. Deliberate in her work, she double checks everything before bending to the viewfinder to compose the shot. "Climb up on the honor box," she tells me, pointing to the squat,

blue, sheet metal case on which is printed, in faded white letters still legible despite a palimpsest of graffiti, *Philadelphia Inquirer*. I swing a leg over the box as if mounting a hobby horse and rest my hands on its coin-box saddle horn. Jasmine, arms akimbo, shakes her head at my hokey pose. A wincing, pained expression contorts her face, but it's a fleeting pain that gives way to an indulgent laughter and the "No, no, no!" of mock impatience and disgust. "Pull your legs up and wrap your arms around them," she suggests, cooling herself by pinching the stiff fabric of her service station attendant's jersey just below her breasts and fluttering it with a rapid arm-pump. The sound this creates is like the beating of a wing beneath a thick quilt, and the air forced out of the interstices between the jersey and Jasmine's body is fragrant with the essence of spiced pine and citrus, a fragrance not unlike that of a frugally mixed gin and tonic handed, at sea, to a functionary on leave from the Banque Nationale de Paris content to fill his days lounging on a striped, canvas deck chair faded by wind and salt: Van Cleef et Arpels—a men's cologne, really. She'd bought it for *me*, as I recall, but fell so in love with the stuff she decided to keep it for herself. Tough luck, Ruineux. Content I remain with my Clubman toilet water and an aftershave that smells like lilacs.

I gather my legs up to suit Jasmine's wish, wrap them in my arms and interlace my fingers in front of my knees. "Look stupid," she adds, refining. I take it to mean look naive, an expression I can only imagine is achieved by opening the eyes wide and completely relaxing all other facial muscles. Just to be sure, I modify naive to stupid by allowing my mouth to drop open and, quick to confirm my assumption, Jas tells me to "Shut it. Just shut it." There's a note, now, of dry irritation in her voice. Tired of pushing it out of her eyes whenever she bends over the Praktiflex, she corrals her hair with both hands and draws it into a temporary pony tail. This she twists a few times before tying it into a loose knot. A few strands fly away at either side of her face, but they don't seem to bother her. A form-following-function hairdo, I think: fetching, a

trick I've never before seen her play with that wild hair of hers. It strikes me as sexy, nonsense, botanical.

Jasmine holds up her light meter and, squinting in the orange, halogen light, takes a reading, adjusts the F-stop on her camera, and checks the focus. Then she walks up to me and takes my head in her hands, posing it with the tips of her fingers in such a way as to give the impression I'm gazing out over my right shoulder at some object about a block down the street. To make the pose easier to hold, I concentrate on what looks like an abandoned shopping cart which has been overturned at the corner of 11th and Spruce, just in front of Logan Square Pizza—a name belying the fact that the joint is nowhere near Logan Square—a shopping cart from which all but one of the wheels have been removed. I can't be sure, but from my perch atop the *Inquirer* honor box, it appears that someone has woven a stray article of clothing—a twisted pair of undershorts or an orphaned white sock—into the mesh of the cart's trapezoidal basket. Focusing on this debris, I'm aware that Jasmine's still fiddling with her equipment, most likely screwing the remote shutter release into place and checking her watch, waiting for the sweep hand to click its way toward the Roman numeral XI at which moment she'll hesitate before counting down: Three, two, one. Now. "Three, two, one. Now," she says.

