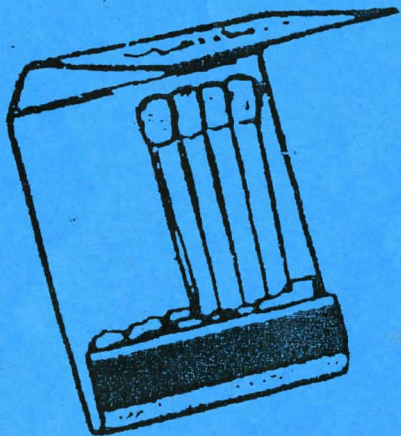


AVOW 11

strike match,

run, run, run:

the stories.





hello.

avow11.

stories.

COME IN.

Lt. McAllister

Off from work and waiting for the bus. It's a chilly night; fall's coming, whispering down the road, and this coat just isn't thick enough. There's another guy waiting for the bus with me, an obviously homeless man with a thick white beard, Navy cap, black plastic bag and one arm. We get to talking, a few sentences passed, and I hand him a cigarette before he asks for one. I do that sometimes. Sometimes it's nice to speak to someone, just to feel a part of the earth, larger than yourself, like you're a part of this place you're in. Even these minor, fleeting connections can be something. We see the bus coming down the street and he's struggling to get the strap of his backpack over the stump of his arm. He says to me, "Hey, help me get this motherfucker over what's left of this arm." And I do.

The bus arrives and we step on. It's warm in there, a few other late night stragglers slung into their seats, far away from downtown. The one-armed man puts his money in the toll-box at the front of the bus and the driver thanks him, calls him sir. The guy laughs, to my ears pretty bitterly, and says, "No need to call me sir, Lt. McAllister's fine." He sees where I'm sitting and sits across from me, we strike up another conversation. Portland, frankly, has an inordinate amount of crazy people living here, and I've seen enough people freakout on busses, the street and elsewhere, to sometimes be wary. Despite the stink of booze around this guy, and the way his eyes gloss over mid-sentence and he just drifts off, there's an air of kindness around him. A ragged face, he's a mean-looking motherfucker, but carries a sense of calmness around him at the same time. We talk and when he drifts off, with his eyes getting that glazed-over sheen to them, I politely look away until he strikes up conversation again.

We eventually make it downtown and it's started to rain. Ok, fall's coming, another 7 or 8 month stretch of showers and drizzle and breath steaming out of people's mouths, all that. It's dark out.

I'm two stops away from getting off the bus when McAllister looks over at me, his hand curled into a fist, stretching it out at me. "I can't feel my arm," he says, waving his hand at me. What? What the fuck is this? Maybe I misread the guy, he's gonna sock me in the mouth.

He nods at his arm, "I can't feel my arm, hold your hand out." I hold my hand out and he drops a handful of change into my palm.

"What? Oh no, sir, I can't take this."

"Go ahead," he says, grinning. "If you don't need it, give it to someone who does, but don't let no motherfuckers cheat you out of it. Don't give it to em if they don't need it. Buy someone a cup of coffee or something."

I don't know what to say and so I just tell him thank you and touch his shoulder as I get off the bus. Tired and bleary-eyed and needing a shave, I walk down Alder, past Django's records and Georgia's, where there's normally a plethora of homeless kids and gutterpunks sparechanging out front. The money, most of it in quarters, is heavy in my hand, but this night of all nights, the streets are empty.

I think that the world hands you moments like this sometimes, and you can see them and live in them, be right there, if you keep open enough and learn to see them when they come. At the same time, when I got home, I put on a pot of coffee and went into the bathroom, looking at my face in the mirror. Holloweyed from no sleep, ragged, I turned the hot water on and took a razor and shaving cream down from the cabinet. This is me.

12-Gauges And Ripped Fishnets

"Her mom's really cool," Tony said.

"Yeah," I agreed, as we pushed our bikes up the hill.

I was in 7th grade and I told my mom I was staying over at Tony's house. Tony lived at the bottom of the hill next to the cemetery. Tony's mom was nice but she was crazy. Fuck, his whole family was crazy. That night, I rode my bike over to his place, past the yard full of chained-up, screaming dogs. We watched wrestling on TV and listened to Tony's cousin, who lived in a trailer in their front yard, talk about how drunk he'd gotten and how hard he'd fucked his girlfriend the night before. Tony seemed to idolize him but I just thought he was crazy.

