

Northridge Review

POETRY

FICTION

INTERVIEW WITH JELLO BIAFRA



Northridge Review

Fall 1987

"The readers know a good story but the editors don't"
— Ernest Hemingway

Volume 5, Number 2

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Awards

The Rachel Sherwood Poetry Award

Rachel Sherwood was a poet who knew and wrote of the mysteries of the afternoon and evening. On July 5, 1979, at the age of 25, she was killed in an automobile accident. Rachel Sherwood studied and flourished in her art at CSUN. In memoriam an annual poetry prize has been established in her name.

Poets honored with the prize receive fifty dollars from the university and are noted alongside the name of Rachel Sherwood, who was deprived of sufficient time to be the recipient of such honors.

The Northridge Review staff selected Mary Harris as the winner of the 1987 prize for her poem, "Clan."

The Helen Helms Marcus Short Fiction Award

This annual award was established by Helen Helms Marcus to encourage writers of short fiction to pursue their art. The award was first given in Spring 1986, with the sponsorship of the University Women's Club. Writers honored with this award receive one hundred dollars.

Amy Gonzales was selected as the 1987 recipient for her short story, "Sit Like a Lady," published in the Fall 1986 issue.

These awards are selected by the Northridge Review staff each spring, from works published in the Fall and Spring issues.

The Northridge Review is pleased to publish "Pears" by Suzanne Ghiglia, the winner of the Academy of American Poets contest, and "at the nursery" by Margaret Ritchie, the honorable mention poem.

Cover photo: Christine Mutschenbacher

Cover design: Victoria Potts

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Matinee

So I'm sitting in this movie theater watching "This Year's Best", smelling popcorn and listening to some guy chew milk duds like cow hide and my stomach starts to feel like a kennel full of dogs barking to get out because some guy on the screen just bashed another guy's face with the butt of his gun and as the blood splashed his face chicken-pock-style the lady with the humming hearing aid next to me spills coke and it splashes in my face so I wipe it off and look back at the screen to see a burnt black man nailed to a tree so now my insides are really ready and I try to get up but my bargain boots are stuck to the floor so I close my eyes and go to a warm bed in my head like I used to do at the dentist.

Flying

People were deceived, for the most part, by his placidity. But behind the torpid manner cowered an excitable being with a fluttering heart. He was such a timid boy. Especially in the face of loud urgency or demands. Beverly heard on the news he couldn't tell them his name.

Donny, scrubbed and serene, waited in his wheelchair, which took up the only open patch of kitchen floor and barricaded the exit. But the morning sun — the only sun to find its way through the maze of neighboring buildings — crept through the solitary window with a reminder of open skies. From a cage in the corner the zebra finch racketed a welcome to the light. Donny rolled his head toward the sound.

At his feet, Beverly said, "Such a handsome birthday-boy!" He seemed almost beautiful with sunshine spilling a glow across his pallid face and turning his fair hair gold.

She couldn't imagine shutting Donny away from the light. It was inconceivable. Others demanded it, however — first the boy's father and now Eric: it was his motif. When he was absent, the refrain vibrated in her mind in connection with Eric. When he was present, the same note sounded, tantalizing, whether he spoke it or not and despite her efforts not to hear. Eric's easy smile would disappear, replaced on his smooth face by earnestness. "Think of ME," he'd say. He could see nothing in the boy.

Beverly looked up from the colorless linoleum. "Today is SPECIAL," she informed her son. She was kneeling, tying Donny's laces. The white bows drooped against red canvas. Six months and still the sneakers were unsullied.

"The SHOES — my God," the other mothers in the park would say to each other, watching the children scuff and tumble and climb, "the SHOES they go through! It's impossible to keep a kid in shoes." And Beverly would see the women clustered on the bench nodding wisely together, making a wall of their backs. While beside her, Donny slumped in his chair and watched the leaf-shadows sweeping back and forth on the bright grass and the pigeons with their heads cocked sideways sidling up to the crumbs on the dirt path and the pigeons flashing up in graceful panic when he rocked with happiness.

She and Donny went to the park less and less.

Beverly sighed and rose wearily to her feet. She drew the belt tight around her limp wrapper. The night had been too late again, almost always too late because too rare: old Mrs. Karpuzov — Beverly couldn't blame her, it wasn't her fault really — Mrs. K. was reluctant to sit with Donny, to be near him, even when he slept. It was the way people were about the child, they felt caged by something shameful. And then to argue again with Eric, there was only one argument, to come home to Donny's formless nightmares visited on her like a judgement. Although she would have been tired in any case. She smiled for Donny.

"Eight years old. Such a big boy!" His head was turned toward the finch. Gently, she traced a fuzzy gilt eyebrow, claiming his attention. "Whose birthday is it, Don-Don?" The gaze that fastened on her face was clear and green and bottomless as a mountain lake. The golden brows puckered.

"Donny's birthday," she prompted. "I know you can say it."

Green eyes wavered between the birdcage and Beverly's face.

"Donny," she insisted. "Birthday."

"Dah," he finally said, the sound released slowly and with care, fragile as a robin's egg. "Bah-bah." She smiled and patted his cheek. He began to bump from side to side. "Bah, bah, bah, bah. . .," he chanted.

Already this morning, the tension was settling in her shoulders. Her smile faded. "My goodness, I almost forgot. Wait till you see. . ." She squeezed through the narrow space between table and wheelchair and headed for the pantry with quick, excited steps.

It was a tiny built-in pantry with leaded glass doors. Boxes of cereal, jars of baby food labelled with smiling infant faces were visible through its miniature windows. She liked the pantry; it was a touch of homey, old-fashioned charm. As for the rest of the flat — it was there, that was all. Four walls enclosing mother and son, a roof over their heads.

Behind the oatmeal box on the second shelf were three square envelopes all marked 'Donny' in the same hand. She drew them out and cried, "Wait till you see!" Donny still lurched rhythmically in his chair.

The sun fled, leaving the kitchen dim. Beverly flipped the light switch.

"Birthday cards," she grinned. There was just space enough to pull a chair out and wedge herself against the dinette. She pecked the formica with the edge of one stiff envelope. Donny stopped rocking; his head swivelled. Beverly laid the cards out carefully.

Balloons in primary red and blue, sulphurous ducks with a placard proclaiming '8 YEARS OLD': "Mrs. Karpuzov," she read. "Isn't that nice?" She waved the bright colors before his face, and he focused briefly. There was a volley of bird chatter from the finch, a whirring ruffle, then the rapid light tapping of its circuit around the bottom of the cage.

The next card was all flowers and serious script. "This one is from Daddy." Alarm rippled across Donny's slack moon face: for an instant, the air hummed with a vague unease. But the card was a lie, a lie and a lullaby: "... come true, Having a wonderful son like you. With all my love, Daddy." Donny's gaze drifted away, peaceful.

She wondered where Donny's father was. She hadn't heard since the divorce. For four years, his memory had retreated, farther and farther away. Some could not bear to witness certain and pointless deterioration.

"And, OF COURSE, there's one from ME..." She looked at the child's profile. He was no longer there. Like father, like son. Her hand fell slowly to the table, down and down. She left the last card in its envelope.

Eric, her — what? Boyfriend? Temptation? Eric was a salesman. He'd be driving his inland loop today, spreading charm and order blanks through the outlying sections of his territory. He wasn't due to call at Valley Roofing for another week.

So there would be no sudden breath of air, no lifting heart, nothing for her at the office, a knocked-together hut at the back of the supply yard, an over-sized wooden box cluttered with scarred desk, crumpled invoices, bills of lading, and filing cabinets that banged her knees if she shifted too far in her chair. A person could suffocate.

Perhaps he would stop by tonight, after Donny was tucked into bed and out of sight. Eric would press for a decision. She saw Donny sitting in a vast and shadowed room while white uniforms flitted through the gloom like ghosts. She and Eric walked through the park, and the pigeons swirled in the air like a cloud of confetti. "Think of me," his voice breathed inside her. He would press... Her tight shoulders ached. Her breasts ached. Her heart ached.

Beverly looked at her son. Last year at this time, he had balanced, for a while, in a regular chair. He said "birthday" — drawn out slow, of course, but clear as day — and even seemed to examine the cards. She caught herself before she sighed; it was becoming a habit.

It took no time at all to slip into jeans and shirt and sneakers. Then she ran cold water into the pan she'd used for Cream of Rice and into the two sticky bowls and left the dishes crowded together in the sink.

Napkins, sodas. Cup and spoon. Next an apple and a bologna sandwich followed the jars of bananas and strained beef into a brown bag, and, on top, she put two cupcakes from the bakery. The bag went in Donny's lap. He sat with his arms draped around it the way she'd arranged them. like the limbs of a bendable doll, a doughy mannequin in too-tight OshKosh overalls and too-new sneakers.

She had put the car keys somewhere — it was cheaper, usually, to take the bus and besides, it conserved gas — there they were, now they were ready. She put the keys in her pocket, nestled her purse in his lap alongside the grocery bag, then carefully manuevred the wheelchair backwards out of the room, turning the light off and leaving the finch quiet in the dark corner.

The rickety elevator clanked down, down, to the faded lobby, and they went through the lobby and down the crumbling elegance of the steps at the entrance of the building.

On the sidewalk, Donny blinked at the light. There was no yellow bus at the curb, no special bus with converted doorways and hydraulic lifts and modified aisles. When she turned the chair away from the bus-stop, he began to fidget.

"No school, she explained, "You and I are playing

hooky. That's your present: we're having a picnic!" She explained again, several times, changing words and tone, until something of her meaning filtered through and he was satisfied. Or simply forgot.

He was a growing boy— heavier, it seemed to her, everyday. She worried about getting him in the car. It had been so long since he'd been in the car. They seldom went out. Desolation was easier in private.

She wondered whether the makeshift harness would hold him straight in the seat now that he was getting so big. She worried about the freeway, about car trouble and needing more napkins and finding the road to the creek and getting the wheelchair down the path.

How could she concentrate on important decisions when she was hemmed in by trivialities? Donny's father had never understood either, and back then it was just beginning, really. Men had so little patience. She forgot to hold the sigh back.

The car was a station wagon, a tank, splotches of chalky white overtaking the original grey paint like a skin disease. "U.S. Navy Motor Pool" and a string of numbers still showed faintly on the door, and rows of rusty holes ran the length of the car, marking the former locations of decorative chrome.

"Built to last," she told Donny, leaning over his shoulder to point. Exactly what his father had said when he'd brought the car home, although it was ten years old at the time and the broken odometer had already turned over once. "Built to last," he said and disappeared the next week. Which was touching, in a way, since he must have wanted to leave her well provided for, at least as far as transportation was concerned.

On the freeway, the wagon labored in the slow lane and lugged at every rise in the road. But it felt like they were

soaring above the highway at the speed of light. Hot wind rushed through the open window, and the city sped by like a muted kaleidoscope. Donny was entranced. The freeway snaked out from beneath a dun-colored veil of smog and into the brown hills and wound through the canyons.

Then, familiar as yesterday, there was the turn-off. And suddenly, a small and noisy Donny stood bouncing in his seat, three years old, with a toddler's unquenchable energy. Donny's father sat behind the wheel, except his mustache had vanished and his blonde hair was Eric's, a glossy brown-black. He smiled at her with Eric's caressing smile.

And how could she forget the road? The three of them took the same route every week: behind a 'No Trespassing' sign there was token asphalt for a mile and a half, and then the air turned to dust and the road turned to dirt and fist-sized rocks bounced under the car. The tires crunched over dry wild oats, and she parked in their usual spot near the edge of the gully.

Going down was harder than she'd thought. The path, a narrow fire road, cut steeply across the face of a shallow cliff. She dug her heels in, hauling on the hand grips and trying to throw the load back on the rear wheels of the wheelchair. Donny sagged, inert, his face gentle in the open air. The big wheels jerked over stones and caught in holes. She was constantly wrenching the chair straight, fighting it as it skewed from side to side. Her arms and legs were heavy, trembling with the strain.

She might have managed to carry him. Beverly stopped and steadied the weight in the chair. She should have carried the boy and come down again with the folded chair. But she'd been thinking of them as a unit.

There was no way to stop now. She struggled on. They

bucked and slithered down the cliff, and it seemed like years before they reached the bottom. She felt dizzy from the effort. She patted the wheelchair and giggled, "Built to last."

They were in a wash threaded with a ribbon of running water and a procession of cool cottonwoods. She forced the wheelchair through the sand. Near the trees there was shade and space and firmer ground. She smoothed her hair back with both hands to let the breeze fan her face, then stretched triumphantly.

She was curious. "Do you remember?" she asked.

But Donny was gone, leaving only the mild landscape of his face. His head lolled back against one shoulder, and the green eyes roved the open sky.

"Well," she said aloud, from long habit. "I guess it's time for lunch."

The lunch shut up in the brown bag was a jumble. The story of her life. She sighed and rummaged through the cupcake fragments.

No broken jars. But her sandwich looked as though it had been hammered. She dangled it between finger and thumb and grimaced. "I guess not," she said. Instead, she fed the boy, whose mouth gaped automatically between spoonfuls, even food failing to distract from an inspection of clouds and sunlight flickering in the leaves.

She was afraid to open the soda cans: battered about like that, under pressure, they would probably explode. So she brought him a cup of water from the creek, then wet a napkin in the cup. The paper dissolved beneath her fingers as she wiped his face. She threw the soggy wad into the bag along with the remainders of the picnic.

The boy in the wheelchair paid no heed. He had seen the birds, a trio of sparrows popping lightly over the ground, coming to investigate. Beverly edged away; he

didn't need her. At the edge of the creek she freed her feet from sneakers. and rolled up her jeans. The cold water bit at her skin, and stones slid underfoot. She flapped her arms for balance. The shining water forced her to squint.

It was very quiet. When she rolled her head from shoulder to shoulder, there was a grinding sound in her neck, and faint cracks when the clenched muscles relaxed and tiny bones snapped into place.

A raucous cry sliced through the stillness. The sparrows had vanished. Farther up the wash, two ravens squabbled and danced over something in the sand, their huge wings arched wide. Closer, on the near shore, the boy seemed to be drowsing.

Beverly waded downstream to the bank, to listen under the trees. She spread weightless arms wide and still there was room. Eyes closed, she shuffled in lazy circles.

Voices breathed in the cottonwoods. Whispers and phantoms wove behind her eyelids as she turned. "No hope," Donny's father said. "I can't, I just can't. . . I can't," she echoed. Doctors shook their heads, murmuring in serious pairs. The mothers buzzed behind their wall; faces closed against her in the street.

"Hopeless," said Eric, her new hope, tugging at her hand. In connection with Eric. He said, "Think of us." Always, she answered.