The overall impression arising from the image will suggest that this insignificant chunk of Philadelphia, the homely corner of 11th and Locust, has been inhaled into the lung of night. Warm, spongy, the tissue of darkness in which the shot is framed will not disquiet, but comfort, as it comforts me now, sitting here in what must be the far right quadrant of a horizontal shot. Though I'm foregrounded, there is little of me to note: obscured in the respirating night, my legs are an undifferentiated black mass bisected by a soft, amber band (my arms) above which bump the two soft mounds formed by my knees. My torso is obscured by my gathered legs and only a small portion of my right shoulder catches any light. A hard look might reveal the shadows of my eye sockets, dark

against a soft corona produced by a light behind me illuminating the outline of my hair, a patch of forehead, my nose, lips and chin, the edge of my throat. Below me, the honor box forms a pediment for my organic form. Behind me, grainy yellow light lends to the surface of 11th Street a soft pile, as though it were some extravagance of municipal spending: a street befitting such dignity and pomp that ordinary paving just wouldn't do: a carpet has been installed here, the handiwork of carpet-layers Local 201. Through its nap run trolley rails that only glint near the intersection, just at the point where they are intersected by the faded white stripes of the crosswalk. Much of the interest in the photograph lies in its background: the far side of 11th. There, just below the top of the frame, burns the box-light sign of the Savoy Restaurant, its white plastic casing rendered luminescent by bands of fluorescent tubes arranged within it. On the back-lit plastic, printed in a red, Gothic font, somewhat faded to pink here and there, is the straightforward marker: SAVOY RESTAURANT. Kissing the sign's left edge, nearly bleeding into it to contact the foot of the S in SAVOY, is a white disk of light surrounded by a corona of mint green. Strange that this greenlight faces the camera when, judging by clues such as the disposition of the parked cars along Locust Street, and the golden streaks of light—headlights of phantom autos that do not appear in the print but which obviously approach from the east (again, toward the camera)—it's clear that the traffic signal faces in the exact opposite direction of Locust Street's one-way flow of traffic. On the same traffic standard, just above and to the left of the green signal, red bleeds from within the topmost of the three hooded lights facing south on 11th. That is to say the redlight faces the same direction as I, to the left of the image, and this sets up an amusing parallel: echoing my shadowy form in iron and glass, this found-object representation, in the abstract, suggests the dimly illuminated patches of my shoulder, neck, and face; mimics my absorbed gaze to the south (the redlight, of course, being the more vigilant between us). And perhaps the more graceful: its slender, steel post spreads elegantly at

its base, softened by a molded casing—a shoe, so to speak, that roughly resembles a Hershey’s Kiss. Immediately to the left of and behind this traffic standard appears what I’m coming to consider an organizing principle: a predilection, on Jasmine’s part, for post and lintel structures seems to inform this series of photographs. It’s there in the concrete superstructure of the parking garage, in the Gateway to Chinatown at 10th and Arch, and here, at 11th and Locust, in the modest facade of the Savoy Restaurant. In a field of red brick, surrounding a window seven panes long and three panes deep, are set two mock, fluted pilasters. At best a careless gesture at Doric, they satisfy the requirement for a base, shaft, and capital rising toward a clumsy illusion of support for the simple, knurled molding that abuts the soffit on which the Savoy’s sign has been installed. The elements combine in this recurring post and lintel pattern, frames within the photograph’s own, larger frame that never quite manage to include my image. Always somewhere between the frames, I seem to be.

Dangling from the soffit are conical fixtures casting their light at irregular angles toward the building’s facade and onto the sidewalk. Attached to the left pilaster is an eye screw to which has been tied a thin rope, the other end of the rope being attached to the brass handle of a heavy door set at the corner of the building. The rope prevents the door from completely closing: an invitation to passersby to stop in for a coffee or a plate of scrambled eggs. Descending in a forty-five degree angle from the door’s upper left corner is a series of three small rectangular windows, the center window glowing amber with light cast from one of the soffit fixtures.