Then we decided to go to Sarah's house. Tony lived at the bottom of the hill and Sarah lived at the top, at the very top of this long, twisting, gravel road. We both had a crush on her. Tony had known her a long time, I'd only known her since middle school. She knew who the Sex Pistols were and wore ripped fishnet stockings to school. Ripped stockings in the 7th grade, man, I was in love.

So we're walking our bikes up this long road and we're talking about how nice Sarah's mom is. When we made it to her house, it was around ten at night. We knocked and her mom answered, puffy-eyed from sleep. She said that Sarah was down at her grandparents' place, spending the night with her cousins. Her grandparents lived at the middle of the hill and had a trailer in their yard too, but no dogs. Sarah and her cousins were in the trailer out front, her mom said.



"Just go on in, guys, it's no problem." In retrospect, it seems that all parties involved later thought the whole ordeal hilarious, except my mom and I, but I'm getting ahead of myself. Needless to say, I just wished that Sarah's mother had told her folks that it was "no problem."

We pedalled our bikes down the hill and went into the trailer. Her cousins were OK, Sarah was as flirtatious as ever. The trials of being a horny 7th grader, Christ. We hung out and the next thing you know, there's this quavering, old-man's voice outside the trailer door, signalling our doom: "Who's bikes are these out here?"

I was worried but Sarah just laughed and let her grandpa in, who hit the fucking roof. He was not pleased the girls were hanging with the boys. At all. He grabbed Tony by the arm and threw him out of the trailer. Being ever-accomodating, I simply jumped out after Tony, saving gramps the trouble.

He looks at us and says, "Don't you little shitheads move." He starts walking back to his house and says to grandma, who is hovering near the door of their house, "Grandma, get me my fucking shotgun."

What fucking backwoods home-movie had I stumbled into? Things were moving much too fast for me; I was only thirteen years old, caught between a fierce sense of loyalty to Tony, who was just standing there smirking like a jackass, and a sense of saving my teenage ass from the blast of a Mossberg. And there was not a peep coming from the trailer. They had opted to stay inside. Sarah and her cousins were not laughing now. No one was, except maybe God. My heart was beating like a triphammer, it could've been the drumbeat to a Cryptic Slaughter

song. You know?

But when I saw grandma come out of the house and hand grandpa a very black, very large, very *gun-looking* type of shotgun, self-preservation won out over loyalty. I grabbed my bike and tore out of there at light speed. I heard grandpa yell at me, or maybe at Tony, "Don't move, goddammit!" Yeah, right.

I don't think I've ever ridden a bike as fast as I did that night, before or since. It was all downhill, the moon was bright and I pedalled all the way down. The blur of gravel under the wheels sounded like machineguns. I'd occasionally look behind me, expecting the headlights of grandpa's armor-plated 4X4, or maybe pulled by a sled of maddened pitbulls, hot on my trail with the shotgun at his side.

I sped past Tony's place without a second thought. Like I was gonna go into his weird house, if I could even make it past the dogs. Fuck that; I was a little kid, still very connected to my bed and my comic books and the safety of my own walls. I was going home. Past the cemetery, the high school, houses. Hung a left onto 101, straight for a while, hung a right before the bridge and I was at my apartment. I looked down at my watch and it was past one in the morning. A sneaky entrance past my sleeping mother was possible. And then I realized I'd left my jacket in the trailer and it had my housekey in it. Fuck. And there was no way I'm waking my mom up at this hour with a story like this. No way.

Once I'd gotten off my bike, I'd realized how cold it was, the hard ocean wind coming off the beach only 3 blocks away. We left our car unlocked. I went into the backseat, pulled it down and crawled into the trunk. We'd laid a blanket down back there when we'd gotten out Christmas tree, so I lay there in the dark of our trunk, wrapped in a shitty blanket covered in pine needles, shivering. Drifting in and out of sleep until about 7, teeth chattering, until I just couldn't stand it anymore.