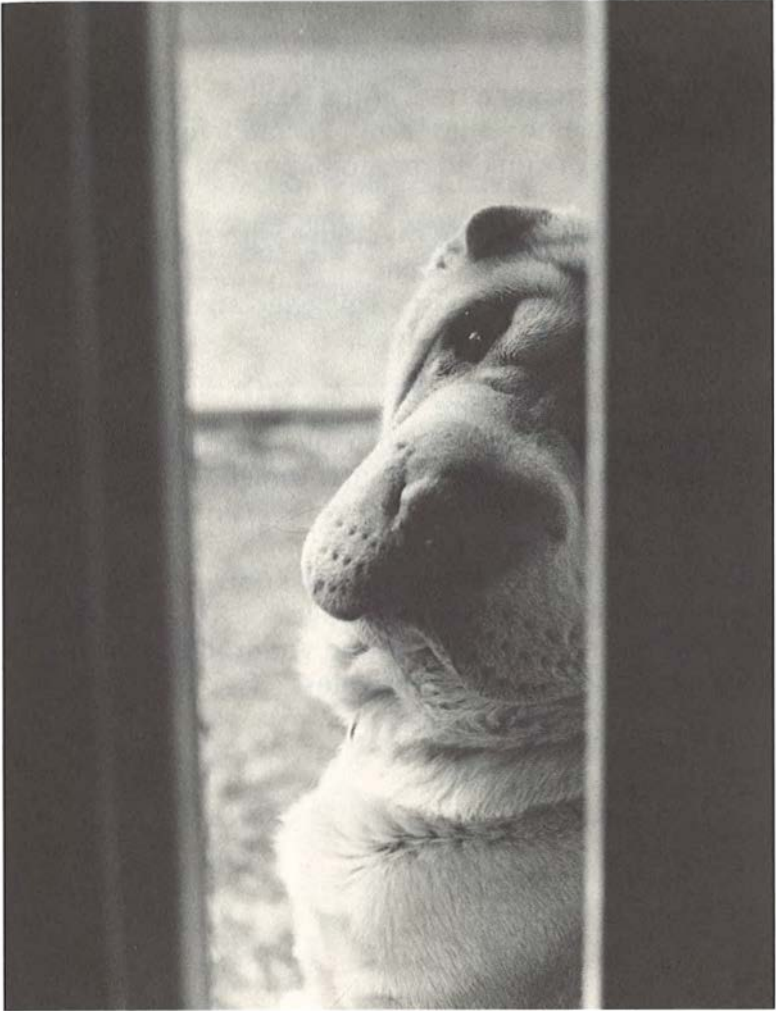
Eric's face wavered, melted into young Donny's, fresh and gleeful. She cocked her head. He was piping, thin and high, a string of words flung back over his shoulder to her. She couldn't catch the words. But he was happy. He darted away, out from under the trees, and she lost him in the glare.

Beverly opened her eyes. It was time to leave. Relief made her light-headed.

Climbing up was easier; her muscles were refreshed and strong. She fixed her eyes on the lip of the cliff. Back under the cottonwoods, Donny sat enthroned, turned to gold. A squirrel nestled on his shoulder, jabbering softly in his ear. Guardian ravens crouched on the back of the chair, and sparrows perched trustingly in his outstretched hands. His smile was like a benediction.

When she got home, she would fly to Eric. He would accept her, draw her into the circle of his arms and fold his body around her like a cocoon.

Emotions, like barbed wire, are
painful, dangerous, twisted
rusted by time and salty rain
too often ignored by careless trespassers
who fail to see the posted signs
and cut the wires
the wires that hold a person's soul intact.



Wendy Walton

A House, A Snake, A Tree, and A Lake

You ask me to draw you a picture
of a house, a snake, a tree, and a lake.
Though I question your reason, I scratch my reply
upon a scrap of crinkled memo paper.

I finish and you examine my house with many windows
and the door that stands ajar,
my rooted, leafless tree, my squiggled snake,
and my lake - large and waved.

You interpret my picture,
seeing that I invite people into my life,
feel rooted in who I am, and that tonight
my emotions are too troubled to feel sensual.

I don't need to see your picture to know
that your house has fewer windows,
and that your snake coils around your rootless tree
near your lake - small and waveless.

You Left

You left a bracelet
hairpin or other
trinket, item
when you left

A funny forgetfulness
I reminded you
but you left silky
things and
bedclothes, too

Once, you left nothing
with me searching
flipping pillows and
papers looking for it

Wendy Sterndale

Installation at the Museum

de Kooning on the floor,
casually dumped.
Magic black brushed on canvas.

One is framed on the wall,
formally presented.
A couple more dumped on the floor
are creased, as if they're not precious.

This canvas of wide wild brushwork
is a two fisted effort.
Exhilarating in its odd placement.
center stage on maplewood floor.

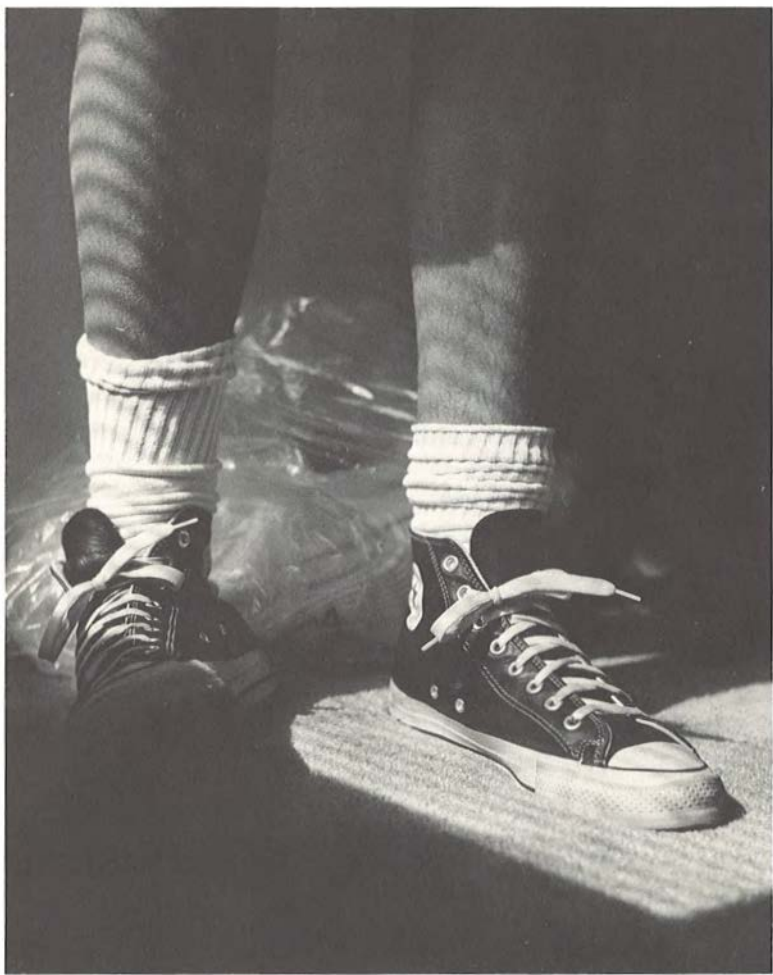
Richard Alcocer

Geopolitical Solution

Do you remember when
we used to sit for hours
in that grimy bar off campus
and wax philosophical?

All that beer
and so many cigarettes:
I used to walk home
half drunk and dry-throated
thinking how all the
problems of the world
could be solved
if our leaders could meet,
armed with
a full pack of smokes
and six pitchers of beer,
and a couple of glass ashtrays
which read

"STOLEN FROM LUCKY JOHN'S BAR AND GRILL"



Silly Putty

My roommate, Mark, walks in the door. He grabs the last Henry's out of the fridge and asks what I'm watching.

"Bonanza," I say.

He sits on the couch next to me and watches as Little Joe takes on two bad guys. He doesn't say anything until the commercial.

"Are you going to be home, tonight?" he asks.

"Yeah. Why?"

"No reason. Lori and her friends are coming by, that's all."

"Lori?" I ask.

"Yeah."

"Why Lori?"

Mark looks at me.

"I thought you were over her," I say.

"I am."

"Well, then, why did you invite her over?"

He doesn't answer me. Bonanza is back on. Little Joe is in jail, now. The sheriff doesn't like anybody beating up his townspeople.

Lori is Mark's ex-girlfriend. She broke up with him about a year ago. It took him a long time to get over it. He was in love with her.

A pretty girl brings Little Joe a picnic basket.

"A-Ha!" Mark says.

"A-Ha, what?"

"He's going to smooth talk her into getting him out of jail."

"Oh."

"I like Little Joe," Mark says. "He's always got the upper hand with women. Knows how to manipulate them. He never gets hurt."

Mark is the same way. Except with Lori. But that was a

long time ago. When she broke up with him, he was hurt pretty bad. He decided never to let that happen again. I wonder why he invited her over.

The phone rings.

"Answer that," I say. "Will ya?"

Mark looks at me. "Why?"

"Because if it's that girl I took out last Friday, tell her I'm not home."

"Who? That girl from your class?"

"Yeah, Sharon. She's called me at least three times in the past two days. I think she wants to have my baby."

Mark smiles. "Sorry, pal. You're going to have to do your own heartbreaking."

The phone rings a third time. "So you're not going to answer it?"

"Nope."

"God damn it," I say and pick up the receiver. "Hello?"

It's for Mark.

"Who is it?"

"Donna."

He takes the phone. Donna is gorgeous. She graduated with Mark last year from U.S.C.: A degree in Bio-Chemistry. Top three in her class. They have been dating for about a month. She's madly in love with him.

"Hi Donna," Mark says. "Listen, can I call you back in about an hour? I'm in the middle of something kind of important. — Thanks."

He hangs up and watches as the girl hits the sheriff over the head with a gun and opens Little Joe's cell.

"Told ya," Mark says to me.

On their first date, Mark took Donna to his ten year old nephew's junior league basketball game. Afterwards, he took her, and the team, to Shakey's for pizza and root beer. Their next date, he took her skeet shooting with his

shoot and by the end of the day, she actually hit two clay pigeons. Their third date, Mark didn't have any money so he invited her over to our place for dinner. The apartment was a mess, but the table was set beautifully: Expensive china and silverware that his grandparents had given us as a housewarming gift, embroidered napkins and gold mounted candles. For dinner he served two grilled cheese sandwiches. They drank ice-cold milk out of crystal champagne glasses. I got home from the restaurant just past midnight and they were playing charades in the living room. When I went to bed, she practically raped him on the living room couch. She's called practically every day since then.

One night I was home alone. I was making dinner when the doorbell rang and when I opened it, Donna was standing there with a half dozen heart-shaped helium balloons. Mark was on a date with someone else that night, so I wasn't sure what to say.

"He isn't here. I haven't seen him all day."

"Yeah, I know," she said. "He's on a date with that girl from his work. I just wanted to drop these off."

I let her go into Mark's room and arrange the balloons. I went back to the kitchen and dumped the noodles into the boiling water. When she emerged from the room a few minutes later, I was draining the excess oil from the meat into the sink.

"Just making myself some spaghetti," I said. "Would you care for some?"

"No thanks, I just ate. But I will have a beer if you've got one."

I grabbed two Henry's out of the fridge. Donna took one and sat down on the kitchen counter. I stirred the Ragu sauce.

"This is a really nice place," she said. "How long have

you two been here?"

"About six months. We used to live in an on-campus apartment."

She took a sip of her beer. "Oh, really? How long have you known him?"

"Mark? God, I don't know, about ten years now. We met in the seventh grade."

"That's a long time."

I looked at her. She was wearing a black skirt and an oversized white sweater. Her legs were long and tan. She had medium length blondish-brown hair that she kept in a light perm. Her eyes were a deep green. She was one of the prettiest girls I have ever met.

"You really like him, don't you?" I said.

She smiled and took a sip of her beer.

"Is he the only guy you go out with?"

She nodded her head. "He's the only guy I like right now."

"Doesn't it bother you that he goes out with other girls?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. Not really, I guess. He's completely different than the other guys I've gone out with. He's the first guy I've met that doesn't want to get serious. He just likes having a good time."

I took the noodles off of the burner and strained them in the sink. Donna finished her beer and threw the bottle into the trash.

"I guess what I like best about him is that he never tries to impress anybody. He doesn't try to be anything he isn't."

I mixed the Ragu sauce in with the meat and stirred them together.

"But I suppose I would like to see if I could get him to stop seeing other girls and just go out with me. I guess it's

kind of a challenge.”

I dumped the noodles on the plate. “Well, if you ever give up on that nut,” I said, “let me know, will ya?”

She smiled. I poured the meat and sauce onto the noodles.

Besides Donna, there are at least three other girls that are always calling him. He likes them all, but if they aren't around, he doesn't think much about them. He really doesn't care that much. Mark seems to have mastered the art of enjoying himself and whatever it is he is doing at the given moment. I try to figure out why he invited Lori.

When Bonanza is over, I go to my room and sit at my desk. I look at the two framed photographs on my desk top: Mark and I, in our freshman year at U.S.C., in our dorm room amongst a pile of open books and lecture notes. Crystal and I, clad in gown and tux, at my brother's wedding. Crystal is my ex-girlfriend. She broke up with me last month. I open a drawer and pull my journal out. I read over last weeks entry:

November 6, 1986

Things are getting better. Got an A on my Hemingway paper. I may graduate yet.

Got drunk with Mark last night. Had a heavy conversation about life. He says that true love doesn't exist. It's just a non-existent goal we have been taught to strive for.

I called Crystal last week and asked her to come back. She said no. I can't believe I did that. Mark says that it's natural; we all want what we can't have.

I think I'm starting to get over her.

It's 8:30. I'm on the couch watching Humphrey Bogart

and Lauren Bacall in *The Big Sleep* when Mark walks in the door with two shopping bags. I turn down the TV and help him unload. A twelve-pack of Michelob. Three four-packs of wine coolers. Potato chips. Dip. Hot dogs. Popcorn.

I point to the Michelob. "What's wrong with Henry's?"

"Lori doesn't like it."

"Oh. Can I have one?"

"No. Wait until they get here."

I go back to the couch. Bogart is trying to smooth talk Bacall into untying him.

"Smoother than Little Joe," I say.

"What?"

"Bogie. He's smoother than Little Joe."

Mark isn't listening. He's busy washing the dishes. "Would you mind cleaning up that mess," he says, referring to the remains of my lunch from Burger King.

"Why?"

"Because I have guests coming over. Don't you usually clean-up when you invite people over?"

"Yes, but I've never seen you do it before."

"Well, I'm doing it now. Would you mind?"

I throw all the wrappers into the bag and throw the bag into the garbage. When Mark is finished with the dishes, he takes the garbage out. He wipes down the coffee table, the dining-room table, and the kitchen counter. He runs the vacuum over the carpet. Our apartment looks good.

Mark takes a shower. He puts on a nice pair of slacks and a button down shirt. He looks good, too.

"Aren't you going to change?" he asks me.

I'm wearing an old faded pair of jeans and a high school football sweatshirt.

"Why?"

"You look like a bum."

He wore army pants the night Donna came over.

"So?"

"I'd appreciate it if you changed."

I go to my room and put on a less faded pair of jeans and a polo shirt. I'm thinking maybe I'll go see a movie. I have no money, though. I decide to stay.

The girls show up a little after nine. Lori and her friends Beth and Monica. Monica is pretty cute. Beth is overweight and has braces on her teeth.

"You remember Tom, don't you?" Mark is saying to Lori.

"Of course I do," Lori says, and gives me a hug. But it's not a real hug. It's more like a cheerleader hug. Lori was a cheerleader in high school. She's very pretty, but doesn't come close to Donna.

Mark breaks out the booze. Beth and Monica opt for wine coolers. Mark and I start on the beer. Lori wants to make Pina Colladas. We don't have the ingredients, we explain to her, so would she settle for a Bartles and Jaymes? No, she *really* wants a Pina Collada. Could somebody please go buy the necessary ingredients? Mark says he will. I think he's kidding but he isn't. He gets his jacket and he and Lori set off to the liquor store.

I try talking to Beth and Monica. Monica is a hair stylist in the Valley. Beth is a cashier at Alpha Beta. Neither go to school. They both have boyfriends. Beth thinks hers is cheating on her and Monica is thinking about cheating on hers. Monica pulls out a cigarette. She looks ridiculous with it in her mouth. We don't have an ashtray. I give her a soup bowl.

Mark and Lori are back with the stuff. We make a whole pitcher full of Pina Colladas. Lori has one, then switches over to beer. Mark turns on the stereo. We sit around

listening to Johnny Reno and the Sax Maniacs.

Lori is rummaging through her purse. She pulls out a plastic egg and opens it up. A small ball of clay falls out. She picks up the clay and rolls it between her hands.

"Hey," Mark says, watching her. "Are you still playing with that silly putty stuff?"

"She sure is," Beth says. "We went to the store yesterday and she bought four eggs of it."

Lori smiles and takes a sip of beer. Monica lights another cigarette.

"What's silly putty?" I ask.

"Oh, you know," Mark says. "It's a kids toy. It's like a ball of clay."

