

FRANK HYDER

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Mixed media print/paint combination on Mylar, 144 x 80 in



COURTESY PROJECTS MIAMI GALLERY
PHOTO CREDIT JOSPEH PAINTER

MARK ZIPOLI

Final People

She's like the rain in Los Angeles, he thought, as he stood before his office window and stared out through the venetian blinds. He was watching the measured steps of a blonde sixteen-year-old girl walking up Gower Street. Like the occurrence of rain in LA, she was measured: the moments of her loss of control were scarce, few, never sure to be expected, unlike so many of her young homeless friends, whose tempers and spirits carried them exposed, vulnerable, angry from one street to the next. Today, as the winter sunlight collapsed over her head and lay upon the parked cars and bone-dry asphalt, she bore the burden of being used to things.

Social workers weren't expected to wait for their clients eagerly, but he did, for her, the girl named Puppet. For the past three months now, three mornings a week, Puppet showed up at five minutes to nine at the neighborhood drop-in center for homeless youth. A man in midlife, like himself, in the middle of Hollywood, in the middle of a decidedly dismal career at helping people, wasn't supposed to peek routinely through his office blinds while waiting for someone like her. But he did, even though he hated the sun; and how Walter Vann hated the Los Angeles sun: It exasperated him. It nearly blinded him, being so sharp and unavoidable. It was overwhelming. Yet he mounted a useless stand against the bars of sunlight that tilted and squeezed themselves through the blinds. They serrated the shadows of his torso, yet he stood his ground waiting for her, hands behind his back; and, as usual, watched her walking up the block.

He hurried over to his desk. It was laid out, as it had been nearly thirty times in the past three months, with a bagel and cream cheese positioned before a medium-size container of regular coffee and a small, unopened bottle of orange juice. They were set on the left third of the desk, twelve inches from the side and ten inches from the front—always in the same place. He draped a napkin over the coffee lid and then rested a second napkin on top of the bagel. Also in attendance, as usual, was a white paper bag standing upright as evidence that the food had been purchased on Sunset Boulevard. His coffee was off to the right. Behind him stood a six-foot chimney vent heater; it was balanced on either side with two tightly packed bookshelves. Walter then heard the signal, like small bells in his head: He heard the collected voices of youth gathering

on the front stoop. Sometimes they were subdued from a night of drugs and excitement, sometimes with fear of plans for the day's survival.

Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays his office was Puppet's for a full half hour, she usually in the guest chair, he always behind the desk in his swivel executive chair.

"Is it okay if I sit down?" she said, pretending surprise at being let in. Behind them, in the background, were the sounds of the other clients filling their paper plates with food from the tables in the common room.

"Sure."

"What have you got there?" she asked.

"A bagel," he replied. "Would you like half?"

"Only if you don't want it. Only if you're not going to eat it."

"I don't and I won't," he smiled. "You know," he went on, before her inevitable ministrations of removing the wax paper from the bagel and lifting the container's lid. She sniffed, sipped, then looked indiscreetly into the empty white bag. "There's a whole table full of food out in the common room," he added, as usual, and pushed the orange juice over to her.

"Yeah," she replied. Her nod was quick. It had become quicker with each visit, after each response, after each time he told her about the food in the common room. Her hair swung when she nodded, as if she were in tune with the rhythm of a train, an obsessive-compulsive haunting, one that lay deep within. Her feelings were never hurt as he went through his lines of psychosocial assessment. She was obligated to reply to them. She nodded slightly, with softly closed eyes, acknowledging preferential treatment.

"I don't trust the other clients," she said with an unlearned delicateness. "I don't trust the food. I don't trust the people who made the food."

She took a sip from the coffee and looked at the puffiness in Walter's face, at the bloated sacks under his eyes. "I don't like their poor hygiene and their underdeveloped thoughts. That's what OCD means, right?"

"Not much to disagree with there, Puppet," he said thoughtfully. "Don't say it too loud."

"Only to you," she said.

Then he opened her file folder labeled Delena Burns and jotted down a phrase, a sentence to make her feel better. "I won't even put it in the progress notes."

"You know, I'm not just a person in need," she said. "I'm also beautiful."