I went to the door and knocked and my mom came down and opened it. She just gave me that look that moms have. The Mom Look. The one that tells you you're in deep shit but you'll be in it worse if you try to pull a fast one on her. And I just folded like a house of cards, walking into the house with machinegun teeth. I told her everything; the dogs, Tony's cousin, going up to Sarah's place and then halfway down, grandpa in his pajamas and baseball cap and the shotgun and sleeping in the car and and and. Finally she stopped me and said we'd talk about it after she'd gotten a couple more hours of sleep.

The end result was that my mom grounded me for a week for being careless with my belongings and Sarah brought my jacket to school on Monday. She was laughing at me and when I asked her why, he'd had a fucking shotgun, etc., she just laughed some more. So did Tony. She said, "After you left, he called my mom. She told him that she'd sent you down there and that it was fine. She thought it was hilarious." And Tony had ridden down after me, gone into his house and told his cousin about it and they'd cracked up too. Laugh laugh laugh, giggle giggle giggle, the whole world thought it was funny. In the meantime, I was grounded for a week.

Erik And The Skinheads

For the six months I knew him, Erik was an older brother to me. Protective, but respectful. Treating me like an equal, he still managed to be insightful, like a mentor, but by relating his experience in a way that wasn't degrading. He talked *to* me, not down to me, in a way that I learned from his experiences without even knowing it. I haven't seen him in over seven years.

Erik was a punk rocker from way back. Ten years older than me, he'd seen those bands I'd only read about, he'd been on the streets and then off them, had lived through that particular warzone known as punk rock in the 80's. "I'd be at a party some night," he told me once, "and one of my friends would be at the party, passed out on the floor. You just figure they're drunk, and then, hours later when they still haven't moved, everyone gathers around and they've been dead for hours." Secret junkies.

He'd been friends with Mia Zapata before she'd been murdered and despite the fact that we were living in Seattle in the mid-90's, at the beginning of the end of the whole grunge thing and punk rock just starting to get big, and all the blurring and questioning and reactionary shit that that would cause with myself and the people I knew, one thing with Erik was still very clear: he had the most passionate contempt and hatred of skinheads of anyone I'd ever met. A holdover, I think, from the whole 80's punk rock years; there were a lot more skinheads around then and things were, from what I've heard, pretty violent. When I talk about punk rock being a warzone back then, I'm not kidding. One of the things I've enjoyed about punk is a strong sense of oral tradition, and I'd heard the stories. The lines were drawn pretty clearly.

I played it pretty safe: I went to an art school in the nice part of Capitol Hill and only strayed downtown to see Erik or Collin and Mariah, friends of ours that I knew from my hometown. Erik went all over. I'd be worried about walking through a certain part of town and he just walked right through it, not like he owned it, but like he deserved to be there as much as anyone. I was ten years younger and scared. Erik just walked.

So, I heard about all this later, from Collin. I'd called him up after I hadn't heard from Erik for a while. Erik was holed up in his house, healing. Turns out a few nights before that, Erik had been walking through the park to get to his graveyard dishwashing shift at the downtown Minnie's. I wouldn't have done that in a million fucking years, not me. But Erik had to get to work and cutting through the park saved him ten minutes.

And there's three skinheads drinking in the park there, right in front of him. Two of them have 40s they're drinking from and one of them has a cane. Erik stares them down but tries to walk past them. One of them runs at him swinging and Erik, a veteran of these things, dodges and drops the guy with a fist to the nose. He's out, down, for the rest of the ordeal. And then the second skin tackles him and they're rolling, gouging for eyes and throat and all that. The guy grabs hold of Erik's ear with his teeth and nearly bites it in half and that's when Erik does the same to his nose. Erik winds up on top and is on his chest, driving punches down into his face, when the third one comes in like Babe Ruth and swings with his cane. Up from the knees, he swings the cane right into Erik's head, connecting right above the eyes. Splits his head open in a line from eye to eye. "It looks fucking disgusting, man. I'm amazed he didn't die," Collin tells me over the phone. Though, from the sound of it, he was on his way.