It calls to mind that night on which, posted in the window, the menu of the St. George Diner caught our attention and we lingered for a moment over the thought of a basket of French fries or even a capricious breakfast plate with eggs over-easy, rye toast, sausage links and home fries. Everything looked so warm inside the St. George, but we gambled on a short wait for the bus that would deliver us to West Philly. On we walked

to 10th and Market. There, snackless, we joined a group that appeared to have been waiting for some time already; glassy eyed, sniffling, gently hopping from one foot to the other, comforting themselves with the notion that this hopping gesture is supposed to conjure warmth. Some had their hands shoved into deep coat pockets. Others clutched tokens in their gloved palms. I started to unzip my jacket, offer it up to Jasmine, but she waved the offer away saying, “Keep it.” Agitated, shivering in her short black skirt and denim jacket, she stepped out to the curb and gazed in the direction of the Delaware from which ripped the first gash of winter’s switchblade. Kicking her heels along the sidewalk, pacing sullenly a few moments, arms tightly folded, head bowed and hair stirred by the sharp wind, she eventually found her way back to my arms. I drew her against the wool.

Diagonally across the street from us, looming, was the Hotel Vendig. An architectural shambles, it had somehow managed to escape the wrecking ball and advertised its general state of disrepair with a battered neon sign that had long ago burned down to the words “Hotel end.” Often an object for my dreary speculation, I imagined all manner of vice transacted for and indulged in behind its haggard, 19th-century facade. One of the last brick buildings on Market Street, the clouded panes in its cast-iron bay windows were, for me, dead eyes in a face that had seen too much of the world. From one of them gazed a bent figure, sepulchral, frail. Into his trousers pockets he’d shoved his hands and stood, shoulders hunched as if against a stiff wind, aping the pose of those of us waiting for the bus. This really is a “chilly mid-November night in Philadelphia,” I thought, repeating the mundane words of a KYW meteorologist I’d overheard when passing by a car stopped for the light at 10th and Chestnut. The motorist had cracked the window far enough to toss out his unlit cigar butt and in the moment before he powered the widow closed I caught, out of the corner of my ear, as it were, a fragment KYW’s forecast summary. Funny how things get lodged in the mind.

The figure in the fifth-story window of the Hotel Vendig arrested my attention: the familiar sweep of his thinning, gray hair; the pleated trousers; the checked cardigan, misbuttoned and hanging uneven. A likely incarnation, I thought, of the figure moving through my dreams, dreams not recurring, exactly, but serial: each adding a new wrinkle, an unusual twist, an entire catalogue of phantom experience running parallel to everything I did said felt *was*. Though from the bus stop I could not see, I *knew*, as the old man moved his cupped hands away from his face, again imitating those of us huddled at the stop, that a crooked scar, a sliver of white flesh on his blotchy, flushed complexion, etched his bent nose. And his eyes: a web of capillaries branched out from his irises and disappeared beneath thin lids. The irises were gray—blue gray. A tie hung in the loosened collar of his shirt; plaid, sloppily dangling outside the V of his cardigan: a neglectful attempt to be casually mannered. When he moved away from his window and switched off the light, I lowered my eyes and rested my chin on Jasmine’s shoulder. Then I closed my mind, or tried, but the image remained. No longer at the window, the specter was bent over a Pullman stove, stirring the contents of an aluminum saucepan with a plastic spoon. In his left hand was a page of manuscript creased lengthwise down the middle. He read the page, slowly, pausing here and there, apparently rereading certain passages. When something pleased him, he nodded appreciatively. At other passages he turned his head from the page, clenched it tighter as his fingers balled into a fist and crumpled the paper. Still further displeased, he weakly raised a foot and brought it down in what, for him, must have been an outraged stamp. Then, forgetting what it was that had aggravated him just a moment before, his grip on the typewritten page relaxed and a tired grin opened his expression.

Overhead, the electric trolley cable twangs like a broken piano wire as the Germantown local approaches from South Philly. “That’s it,” Jasmine says, snapping closed the shutter. A twenty-second exposure, she tells me, perhaps several seconds too

long: she might have overexposed the Savoy's bright sign. "And you," she adds, "squirmed a couple of times. Not much, but maybe enough to soften your silhouette." She throws me my jacket, hoists her camera bag over her shoulder, and leaves the tripod for me. The trolley screeches to a stop and its lone passenger steps down onto 11th. Then, bell clanging twice, doors flapping closed, the bucket of bolts rattles away from our corner trailing sparks where its contact rod hits a juncture in the wire.