"You are beautiful, Puppet. Needy or otherwise."

Like the other stranded or runaway kids, she came to the drop-in center for casework services. Like the other kids, she had the opportunity to use the shower, which she did; to receive packaged food from the dayroom volunteer, which she did not; to see a doctor from the free clinic, which she did on occasion; and to talk to Walter for the time allotted for his crisis intervention efforts, to which she had availed herself at every opportunity. Her crisis: she was sixteen years old and lived on the streets of Hollywood. Her sobriquet, Puppet, had been her own creation.

"I'm a representation of my current self," she had told him on first meeting him.

She was a talking sock without the straight man, he thought, a stringless agent of her own artistry. She was a nose that never grew when she lied, and a pair of feet that never kicked up high when the merriment got too crazy.

"Don't get me wrong. When my act fails, there's no one to blame but me, not even my mother, or my father, or my God. Which isn't to say that I have one, Mr. Vann, don't get me wrong."

He had been charmed by her use of language. Why wasn't this girl in school?

Puppet was not a work of art; she was not hatched like Andrew Wyeth's Christina, unmoving in a field of grass. But she did fill a photograph with tears when you looked. Walter had looked long enough to examine her golden loop earrings, the casual, relaxed part of her shoulder-length blonde hair, and her exhausted eyes—on Mondays always smudged with mascara. He thought the makeup conflicted with her curt, provisional smile.

It was a smile that tried to distract from any knowledge of the two-fisted bruise marks on her back and the insect bites on her buttocks and thighs, of which Walter had been sure to take into inventory from the nurse the last time Puppet had been in; he'd insisted upon it. It was a smile that crept through the taste of gruff and wasted tricks from the previous night.

They did not discuss that, but he knew. They did not discuss her johns, her customers, her desperate men because she felt it was garish, and she had told him so.

"It's unladylike, Mister Vann," she had said to him.

Puppet then used her sleeve to wipe dust off of his half-empty shelves on the wall, back and to the left of her. "My mom said a person had to be consistent with keeping her own counsel." Stooping before the shelves, she held up a newly framed photograph of Walter with a little dark-haired boy. She gave him a knowing, accusative smile, as if to say: What are *you* doing in this picture?

"My nephew. He lives in Denver. He's the youngest kid in my family," he said.

They talked around her vague nighttime behavior, as she offhandedly put it. She knew full well that her friends out in the common room had freely spoken of her street activities in the alleyways and behind the bars. They had revealed to him the essence of her dangerous nights, the rewards of her dry, sleeping days.

It was part of her charm that she spoke so little of her local activity and so frequently of her mother and father back in Youngstown, Ohio; but never of the circumstances that would have propelled her out of Youngstown and into Southern California. Her parents were reminisced about, as if they were stories told by an old ranch hand sitting on a porch with a cigarette in his mouth, a beer in his hand and more on his breath. Her past was discussed in terms of a wretched catechism. It was for Walter to filter out the nostalgia, to take note of the neuroses. It was a process he found arduous, since he thought her neither neurotic nor overtly sentimental. But she looked like she was sweet on her past. She talked like she was. She smiled, and thanked him for his generosity as if she were a but-tonhole of memory.

Why a sixteen-year-old girl could have an easy entrée into the heart and mind of a crispy cynic like Walter Vann was something that his coworkers speculated upon and the other clients smirked about. Yet any astute spy and caroler of gossip would have known it wasn't about sexuality. Since he was a boy, nothing could divert or match the affection, the desire, the adoration he had for his own sex. While keeping his nature hidden from view, his conscience clear, he did not look at her the same way that the boys and men of Hollywood looked at her: his interest in Puppet was her well-being.

Walter knew who Puppet was, not the girl before him, nor the girl who with a sloping back walked up Gower Street where he could see her. He knew who she was inside

of him. This disturbed him. She brought to mind a color-distorted Polaroid, the kind one sees in flashbacks during a movie—the kind that, for the observer, revealed a moment from the past with the violence of a pickax. And she knew who he was, she'd known the moment he'd caught sight of her in the doorframe, and then the moment he'd offered her his breakfast.