The skin with the cane gathers his friends up and they take off and there's Erik laying in the park at one or two am. The whole thing took about ninety seconds. Bloody mouth from biting the guy, ear hanging there, head cracked open in a straight line, gushing blood and unconscious.

He comes to, eventually. Who knows how long he lay there? I don't and neither does he. He starts walking back home, bleeding like a motherfucker. He says he passed out twice on the way to his house, just sank against a wall and sat down. This is in downtown Seattle, the middle of the night, and no one helped him. He said the few people he saw that night gave him a wide berth.

He finally makes it to his house and stumbles into the living room, passing out again on the floor, waking his roommates. They see him and start freaking out. The capper to this, the part that amazes me still, is that as they're trying to get him up to take him to the hospital, still bleeding, still with a fractured skull, he hallucinates, *thinking his roommates are the skin* -

heads, and starts trying to fight them. Jesus.

Then he passes out again, they gather him up and he's docile when he comes to again, he knows who they are and they take him to the hospital.

And Erik has no insurance and they won't admit him to the hospital. They give him a local in his ear and his head, they stitch him up. A nurse leads him to a bed and says "You can have this for an hour," and when that hour is up they tell him he has to leave.

And that's it. I never saw him again. I moved shortly after and the few times I talked to him on the phone, he was distant. I don't think it was shame, I can't see anything shameful at all in the way things went down, but I imagine something like that takes some of the fire out of you for a while.

But I miss him. He's synonymous with that period of time to me. I miss his passion and the way he wouldn't let me to fall into self-pity *no matter what*, and the way he allowed me to both learn and teach. Alex and I were putting the first issue of this zine together then and he was fiercely adamant about us going through the whole process whenever self-doubt took hold and I worried the zine would blow. And he went out and gafferred up people he knew, advertisers, to put ads in the zine to help pay for printing. That and a thousand other things, you know?

And I picture the guy in my head, one of those people that just light you up like a candle, and then they're gone, and I realize I'm not getting this down right at all. There's no way to get all of it down. I guess the only thing, the best thing, I can really say is this: I was right out of high school and trying desperately to find a place in the world as a man, an adult, and he was one of the first men that I ever met, that carried the weight of life so well, and I wanted to be just like him and I miss the guy. That's it.

Savage Nick

One of the girls, the blond one, said she wanted to take a picture of it, so she stood on the seats in one of the booths there at the bar with her camera, while Nick and the drunken huge guy posed: The big guy with his fist pulled back and Nick drawn backwards, his hands drawn up to his face in terror. Then the flash went off and shit just went crazy.

There's plenty of stories I could tell about Nick but this is one of the better ones. It starts out like most of my stories about that particular bar do: I was just wandering around .Seeing who's there, watching people shoot pool, talk, all that. Found some kids in some of the booths that I know, the air blue with smoke, the insectile buzz of stunning hipsters on the make. A vague sense of jealousy almost always overcomes me there and I smoke more than usual.

I end up bouncing between a few tables, groups of kids that I'm friends with that don't really know each other. Nick ends up talking to two women that are burlesque dancers or can-can dancers or something and I stumble over and one of them tells me about their act. I am drunk and it's getting to be so late. I've been awake forever. It is Mardi Gras, Fat Tuesday, whatever the fuck it's called and everyone is dressed up. That Jason guy is dressed up as a sailor, women are dressed as men, other women are dressed more provocatively than usual. My shirt has a hole in it. I wander between tables and cough. I drink beer from a plastic cup.

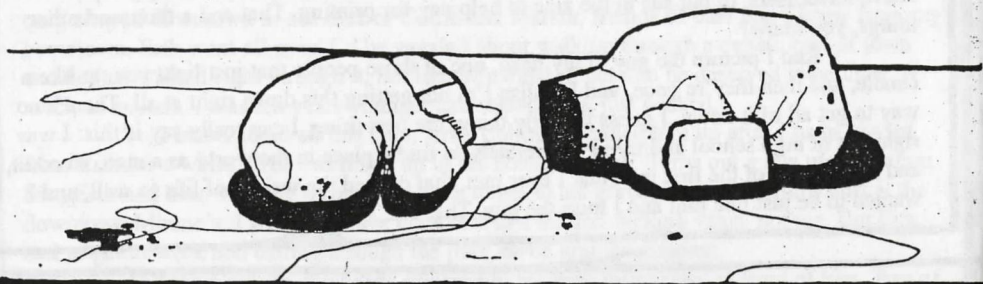
So I'm listening to these two women talk to me about their act as burlesque dancers, can-can dancers, something. While the blond woman talks to Nick, the short one with dark