In many ways more sophisticated, in others lax and slow-paced because of the lingering gaze in which it frequently indulges, the working-print version, as I recall, cuts violently from the electric spark fulgurating behind the trolley, to a blackened screen, and then to a closeup on an incandescent light bulb that pops on with the muted tock of a wall switch. Even on film the tungsten filament burns with an intensity that drives the eye away from the screen, the after-image reduced to a retinal action painting that dazzles with a series of gold streaks pulsing above an atomized precipitate of silver: an internalized schematic that conjures a platoon of stunt cyclists colliding in ruinous arcs above the celebrated fountain at Caesar's Palace Resort and Casino. No doubt a calculated effect, the after-image is sustained long enough to corrupt that of Jasmine and Ruineux, she with camera duffel slung over her shoulder, he shouldering arms with the tripod, as they push through the projection booth's metal-plated, fireproof door. An embellishment of light that exists only in the nervous system of the viewer, the after-image ricochets and blossoms at the edges of vision, animates the peripheral in much the same way as a patron's ostentatious, gilt frame will animate a commissioned work nearly out of existence.

I've seen these things. I know. I answer the call on Sunday mornings to stroll along the Ben Franklin Parkway and climb, at its terminus, the expansive steps that lead

to the Museum of Art. There I wander about the secluded wing in which the expressionist paintings have been sequestered, marvel at the crass sensibility that would slap Chagall's *Oh God!* in a baroque frame eight inches wide and three inches deep: an elaborate thing, rich in spellbinding details—complicated arabesques surrounding carved niches, miniature Gothic arches from which gape finely crafted gargoyles, eye sockets vivified with red, faceted, semi-precious stones: a frame, it seems, calculated to exalt the frame maker's so-called consummate skill over that of a mere dabbler rendering canvas space according to his latest "vision" through color, line, and shadow. That ridiculous frame drove me, one morning, to a trick I learned from Jasmine: her method for framing a potential exposure using nothing but her hands. Hold both hands in front of your face, palms facing away from you. Then rotate the right hand forty-five degrees, touching the tips of your thumbs and laying the meat of the right fingers against the knuckles of the left. By doing this, you create a horizontal, rectangular frame the sides of which are in approximate proportion to those of a frame of 35mm film. By closing one eye and gazing through the frame you've created, you can establish and manipulate the possibilities of a potential image. Pull the frame closer to your eye. Move it away. Edit. Crop, really. That's the term. It's a technique, I discovered, that I could use to blot out the frame, a frame Chagall never intended. Doing this allowed the painting to claim for itself the attention it deserves. Were I some kind of fanatic or thug or terrorist, I'd deface that frame, strike out with something sharp at the jealousy or hubris or vanity that inspired its juxtaposition with the Chagall, damage it so far beyond the limit of restorability that the curators (who I'm sure must occasionally wince or experience a fleeting nightmare over that abomination) would have no other option than to remove the frame and replace it with something appropriately subtle, something that *defers*. Or, much better, nothing at all.

All of which is to say that the after-image seems designed to foment a crisis of attention in the mind of the viewer. Which to ignore: the peripheral light show triggered by a momentary sensory overload? or the image pressing through it of Jasmine and Ruineux as they close the projection booth door behind them and set up the photographic equipment? Each separate, optical event bleeds into the other—one external, one internal: a cinematic device so insidious you can imagine the director in the seat behind you, his strong, agile fingers closing around your throat.