Puppet had shown up for the first time at the drop-in center with a waiflike boy out of a Victorian ghost story. She'd been Walter's first client of the day. The moment she'd noticed him through his open door, seen the bagel with cream cheese, the plastic bottle of orange juice, the container of coffee, two napkins, and then his face, she'd known she had all she needed to consecrate the possibility of another day's survival. She'd slowly approached his doorway and waited for permission to enter. His own throat had constricted from an unsolicited authorship of her needs and wants, old Maslow teetering in from the past, long nights of textbooks and case histories remembered in an instant.

"Is that good coffee or is it from the dayroom?" she had asked.

"It's the good stuff," he'd smiled.

"Do you have an extra one or is this, like, the only one you have?"

"It's extra," he'd replied. "You want it?"

"Yes, sir," she'd breathed, "yes, I do."

"I'm Mister Vann," he'd replied.

She'd looked from the white paper bag to the coffee and then to the bagel.

"What else do you have here on your desk?" she'd asked.

"A bagel. Would you like the half I haven't eaten?"

"Yes, thanks," she'd said and sat down.

While she chewed, a tiny smudge of cream cheese had remained just outside the corner of her mouth. Walter had picked up one of the napkins and handed it to her. Silently she'd dabbed away the cheese and, waiting for him to remove the cover from the container of coffee, exhaled fully. Her upper lip spanned somewhat over the lower one. It was rounded off like the view of a beach umbrella. Her cheeks, protecting deep-set eyes that protected years of deferred humiliation, were soft—unusual for someone who slept on flattened cardboard boxes in back alleys.

Walter had slid the bottle of orange juice over to her,

but she, with a supplicating tilt of the head, had slid it back so that he could open it. “I can’t negotiate that twist top,” she’d smiled.

He’d opened the bottle and returned it to her, initiating what would become part of their ritual.

“The amount of insanity in this place is unsettling,” she’d said while she raised the orange juice to her lips.

“What place? Here? The drop-in center?” he’d asked.

“Los Angeles,” she’d said. “Los Angeles is insane,” she’d placed the bottle back on the desk and then tucked some fallen hairs behind her right ear.

“No more than other things in life,” Walter had said. “Have you ever worked for the federal government?”

“No,” she’d giggled.

“Have you ever sold insurance?”

“No,” she’d laughed.

“Then don’t be so quick to judge.”

Puppet had giggled again and bowed her head so as not to choke on the glutinous piece of food in her mouth.

“Where did you sleep last night?” he’d asked her, while he took a clean file folder from a pile off to the side. He’d placed a white label on the tab.

“No place in particular,” she had responded, pausing to take another sip of coffee. She’d looked toward a corner in the room, hoping the lie was sufficiently rendered.

“Have you been eating?” he’d asked. He’d put the four required intake forms on top of the folder, one green, one goldenrod, one pink, and one yellow.

“I’ve been trying to stay in the background and not get run over.”

“By what?” he’d asked.

“By life.”

“Well, it’s very easy to get run over on Hollywood Boulevard,” he’d said.

“In more ways than one,” Puppet had added, smiling, as she folded the corners of the wax paper.

He had smiled back at her, only his smile had absorbed the assurance that she had already been derailed by the collusion of squatters, by her living underneath the freeway overpass, and by having already inclined herself toward the imprint of a chain-link fence on her back, the smell and tremor of old loins, and a cop’s nightstick.

That Puppet could bring out the charity in Walter, that she could bend convention and take his breakfast as

her own, with the relish and grace of a little girl under the protection of an older brother, was like marching under a triumphal arch. However, in her case, Puppet’s garlands and lutes were the gummed pavement she lay on and the early morning radio from a dry cleaners on Cahuenga Boulevard, under whose window she often slept.

It was pity that he included in his feelings toward Puppet. He would never say that to anyone. He would never bring the thought forward for reflection. It would be rude, and he’d always carried within him the crass superiority of a good boy.

From her place in the chair, Puppet had unearthed something from him: she’d seen in him an intractable loss of heart. He knew she’d recognized it; that she’d seen and known for certain the insides of many men’s hearts, which were as hollow as a desert sewer, and Walter’s heart was no less difficult to unravel.

