

Because You Want To Love
for Gerald Stern

You've known for the last forty miles
on Interstate 95 that by the time you get
to Aramingo Avenue you'll be angry
at General Motors for burning up
all the *Mack* buses and all the green striped
trolleys, and at the concrete lobby
for selling motels and mobility to
a clubby bunch of Babbitt individualists.
At Girard, where you snake off
into your favorite Philadelphia,
your Firestones skidding over the glassy
tracks laid down between granite
cobble by a gang of fresh Sicilians
a hundred years ago, you'll remember
that Mumford was right about
the car being the death of cities.

And before you hit the plywood district,
before the bombed-out Schmidts
Brewery and the old Jewish neighborhoods
now lined with flag and gun shop Joes and
crackhouses and that one skinny whore with
a mouthful of rotten teeth, you remember
that you want to love this city.

You grind your teeth a little bit, maybe rip
a little flesh from your lower lip, and just
a block beyond Front you left onto Second
and head for Vine, for art at the Painted Bride.
If you're honest this is where you begin to cry.
Old City, they call it. If only it were Prague.
And you've questioned it a hundred times
and you keep on hearing the answers always
making as much sense as before: what the hell
happened here? What coal-freight derailed
through this neighborhood? And tell me,
How long's it been gone? And whose fire's
comin' next time, anyway? You're crazy.

It's then you curse: the no parking, the parking from eight a.m. to six-thirty p.m. Monday or Wednesday or Thursday except, and Saturday and Sunday and no goddam parking anytime because it's a sacred tow away zone from here to Detroit, home of holy blasphemy and liars.

You want to remember, you, before you escaped to the empty suburbs, what it was like. You want to love your neighbor, the way your mother loved Mrs. Fritz two doors down at 1516, who spent untold hours in dark lonely humidity in a rowhouse brickie in Northern Liberties because she didn't have a few lousy bucks for a caved-in front porch. You think of her, and your mother, wheezing from all that airborne fuzz molded into a fine Stetson fitted for a Dilworth or a Cecil B. Moore. She did it for you, loved her neighbors even if they were German Marxists, and you know it, and you wonder how in the hell you're going to face her when she's frozen beneath Our Holy Savior behind Bob's Diner on Ridge Avenue. You, living in Pheasant Run, in Vinyl City, cooped in the big beige, driving the big beige.

You try as hard as you can, you keep it before you and stare into it like that bug-eyed Rizzo poster in Fat Edna's on Manayunk and Vassar and you get up to piss and look into that mirror—you remember: you want to love this city. And you do and you mean it and you cry for it and you swear it. You do. For the love of your friends still living here in the impossible goddamn it you do.

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