“Just this one,” says Jasmine, pointing to the bare, incandescent bulb closest to the doorway. The others on that circuit, she says, will have to be darkened for the effect she wants. So, Ruineux walks to the far end of the booth, back behind the desk on which rests the Royal Quiet De Luxe. Wrapped around its platen is a page of manuscript covered with uneven type, faint on one letter heavy on the next, riddled with false starts and dead ends (parts of sentences—the better part, as a matter of fact, of the page’s only paragraph—typed over with Xs or ampersands). Mute testimony to a project abandoned, the page snatches Ruineux’s attention and, clumsily, he pulls it from the Royal, reads aloud (though in a low, sibilant whisper Jasmine cannot hear) the three sentences that have remained intact: an idea, really; a starting point from which nothing has developed: *“There is a woman. Agitated, no doubt shivering in her short skirt and denim jacket, she steps to the curb and gazes down Market in the direction of City Hall. For some reason, a tear wells in my eye as she heaves a sigh so heavy I can see the cloud of her breath.”* Something like surprise registers on Ruineux’s face to reveal (as is shown in an intense closeup) not only the web of capillaries branching out from his irises, a web that spreads and disappears beneath the thin, bluish tissue of his lids, but the faint spark of interest over an abandoned conception even now trying to germinate in that slapdash boxy thing: the hothouse of his nostalgic imagination. He begins again, *“There is a woman ... ”* but remembers, at Jasmine’s prompting, why he’s gone to that end of the booth and, laying

the page of manuscript down on the desk, steps back to the wall against which lies a five-step ladder. Ruineux walks the thing back toward the center of the booth and, positioning it under the first of the four bulbs Jasmine would like darkened, takes a chamois from the cluttered rewind table and climbs the ladder. Using the chamois to protect his fingers, he turns the bulb until it's extinguished, then slides the ladder under each of the remaining three bulbs on the circuit, repeating the process. When he's finished, the lone illuminated ceiling fixture above the booth's doorway throws just enough light for Jasmine to see what she's doing.

She leads Ruineux back into the darkened end of the projection booth, positions the tripod seven or eight feet from his desk, screws the Praktiflex onto the tripod's stage, and connects the remote shutter release. Then, with a decisiveness and precision that betray the forethought she's given to the project, Jasmine walks back to the rewind table from which she retrieves an army-surplus gooseneck lamp and a coil of heavy duty extension cord. Handling the lamp by its flexible shaft, Jasmine positions it on Ruineux's desk just to the right of the quiet De Luxe, bends the neck so that the dented, olive drab shade hovers two or three inches above the carriage. Then, grabbing the lamp's plug, she connects it to the extension cord, lengths of which she peels off the coil as she makes her way back to the rewind table and plugs it into a receptacle box bolted onto one of the table's legs. As she does so, the lamp flicks on without a sound. It casts a cone of dusty light in which the Royal is illuminated. The rest of the booth remains in near darkness.

"Alright, Ruineux," says Jasmine, "step right up and claim your place at the table." She walks around the desk and holds the chair for Ruineux, swivels it so that it faces him. Teasingly patronizing, she pats the seat, swats at the fine layer of dust, ostentatiously underlines her wish that he take a seat at the desk by gesturing toward it with an open palm. "Stick a page in the typer," she says, reaching up to redo the loose knot she's made of her hair, "I want to capture you in your element."

Watching through the porthole, I lower my eyes from the screen and scan the auditorium. Just enough light is reflected off that old, tattered screen for me to make out the nine reclining forms scattered about a theater so demoralizingly empty the usher, perhaps seeing no point in shining an accusatory flashlight or reprimanding those whose feet dangle over the next row, jams his torch in the hip pocket of his slacks and flops down in a front-row aisle seat. When he reaches back to cup the back of his head in folded hands, the white-gloved fingers glow luminescent in the gloom.