“I wish I was a priest so I could forgive her with all my heart,” he would think when he watched her walk away from the drop-in center and stroll farther along up the hill, causing a cold sweat to break out, making him nauseous. Nausea and cold sweat usually attended his thoughts of regret, which is where forgiveness often led him. He’d never become a father, yet had eminently wished it so. Why did Puppet alone remind him of that self-deprivation? For years he’d driven around inside his head but had ignored the landmarks that would have given him an insight to his own insufficiency. There was no place for children in his hierarchy of love, he believed. They had no place in his future. And because he simultaneously supported and rejected those thoughts, he knew paradoxically the conflict had made him feel alive and meaningful. Puppet dug up this adolescent sentiment as if she were a grave robber.

“Did you use any drugs this weekend?” he asked her, now, returning to the present.

“No,” she smiled. “I’ve been clean.”

“For how long?” he asked.

“I’ve been clean for five days.”

“Five days is nothing to be proud of.”

“I thought you would be,” she said, slurping her coffee.

He stopped. “I’m sorry,” he said. He put down his pen. “Too judgmental.”

“Oh, Mister Vann.”

“No, I was definitely too judgmental. You’re right. Five

days clean when a month is a lifetime is certainly something to be proud of.”

“Thanks,” said Puppet.

“Don’t mention it,” he said.

“I did some molly last night, though.”

“Well, gee, Puppet, that’s drugs! Ecstasy, no matter what you kids call it . . .”

“—I know, I know, it puts me at risk.”

“Actually, your whole way of life puts you at risk, if you want to be technical about it.”

Puppet then stood up and slouched against the doorframe.

“Sorry,” he said, looking at his desk.

She glanced quickly into the dayroom; then she faced him directly. She was ready to speak, thought better of it, and then bent down to pick up a plastic fork from the floor.

“Collin’s back in,” she said as she threw it in his wastebasket.

“Who let that happen?”

“Your boss,” she said, leaning back against the doorframe.

Walter kept his face diverted from her and pretended to read from her file.

“Mister Vann, when you see him this morning, can you be a little easy with him?”

“He called me a douche bag and told me to go fuck myself.”

“You chewed him out,” she giggled, “for pissing on the corner of the building outside.”

“Shame has its value,” Walter said, looking up from his notes.

“He was angry, Mister Vann. He was hurting that day. His dad went back to jail, and you know Collin’s mom never made parole.”

“Waste of life.”

“She says she’s innocent.”

“Collin has the scars to prove otherwise,” Walter said.

“See. You still like the little squirt. Not his fault he’s a homunculus.”

“He has a Napoleon complex; short man syndrome.”

“He’s only fifteen, and he needs your help. He’s so cute, Mister Vann, and he’s lonesome. You know what that’s like.”

Walter looked at her, taking in her slight deferential insult.

“He’s such a loner,” she said, “and he’s been fucked over by so many people. He doesn’t realize that he’s hurting anybody, or pissing them off.” She then switched her tone from consolatory to enthusiastic: “He’s almost ready to try out his new name.”

“His new name?” asked Walter.

“Worm.”

“Worm?”

“Yeah.”

“Really? Worm?” Walter said once more. He sat back in his chair. “You’re lonely, yet *you* don’t swear at people or deface private property.”

“Yeah, but I’m Puppet. I have a name, Mister Vann, I have a name. Collin . . . Well . . . he’s a sweetheart; it hurt me that you wouldn’t let him back in. He’s got an angel’s face.”

“I’ll speak gently to the angelic homunculus. Do you carry a dictionary in your pocket, Delena?”

“No,” she laughed, biting her thumbnail.

“Are you watching out for anyone else?” asked Walter.

“Well, I have to watch out for myself, and Collin. That’s enough. No one’s gonna send me a freakin’ lifeline, you know. God didn’t send me a lifeline. He sent me an anchor.”

“Well, I’m here,” Walter said.

“It’s not that simple, Mister Vann. You don’t understand the people I come from.”

After a moment of quiet, Walter put his pen down and crossed one leg over the other.