"Yeah, and you can mold it into things," Monica says.

"Well, anyway," Mark tells me, "Lori's always been really good at molding this silly putty into little animal shapes and stuff. They look incredibly real."

"It's just a hobby," Lori says, pulling out a little plastic instrument from her purse. She starts working on the silly putty.

"She made this really cute little cat yesterday," Monica says between drags. "You should have seen it."

I get up to go to the bathroom. When I get back, Mark is talking about how he saved the next door neighbor's cat. It's a funny story. I've heard him tell it before. It isn't very funny tonight. He's not telling it right. He's trying too hard. The timing is off. No one laughs. Lori makes a sarcastic remark about it.

I watch Lori. She is working intently on the clay (it already resembles something from the animal kingdom) yet doesn't miss a word of the conversation.

The album is over. Mark gets up to flip it over.

"Can we hear something else?" Lori asks. "I hate this group."

"Sure," Mark says. "I'm getting kind of tired of these guys, anyway."

"You just bought the album two days ago," I say.

Mark gives me a dirty look.

I've switched over to Pina Colladas. I'm starting to get drunk. Lori seems to be finished molding the clay with her hands. It looks sort of like a little man. She starts carving features into it with the plastic knife.

We start playing charades. Mark is great at charades. He goes first:

Television show. One word. Three syllables. First syllable. Bone. Second syllable. Small word. And. Third syllable. (Sounds like "draw".) Saw. Bone- And - Saw.

I know what it is but let the girls try and guess. They repeat the three syllables. Bone- And - Saw. Bone-And-Saw. BoneAndSaw. Boneandsaw. Lori stops working on her sculpture. Beth and Monica look at each other. They can't figure it out. I can't take it.

"Bonanza!" I scream.

"Shit," Lori says. "I was just about to say that."

Mark gives me another dirty look.

"I hate that show," Lori says.

"How can you hate Bonanza?" Mark asks.

"I just do. It's boring."

"Well, what about Little Joe?" I ask. "What do you think about him?"

"He's a wimp."

I stand up and go to the kitchen to make another pitcher of Pina Colladas. Monica whispers something to Beth and they both laugh. Lori wants to know what they said and Beth whispers something to her. All three of them laugh. I sit down at the kitchen table.

"It's all finished," Lori says. She puts the figure down on

the coffee table. I get up to take a look. It's a sculpture of a little monkey. I carefully pick it up. It is incredibly real looking. The face, the body, the hands and feet. A little paint and it would be a perfect replica. I can't believe it. The whole thing took her less than twenty minutes.

"Let me see," Mark says.

I hand it to him. After everybody gets a good look at it and after we all take turns complimenting her, Lori takes the monkey, rolls it up into a ball of silly putty, and puts it back in the plastic egg.

"I'm hungry," she says.

Mark gets up. "We've got potato chips, popcorn, or hot dogs," Mark says. "Take your pick."

Lori thinks for a second. "Bacon and eggs."

"Yeah," Mark says. "That does sound good." He gets up, goes to the kitchen, and turns on the stove.

I stand up. "Jesus Christ! I cannot believe this!"

"What's wrong with you?" Mark asks from the kitchen. Lori sits on the barstool at the kitchen counter. Beth and Monica look at me.

"What's wrong with me!?" I look at him scouring the refrigerator for eggs. "Oh, Christ."

I grab my pitcher and go to my room. I open my journal and begin an entry:

November 14, 1986

Tonight I have witnessed the most pathetic act in the history of mankind...

The phone rings. Mark answers it in the next room. There is a knock on the door. "It's for you," he says.

I think of Sharon, the girl from my class. "Tell her

I'm not home."

Mark sticks his head in the door. "It's Crystal." He closes the door.

I look at the phone. I can't believe it's her. I pick up the receiver and listen for a moment.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Tom."

"Crystal! How are you?"

"I'm doing just great, thanks. How about yourself?"

Oh, not too bad. Jeeze, this is kind of a surprise. Is anything wrong?"

"No, not at all. I just wanted to see how you were doing. I haven't talked to you for awhile."

"I know. It's been a long time." I sit on the edge of my bed. "So, how have you been?"

"Oh, pretty good," she says. "Listen, Tom, do you mind if I ask you a small favor?"

"Not at all."

"Do you think it would be okay if you could call me back? This is a long distance call and I don't want to run my parents' bill up."

"No problem," I say. "598-5288?"

"That's it."

"Okay, I'll call you right back."

I hang up and wait for the dial tone. As I dial her number, I hear Mark in the next room.

"How do you want those eggs? Scrambled or over-easy?"

I finish dialing and realize that my hand is sweating. I hope I don't make a complete fool of myself like I did the last time I talked to her.

Bobbie R. Coleman

Danny's Birthday

Cold November fog
rolled the cherry-top in
the night Danny
got busted

Cops' flashlights
were candles
on the birthday cake
that waited at home
for us to yell
"Surprise!"
"Happy Twenty-One!"

No streamers
hung in the black-and-white
just the dime-bag
he'd sold to the under-
cover informer

His birthday card
the marked ten she'd slipped him
that read under blacklight
"HAHA YOUR CAUGHT"
sold and bought

Cellmates
slept through the party
city jail catered metal-
tray dinner for one
tin-cup water
instead of champagne

Lawyers
Never much fun anyway
told him plead guilty
and the judge
presented the gift:
Three years probation
and not even wrapped.

Bobbie R. Coleman

Now Playing At Your Local Theatre

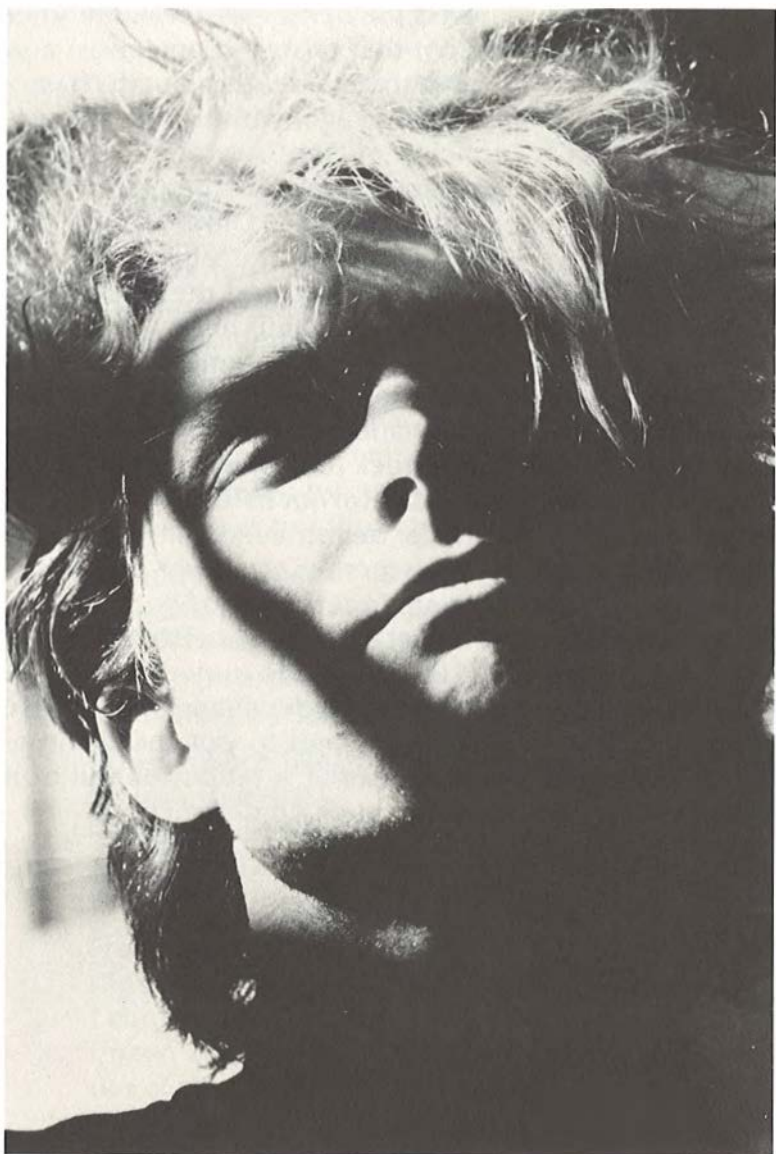
Back off, man, here's
a different set of jaws
Just when you thought it was safe to go back into the water
he's back!
This time — he wins!
Women cry for it; men die for it
In space, no one can hear you scream.
No guy ever had so much fun
coming to Earth
The Eighth Wonder of the World!
King of the Monsters!
based on the best-selling novel
from the King of Suspense
there's a little bit of him in all of us.
No one will be seated after the first 20 minutes
It'll go straight to your heart
what actually happens!
They're back
together again at last!
she mates and she kills.
They'll get you in the end.
Love means never having to say you're sorry.

Bobbie R. Coleman

Miscarriage

"You've lost it," the doctor said

and as I folded
the maternity clothes
into the cedar chest
I watched my stomach recede
felt the baby let go and fall
down my vagina to the floor
limbs and torso and head
detaching in all directions
floating out to the street,
slithering down a drainhole,
being sucked through the plumbing
into the sewer
and vanishing
into space as empty
as my womb.



Mercury

Once a child swallowed the dense poison (his mother must never have told him that this was dangerous) and died. Nothing to cringe at though. It was a death characterized not by lengthiness and agony (the words are synonymous), but by conciseness and wonder. His father had a jarful of it in the garage, amongst the paints, thinners, nails, hammers and cobwebs. The first time dad poured the silver colored mercury into Billy's cupped hands, he was frightened and dropped the thick liquid onto the floor, where it scattered 360° in tiny little balls. But after a few minutes, the chemical element became an object of fascination, and soon, his friend. It was cool as it lay still in the palms of his hands, absorbing the cold temperature in his room like steel. Billy blew into the liquid, creating a tiny whirlpool, careful not to let it overflow, for if it escaped, it could never be retrieved. Billy giggled as he imagined the look on his mother's face when he would greet her with a metallic smile at the end of her hard day. He sunk deep into his carpet and thought of the trees outside and the sour fruits they bore. He turned his head to his right, and saw a good sized spider nearing his eye. He thought "Mercury!" and schemed to put the damn arachnid into the jar where about a tablespoonful of it remained so he could see it suck up destruction.

Clan

Parade of relatives files through
the door like coins through a slot.
Tupperware and Pyrex descend on tables —
Chex party mix,
onion dip and chips.

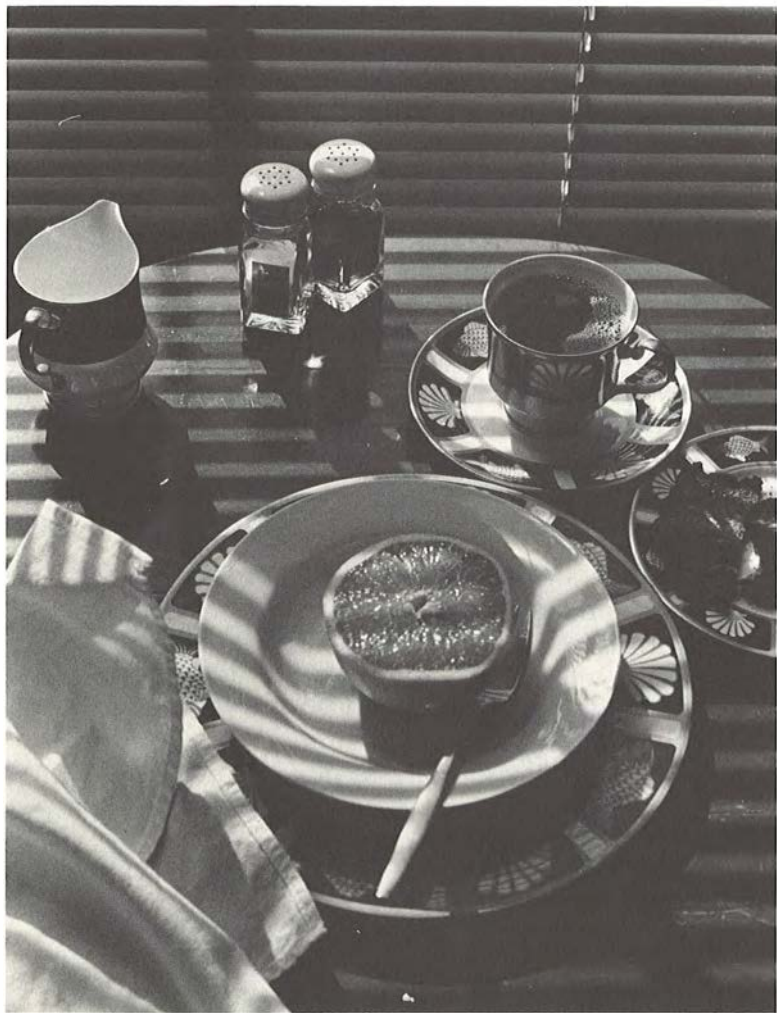
Grandma, balding matriarch,
skin fragile as tissue paper,
issues orders from her armchair.
She stashes insulin and needles
next to homemade pickles in the refrigerator.

Spinster aunt Mildren rolls in;
wheelchair gags on shag carpet.
She gave up cigarettes after her leg
was amputated twice last year.
No one buys her slippers for Christmas.

Grandpa shuffles in carrying Mil's fake leg
upended like an unwrapped gift,
props it in the corner,
sits in a chair and naps upright,
his hearing aid turned off.

Cousins once banished to the station wagon
for punishment
now tower like statues
Mike will graduate Notre Dame;
Bob, a coke rehab center in Arizona.

Five sisters on a sofa hip to hip
slip chip to dip to lip.
I choke on smoke and See's candy
frozen gray and pick cashews
out of the party mix.



Mary Harris

Junk Mail

Ed McMahon swears I may already be a winner.

"Sabrina" is looking for a swinging couple,
encloses her photo and asks for stamps.

The hospital claims Randy owes them \$419
for treating the black eye, cuts he got in a fight
on leave from the Navy.

Another rejection notice.

A one-dollar rebate check for buying Mother's Cookies.

The black Jets t-shirt I ordered for George
after I accidentally bleached his.

A pile of advertising mailers and flyers.

"Have you seen me?" Missing Children pleas.

Reader's Digest, Golf Digest, Bon Appetit.

The new Spiegel catalog, thick and glossy.

Charge card statements from Sears and Saks.

An urgent report from the school nurse dated one
month ago;

George has severe hearing loss in both ears.

Another invitation to a party at McDonald's.

A letter from my mother-in-law who drinks tomato beer
all day,

then writes to me because her son hangs up when she
calls.

A wedding invitation from John the Bachelor

who was once married in a mock ceremony

in a motel shower during a live broadcast

by Sweet Dick, the disc jockey.

No joke this time. Send bath towels.

A chain letter threatens I will suffer

grave consequences if I break the chain.

And I do.



Summer On Puget Sound

"Arrggh! You be quite a scurvy scalawag, says I. I have a notion to cut you through the gizzard, matey."

"Aye, but if you kill me, you'll never find the dubloons. Dead men tell no tales."

"You be a yellow livered coward. Take that."

I swung my cutless around aiming for his broadside, which happened to be his head. He was quick and ducked the power of my stroke. I swung again; our silhouettes clashed against the blood red sky of sunset.

A mean looking scar cut across his face from ear to ear. His teeth were rotted and yellow like burnt carmel. The scent of his sweat was hot and steamy; it mixed with the cool breeze that swept across the water.

The rotted, splintered boards of the deck creaked beneath our feet. Metal sliced through the air. Wet warmth crept down my arm, leaving the sleeve a darker shade of liquid crimson. My sword rang on the deck as the pain shot up my arm. With my other hand I clenched tightly to the rigging. The bristled rope dug sharply into my calloused hands as I reeled around and swung through the air.

