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January 2004

Twentieth Century Portrait

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Recommended Citation

Alan Soldofsky. "Twentieth Century Portrait" *Rattle* (2004).

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TURN OF THE CENTURY PORTRAIT

After he was laid off, he stood in the heat,
listening to the arguments of afternoon.
Around him, cars nosed into their stalls.
He noticed a blister between his thumb

and forefinger, a broken whitish flap
of skin, no one to complain to but the wind.
So he spoke to no one in his gnarled accent,
the car radio abrading his brow

and sat hunched, hands on the wheel
of the '81 Cutlass, speedometer stuck at 60,
before turning the key, hearing,
the cylinders fire their fat familiar bursts,

that brilliant hollow-throated thrum,
rattling down his arms' ulnar nerves.
A wrecked alphabet affixed to the driver's side
corner of the windshield, decals peeling off

sun-seared glass, a smell like bacon left out
all day in the pan, an incipient rancidness,
a metallic tang of blood pooled
behind his tongue, eyes suddenly stung

by salt dripping off his forehead. The surge
bringing down its full weight upon him,
knowing what a piece of shit all this is,
and what the hell is he going to do about it.