“Do I come off as a lonely person?” he asked her.

“Yeah, you do, sometimes.”

“You only see me for a half hour, three days a week, if that much.”

“I’m not the only one who thinks about you. You got a room full of kids out there and they don’t stop talking just because you’ve left the building.”

“Don’t I know it.”

“I look out for *you*, Mister Vann.”

“You do? How so?”

“When you make that weekly stop in Carlton’s Liquors down the street, on your way to the bus. You always walk by yourself with earplugs, listening to one of those book-on-tape things. There’s nothing and nobody getting through to you.”

Walter took a deep breath, the kind one tries to hide. He uncrossed and crossed his legs once again.

“And you come out of Carlton’s as unhappy as you went in,” Puppet added.

Walter looked past her.

“I have eyes, Mister Vann. My mom didn’t have to go to college to know how to raise seven kids. She taught me well before she gave me the boot. I have eyes. I know how to see somebody.”

“I’m a grown man, Puppet. I think I’m allowed to make my own choices.”

“Oh, I know that.”

Walter picked up the ringing telephone with his right hand. With his left he slid a packet of 5 chewing gum across the desk to Puppet. Her teenaged eyes gleamed as she sat down in the chair and opened the cobalt pack, taking out a couple of sticks.

“One for Collin, too?” she said.

Walter nodded. He tried not to appear too content as he switched his attention to the phone and then hung up.

While Puppet swallowed the first flood of saliva and sweetness from the gum, she leaned over to Walter, reached up, and touched the swollen sacks under his eyes.

“You need sleep.”

“Yeah,” he said and withdrew quickly. She jerked backward. She sat up straight in the chair.

“Sorry,” she said quietly.

“Please don’t touch me, Puppet,” he said softly. “That’s not allowed.”

“You’re probably right.”

He smiled, reddening.

“You’re embarrassed,” she said. “Sorry. You are. Not because of sex. It’s because you’re a guy. It’s pride isn’t it?”

“Probably,” he said with a bit of thickness to his voice.

“Thought so. Men are all alike.” She leaned sideways and tossed the other stick of gum out the door and into the dayroom, where it was caught by two small young hands.

“Yeah,” he repeated, again in a whisper. He watched their reflections in the large chrome Anheuser-Busch mirror sign that hung on the wall opposite them. Above it he had pinned a note that Puppet had given to him during her first month of visits: “Innocence dwells with Wisdom, but never with Ignorance.”

He turned to the small window on his right, looked at the framed photo of himself at twenty-two, carrying his six-year-old brother under his arm like a sack of potatoes. He bathed his consciousness in the fact that his little brother, with his now immense muscles and chest, could toss Walter across the room. The photo became a supernatural rendition of the prelude to a man.

Walter soundlessly emitted a sigh and thought of Puppet’s fingertips on his face. They had the pressure of a ghost, of a spirit inoculated with an unnatural grace for someone so young. The touch, ever so slight, was like the gliding flight of a cormorant looking for food along the sea waves. It reminded him of his three-year-old niece’s tiny hand as she once rubbed aloe vera on his sunburned back some twenty summers ago. But thoughts of these sensations engendered in just a few seconds of contact were making him anxious, which he hoped had been unnoticed by Puppet. Not because a professional boundary had been crossed, because one had been, but because Puppet’s touch was enough that it gave him palpitations, it gave him an unsteadiness that caused him to think of his own mother’s touch. What restrained tears both he and Puppet could manage because they were both without their mothers, as were the other boys and girls in the dayroom. Finer than silk, more comforting than the blue-robed gaze of a saint, her recognition of how badly tired Walter was, while at the same time his awareness of how gentle was her distress for him, brought an uneasy indulgence between them. She understood that he had asked her, by an absence of motions or signals, to take advantage of a fissure in his self-composure. She understood that he would go on allowing for the advantage for as long as she needed it.

Stirring up his regrets, his little brother, his niece’s hands, his mother’s touch, who was this wayfarer who had such undeclared power over him? No, it wasn’t Power. It was Servility. He was a hospital patient, she was a sister of mercy. Except at night, when she hired her young body out as a sounding board for the rage and sexual release of Hollywood’s monsters.