My feet plugged him hard in the chest. He doubled over like a sack of fine flour. I swung back and knocked him again. The power of my legs covered in Spanish leather thigh boots easily picked him off. He fell over the side and I heard a satisfactory splash.

"God-damn it, Giz!"

I peered over the side of the Hispanola and stared at my brother. I roared with laughter when I saw his butt was good and squelched down in the muck near the shore. His face got all red and the veins started to protrude in his temples, just below that horrible blonde crew-cut.

"You're a booger!"

“Oh, don’t pee your pants, Whoopie.”

I walked around the old hollowed out tree we call the Hispanola and picked up my spoils of the battle. I planted myself good and solid on shore and peeled away the gold foil from my chocolate dubloon. I lingered over it, my tongue ran up the sides, the chocolate oozed and ran down my throat. Good chocolate is the best possible orgasm.

Whoopie slogged his way through the waist-deep goo. His wooden cutless we’d made from some old plywood dragged behind him. I lifted the patch on my eye to get a better look at the damage to him, thus getting a better laugh. Poor guy. He was soaked and covered in moss and river slime. Personally I thought it was an improvement, but he didn’t seem to think so.

“You’re a turd.”

“Yeah, I happen to be the turd with all the chocolate.”

I stood up and wiped the sand and burrs off the butt of the old red bathrobe. I put the remaining booty in my pocket and tred towards the winding forest path. My little brother slopped along behind; the squish, squish of water-logged Keds.

This was our second summer on Bainbridge Island, smack dab in the middle of Puget Sound. We lived in a huge Victorian house on the south side of the island; the white paint peeling in the hot sticky air. I guess out of all the places we ever lived I like this one best, even with all that happened there.

I was twelve at the time, I’d be thirteen in December. Kinda a drag to have your birthday so close to Christmas, huh? Anyway, my younger brother, Whoopie, we called him, was ten. Our real names were Harry and Richard Hamilton, but we just went by Giz and Whoopie; there were just the two of us boys. I guess our mother was

relieved that it was only two, and not more. We were holy terrors.

I think mother dreaded us most on the days when it rained, or snowed, or it was just too damn cold to go out. Whoop and I would turn our house into a war zone. We had a shitload of army soldiers and cannons and the like. They were made of iron and were hand painted; each one must've weighed a couple of ounces, and boy, could they do some damage. There were quite a few dings in the wall were an infantry man or captain had been flung. I still have a nice bump on my head from when Whoop catapulted one of his cavalry in anger. We were arguing over who was going to be "General Nuisance." "General Nuisance" was a joke my dad played on us; told us he was the greatest general ever, so naturally both of us wanted to be him. We were pretty stupid.

Some people said it was real creepy to see me and my brother together. We had exactly the same face, only his was a little fatter. We both had long straight noses and high cheekbones, kinda like the Barrymore's. Steel blue eyes ran in our family, very cold and austere, except we were always laughing and hooting around. What made people stare at us was that Whoopie had soft golden hair; the total Nordic-Prussian-Aryan look, and my hair was black as the ace of spades. I got it from my dad who was a second generation Scot.

You could really tell my dad was Scottish even if he didn't have the thick brogue that Grandpa did. He sure drank whisky like a Scot and he sure used the language of one. When mother wasn't around he'd sit us down and tell us the best dirty jokes. God, were they salty. But one time she overheard him telling us two little sprouts about Greta, 'the girl with golden gazangas', Damn, if Whoopie and I didn't think she was gonna pack up and leave...

"Who do you think is the strongest guy in the world?"

"Why?"

"Come on, just tell me! Who do you think is the strongest guy?"

"Where do you come up with these questions, Whoopie? O.K., O.K.! Strongest guy? Gotta be Sir Lancelot."

"I think it's Flash Gordon."

Whoopie always did this, asked stupid questions and then made like your answer was completely wrong. You know, like his answer was so superior to anything you could dream up. It always irritated me.

"Whoopie."

"What?"

"Do you know what I would do if I was the strongest man in the world?"

"What?"

"I'd beat the shit out of you."

We walked through the thick forest, down the small dirt trail. The air was fresh with the fine scent of wet pine and redwood. We hacked away at low branches with our cutlasses and poked at the nettles and poison oak that tainted parts of the walkway. The emerald of the forest was a fire with the amber and red of the sun's last rays. That sun set with such a brilliance; somehow I knew I would never see a sunset that beautiful again . . .

"Hey! Hey, come on you knuckleheads!"

It was Boo waiting for us to go swimming out at Zachery cove.

My brother and I peeled out of the kitchen; it was already a scorcher of a morning. We nabbed our kits; everything a kid could need for an outing. We each had a yucky worn out towel mom had given us (way too gross for anybody but us kids to use), two bottles of grape pop (the kind that coats your tongue with electric purple goo,

like you're the kid of alien beings), a liverwurst sandwich, a bit of money, and a bunch of miscellaneous junk, like a pocket knife, string, rubber bands, junk like that. All this stuff was rolled up regulation army style; Dad had showed us how. We picked up our rifles, which were not much more than pea shooters in my opinion. You could barely make a dent in a slab of butter with one of these.

I slapped my chalk-white cowboy hat on; God, I loved that hat. It had a shiny snakeskin band 'round the brim and curved up just above my temple. The best moment in my life was when my dad plunked that thing on my head. I looked real terrific; the starch whiteness against my inky hair. Whoopie said I looked like a skunk, but that creep was just jealous. All he had was an old brown one with a simple cloth band. Boy, did it put a burr up his butt everytime I put on my hat.

Boo stood impatiently next to my dad's ol' rust heap of a car, shotgun (a real nice one, not like the tinker toys we had) and gear in hand. Boo's real name was Harvey Kingsman. Stupid name, Harvey; so we nicknamed him Boo. It stood for 'butthead, one and only,' but he never knew. His parents owned the only grocery store on the island, real convenient. Every once and a while Mr. Kingsman let us run wild in the candy section. Three Musketeers, Unos, Baby Ruths; we'd be sick for days, but what a way to go, huh? O.D. on chocolate.

"You guys will never believe this. This sucks, totally sucks."

"What's up?"

"My mom said we have to take Fishface with us."

"Ah, Jeez, Boo! You're kidding, right?"

"Shit, I wish I was."

"What a pisser," Whoopie added for emphasis.

Fishface was the only other kid on our side of the island.

He was three and didn't have anyone his age to play with, so his mother made deals with the Kingsmans and our folks to have us play with him. Talk about ruining the day. The kid wasn't so bad; he was real quiet and just sat there and ate dirt or squashed bugs or watched the snot drip down his face. What really got us guys was the simple fact we were responsible for the condition he returned in. We got such hell if that precious little kid returned with a hangnail.

Once I thought Mrs. Corothers was going to have me and Whoop arrested. My brother had just gotten this real nifty paint set for his birthday: twenty-five colors. Well anyway, we were out playing Picasso in the woods, and of course we got stuck with Fishface. We gave him a couple colors and a brush and let him paint rocks. The stupid kid ended up painting his private parts. Mrs. Corothers must have shit her pants when she saw her "adorable" three year old kid with green genitalia.

"Couldn't you get out of it?"

"No way."

To this day I wish to God we had gotten out of it.

Three sets of footsteps made their way across the dry shadeless road. We cut through a field of chest-high weeds. The golden stalks dry and brittle from the heat crunched as they collapsed under our sneakers. Sweat was already collecting around my neck and under my arm pits. You could just tell we were going to be lunch for every mosquito in Washington state.

We go to the Crother's house; Fishface sat silently on the porch, all bug-eyed as usual. Boo looked at me - the look of sheer distress, almost as if he was going to be crucified. He took a deep breath and fixed his eyes on some imaginary vortex in the sky. I looked over at Whoopie. His face was all scrunched up like a dried up ol' raisin. I myself

looked very stern, and we waited for it.

Squeek. The rusty screen door yawned open. The petite foot stepped delicately onto the loose wooden boards. Every muscle tightened. And then came that horrible sound. That excruciating mush, that sappy goo. Worse than nails on a chalkboard.

"Loook, precious! Your little friends are here. Now you take care of my swee-eet whittle pumpkin, Clarence. He's such a cutey-pie; look at those precious dimples. Kiss, kiss. Wave bye-bye to Mommy, honey."

It was enough to make you want to puke your guts out.

Boo and I grabbed up the precious little twirp, as we waved "bye-bye to Mommy". We probably broke Olympic records everytime we left that place. Of course we did make our usual stop at the blackberry bushes on the edge of the Crothers' property. This was our concession. I guess it was a fair trade. Those blackberries were my one weakness. Firm, dark, deep purple, they just melt in your mouth. They left your hands, mouth and half your body covered with those sticky sweet clots of escaped juice.

We reached Zachary Cove around noon. Booran down the bank, kicked off his sneakers, and peeled off the sweat soaked shirt with a snap. The three of us big kids stripped down to our underpants and left Fishface on a rock to eat snails or whatever was unfortunate enough to crawl his way. That kid would eat anything, old rotten shoelaces, weeds, marbles. God, you'd think his mother never fed the kid. We made special sure that our guns and cowboy hats were well out of reach from the gnawing teeth and slobber.

"YAAAAAAWHOOOOOOO!!

That was my feeble attempt at a Tarzan yell as I swung myself over glass-still water and dropped myself in; cold

as dry ice. You got used to it after a while. Boo cannon-balled in next to me scattering spray in a fifteen foot radius.

"Come on, you pussy!" Boo cried out to a shivering Whoopie who was in the process of inching his way in. Took him a good friggin' ten minutes.

Water, for me is the greatest sensation next to chocolate, the cool silky feeling of floating in liquid space. I sank down and let my ears plug up with water I could hear the muted thuds of Boo and Whoopie trashing about. I was pretty sure Boo was giving Whoop a good dunking, and naturally that brought a smile to my face.

After 'bout an hour we started getting tired of running 'round like a bunch of nutwads. I stood up close to shore, my shoulders just peering out of the water. I glanced over to see that Fishface was still alive. I don't know how he fuckin' did it. My blood turned twenty degrees colder than a cherry popsicle as I saw his slime coated fingers inches away from my frost-white cowboy hat.

I thrashed as hard as I could towards shore, yelling and screaming and thinking of terrible ways to kill him.

His fingers clenched onto the chinstring.

I must have scared the living shit out of that poor kid as I came barreling up, red and angry. He let out a bloody shriek and dropped my hat into the green below. I dove in after it. It was unscathed. I let out a sigh of relief and stood up. I looked over at Fishface; his eyes were even more bugged, like two champagne corks just ready to fly and spray foam. I shook my head and looked down. I WAS FUCKING STANDING IN A BUNCH OF POISON IVY! THE SHITTY LITTLE BASTARD DROPPED MY HAT IN FUCKING POISON IVY!

I didn't lose my temper. I gingerly placed my hat higher on a branch, and ran for the water. I hoped to God I could

get some of the thin toxic layer off before I ended up looking like one of the Corothers's blackberries. Boo and Whoop for once in my life were sympathetic. I made the best of it; it wasn't too bad. I could feel the itch festering at my ankles and on a small patch of my abdomen, but that was about it. Lucky me.

Around three o'clock the three of us gunslingers shouldered our rifles and headed off into the wilds of Bainbridge. Fishface was left behind; Boo chained him to a tree with a chewed up dogleash. The clasp was rusty and corroded. We thought it was pretty Fishface proof.

I feel really bad about leaving that kid there now. Even if I did hate his guts, I would never really wish death on someone. Boo took it the worst out of all of us. He felt responsible since he's the one who leashed him up. Whoopie was just stunned.

I had only dealt with death once before. It was when my cat, Skippy, died. Skippy was a stray peach-colored fuzzball that followed me home one day. He was my cat. And even though I was allergic, he slept with me every night curled around my face.

When I was nine I caught the chicken pox. I must have had a hundred and two temperature; Skippy was right there licking the sweat from my forehead with his pink sandpaper tongue, purring away the chills. Another time Whoopie had me pinned in a head-lock against the bed-frame. Skippy jumped down from the bookshelf, where he liked to sleep, and dug his claws deep into Whoopie's back, drawing two or three droplets of blood. Damn good cat. My best friend.

I kick myself to this day for the suffering Skippy must have gone through. I came down to breakfast, cold. Thick puffs of hot moisture misted out my mouth and nostrils. The sizzling hickory smell of bacon coaxed me to the

table. Skippy didn't come down with me and I figured he'd just gone down early to keep warm.

I heard his meows. His cat screams. I didn't realize. No one knew. The screams got louder. More painful. Heat. My heart. MEOW! Skippee! meow. Gone.

We found Skippy caught under the stove. His fur was singed and parts were charred black. Burnt blood was cooked on his forehead. When my dad pulled him out he was still alive. Barely. His head lolled in my dad's calloused hands. The green eyes, like two almond shaped emeralds looked at me. I swear what little moisture was left in Skippy's body collected and formed a tear as he stared his last look at this world.

I cried.

It was the only time I ever cried at death . . .

We looked for Fishface for an hour after we came back. We had only been gone maybe forty minutes, but he was gone. The leash chewed away at.

We found him face down in the water a couple hundred yards away. He was white and bloated like a wet marshmallow, with just a touch of blue. We pulled him out, his skin was cold and leathery. That poor little bastard. He just lay there with that same vacant pop-eyed expression he always had, but now he was dead.

I guess out of all the places we ever lived, I liked this one the best.

Even with all that happened here.

That was my last summer on the Puget Sound.



On Voyeurism

I.

The men are standing in rows
with hunched over shoulders
at the newspaper stand.

The silence is broken only by softly turning pages.
Even the breathing is quiet - restrained panting.

My presence is a gong and the men
shuffle their feet
angry at the staining virtue
marring the perfect smut.

II.

His eyes, set like extended jewels,
flick idly back and forth
behind the glasses
and widen slightly
as the angora sweater hits the floor.
His moist tongue snakelike
over dry lips.

Through the safe glass
she feels his gaze
and although repulsed,
she likes it.

Laughing, she raises the shade
and dances a striptease
for hungry eyes.

He touches himself as the silhouette
in the window writhes and twists;
high breasts and sweating thighs
flashing in the half light.

Feeling his touch, she handles her breasts
and moves slowly down,
hands feasting on parted flesh.
The smell of musk prevades.

Gambler

mom plays poker
in old pajamas, pastels
in her drawer keep them smelling

sweet as brandy stains
flannel worn transparent
at the elbows

it's not a question of win or lose
she's practicing
smoke rings
alone, she blows

red chips, blue chips, white chips
the opponent, a long ash
fallen in the empty chair beside her
"stacks up," smoke
still swelling

like a bruise, mom's yellow
teeth and the purple
speckled stains of loneliness dribbling
down the front of flannel
worn transparent
at the elbows.

Nibbles

the leaves smelled like popped
corn falling light and brown,
the butter moon melted
behind tall dark trees, a yellow
orb pasted in the clear night, black
as licorice.

To the Richardson's
for sticky warm apples:
she was a witch but her wart was real.
We collected apples, juju bees, sugar
daddies like blue skinned mussels wrapped
with a crusty shell.

I was a bunny;
you were a ghost,
we weren't scary like Mrs. Richardson;
I held your hand all night.

Now I collect glass, like mussels,
nibbles smooth as a jellybean, the surf
crumbles like sugar.

I walk along the shore, the purple
sky stretching like the stringy insides
of a sweet wet, pumpkin across the water.
I collect the pieces in a jar
cool blue meatless
confections for you
who haunt me.

Margaret Ritchie

At the Nursery

at the rhododendrons, their clay
pots swollen, ripe soil wet and pungent you
put me in charge of the seeds, letting me go
where the small packets line up like a colorful
band of plump cellophaned players: tomatoes
carrots summer squash sealed loosely
in slick packages rattle
like a golden gourd.

I am starting my own garden
to feed the hole in my head I believe
is the only opening to my toes.