hair asks about my tattoos and I'm saying something, doing my part to fill the air with my voice and then we're all standing: they have called last call, I think, and we're all getting up to get our drinks. I take a few steps away, just a few, and this huge guy, much bigger than any of us, is right in Nick's face and Nick is pushing him away. It appears he didn't appreciate Nick talking to one of the can-can dancers, even though I'd been doing the same thing fifteen seconds ago. Thick blue smoke, they'll be turning the lights on in the bar soon and we'll all shrink down, crouch down just a tiny bit, like we're vampires trying to hide from the light. It is the non-laid-back, have-a-good-time light. It is the I-was-gonna-go-home-with-you-but-now-you-look-like-a-fucking-mutant-with-the-lights-on light.

So Nick pushes the guy and then, being who he is, profusely apologizes to the guy immediately, saying there was no problem, he overreacted in the pushing the guy, all that. I am standing next to him and the short can-can dancer.

"Christ," Nick says in that way he has, "I'm sorry. I feel like I'm in high school again; my palms are sweating, my neck hurts."

The girl with the dark hair looks him over. "Don't worry about it. Don't wet your pants or anything."



"I feel like I'm going to," Nick says.

No one seems particularly disturbed except for Nick. The guy was large and drunk and sweating. *He* seemed to overreact, Nick was just reacting to *that*. But Nick is drunk too. The time is nearing for the light to get thrown up on all of us: I can feel that shit under my skin, man. I light another cigarette, Jason is still dressed like Popeye, no one seems too worried. Nick even walks over to the guy and officially apologizes, even shakes the guy's hand.

And that's when the blond one says she wants to take a picture of the two of them and Nick obliges. They do their pose and Nick told me later he had an idea of what was going to happen. He didn't really think the guy *would*, but the thought certainly crossed his mind. "If you really hit me," Nick said to the guy as they got into their camera positions, "I'm going to hit you back."

And the guy does exactly what you reading this probably figured out a while ago: as soon as the flash of the camera goes off, the guy leans into it and drills Nick right in the face. It was absolutely the shitties, low-blow suckerpunch I've ever seen.

Nick stumbles back and I'm right there with my forearms up, running into the guy. The terrified, blind kid just reacts, the most physical I've been since I got the shit beat out of me by a logger almost a decade earlier. I run the guy into the pinball machine, the pinball machine hits the wall and then Nick's right there, right past me and just smacking the guy so fast. They whirl away like a couple of fucked-up puppets with their strings cut, a weird ballet with people instantly gathering to watch but moving out of the way when the two of them come hulking and flying through.

The guy doesn't get another punch in, Nick is just on him and then one of the bouncers tackles the big guy neatly, behind the legs like a football player and then they come flying back near me where it all started. Another bartender has Nick, who's already apologizing again and trying to explain himself. The big fuck is docile, laying on the ground with the bouncer pinning him.

All I can do is walk over to the guy, still shaking with anger at the injustice of a punch

like that and lean over him. I'm back to normal now, self-conscious, but I manage to say, "Hey, nice fucking suckerpunch, man. That was fucking horrible, you know that?" It's all that I know how to do. The bouncer gets off the guy, who has blood running down the side of his face: one of Nick's rings has cut him. Nick is fine.

The short can-can dancer, the big guy's date, chides him, but the weird thing is that it's in such a boys-will-be-boys kind of way. Like he farted in church or made a retard joke or something, not like he just jumped a kid twice as small as him. "Damn," I tell her, still pissed, "that's quite a catch you got there. He's a hell of a guy."

She ignores me.

And that's pretty much it. The bartender saw the whole thing, there was no need for Nick to apologize. He caught the MAX with Chris and I walked home.