“You don’t give me very much about yourself,” he said after a long, comfortable pause.

“You don’t ask,” she said.

“I don’t push.”

“I could volunteer more information. That’s true. I don’t know where it would help you, how it would help what you do here. You get my drift?”

“I’m simply trying to keep you alive.”

“Isn’t that good enough?” she asked quietly, and pointed toward a navy-blue piece of lint on his cream-colored shirt. He looked and pinched it off. She pointed to another one on his left shoulder. He pinched that off too. As she was about to point to yet a third piece, Walter stood up, extended his arms, and slowly twirled around so that Puppet could see the rest of him.

“You missed a belt loop in your pants,” she said.

“Damn.”

He sat down and took up his position as counselor.

“Let’s go back to where I ask you things and you respond nicely,” he said.

She sat back in the chair, hands clasped atop her crossed knees. One of her feet wiggled nervously.

“You know,” she said. “An older man once told me that the relationship between God and man was light.”

“You know older men who talk about God and man?” he said smiling. “A friend? a customer?”

She tilted her head and crossed her arms about her chest. She looked out the door.

“Sorry,” he said, realizing he had embarrassed her. “Um, just light?”

She turned back to face him.

“What do you think of the relationship between you and me?”

“You don’t get to ask that question,” he said.

“Kind of late to tell me that now.”

“You know, each time you leave this office,” Walter began, sensing he was approaching dangerous ground. “I know what you’ll be up to when you’re outside, out there on the boulevard. Or the hills. Or downtown. Or better yet I don’t know.”

“That’s what we don’t talk about.”

“Yes, that’s right. I know the odds are against you.”

“Hey, none of that. You keep bringing those things up.”

“It makes me nervous. Tell me something. Tell me why you left Youngstown.”

“What’re you nervous about, Mister Vann?”

“My fear is that one night it will be your last night.”

“Life isn’t just about living, you know.”

“So they say. You won’t return; then I’ll never understand.”

“Oh, I see. You’re the secret holder and I’m not giving you any secrets.”

“No, I want to keep you safe and off the street.”

“I know.”

“I want to keep you out of juvenile hall. But, I’m a mandated reporter, Puppet. I could lose my job if I don’t try to place you somewhere secure; even in juvie. But I’ve done no such thing, have I?”

“Okay, Mister V.,” she breathed in deeply. “I see where you’re going with this. I’ll help you get rid of one or two of your fears.”

“You’re too generous,” Walter replied.

“Not today, though.”

“Yes, today.”

“I’ve got things to do.”

“Why did you leave home?” Walter insisted. “And you can’t lie.” His phone rang again. He picked it up and looked toward Puppet.

“Yeah,” he said into the phone. “Probably another ten minutes or so.” He replaced the receiver.

Puppet stared up at the small window.

“I know something.”

“And what might that be, Puppet?”

“Maybe you’re like Collin and you need a new name.”

Walter looked up at the wall clock.

“I didn’t just up and leave,” she said softly, “Mister Social-Worker-Mandated-Reporter.”

“No?”

“No. I got thrown out.”

He waited, picking up his pen and moving the case notes closer to him. Puppet swallowed and breathed in, slowly exhaled.

“Because one day a kid I was babysitting fell out of a fourth-floor window and he died. It was a mess. Nobody, but nobody, in my neighborhood could handle it, let alone anybody in my own house. The kid happened to be my two-year-old cousin.”

“Jesus.”

She took another stick of gum and stared over his shoulder.

“I know. I loved that kid,” her throat became tight and dry, despite the gum. With watery eyes, she turned her

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.