It started with the avocado
seed on my windowsill
and comes to this, my love
is caught in a plastic
glass, transparent, suspended
by wooden toothpicks, driven
past the skin to the meat, the sweet
beginnings of roots dangling
in rotten water.

I can see you at the ferns
marvelling at their bright perfection
you sift between them like an ant finally
crawling toward me at the potted pines;
like small men their arms yellow
and stiff, I think, LA smog does something
to the trees, I think
if we meet
it will be at the planted flowers:
so strong a perfume that
that section makes the eyes water.

While I touch animated pictures
of squash and carrots you
will motion for me, enveloped
between iris and bird of paradise
as if to say "in LA we have enough to eat. Let's
care for flowers despite the air."
But you are planted somewhere
between the ferns and me
carefully planning my garden I am
I am dreaming of fruit.

Margaret Ritchie's "at the nursery" received an
honorable mention for the 1987 Academy of
American Poets contest



Paul Martin

Daddy's Home

I don't know when I first became conscious of the sound; a white-hot, passionate voice mingling on the streets of this ghetto. The hipsters, petty thieves, street people, all with the eternal glow which surrounds those types of humans, trapped forever in poverty. The glow is dream-like, constant; the inhabitants of the streets come and go. Some will die tomorrow, but others will take their places the day after.

And the voice over it all . . .

I walked towards the smoky, white-hot blade of sonic passion, past Quido's Pawn Shop, the flop-house on 119th and Jefferson, the rock house on Quentin Ave. Old Blackwomen with missing teeth stare out busted, rusted windows at my well-dressed figure, moving through the dark streets. I wasn't a pimp; they knew that.

I entered the center, hub, of the red-light district. Al's Nude Bar and Grill screamed at me in yellow neon sinfulness. As I passed the door, a man and woman stumbled out, drunk and groping, dripping with sweat and impending carnal satisfaction. A voice from across the street interrupted my thoughts.

"Hey baby! Drop a dime on me! I'll do things you've only dreamed about, sweetheart. Come on over and see Penny."

The memories flooded back. Penny tricked fifteen years ago when I was growing up here; queen of the streets, everyone knew her and loved her. The Virgin Mary would have touched a lot more people if she had been a street whore in a Harlem ghetto. Penny was the caretaker of broken souls, fixing them up with her brand of street love.

I crossed the street and walked over to her. She was

very surprised when the street light flooded my face.

"My God, child! Is that you? What the hell are you doing here? I thought you were on tour with your band, blowing the gospel of soul, baby. What brings you here, Clinton?"

I smiled at her. The face was lined and worn, the body aged. "I am off for a month or so. I came down here to see Sandman. How's life, Penny?"

She laughed loud and raucous. "Life sucks baby, and so do I. Why don't you drop a dime on Penny?"

I knew she said this more for the benefit of the passer-by's than mine. Penny and I together would be like incest. "Where's your baby, Clinton? How many kids you all have now?"

"I got two, Penny and my wife is filing for divorce."

She became serious. "Clinton, what happened? I thought you was doing good."

I choked on my words. "It's falling apart, Penny."

Just then, a nervous-looking white man approached Penny. "How much, lady?"

Penny looked reluctant. "Clinton, Sandman is on the corner of Jefferson and 19th playing away. There is no place like home to heal yourself, child."

She walked off into the darkness with her Woody Allen trick. I remained behind, desperately searching for answers to the questions that assailed me. I fought all my life to escape the poverty and now I find my life empty with success. Down here, I could stand on a street corner at two a.m. and play my horn and people would come, laugh, cry, listen to my voice. I took some chances, got some breaks, and became a studio musician, playing on everyone's albums, and starting my own groups. Now, I walk on stage and I have thousands of people waiting to hear my voice, my horn, but the voice is silent. The lament of the struggling black man from a Harlem ghetto is over. I

am just another commodity who puts out a product once a year, tours for seven months, drinks too much, and tries to survive in a world that sucks the life out of us, leaving emptiness and pain. I loved my wife and kids but now they are leaving me and I am so empty I can't find the tears to cry.

The sound drew me out, and I walked on. I rounded the corner and there stood Sandman. He glowed like the mystic he was, the heart of the streets, the voice of the poverty-stricken people. He was playing his beloved horn; his love for all these years. There was a woman once, but she died while he was serving in the army. He became the musical spokesperson for the ghetto after that, preaching in every Jazz club and dive in Harlem. As always, tonight he had a small crowd listening to his musical testimony, and throwing small change in his sax case.

I stood in the crowd, my eyes closed tight, my hands buried deep in the pockets of my coat, hiding against the December chill. The familiar refrain of "Thanks For the Memory" circled out of Sandman's horn and wrapped me in a warm embrace. This was my home, my life force.

I opened my eyes and looked at Sandman. The years had left their mark on the man. He remained — with his dark glasses ever present even now after night had fallen, deeply lined face, checkered flannel shirt, cotton trousers, and white, or maybe more like sepia brown sneakers. If anyone could help me make sense of my life it was this man before me, a combination sage, prophet, and mystic, who blazed the trails of white-hot sonic passion, never failing to inspire a deep-felt emotion of one kind or another.

The Sandman finished up with a flourish, the crowd wandered away, and I stood alone with him. Although I

didn't see him look at me, he gently put his instrument down and without looking, said, "Hello Clinton, I knew you would come."

I tried to hold back my amazement at his guessing my return. "What's happening, Sandman? You're sounding great!"

"How come you didn't bring your horn and play with me, Clinton? I could have used a partner."

I couldn't answer the question, so I tried to brush it off. "My axe is back at the hotel, man."

"Hotel? Did you and your lady move? Last I heard you lived in the Heights, kid."

"My lady threw me out," I choked. "She filed for divorce. I'm kinda down on my luck, man."

"So you thought you'd come see Sandman, huh? Sorry, babe, I ain't got no money to lend."

The Sandman started to walk away. I stood alone in the soft yellow street light, trying to ask for help, but not knowing how. I was alone, completely alone. This man helped me as a child and I thought he could help me now, but he was walking away.

He stopped for just a moment and half-turned back. "If you need a place to stay my pad is open, as long as you don't eat too much."

I said thanks, but he was already gone into the night. I returned to my hotel and checked out. About an hour later I sat in Sandman's one-bedroom apartment two blocks from the street corner concert hall. As he prepared some tea I walked around the dimly lit room. The furniture was old and worn, but soft like an old friend or favorite blanket. I had spent many hours here practicing, learning my trade from this teacher. On top of an old upright piano in the corner were Sandman's possessions of greatest wealth: pictures. There were pictures of Sand-

man with every musical star of the Thirties and Forties. Duke was there, so was Dizzy, The Count was smiling: all memories, all old and decrepit, but alive nonetheless.

"I picked up Miles' new album Tuesday." I looked up as Sandman entered with the tea. "What's all this electronic shit now? You ain't got musicians anymore, you got computer programmers. How are you supposed to develop your sound when you sound like everyone else who owns the same computer? Shit!"

I smiled. Sandman was always outspoken. "You playing anywhere besides street corners, man?"

"Don't you knock street corners, child! The club scene is dead but the corners are still alive. Maybe you should try it. You don't need no sound check or any of that shit, you dig. You just play! Maybe if you did some more of that you wouldn't be in the shape you are now!"

"That's what I came to talk to you about, Sandman."

"Your life is on fire, son. Am I right?" I looked down. "Some of us never know when our lives are on fire, Clinton, until they burn down to ashes around us. I remember when you were eight years old. Your dad had left your mom years before, and you and her were living in one room on Jefferson Ave. I don't know how she did it, but that Christmas she bought you a third-hand horn from Quido's. Remember that?"

The Sandman took off his glasses, eyes glistening a liquid brown. He was old. It was not that apparent on the street, but inside and out, he was really old. I looked into his eyes, lost and far away, back through the years to another time.

"Them was good times. You ever notice, Clinton, that when you're living it, everything looks bad but later when you think back, it was the best time of your life, just like a circus." He gestured to the piano. "Those were good

times, sure enough.”

I could appreciate what he was saying, but I wanted my answers. My impatience was growing. All of a sudden, the light left his eyes and he stood up.

“I am going to bed now. Goodnight.”

“Wait a minute.” I jumped up, “What about me? Sandman we need to talk. My life is falling apart and I thought you could help me.”

“Son, I don’t have those kind of answers. I taught you how to play, helped you get your first horn, and introduced you to some connections. You come back ten years later burnt out and I am supposed to give you inspiration too? You want me to save your marriage? I am an old man, child! Somedays I can’t even save myself.” He walked into his bedroom and shut the door, leaving me standing alone in the darkness.

When I got up from Sandman’s couch it was eleven a.m. the next morning. Sandman had long since left for any of the various odd jobs he did around town. For me, I had a lunch date with my wife to discuss the impending divorce. I felt worse today than yesterday. I’d come here desperately seeking some thread of sanity, and found only loneliness.

I took a cab to the sidewalk cafe where my wife, Cheryl, waited. I was thirty minutes late and she was upset.

“Where the hell have you been?”

I’m sorry. I overslept.”

“Well, well! It’s nice to know someone is sleeping soundly these days. Your daughters and I sure don’t!”

I quickly wrote down Sandman’s phone number on a napkin and passed it to her. “I’m staying at Sandman’s. You can call me there.”

She looked puzzled. “Why there and not a hotel?”

I figured now was as good a time as any. “Cheryl, I want

you to be open-minded about this. I love you and I don't want to lose you. Please hold off filing for awhile. Let me try to get my life together."

"Clinton, you're forty years old! Your daughters need a father. You go out on the road seven months a year. You come home and you're there, but you are drunk all the time, or gone to the studio."

"I am not happy with myself, Cheryl."

"You have been unhappy for too long, Clinton. Move on, baby. Your daughters are growing up without you."

"What do you want? You want me to give up playing, the only thing I know?"

"No, Clinton. Listen to me, honey. When I first met you, you were the new cat on the scene. I remember listening to you and the passion you had. I cried, Clinton! You reached inside and made me feel something. You came from the streets. You knew, and your horn was telling the world about it."

"God-damn it, Cheryl, but that's over! I am a rich, fat cat now living in a white man's world. I got kids, and you and everything should be wonderful, but it's not! I'm not hungry anymore."

"Clinton, you have to get that hunger back."

"Sure, baby! Why don't you just pull it out of your pocket!" My anger rose in my throat and tears spilled down my face. "Just pull it out and give it to me!"

"I can't, Clinton. You have to find it yourself. Not I, nor Sandman. nor anybody else can give it to you."

She left me alone at the table. I paid the bill and went in search of Sandman.

As I walked through the garbage-strewn streets, I thought about Cheryl. I loved her. I had to get her back. The feeling overwhelmed me: how can I bring them back to me if my life is in shambles?

Up ahead on 109th I saw a police car with its red lights on parked in an alley. I looked in as I walked past and my mind registered both visually and aurally. Sandman was there. I walked by the cop, frantically talking into his radio. I recognized the song as "Coin Home". Sandman stood in the alley, garbage around his feet, and something covered with a yellow blanket in front of him. As I drew closer, I noticed a solitary tear rolling down from underneath the dark glasses Sandman always wore.

He finished the song and stood there, solemnly looking down in the fading twilight. I wanted to reach out and say something but I couldn't. Sandman spoke first.

"This is it! You come here bitchin' and moanin' to me about your lack of inspiration. How's this for inspiration? Ernie and I played in Basie's band together. I told the sonofabitch to quit drinking. He gets a bottle of wine and goes to sleep under some papers and a garbage truck runs him over. I told him! Lord knows, I told him! No one cares anymore! We spend all our time trying to survive this life, hoping it will go on forever, only to find it's gone away. Only memories, man! Only memories!"

He began sobbing heavily. I took him in my arms, his frail body, elderly, aged, shook uncontrollably. He stayed against me for a while, trying to control himself. He pulled away suddenly and took off his glasses. His eyes still held the light, the passion, furious passion for life, a life that had been so hard. He was calm.

"This is it, son. You only get one shot. Stop swinging for the goddamn fence all the time and play!"

"Sandman . . ."

"Clinton," he interrupted, "you say you don't have the feeling. Bullshit! You were born here. Your daddy was an addict, your mother a part-time whore. Look where you came from and look what you have now! You got two

beautiful daughters who are growing up like flowers in the wind. Play it! You've got a beautiful wife who loves you. Sing about it, man! But remember, always remember, where you came from, your history. That's who you are. No one can take away your struggles and your triumphs."

He walked away and I was left with Ernie's body. I left the alley and walked the streets. There was so much to live, and to tell. I walked through the school yard, abandoned now in the chill Christmas air. I watched a swing, with the ghost of some innocent child, sway gently in the breeze. Could the ghost be me? I walked down the avenues: store fronts decorated with Christmas lights and foil tinsel, ready for dreamy little faces to look in and wish for an escape from their poverty. I saw junkies, petty thieves, felons, and street people practicing the art of survival of the fittest, forgetting about the holiday of Peace and Love.

I stopped by Sandman's and picked up my things. I knew I would be sleeping in my own bed tonight. The past is just that: the past. It's there for us to remember and think about, and then move on. I would have to make some changes to save my marriage but this is it man. You only get one shot.

Rounding the corner at Jefferson and 19th I heard the voice. The sax was to my lips almost without thinking and a new voice joined the old in triumphant sonic passion, furious passion. The sounds mingled and melted to form a white-hot blade which cut through the ghetto and poverty to speak directly to each man and woman's heart.

The voice held tradition. Countless thousands who went before rose up to give testimonial to a new day. Ernie was there, and so was my mother.

We told a story that night, Sandman and I. A story of struggle, pain, love lost and gained, survival, and finally, triumph over the doubts that shake us all. The message went out loud and clear across the burning city. It touched lives, hearts and souls, and finally, it brought the message to two little girls and a beautiful woman up in the Heights. The message was very clear: Daddy's home.

Deborah Williams
The Pink Book

"Fuck you, who needs you,"
your 16 year old daughter has just said,
stomping out the door,
her arm curled over the bent elbow
of her new best friend and confidante.

When nobody's home, silence,
you tip-toe into your room
push aside the other half of the closet door,
the half that rarely gets opened,
and stretch your arms as far as they can reach
fingering a pink cellophane-wrapped scrapbook.
Your fingertips work to grasp a corner,
you pull the crackling dusty plastic towards you,
the brown dust leaves a mark on your white tee-shirt
just over your right bosom.

You cradle the book
while you sit at the foot of your bed
gently opening the pink crackling cover
and press your right cheek
against the cool cellophane adhesive
that seals your 16 year old's baby pictures
to the sticky paper
and you hug the pink book
until your arms hurt.

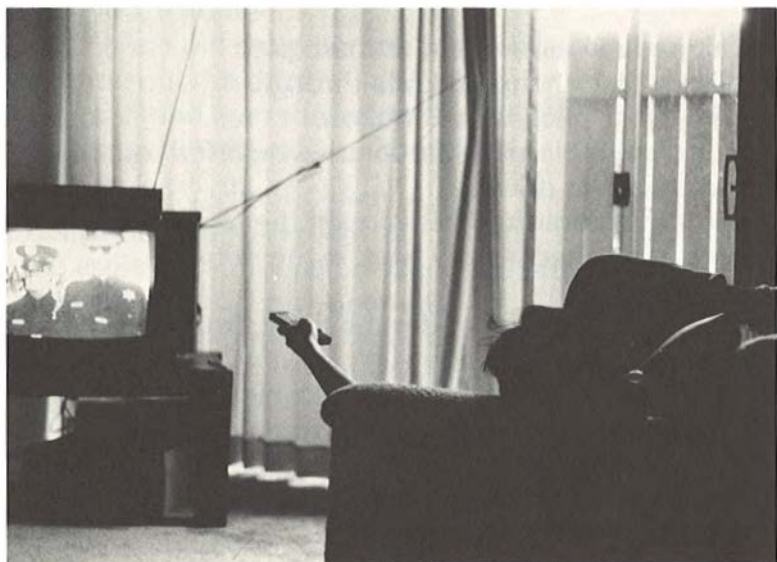
Rhubarb Pie

I.