And of course, you had to know this by now, that this isn't any of Aesop's fables: there's no neat thread to tie it all together or make it OK. It was just a stupid barfight. I bet three or four or five of them went on that same night in this town. I couldn't sleep when I got home, still amazed that the guy would do that. But we all got to leave that night standing tall and not shrinking down and skulking out: in all the ensuing chaos they were late in turning on the last call lights. When I left that place that night, it was still dark and loud. The lights after the last call, man, those are the worst.

Popcorn Alone Does Not Make A Man

You know, something gets lost between the writing of something and the reading of it. And a whole *bunch* is lost between the living and the writing. Went out with John last night, having a few drinks, and I was continually amazed that I even had thing to say. Ah, big John, that's not a reflection on you, that's a reflection on me. I mean, just seems like there's not a whole lot to say most of the time.

But one thing stuck with me. We got in a discussion there in a booth in some bar, the smoke all blue and unmoving, and it was a conversation about *suffering*, for christ's sake, people's capacity for suffering. I was at that point of mild drunkenness where I start to get a lot more impassioned about a particular viewpoint I might hold, more so than I would entirely sober, but not entirely exasperated that the other person doesn't see it my way.

So, we were talking about suffering, right? Just your standard, run-of-the-mill type suffering, the financial, minimum-wage-or-less kind of suffering, lots of ramen, lots of rice, lots of potatoes. How many ways can you cook a potato? Too many. Not nearly enough.

"We've all been there," John says, "all of us." I'm still not sure if he meant every person in the bar that night, or everyone in our particular circle of friends. Anyway, I told him the story of when I was trying to make a run at being a painter, just selling paintings to pay the bills. And there was this one particularly rough stretch of time when I had nothing to eat for seven or 8 days except popcorn. Popcorn, popcorn, popcorn. Big bowls of popcorn, rationed out twice a day to make it last as long as possible. That is a feeling unto itself: your stomach still rumbles, but it's a *confused* rumble. Like it's saying, "Yeah, there's something in here, but it's not, kind sir, terribly substantial. Besides, didn't you give me this shit *last* time?"

So I relayed that story to John and I drank some of my drink and he drank some of

his drink and said that experiences like that make people stronger.

"What?" I said. "That's bullshit."

He shrugged. "It does, it makes you stronger."

"It just gives someone a larger capacity for suffering." I mean, that's not really a strength, right? It doesn't make me any less lonely or impatient. It does not make me more outgoing. It does not walk on two legs. It does not carry a bag of potatoes home to yours truly. It doesn't help me speak to women without getting nervous or help me stand up for myself when I'm getting walked on. And it doesn't help me speak or write any better, paint any better, about those subtle moments like this one that are so fucking hard to pin down; the quiet friendship John and I have built up over the past couple years, getting together to shoot the shit or shoot pool over a couple drinks. The only thing suffering seems to do is let me know that it's possible for my body to somewhat function (at least heart and lungs, you know) on two bowls of popcorn a day. And what lesson have we learned from that?

Nothing. Suffering does not build character. Physical suffering does not make you stronger. It just increases your capacity to exist with physical weakness. Nietzsche and his "that which does not kill you" pap can fuck off, or at least bring me a couple yams to go with these taters and popcorn.

Anteaters Don't Fuck Black Widows

Another night in a bar with a group of friends. We have left the opening of a group show my paintings were in when it became clear that there were just too many self-important art types around, suffocated by pretension and leather pants. The bar is new to me, only having been there a few times; they have Propagandhi on the jukebox and Pabst costs a dollar forty a pint. The air's all smoky and the floor is warped under its worn red carpet. Hear the poolballs making out and kissing each other?

We left the opening early. I have been here a while. My friends have been leaving in twos and threes until it's just me and Alex shooting eightball and I somehow end up sitting with these three woman at their table, talking. They are funny and hot and dangerous. They are hanging out with a couple guys they say they don't really know, and then there's me, who they don't know at all. It's one of those good nights without terror or worry and the charm I have seems natural to me; I'm not trying to be the cool guy, I'm just talking and having a good time. I'm over at the jukebox when Alex finishes his game and offers me a ride home if I want it, even though he lives just a few blocks away and my place is on the other side of the river. I tell him I'm having a good time with those women over there and he leaves and it is just me. Had I been wearing my time travel costume and seen the pointlessness of the next twenty minutes I would've been buckled into the passenger seat of his car quicker than shit. But I stayed. The trouble with going to bars, and the trouble with me, is an absolute inability to learn from past experience. Taverns do not a friendship or romance make, motherfucker. When are you gonna get that one down?