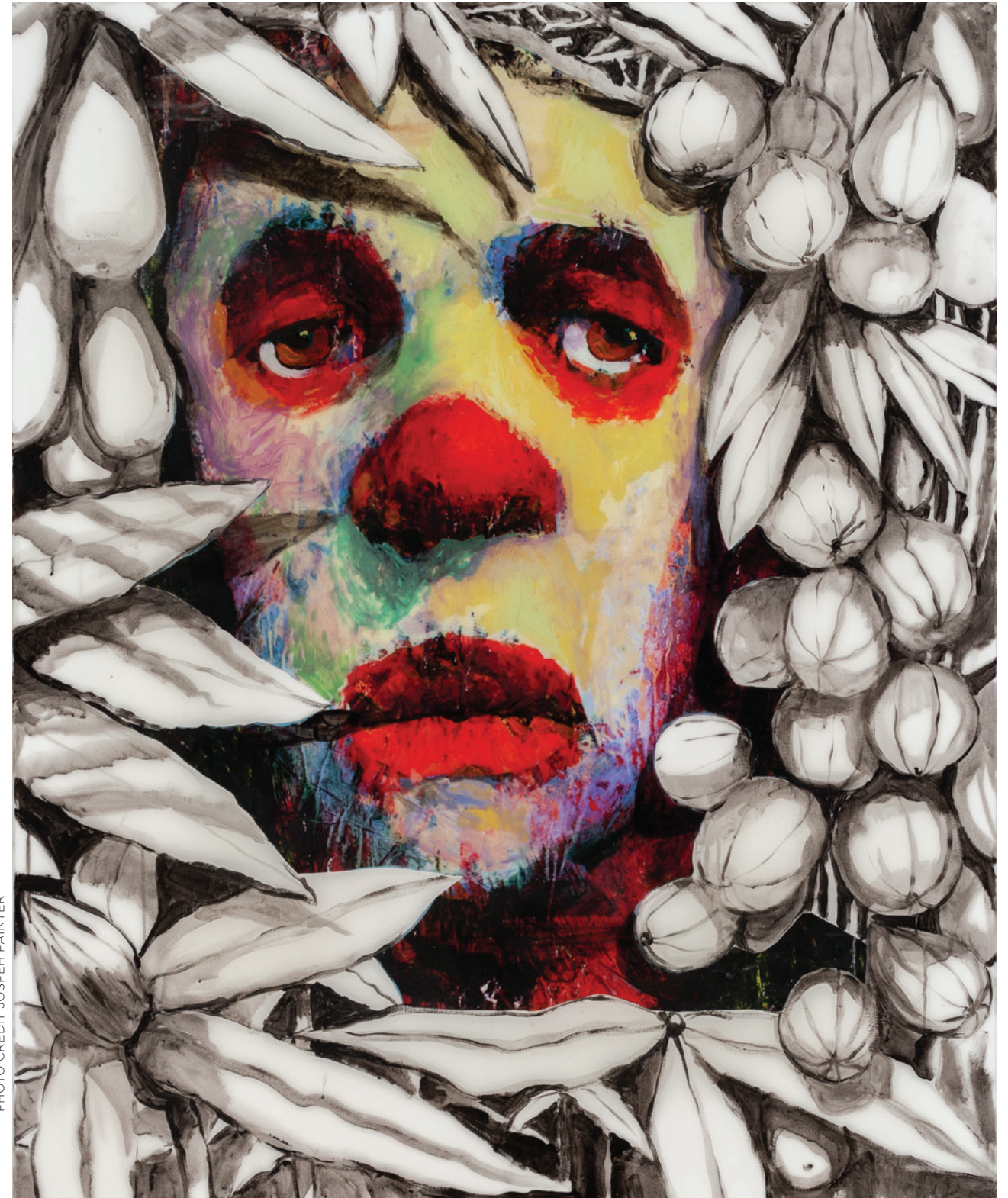
During the deep night, once the moon was down, Delena Burns methodically opened her cardboard box behind the French dry cleaners. She allowed her face, now a piece of granite, to become a self-conscious return to a peace between the sick and the sane, between the wounded and the self-contented. Without 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.

Mark Zipoli hails from Connecticut and received his BA in English from Queens College, City University of New York. His stories have appeared in *Uncharted Frontier*, *Hirschworth*, *Writing Tomorrow*, *Blue Monday Review*, and *The Blotter*. He lives in Santa Monica, California, and works for Extraordinary Families, a foster family and adoption agency.

FRANK HYDER

Leafman Series #5, 2013

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



COURTESY PROJECTS MIAMI GALLERY
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