I watched my mother cut rhubarb pie
pulling a black handled knife through
flaking crust, sliced even motion,
falling crumbs blending the abrasive cleansed counter to
Then we all sat down
as orderly as polished flatware on the napkins
after having checked my back in the mirror
I sat straight.
slipping feet, hidden under the table, from tight shoes
Mother said cousin Sherry was looking
better these days having lost some weight, Father nodded
as I pushed the pie-filled fork over my tongue
thinking how good the feel
the feel of my soles brushing, rubbing
over the smooth tops of my shoes

II.

Barefoot, I scoop rhubarb pie, slap it onto the plates.
My daughter says, "really mom, can't you do anything
without
making a mess?"
"Nope," I reply, a fat smile widening my face.



She said
I don't like poetry
Let's turn on the TV
instead

I said
I want to peel you
from that droning box
like silly putty
from the comics
I said it silently

The woman of words
said the world would split open
if I told the truth.
She compiled all the poets
who had words inside them
like birds in cages and
made me feel frustrated to be young.
I have truths inside me
that drop like the auburn leaves
on the tree outside my window
and I think the humming bird
came by just to tell me to write, too.
Like a spider's dance, my fingers press
each key to say one more thing
and I say spiders now
because the feminist poets
tell me to weave webs.
But I like the light
that radiates each streak silver
on the small woven scheme in a diamond
of my chain link fence.

House

1

This house warmed me
after pouring rain
gave me sleeping bag
Thanksgivings while
Macy's marched on TV
marks my height
in the doorway
and my crushes are
scratched into wallpaper

There was a frame once
to crawl and run through
a skeleton waiting
for skin and blood
I nailed my heart
over the door
for good measure
and chose the room
with the azalea in the window
for myself

2.

This house bleeds
at the sink
leaking thoughts into
yellow rings on the ceiling
from rain

In this house
I climb up the stairs
along the spine
to kiss the back
of your neck

I tucked my toes
under the blanket
to be warm

3

Now I'm learning
to keep the feeling
minus the rooms
have moved all my things
in big brown boxes
to the new place
added a warm grey cat
for good measure

She and I watch
the wet sky drip trails
on the window
while the evergreen
I made sure would stay
looks in



Ruth Aroni

Submerged

He does not know
that I smoke in bed.
Crouching in the bathroom
of a quiet French restaurant
I puff.
And in the tub, scratching
years of stain
I submerge my head in
the tepid water,
looking for a miracle.
And at the mirror I scrub
my grayed teeth and smear
paint, an egged Indian.
My perfumed body smiles
in disgust. I am unprepared
to greet him.

Suzanne Ghiglia

Pears

They sat in their sack between us like miniature children on the bench seat.

We didn't eat them
or talk about them
but instead pointed out rocks and rivers
or drove and drove with no sound
from Four Corners up to Grand Junction.

We had seen them when we gassed up the buick.
Gold, pink, cheerful, matronly, crowded in the cart
we could practically taste them in the air
it was cold October
I'd never seen any like that.
We had to have them.

I was scared on the curves and on the long flat roads
not of the confident, unchanging map. But of the horizon
of your face.

We were just empty space, whirling atoms
sucked to the earth by gravity only
but for those pears.

Suzanne Ghiglia's "Pears" is the winner of the 1987 Academy of American Poets contest.

Joi Weston

Thursday on the Couch – for Julie

This couch has held

a broken neck screwed in an aluminum cage
a heroin-racked body growing clean
poker games/backgammon/Trivial Pursuit Baby
Boomers edition

beer drunks asleep/Valium dreams

a woman cherishing her new lover/lovers
screaming across the room

holiday festivities/terse, tense business meetings

student essays spilling onto the floor while tutor
and tutee grapple for words.

But above all, two woman exploring life, drinking Dr.
Pepper

while the smoke rises between them.

They talk of rape and abortion;

of finding love and losing it;

of finding life and hating it;

of teenage lives: first love, first sex, first drugs;

of screaming mothers and silent fathers

(yet hers still breathes).

“Every man benefits from rape,” we quote, we believe,
we know

“So I said ‘Fuck off.’ They laughed.”

“He said ‘I can arm wrestle any woman in this
room. So what?’”

“He can’t communicate . . . an emotional cripple.”

“I told him no more silence.”

“Have you read . . . ? Because she had three abortions
they said she was a bad woman.”

“The doctor said, ‘It says here you’re a twenty-five year old woman, two abortions” — my label:
twenty-five & 2 TAB.

“They didn’t get it all the first time.”

“Fuck them all.”

While around them the girls squabble.

The dog begs, eats, barfs.

Sizzling onion-stuffed chicken sends salivation.

The cleanser-scented engine artist enters, collapses with his beer.

The afternoon is over. We’ll begin again next Thursday.



You Are Here

You want a bite to eat before you meet Karen and Donald in Westwood. The nice thing about your neighborhood is that there are so many fast food places within walking distance. Your mother always laughs at you for calling this a neighborhood. No place in LA is a neighborhood like the one you grew up in, where you knew all the neighbors. Here, you know all the kids who work at McDonald's, Taco Bell, Burger King and Hot Diggity Dog.

So you walk to Taco Bell, only superficially noting the group of people clustered together under one of the orange metal umbrellas, clustered around a round, rusted white table, at the edge of the outdoor dining area. Ten or twelve people sitting and staring at the service windows of the Taco Bell.

You ignore them and walk to the order window, thinking only of a Macho Burrito and a Diet Pepsi. At each of the four windows, a young employee stands, staring out at you. In their plaid uniforms and name tags with the chipper message, "Try Taco Light!" they look like the goofy painted ducks at a shooting gallery, set up straight and even and identical. They all stare at you and a voice from behind you, from the crushed group of people, is going "psst, psst." You approach the window and the girl behind the counter, you know her as Suzie, is very slightly, almost imperceptibly shaking her head no. As you get nearer, you see her eyes are damp. Big brown eyes and full of tears . . . a tear slides down her cheek as you open your mouth to order.

A motion catches your eye in the back of the Taco Bell. A red knit hat . . . no, a ski mask. You forget about ordering and realize that there is a man in a red ski mask holding a

gun against the head of a teenage, skinny, plaid-clad boy who is frantically trying to stuff dollar bills into a white Taco Bell paper bag. Ever so slowly you back up. The ski-mask man is not looking toward the window and you inch backward until you become part of the group at the table.

A heavy-set woman in a purple floral polyester blouse whispers at you.

It's a stick-up."

This you know. This you finally figured out. You watch the stand, gaping at the bright interior, as fascinated with the scene as the ten or twelve people around you. Fascinated to see t.v.-like action right here in real life. The Taco Bell kids up in the front stare back at you, mute fear in their faces, yet they look so perky in their uniforms, it is hard to connect them with the strange drama behind them.

The boy opens another door, shakes his head and closes it. The ski-mask man shakes the boy's shoulder, waves his gun as if he is unhappy. The boy's mouth forms an "O" and even from this distance, you can all see his distress. It is obvious he is pleading. Perhaps there is no more money. Perhaps there is a safe he cannot open. Whatever it is, the ski-mask man is angry and the boy is visibly shaking.

Purple-Polyester says to you, "There's something wrong."

"He looks mad," says a very blonde girl, peering over your shoulder.

Her boyfriend, fashionably crew-cutted and dressed in bright surf shorts, puts his arm around her shoulders and says, "How much money did he think there'd be at a Taco Bell?"

A man in a grey business suit says, "If he wanted a lot of

cash he picked the wrong place.”

“I think . . .” you start to speak but there is a loud explosive noise and you see the young boy’s face disappear into a mass of red, just before he slips out of your sight to the floor. Purple-Polyester grabs your right hand. Blondie gasps in your ear and puts her hand on your shoulder. You reach to the side and grasp the elbow of the business man and feel the deep trembling that started in you is also shaking through him. There is a general compression of the ten or twelve bodies around the white table as everyone pulls in trying to make contact, get reassurance, share fear.

The ski-mask man turns to look at the service windows. He holds up his gun and fires. One of the boys facing outward drops. He fires again and Suzie, the girl with tears in her eyes, the girl who warned you away, she drops and you cry out, “No!” The gun turns so that you can look right down its barrel, though you are maybe fifty feet away. As a group, as a mass of skin, bones, breath and fear, everybody falls to their knees at exactly the same second that the gun fires inside the Taco Bell and milliseconds later, you hear an odd metallic noise and you realize the orange umbrella is quivering, reverberating, shaking the pole and shaking the white table that all of you are clinging to, and the reverberations go right through your already trembling bodies.

The metallic ringing noise is drowned out by distant sirens that hurry nearer. You huddle together, until the business man strains his neck and looks, then stands up.

“He’s gone,” the business man says, and slowly, helping each other, the rest of the group stands up. Purple-Polyester is still clutching your hand, and you pat it.

The two remaining Taco Bell employees are hysterical.

One is screaming in short bursts, echoing the siren that you can hear in the distance. The other is draped across the counter, her body shaking as she cries.

You and the others move forward to the windows. You see over the counter and realize that the brown and red thing on the floor is the girl you had almost spoken to. You back up a few steps.

In no time, the police are jumping out of black and white cars and running past you. They swarm around the taco stand, some running down the alley, others gathering inside and hovering over the kids on the floor.

One officer comes to your group and asks if you will all stay for a few minutes so they can take reports. You say yes.

You go back and sit at the white table. Purple-Polyester, Blondie and her boyfriend sit around it with you.

"I can't believe it," says Blondie, shaking her head and crying silently.

"He just blew 'em away, bang, bang, bang, just like that," says her boyfriend. His face is white and shocked and he looks as he must have looked when he was ten years old. A child, really, not a grown-up at all.

"Why kill those kids, why?" says Purple. "It's not their fault, it's not their business. They can't help it if there isn't any money."

You all agree. Purple holds your hand on top of the table, and Blondie takes your other hand. Her boyfriend is wrapped tightly around her, his head against her shoulder.

The police are busy and you talk quietly with these three people for about half an hour. You re-live it over and over. Blondie says, "I can still see the kid, shaking his head." You say, "I could tell he was apologizing, that he was pleading." The boyfriend says, "The way he raised his

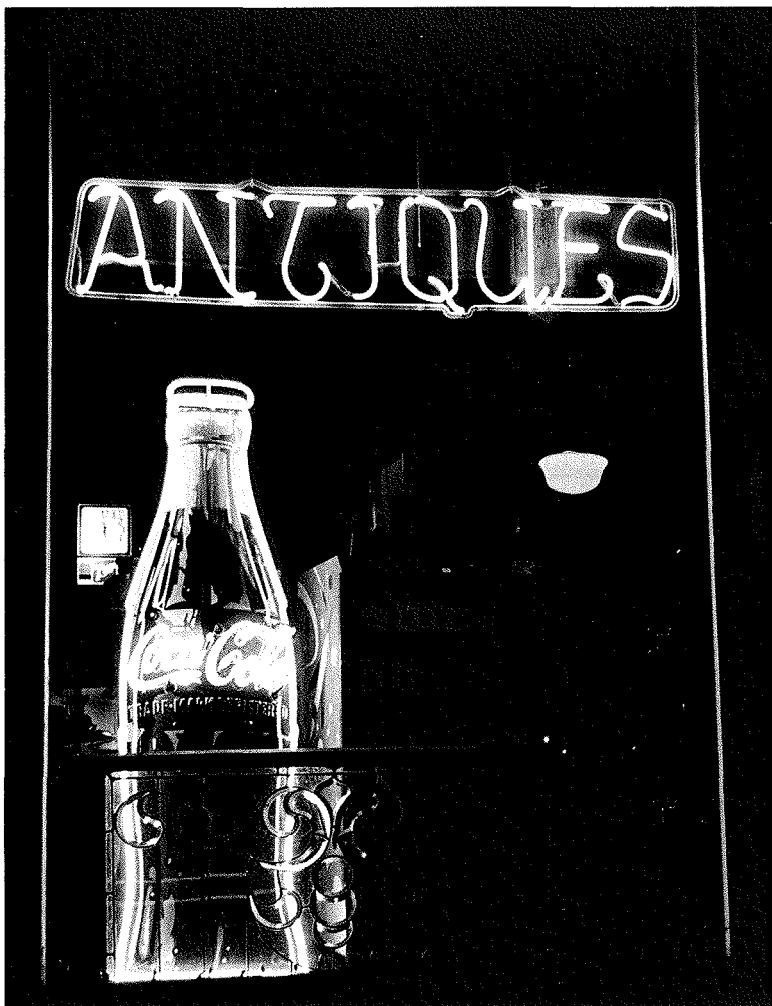
gun." Purple says, "The way the umbrella shook when the bullet hit it." You all agree that when he turned the gun toward your group, you each thought you would die. You swear that you looked down the barrel, that you knew it was pointed at you, that you could see the bullet in the chamber, the finger tightening, the slow cruel heartbeat in the chest behind the hand behind the gun. You knew you were dead. "If you guys hadn't pulled me down with you..." you shake your head, and the hands holding yours squeeze and console.

The police finally talk to you. They talk to you all together, then talk briefly to you alone. Finally, they say you can leave. You go over and hug Purple-Polyester. You hug Blondie and her boyfriend together as if they were one person. You walk up the street, heading back to your apartment. The last thing you need is a movie, so you call Karen and beg off. Instead of the movie, you spend the night watching stupid sit-coms on tv. You long for the company of Purple, or Blondie and the boyfriend. You want to discuss this one more time. You've shared something with them that you never shared with Karen and Donald, and even though they are your best friends, they can't possibly know you or help you like Purple and Blondie and boyfriend. You think, "This must be what it's like in war, this must be what it's like after a plane crash." Sleep overcomes need, and you toss fitfully the whole night on the couch.

Two weeks later you walk past the Taco Bell. A heavy-set woman in red pants and a blue sweatshirt is at the white table, looking at you from under the orange umbrella. She eats a taco, holding it carefully in two hands. You wonder, "Is that Purple?" But her face is not clear in your memory and you walk on past.

Waiting

A clam buried deep
down in the wet sand, I wait —
shell sealed shut
feeling only the distant rhythmic thud
that cannot reach far enough
below to find me.
Even as the tide creeps nearer
and the ocean's pulse surrounds me,
I remain burrowed, refusing to surface.
I must be dug up,
pried open,
cleaned out.



David Green

*Friction, and the Archer's
Uncertain Aim*

An Arrow begins flight, it splits the air;
the bow resounds, a note plucked from its frame.
The arrow's steady, one afar would claim —
its path is so much wilder seen from near.
It dances to a song it cannot hear.
For its million corrections, it can blame
friction, and the Archer's uncertain aim.
Destination: unknown. Each path: unclear.

That first is followed by a dull beat —
the end's percussive accompaniment.
Arrow knows not its own accuracy:
Has it met the mark it was meant to meet?
Did it fly true, or was its path too bent?
And did the Archer stay, the end to see?

Autopsy, or The Wages of Sin

1: Failed Love

With its swift wings, its venomous talons
ecstasy is cannibal and figment.

As you attend the viewing,
sign the guestbook, do you wonder when
this body's slow descent began?

2: Vocation

Are we biologists? Are we coroners?
Do we inspect the bowels for causes?
Are we oracles? Are we carrion-birds?

3: Coroners

Slice the leathery skin:
an evil gas escapes.

This terrain, hid
beneath the epidermal sheath
was not meant to be revealed:
the plumbing is vile and distant,
I do not know these contours.

