

gaze to the white paper bag. “Red hair, freckles, scratchy kid’s voice. He was a sweetheart.”

When two tears inched their way down Puppet’s face, Walter looked over to Puppet’s note pinned above the Anheuser-Busch mirror. He held his gaze until she wiped her face.

“They said *I was a monster* to have let that happen. I put my mom and dad in an awful spot that day. Mom gave me the road out, though. No sitting around wondering where she stood. She told me that I was totally responsible for my baby cousin’s death.”

“They arrest you?”

“Yeah, then released me into my mom’s custody. She said, ‘There must be something horrible going on inside you, Delena, to have been such a careless freak.’ There was no way that I could walk that little boy back to life, no matter how hard I prayed or what I promised to do or how much I suffered. They didn’t want to hear it. They didn’t want me there. They didn’t want me to be seen. These people I’m talking about, they’re final people. They go way back, Mister Vann, and they don’t believe in purity of heart. The price was too high, you get me? You know? I wasn’t a freak, Mister V. I’m not a freak!”

“You’re still their daughter,” he offered.

“Yeah, but now I’m not a real daughter to them,” she groaned. “I’m tucked away in a drawer. I’m not even a memory.”

“Hmm. When you’re dead to your folks, it doesn’t give you much to work with.”

“Who you telling? My uncle got a hold of me and beat the shit out of me, put me in the hospital for a month, and they did nothing, not a thing, to him. When I got released I put an I’m Not Coming Back sign on my shoulders. Then I split.”

“What were you feeling at that time?” he asked with a professional distance.

“Only tears that were shed were my own.”

As she spoke, she clasped her hands so tightly to her heart that her nails drove into her palms. It was then that Walter saw no difference between the act of breathing and the sacrifice of oneself for another. He knew, also, that Puppet saw that too.

“Time to go,” she said, and grabbed the white paper bag, now stuffed with the coffee container and the plastic

bottle. Standing up, she crumpled it as she had done thirty times before.

“Have a nice day, Mister Vann.”

At noon, when the center closed for an hour, Walter walked slowly over to his front office window and tilted the blinds so as to see the street and not be seen. The sun had shifted, the traffic had increased, and the noise of people doing business began to surround a group of his young clients. Puppet walked off to the side, with Collin close beside her; her Worm, her ad hoc cousin. They strolled aimlessly up the hill toward Franklin Avenue, which they would take to Cahuenga and then over the hill into the Valley. They were his kids, thought Walter, these apparent exiles, young urban Bedouins. They were undistracted, yet unfocused en route to the next squat, to the next makeshift shelter that provided no shelter but merely diverted light from automobiles headed for the freeway and from the cruisers of the sheriff’s deputies.

“Who am I kidding,” he said, turning away from the window. He had little doubt that his kids were simply the modern day version of the children the poet William Blake had described as being locked into “coffins of black” as they were sold into labor as chimney sweeps in London.

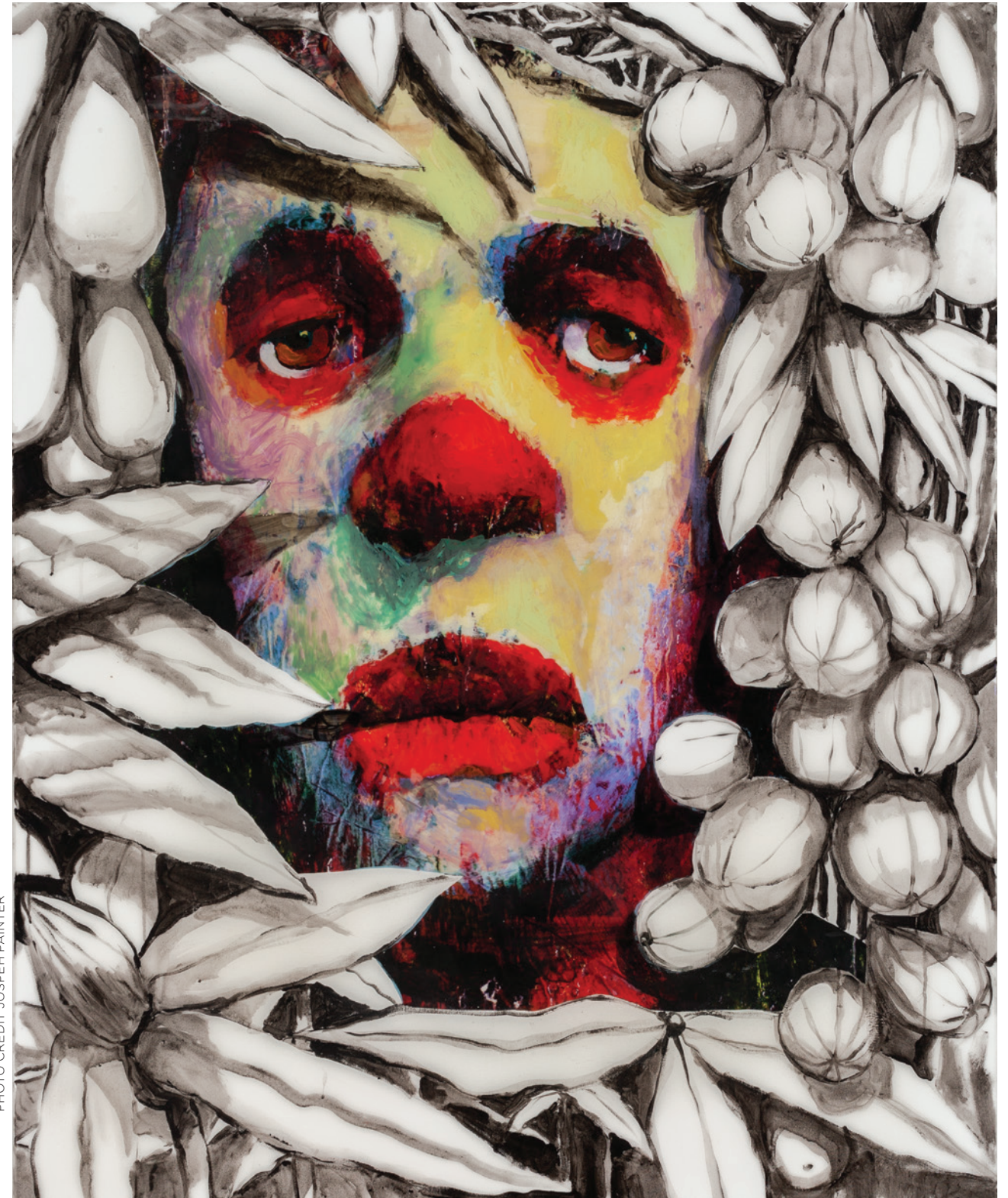
During the deep night, once the moon was down, Delena Burns methodically opened her cardboard box behind the French dry cleaners. She allowed her face, now a piece of granite, to become a self-conscious return to a peace between the sick and the sane, between the wounded and the self-contented. Without any thought that someone was worried about her, without any doubt that a bagel, coffee, and orange juice in a white paper bag would be waiting for her on Walter’s desk, she went to sleep.

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## FRANK HYDER

*Leafman Series #5, 2013*

Mixed media print/paint combination on Mylar, 60 x 48 in



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