Meanwhile, Ruineux slides into the chair and pulls it up to the desk. Jasmine remains for a moment, stands behind him, lightly massages his shoulders with the tips of those long fingers of hers. “No typing,” she says as he inserts a blank page into the Royal’s carriage. “Just lay your fingers on the keys.” Part of the cure, he thinks: a homegrown therapy for Complex 35 in which the subject is made to confront a representative nothing and, despite the tools at hand, is forbidden to inscribe that nothing. And in the booth, yet: his home turf. Even as Jasmine steps behind the camera to compose the shot, he’s winding up the machinery of his own composition. He can’t help it. Like a cymbal-banging monkey it plays itself out in his mind; a toy so old, from a culture so far removed, its status as a toy is open to question. An improbable grotesquerie unlikely ever to yield itself to a windy explication, this composition may, Ruineux is coming to realize, be best left among the mind’s curio collection. A hand-me-down curio at best, he thinks: *“There is a woman. Agitated, no doubt shivering in her short skirt and denim jacket....”* How many gaps does the mind fill in? and how many are plugged by lines like those? external, commodified nuggets of memory, imagination, speculation? Is there a difference worth worrying about?

Jasmine looks up from the viewfinder, asks Ruineux if he's ready, counts off "three, two, one—now," and squeezes the remote shutter release. Ruineux's face, no doubt, will glow with the warm light reflected off the blank sheet of paper wrapped around the platen of the Royal Quiet De Luxe. Brow knit, lips pursed, he'll manage a convincing impression of concentration, as though genuinely caught in the act. An intimate shot, the darkness surrounding him will radiate an engaging warmth and underscore an implied comfort with his surroundings. Five tiny stars will shine through pinholes on the desk lamp's scalloped shade. Intense, concentrated, and white, the stars in this constellation will command almost as much attention as the fat yellow light bathing the Quiet De Luxe; or the Quiet De Luxe itself; or even the image of Ruineux. From the portion of manuscript hanging over the typewriter's carriage, it's clear that the page is blank; a hint, perhaps, that the photograph is a parody of the romanticized solitude that first infected Ruineux when he glanced up from the bus stop on a chilly mid-November evening at a figure who, for him, seemed so recognizable: the embodiment of a borrowed construct: an easy destiny: a destiny that allowed for an indulgent, self-pitying passion play by virtue of which bridges would burn, connections would be severed. A ridiculous romance of complicated failure and unoriginal isolation is scripted on that blank page over which Ruineux hovers. Fade.

Schubelmeyer Hannet shuffles the photographs, color prints on eight-by-ten inch Kodak paper, matte finish, then returns to Ruineux's text, a text that's been broken into sections that correspond to each of the photographs and which serves to both animate the photos and doubly expose Ruineux by virtue of the interior monologue he's derived from them. Turning to Ruineux, who sits on the edge of his bed, hands on knees, an expression of patience brought on by chronic fatigue softening his face, Hannet declares

that he's pleased. "This is something we can work with," he says, slapping the manuscript with the back of his hand. "You're definitely onto something here, Jack. Of course, photographs carry extra costs, but hell—we'll work it." From a small, white paper bag on which is printed, in dancing red letters, "Nuts to You," (presumably the name of a nut shop), Hannet shakes a handful of cashews, singles one out between his thumb and forefinger, and flips it into his mouth. Sucking the salt from the nut, he holds out the bag for Ruineux who demurs with a bemused wave of his hand. "Diverticulitis," he lies. Truth is, he can't stand cashews: no bite.

From a point of view that would place the camera somewhere outside the window of Ruineux's fifth-floor room, a radical shift of perspective gives the audience a peek through the transom above Ruineux's door. Hannet, munching now that the salt's been dissolved, lays the sheaf of photographs face down on Ruineux's desk and weights them with his half-empty bag of cashews. Rising from the creaky swivel chair, he pulls on his overcoat, makes an unnecessary adjustment of his signet ring, and, placing his hand on the old guy's shoulder, wishes him goodnight. "Things are working out pretty good, Jack. Hang in there. Work your angle. It's a good one." As he moves toward the door, his image becomes distorted into nothing more than epaulets and a swirl of dark hair. "Feed the nuts to the squirrels in Rittenhouse Square," he says, halfway out the door. "They're looking pretty scrawny these days."

Cut to a head shot of the young Ruineux, sitting at the Royal in the projection booth of his Olympia Theater, filling in the gaps of Jasmine's *Kimono of Pity*.