4: Carrion-birds

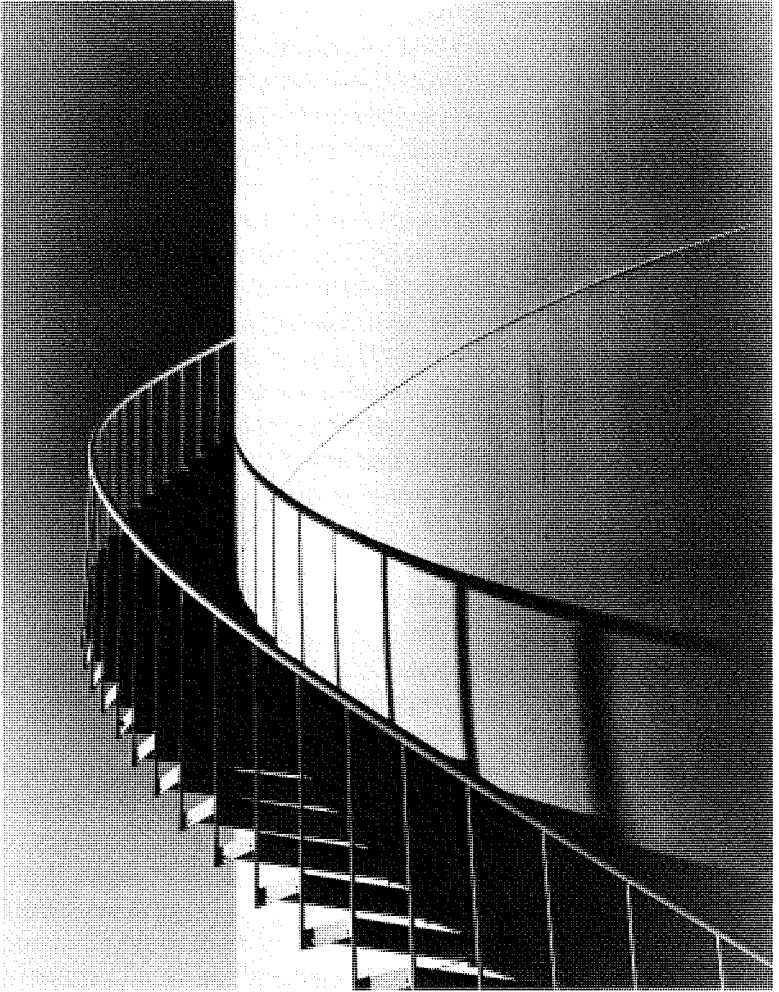
A buzzard's grey feathers
turn brown with caked blood.

His dark, natural vision makes us ill:
all night long machinery whirs
in the factory. He has patience.
He has faith in what we most fear.
He does not care for causes, only
feels the slow thrill in his veins
when there's reason to stop the circling.
What is history to him?

5: Film noir

What do I search for
in the forest of a corpse?
Do I suspect a resurrection?
I at least expect clues
to the murderer of love.

I have posted the reward:
I myself raise the knife.



The Coriolis Effect

Jacob Wilsey bit his lip, waiting for the perfect bead of solder to drop onto his circuit board. Nothing but a perfectly round silver ball would do. Anything else would be scraped off so he could re-solder; but he rarely had to do this. He had honed his soldering skills to as close to perfect as possible.

He became obsessed with anything of at least marginal interest that crossed his path. The laboratory in his basement overflowed with half-finished projects that had started as obsessions, but quickly became uninteresting. His life's history matched his basement's; it consisted of a long series of events, mostly uncompleted, that simply failed to keep him intellectually occupied. His hopes for a successful life rested in the back of his mind along with his incomplete doctoral studies, his disassembled 1934 Ford Coupe, his relationship with his wife, and hundreds of other disregarded heaps of rubble. None of this mattered to Jacob Wilsey at the moment. Only the various possible solutions to his current obsession had any real meaning; and of these solutions, only one had plausibility.

The obsession that currently kept him occupied was to harness all the unused knowledge in the world. The fact that he had not thought of a solution that worked did not make this obsession an impossibility; it was obviously just a problem that he had not attacked in enough depth to solve. Looking up every fact that had no use and putting it to use would be impossible. Making his obsession into a global obsession was more realistic, but he could not trust other people with such complex issues. He would have to do it all himself. The key was in the Coriolis Effect. People knew the Coriolis Effect had importance, but Jacob had a hunch it was even more important than they realized.

Ruth Wilsey meekly tiptoed down the damp grey cement steps that led to the basement. She stood behind her husband who was soldering a green printed circuit board the size of a slice of bread. The smoke from the acid core of the solder rose in a steady white stream. To Ruth, it must have looked as if Jacob had an exhaust hole hidden in his greasy black hair.

“Jacob?”

He threw his chalk white arm behind himself and waved her away.

“Hungry, Jacob?”

He wiped the sweat from his forehead, and gestured with the smoldering soldering iron.

“No use, Rusty. I’ll get something later.” He held his arms over his head and yawned. Ruth saw his shoulder blades bulge beneath his grey t-shirt.

“Sure?”

“Later, Rusty.”

She turned and went back up. He slapped the board down on his bench. There used to be something about her, something that had kept him interested for years. He hadn’t been able to believe her perfect proportions and had once measured her waist at exactly twenty two and three quarter inches. From the moment that he’d met her until a few years after they were married, Jacob did not desire to play with his mechanical toys. He let her convince him to quit college — to get a teaching job at the local high school. He let her occupy him with fruitless hours. If he had persisted in what he called “the sloth years” any longer, there might have been a child running wild destroying order in his lab. Now forty three years later, Jacob congratulated himself for coming to his senses. He had started calling his wife Rusty rather than *My Love* or *Dearest*; he’d gotten back to work on things with real

rather than personal significance.

The only thing left from that island four decades in his past was the teaching job. Every weekday, Jacob slithered into class. Motivated only by caffeine, he demonstrated the significance of mathematical formulas in the mechanics of his students' everyday life, then rushed back to his basement. He had a loose mastering of names and faces, but rarely associated the two.

He remembered his first lecture on the Coriolis Effect. He had explained how the Earth's rotation influenced natural circular motions like hurricanes, tornados, and whirlpools. This bored the class until he explained that the Coriolis Effect made the water spin counterclockwise when they flushed the toilet; not only that, but if they had lived in the Southern Hemisphere, say in Australia, the water would spin clockwise. That evening he had received several angry phone calls from parents who wondered what Jacob said to make their children lock themselves in the bathroom and repeatedly flush the toilet. He had told one parent, "Knowledge is useless without action." He had confided in Ruth that these "walking wastes of energy could never learn."

There had been a student that Jacob considered uniquely gifted. The boy listened intently and thought Jacob's word was law. He did everything he could to encourage the child's mental stimulation, even paying the boy to assist him in the basement lab. Soon, however, Jacob found that the reward of working quickly far outweighed the limited satisfaction of teaching as the child slowed the pace of his work. Jacob now knew that he could only work alone. No one would understand what he was doing. In fact, they might endanger his work.

This experiment was particularly crucial. The significance of his completed work would change the world

forever. Jacob would permit nothing to interfere. He locked the lab with a deadbolt and two padlocks before going to the kitchen. Ruth sat at the table peeling the greasy yellow skin from a leftover chicken breast with her teeth while reading *The Fourth Deadly Sin*. Jacob took a Coke from the refrigerator. "Jacob, aren't you going to eat anything?"

He slammed the door and started back down to the lab.

"How many pounds have you gained since we got married, Rusty. Fifty? Sixty? Huh? How many?"

"You have to eat something, honey. You're going to starve down there."

Jacob turned and faced her, pointing with the wet Coke can. "You used to have a twenty two inch waist. Twenty two inches."

"I'm not fat, Jacob. So I gained some weight. Everyone does."

"I didn't."

He turned and walked down the stairs. It was true. Not only had he not gained weight, he had lost some. In the last two months alone he had gone from 131 to 123 on his homemade digital scale. He looked over his shoulder and found her reading the novel again. He yelled back up the stairs. "It's sloth, Rusty. Just one from three of the seven deadly sins you indulge in."

"What the hell are you doing down there anyway?" She garbled with her mouth full.

"And gluttony! You can't even swallow before you talk."

"Forget it, Jacob. I don't care what you're doing anyway. It's stupid. Who needs you!"

He snorted a deep inhaling chuckle. "And finally there's envy. You're a walking Lawrence Sanders novel,

Rusty." He inhaled another elephant seal laugh and unlocked the door to the lab.

This would be the one. Not only did Jacob feel a larger compulsion than ever before, but this experiment would make a difference. He could foresee an end to inefficient energy sources, inefficient devices, and inefficient people. Everything had a reason for existing. Knowing that reason, Jacob could put everything to use and set the world free from waste.

She could not comprehend that. She refused to understand any of his work. When he took their first car apart to try to design an automated driver, she could only complain about the money and the waste. She couldn't see the possibilities. "She never sees the possibilities," he muttered aloud. "There are none so blind as those who will not . . ."

He set down his soldering iron. "Rusty! Rusty! Come down here! I want to tell you something." He pivoted on his stool and faced the door. "How can I expect her to see if she doesn't know where to look?" he asked himself.

Ruth hopped down the steps, her yellow flowered blouse concealing a small tummy bulge, but nothing that kept her from looking trim.

"Did you call me?" she said, twisting her dry white hair into a bun.

"Sit down, Rusty."

The floor around her feet displayed various wires, cogs, electronic components, and rat droppings. "I'll stand if you don't mind. What did you want to tell me?"

Jacob walked without lifting his feet, gesturing with open hands in the air. "Just imagine that there was no waste in the universe. Everything had a purpose."

She put her hand to her chin. "O.K."

"Easy, right? Right?"

"Right."

"Right!" he yelled, startling her. "That's because everything does have a purpose. Only, we're too stupid and fallible to know them all."

"Got it."

He clenched his fists, beating the air with each stressed syllable. "Yes! And that's why I have to have enough time to figure everything out . . . discover everything's purpose."

"You've got time, Jacob," she snickered. "I doubt you have that much."

"Exactly!"

She leaned against the cold cement wall. "You lost me."

He went into what looked like phony concentration. His hand tapped and stroked his chin. His eyes darted to the upper corners of the sockets.

"Ah," he snapped, pointing at her. "We're both 72, but you have white hair and mine's still black . . . Why?! Because different people age at different rates. Right?"

"Jacob, maybe we should have some din—"

"I just have to live forever. There has to be a way to do it."

Ruth kicked a discarded rusty nail a few inches. "Jacob—"

"I just have to build a time machine so I can go to the future when they have immortality so they can give it to me and I can find purpose for everything. Do you see?! It's the Coriolis Effect. If I figure out the relationship between it and time— I have the circuitry to do it! I just need to work it out."

She kicked the nail again.

He turned away, then back. "Get out! You stupid slob! Go get something to eat, you God damned cow. Get out

of here.”

She stumbled quickly up the stairs.

The boy was holding a circuit board with a pliers as Jacob soldered. Jacob fed the solder to the tip of the iron. The gray wire turned silver as it melted, dripped onto the circuit board in a steaming mirrored drop, and sent a curling white tail of smoke above the connection. The boy watched the drop turn grey again as it cooled.

“Why does it turn grey like that?”

Jacob grinned. “Because when it’s liquid, surface tension makes it perfectly smooth, allowing it to be a mirror. When it cools to a solid, it dries uneven. Therefore the surface reflects light unevenly, and it looks grey.”

The boy looked up at Jacob, who was already looking at him. “How did you learn so many stupid things?”

Jacob bit his lip until it turned white. He let go, leaving pink tooth impressions.

“It’s so funny. You even know why the water spins to the left when you flush the toilet. Wha’d you call that? The Cor—”

“The Coriolis effect,” Jacob snapped imposingly enough to silence the boy. “The Coriolis Effect is the basis of earthbound physics. Without it, there would be no weather patterns, no ocean currents—”

“Yeah, but it’s funny. Why do you need to know which way the water spins? It still flushes either way.”

Jacob pulled out his wallet. “Here’s your dollar. Go home.”

The boy scowled, wrinkled pink flesh crept over his wide eyes. “Why?”

“You don’t need to know why. Go home.”

Jacob watched Ruth as she tripped into the kitchen. He turned and carefully soldered the last component into

place. He set the smoldering soldering iron tip down onto the wooden work bench. The circuit board slid neatly into a frame made from the front seat and cab of the Ford Coupe. Jacob got in, held onto the steering wheel and turned the ignition key.

Nothing.

He turned it again. A faint buzz built in the circuit board. Blue sparks flew down as if from a luminescent shower head. Spattering smoky drops of mirrored solder burned tiny brown holes in his pants. He thought he heard Ruth scream, but maybe not. Then it ended. The green circuit board sported a charcoal colored burn over most of its surface. He touched it, brushing the charcoal away. He looked at the blackened tip of his finger.

The door to the basement flung against the cement wall. Chips of sandy grey cement showered the floor. Ruth stood in the doorway, white light streaming in around her. She held her throat with one hand, waving something indistinguishable in the other into a silhouetted blur. He could hear a faint gasp, air and bubbling.

"Rusty . . ."

She dropped to her knees, waving for him to come up.

"Rusty? What is it?"

Yellow saliva full of bubbles dripped from the corner of her mouth.

Jacob got out of the car and took a couple steps towards her.

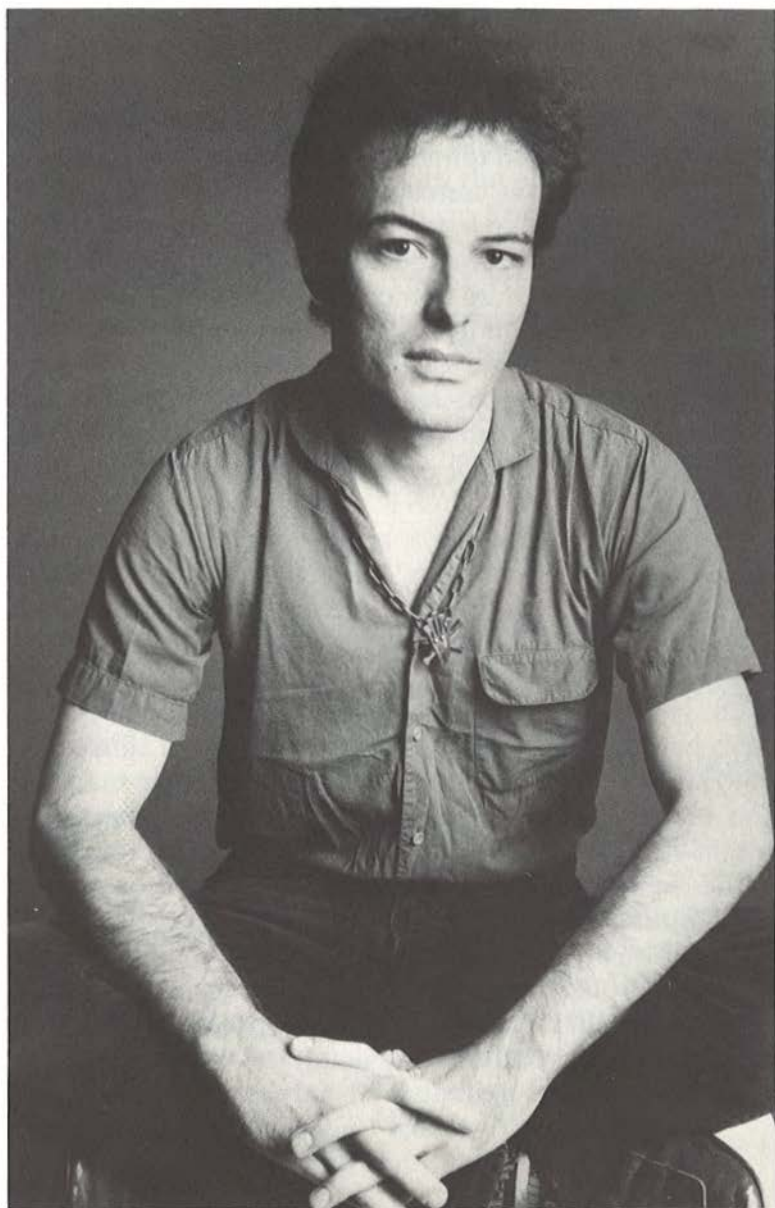
Ruth dropped the object in her hand. Jacob started up the stairs. As he reached the top, Ruth had already fallen back on the floor, gasping a monotone bubbling buzz. He picked her up from behind, wrapped his arms about her torso and wondered if he should squeeze his fist under her ribs; but he had hesitated too long. The gasping

stopped. Her dry yellow eyes stared off into space.

