

## PHILIP ROSENTHAL

*Vineyard*, 2014  
enamel on panel, 36 x 48 in



courtesy the artist

“Okay, I’ll make sure you don’t catch me.”

“Stop! Now you’re just being creepy.”

Not creepy—flip, because he’d long since given up trying to explain to his wife his attachment to dirt.

“Interested in a cash-poor, dead-end profession? Sign up for farming,” she mocked.

They weren’t flush, no argument there. He’d inherited a 110-acre farm. The best farmer in Mawatuck couldn’t get rich off 110 acres. He’d make more money commuting five days a week to a Bartock assembly line. But punching a time clock? Spending the rest of his working days, maybe the rest of his life, hunched beneath a factory ceiling?

“No one dies from hunching,” Leeta said.

But from heartbreak?

As cracker-ignorant and backwoods-hokey as it sounded, forced to give up farming, he believed he’d die of something very much like a grieving heart. If he admitted as much to Leeta, she’d assume he’d gone soft in the head. His father would have said: “We all die of something, George.”

He knew that’s what Ira Scaff alive would have said, because that’s what Ira Scaff dead said all through the long, idle summer.

Before his father died, old-looking rather than old, they’d walked through the sheds on the property together.

“I wish I could promise these tools, this equipment, will bring you luck,” his father said, tossing aside a rusted horseshoe. “But they won’t.”

When his father left the shed, he’d followed, expected to follow. Alongside his father, he’d stood in the corner of the yard, gazing into the fields, expected to stand silent as long as Ira Scaff elected to stand, spitting an arc of blood rather than tobacco juice.

With a bloody knuckle, his father pointed at sprouting soybeans, pale green nubs straining toward sunlight.

“All this land you think is so...grand? When you need to sell it, sell it.”

“What? No!” he’d squalled, in no way prepared for that decree. “You never sold out. I won’t sell out either.”

Again his father spat. “Sell out. That some kind of hippie talk?”

“No, I just meant...you kept the farm. Even when corn prices dropped. Even after the hurricane...”

“Because nobody offered to take it off my hands.”

*A leather tool punch.  
Indian arrowheads of  
granite, quartz, and  
mica, collected from  
the fields, handheld  
proof that people  
came and went while  
land remained.*

“You say that now, but that’s just...now.”

*When you’re dying. Because you’re dying,* he thought, frantic to excuse his father’s lapse in judgment and resolve.

“This notion you’ve got about farming being something more than putting food on your table, something holy. You’ve got to get that out of your head.”

*Never,* he thought. *Never.*

“Listen to your daddy while he’s still around to be listened to. You can’t live the life I lived, the kind your granddaddy lived. Those times are gone, George. And they ain’t coming back.”

His father was tired and ill. The tired and ill were pessimistic, he’d reasoned. Maybe he couldn’t live, farm, the very same as his father and grandfather, but that didn’t justify rejecting the farming life altogether. The present didn’t have to repeat precisely the past to honor it.

While his father coughed and dozed on the tree swing, lit upon by katydids, crawled across by beetles, he’d made a project of reorganizing the sheds. Sort, clean, tidy, preserve. By replacing grimy light bulbs with fluorescent strips, he’d been able to find and rescue what mounds of bolts, screws, pipes, hammers, belts, blades, bailing wire, and inner tubes concealed. An anvil that had belonged to his Granddaddy Scaff. A cypress tool chest, scored with a penknife and the letters S-C-A-F-F. A mule’s plow harness. A leather tool punch. Indian arrowheads of granite, quartz,