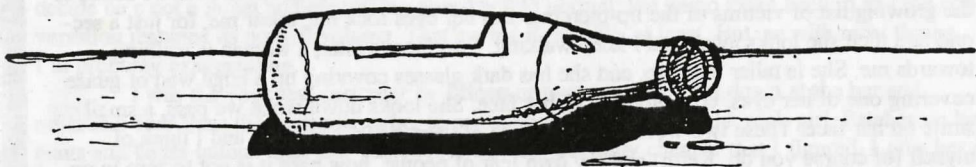
I come back and one of the women shows me the tattoo on her hand. She makes some joke and I laugh and one of the guys whirls on me. I have somehow offended him, maybe just by being there and he wants to fight outside. He is a busted up monster with teeth like a rusty handsaw. He's sweating and bigger than me.

"You motherfucker, let's go," he says, but I can tell he's just talking to talk, to hear himself. Stricken with the lack of movement, just like me. Bars are voids, black holes, cryogenic

freezes that we keep finding ourselves in. I don't think he really wants to fight me, so I just laugh and tell him he gets the first three ones free.

"Shut the fuck up, you idiot," one of the women says to him and the whole thing's diffused. He goes back to drinking and talking to the other guys there. Things keep up at their regular pace and I wonder if perhaps this will be one of the times, one of the rare bar nights that do not end up in a walk home. Perhaps an exercise in passion among strangers shall take place. I'm paying particular attention to one of the women and we've been getting along splendidly. I have been talking to them for quite a while. Then the girls exit en masse to the bathroom, one last run to do whatever they do in there before they go home. I wonder about the prudence of asking the woman for a number, a date, something. I decide it's best to just let things happen and go, as they say, with the flow. A player does not Keith make. The line *My lady, would you care to shuttle off to your place of residence and, ah, get the bone up and do the grown up all the merry night?* Pip pip! never crossed my mind. Nor did *Madam, would you care to gaze in wonderment and more than slight amusement at the sight of a inch-and-a-quarter long, fully erect penis? Perhaps this evening? Birthed in the farthest reaches of the Arkansas Ozarks, I have seen many beautiful things, things to make the spirit sing out: the gurgling stream, the mountains strung up against the purple horizon, a school of honking geese in flight. But none of them come close, none even begin to bring the same amount and quality of joy to my eyes as does gazing upon your lovely countenance. So how about it, shall we go smoke a shitload of cigarettes and create the Beast With Two Backs until dawn begins to slide under the window shades?* Slight understatement of penile length notwithstanding, I am just not the kind of guy who picks up on women easily or well. Part insecurity and partly just digusted at watching guys who do do that shit (though, I must say, not nearly as creatively), I'm more of a watcher than a player. Anyway, the guys see the women come out of the bathroom and they rise. I stay seated. Sawteeth walks by and he says to me, "Sorry about that shit earlier, man. I'm just drunk."

"That's okay."



I am just about to say something to Stacy, the aforementioned woman in particular, when she walks up and grabs her cigarettes off the table.

"You're a pussy," she says to me.

"What? Why?"

"You're just a pussy. I can see the little gears turning in your head."

And with that, she and her crew leave. She is twenty one years old, seems to have undergone an act of schizophrenia during her two minute visit to the john, she sashays and sways and swaggers out of the bar into a Portland night and I sit there, alone, feeling like Sawteeth just punched me a good one in the chops. It is the first time in my life I have ever officially *gaped*.

And the night ended like most of them do: I walked the sixty blocks home. Replayed that shit in my head, trying to figure it out. A pussy? The little gears in my head? After relaying said exchange to various friends, I have discerned a few things. (At this point, little bar-frequenting grasshoppers, little sages of the taverns and watering holes, take heed! There is valueable information to be gathered here!)