Jacob cleared his throat and set her down quietly. He lightly fingered the chicken breast she had dropped on the floor. She really wasn't so fat. In fact, she looked almost as lovely as she did when he had married her. He stood. "Unbelievable," he muttered.

And he thought it too. It couldn't be. He had stood there staring while his wife choked to death. He couldn't do anything. He knew what to do; the Heimlich Maneuver would have saved her. Squeezing below the diaphragm created pressure in the lungs, forcing any foreign object to be expelled. He just couldn't do it. The same hesitation that kept him from completing anything he ever did struck again.

Jacob watched his smoldering soldering iron burn a charcoal black hole in his work bench. For the longest time he had worked on a time machine to go forward. A mind full of theories proved useless because he couldn't do anything with them. Now, here he was, naturally in the future, unable to go backwards to his wife. He couldn't even unplug the soldering iron.



Jackie Chernof

An Interview With Jello Biafra

Northridge Review: Describe your spoken word performances. Do you consider them to be poetry or performance or a combination of both?

Biafra: That's for other people to decide. That's the beauty of a more wide open term like *spoken word*. It doesn't restrict the listener to a concept of, like, the kind of poetry in dripping horror movie letters that you might have expected if you've had poetry rammed down your throat in school as though it were a chore, which of course has turned generations of people off to all kinds of literature, just like the way they teach music in the schools has people hating music and not liking to sing. But, no. Some of it is expanded versions of song lyrics I had written in the past. Most of it is new. If I'm doing it on a college campus and being billed as a "speaker," then it's usually appropriate that I do some kind of question and answer session as well, which can be quite bizarre. At Cal State Fullerton "Hardcore for Christ" came on stage and proselytized for a good twenty minutes in the middle of one of my pieces . . . Handing out these tracts to the audience, and one guy with, you know, that glazed-eyed grin that those people who have been born again have (yes one of those with that kind of weird-ass smile) was saying, "Yeah, man. See me, man? I used to be really fucked-up and strung out on angel dust, man. Now I'm strung out on the Bible, dude." Other people were heckling them and would have done just about anything to get them to go away, but I had to kind of bite my lip and remind myself that if here I am crying wolf about losing a free society, I can't very well deprive people like that of their opportunity to speak either. I mean the past couple of days has been a kind of lesson in that. I discovered right at the last minute, to my horror,

that I would be riding to the *Oprah Winfrey Show* in a limo with Tipper Gore, and one of the things Tipper is well schooled in from, being a political wife of course, is that she's very friendly, very attractive, almost sexy, and there wasn't the dagger-eyed Berlin Wall of disgust with each other like what happened with the woman from *Back in Control* when we were both on *Rock and Roll Evening News*, because we didn't say a damn word to each other, but Tipper was friendly: "Oh hi. You must be Jello. I'm Tipper Gore, and oh yes, one of my daughters is now starting to explore the punk rock, like The Clash and Bunny and the Echomen."

Jimmy Swaggart once said that we picked the name *Dead Kennedys* to promote necrophelia in children. I thought that was hilarious, but not as hilarious when you realize how much power that guy has, even now. I love left handed compliments like that. I would even go so far as to say that we thrive on them. It means that we're penetrating. It means that we're getting through. It means even the most closed of minds can still be penetrated and shaken up and jolted into thinking, even though the thinking may totally disagree with your own.

N.R.: So are you trying to shake people up through your performances?

Biafra: I think that's been a thread through the things I've done for many years. You know . . . Art as a prank, and I've always had a soft spot in my heart for a good prank, creative crime, properly placed vandalism and sabotage . . . That kind of thing. So I figured why not find a constructive use for these impulses and be able to sing and write and do songs and things at the same time? There's not that many people who have somehow blundered into a fortunate enough situation where they can actually make a living by pissing off the normaloids (a service that I am

always happy, if not eager, to provide).

N.R.: What is the most up to date rendering of your legal situation?

Biafra: We filed an action known as a demurer, which is kind of the opposite of an appeal. A demurer is trying to get the charges thrown out ahead of time, so working people, who aren't fortunate enough to be married to senators, don't have to take six to eight weeks off their jobs and live in a motel or something in San Francisco and go to court every day. I mean that's what people are looking at here. So, we feel that we should probably try to get the charges out of there to begin with because a show trial is only going to make matters worse. A municipal court judge has kind of leafed through our documents with a thumb and turned them down. The Superior Court turned them down, so now we will be in the state court of appeals. Meanwhile, there's an arraignment scheduled for April 13th, but the arraignment has been postponed for almost a year now, so I have no idea of what will happen. Yes, April 15th is the one year anniversary of when all this crap began. It was the day I kind of half awake looked outside the bedroom part of the attic where I was, and this big old guy was tromping up the stairs. "We're police officers," and I find there's nine of them tearing my whole fucking house apart.

N.R.: Sounds scary . . .

Biafra: Yeah. They claimed they knocked, but of course they didn't. The scariest part to me was that I was held in one room by a couple of them while the other ones went through all the other rooms in the house so I had no idea if they were, like, destroying things, or lifting things, or worse yet, planting illegal drugs on the premises to bust me for (in the fine tradition of someone like the MC5, or something). I didn't want that to happen. So, it was very,

very scary, very degrading, very humiliating, kind of a subtle form of rape, if you will, which is exactly what those cops had in mind. The two that held me in the room played a constant good cop/bad cop game. They were both LAPD. One was a big old bull who was saying, "Ha, ha. You'll get about a year. Will somebody please shut this guy up so I don't have to hear him anymore?" That kind of thing, and while the other guy would sit down and kind of grin. "You in a band? Wow, I know some people who played in a band, and uh, do you make any money off your band?" You know . . . Feeding me questions that could have bearing on the case, which I was very careful about answering, of course. But the main moment of comic relief came when the head of the San Francisco part of the party walked in with a glazed look on his face. "What are all those pictures of missing children doing on your kitchen wall? Do you know where they are?" I was tempted to say, "Yes, I'm John Wayne Gacy, and they're all buried in my basement," but I realized at the time that if I'd said that, they probably really would have dug up the basement, then my landlady would have been through with me one and for all.

N.R.: How much of a case do they actually have against you? After all, you did have a label on your album.

Biafra: Well, the thing that slips by a lot of people is that any warning label, plus the PMRC proposed stickers and movie ratings are all corporate agreements, they are not laws on the books, they can't prosecute over them. The reason that the PMRC wants voluntary compliance is that if a law was passed, it would be thrown out on its ass immediately for being unconstitutional.

N.R.: Do you think the PMRC is just out to get musicians, or do you think their influence will even actually spread to books and other forms of creative expression?

Biafra: Even if the PMRC doesn't, anything that legitimizes them or lends any credence to their campaign of hysteria will encourage other people to take their censorship tactics one step further. For example, after the Senate Hearings on rock music, suddenly Jimmy Swaggart's irrational complaint about rock music in itself being pornography began appearing in the mainstream papers, and he has enough power that he could tell a large drugstore chain to take Rolling Stone and Creem and Tiger Beat and thirty other publications off their shelves, because they were pornographic. This wasn't even a threat letter from Ed Meese, this was from fucking Jimmy Swaggart. This is the real danger of some people like that having the power to tell us what we should be able to read, and of course, even if another store across the street from WalMart still had all those magazines, it still hurts the magazines, because not everybody is going to run from store to store in their busy shopping times and go look for all the magazines, they'll just throw up their hands. I'm sure the same thing would happen with records. I mean how many people would bother to look hard enough to find a Dead Kennedys record, if you can only buy it by mail or at the X-rated bookstore? I don't want to have to see all our supporters have to walk in with a big old trenchcoat and a hat down over their eyes look over their shoulder and say in a breathy voice, "Hey can I buy one of those... Dead Kennedys records please," and then look quickly around again to make sure no one they know from work is watching. That kind of climate belongs in the Dark Ages, not today. But unfortunately I've felt for many years that we have entered a new Dark Ages.

N.R.: What is the difference between you and someone like Prince, as far as the PMRC goes?

Biafra: Tipper says that it was Prince that inspired her to start going after rock lyrics, and luckily for him, he has all the legal help money can buy. We don't, that's why they picked us to charge instead. Michael Guarino of the L.A. City Attorneys Office even said right on an evening newscast here, "We feel this is a cost effective way of sending a message that we are going to prosecute."

N.R.: **How do you feel about being mentioned in Tipper Gore's new book, "Raising PG Kids in an X-rated Society"?**

Biafra: This is a masterpiece in slick persuasive packaging. First of all there's the name. Already now by the title, the reader will assume that we live in an X-rated society, whether we really do or not. These warning things that she wants on wicked records is right on the front of the book as a way of anesthetizing the consumer to its presence. One of the best compliments she's ever payed my band is on page 28, "Recent album of the Dead Kennedys band contained a graphic poster of multiple erect penises penetrating vaginas. Where's the difference? In the hands of a few warped artists their brand of rock music has become a Trojan Horse rolling explicit sex and violence into our home." . . . I mean where's the real Trojan Horse here? It seems to me it's books and people like this who are claiming, oh these poor parents who are uninformed, they need ratings to make a proper choice for their children, therefore we should be able to do the ratings and do parents thinking for them. I mean how many parents really accompany their kids to record stores anyway? How many of them have the time? And if they keep accompanying their kids to the record store, what happens when they turn the kid loose at eighteen in the marketplace, and the kid's emotional and intellectual growth has been stunted because Mommy and Daddy

had to make all their decisions for them when they grew up, or worse yet, were letting books make them for them.

N.R.: What do you mean when you say that you use a “mutant form of journalism”?

Biafra: It means I pepper my presentation with tidbits of information that I’ve come across that people don’t generally know, and might find interesting if they did. For example, there’s a piece called, “Why I’m Glad the Space Shuttle Blew Up,” that I wrote after seeing a xeroxed copy of an item in *The Nation* magazine that was sent anonymously to my mailbox, that said that if that one hadn’t blown up, then the next one would have gone up carrying a payload of 46 pounds of plutonium. Say that space shuttle also blew up, guess what we’d all have now. We’d have radiation cancer and all the human life on earth would slowly be dying. People estimated “conservatively” that if that had blown up there would have been enough radiation in the air to cause cancer in as many as five billion people. I mean this is how reckless our Defense Department is today, to just try and launch Star Wars behind everybody’s back and not even care if the whole population of the earth gets killed. This is almost the highest level of hypocrisy these people reach in a way. They go on and on, “We must protect the human race from annihilation by building Star Wars beam weapons,” that were originally proposed by Lyndon LaRouche, keep in mind. But at the same time when they’re talking about protecting us from annihilation that way, where’s the Reagan administration with a defense-department-size budget for research on AIDS?

N.R.: After you finish with your legal battles, will you continue with the spoken word performances, or will you

go back to music?

Biafra: Well, since I've been put out of commission as a musician, for all practical purposes, for at least another half year to a year, I might as well try to grow artistically in other ways. And, so I'm trying a bit of this, of course doing a lot of talk shows, things, there's a very vague offer of hosting a radio talk show in San Francisco, which would be a real kick in the ass if I actually got the job. There's some things I normally wouldn't pursue, but the opportunity came along, I'd be a fool to say no to it.

N.R.: You once ran for mayor of San Francisco. Do you have any more political aspirations?

Biafra: I'm leaning against that. I mean, even in my position as a saboteur candidate, there were still all these people coming up trying to make little deals with me and stuff. I began to realize, my God, these poor fools who get as far as national office, they don't even know who they are anymore, because they have made so many deals and so many compromises and so many horse trades that you can't have any principles, you don't have any principles left by the time you get that far. I mean I can fully see why the Democrats could nominate a complete nincompoop like Walter Mondale who just allowed himself to be led on a leash wherever he went. That is the kind of people we get in politics because they're the only people willing to put up with it and stick around. I think one way to solve that, particularly with the presidential election, would be to make it like they have in Europe, especially in Britain where if there is going to be an election you get six weeks notice of when the day to vote is, so there isn't like three years of campaigning for president. You've got six weeks to do a blitz, and the rest of the time you can do something else. I think an even better way to take care of these

bozos who think they should be in the White House would be for them to follow the example of my favorite revolutionary hero, Pope John Paul the First. Here was a guy who worked years and years to get to the peak of his power and what does he do? He dies thirty days later. I think that's a great example for revolutionaries everywhere, because many of them, when they reach a position of power, the revolution stops, and they just want to stay with the status quo. Not Pope John Paul I, he did everybody a favor and died. Imagine how many of these jerks could be president if they could just do it for thirty days and then die. We'd be through most of them by now!

N.R.: **The Dead Kennedys recently broke up. Is there any chance that the band will ever regroup?**

Biafra: No . . . that's been another effect of this whole affair. There's bad blood there now.

N.R.: **Why did you call yourselves the Dead Kennedys?**

Biafra: It's a calling card no one can ignore. It's not just like tee ha ha ha Kennedys. I mean, how did the Me Generation start after all? American empire getting bigger, atomic age astroworld movie star president, gorgeous wife, suddenly, capow! Where has the American dream gone from there? Especially when the person on the street has this funny feeling it wasn't just some nut with a gun in a school library. Then Robert Kennedy gets killed, Martin Luther King dies. Vietnam and Watergate were the straws that broke the camel's back. But I think the ball got rolling towards the Me Generation, the sheer greed and selfishness we have today got started with the Kennedy killings.

N.R.: **Why the name Jello Biafra?**

Biafra: Why not?

N.R.: It's strange . . .

Biafra: It IS, ha, strange. The juxtaposition of images designed to stimulate the brain . . . I picked it out of a notebook. Me and a friend just years ago wrote down cool names for bands, for people in bands, names for songs . . . things like that, and it came time to get a new name, so I opened the book back up and that looked like the best one. It seemed like it would last a little longer than Smegma Pig Vomit, Bobby Bacteria, or any other nominations.

N.R.: But Jello Biafra is not legally your name?

Biafra: Oh no. The last thing I want to do is to have my notorious name on a driver's license so if a cop stops me, they decide to beat the shit out of me and leave me by the side of the road.

N.R.: If people don't start taking notice of what's going on and start protesting against it, where do you think we'll end up? In ten years, will we be living in a much more conservative society?

Biafra: I think nationally it will be kind of like it is in North Carolina right now, where people sit on their ass while an anti-obscenity bill orchestrated by Jesse Helms became law. This bill is, this law is so strict, that if you're in a college art class and the professor opens up a book of Middle Ages paintings or Michelangelo statues and there's genitalia on the statue, the professor can go to jail for three years and be fined 10,000 dollars. Many, many books have been taken off of many, many library shelves, and in the case of these colleges, entire classes have been dropped on account of this law. That's about the ugliest form of censorship you can get. Direct intimidation, which is also what the PMRC had in mind when their literature called for the "reassessment of contracts" of

artists who did things onstage the PMRC didn't happen to approve of. This is the goal of many of these people, even if they can smile and be nice and likable and say, well they're just concerned parents who are against sexism, which I can understand, easily understand and agree with, and don't want their kids screwed up by violence, on TV shows or on records. The problem is what they are really trying to do is intimidate people into going much farther. For example, Beastie Boys having songs taken off their record, and Slayer having to move to another label to get theirs out. Anytime any artist waters down their own work out of fear of reprisal, that in itself is censorship. A climate of fear is a very powerful weapon, and we are a very scared country right now, and people who want to screw us around can thrive on that.

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The Northridge Review is also pleased to present an interview with musician and poet Jello Biafra, conducted by Jackie Chernof.

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