One: I choked, one of those few times, at least to my knowledge, where I was not for-

ward enough with my intentions to garner a pleasant evening of fluid-exchange with a stranger, followed up with the embarrassing spectacle of a late-morning gathering of clothes in a strange bedroom with about ten thousand pounds of hangover resting like an anvil on my head. Apparently she discerned that I wanted to ask her *something*, of which she was correct. And she was also correct in the knowledge that I had not, as of that juncture in time, asked her that something.

Two: A woman who insults you (or, well, *me*, in this particular case) for not asking her if she wants to fuck is not a gracious woman. She is not a kind woman. She is not a woman with which you (or me, in this particular case) care to share the late night hours partaking in the old slap and tickle, the Horizontal Bop, as it were. Said woman is, in all actuality, probably best avoided at all costs. Said woman's psychic and psychological makeup is akin to the hissing of an asp or the sultry chuckle of a black widow, not well aligned to your (Ok, mine) anteater-like personality, which would greatly negate the enjoyment you might receive in the act of her bestowing upon you her physical and/or sexual charms, whatever they may be.

Three: Anteaters, as the title suggests, rarely wind up in bed with black widows and there's probably a reason for that. And bars are for drinking and spending too much money, not romance.

Wheelchairs And Busted Eyes

I pass by two kids pushing a punk girl in a wheelchair. They're talking about how lame Hawthorne Street is and she is totally stunning and beautiful, except she can be added to the growing list of victims of the lip-piercing. But her eyes rock me, spear me, for just a second and then she looks away and I keep walking. Two blocks later, a woman is walking towards me. She is taller than me, and she has dark glasses covering up a huge wad of gauze covering one of her eyes, covering half of her face. She looks down when we pass, a small smile on her face. These two women in the space of three or four minutes and I think of myself (of course you do, Keith) and my own fear of people, how hard it is not to zero in on my feet when I see someone approaching. These dumb tattoos and rips in my clothes, a pseudo-rebel, mean nothing when it comes down to how I carry myself on the streets of this town.

It was an odd moment, an odd grouping of moments and one that's hard to draw correlations to. But it was one of those times when I'm stricken with the urge to speak, you know, to move and speak to someone, to reach out against this whole idea of people constantly being fucking strangers to each other. My friend Ian once told me that New York's greatest asset was anonymity; two or three thousand people at any given moment, all within a space of a few blocks, all outside and walking on the street and you don't look anyone in the eye or speak to anyone. And that's great; nine times out of ten I'm either terrified of people or bored shitless by them, but then there's these moments.

So, chalk another one up: one more locked into his routine, dictated by his fear. I just kept walking and the wind blew the goddamn smoke from my fucking cigarette right the hell apart. Right.

The George Orwellian Cocksucker

I was working the swing shift back then, answering phones and then handling the radios for tow companies. It was madness: people would get their cars towed and would call me to arrange a time to pick it up, as well as how much it would cost. It usually followed like this: I answer the phone with the name of the tow company. The person at the other end starts screaming something like "You motherfuckers towed my car!" I would finally settle them down enough to get the info on the car and where it was towed. I'd look it up in the computer and then deliver a little gem like: "Yes, ma'am, we towed your vehicle for being parked in a fire zone. That'll be a hundred and eighty five dollars to get your vehicle released with an additional sixteen dollars for each day that it's in storage." And then they would start screaming again. If I didn't get my life threatened three or four times a night, it was considered a pretty good shift. I was ragged as shit, moreso even than now, doing a lot of drinking and then crawling in to work.

I live on Burnside and there's a little cluster of bars a few blocks up the street. I usually hit the one at the beginning and the one at the end, straying away from the one in the middle, which has coined itself "old-fashioned" and has been there longer than my father has been alive. They don't serve liquor there, and while I'm pretty much a beer drinker, it just seems kind of half-assed. Like the difference between a topless bar and a full blown stripjoint. If I'm going to fall from grace with my hands behind my head, I'd like to do it with like-minded people, and a beer bar just never seemed to cut it.

You see? I don't know shit. Listen.

I went in there one night after dropping in at the two other places. Nothing going on there and I was still wide-awake, my Sunday night, back to five days of swinging on the swing shift. I walked in and it felt like I was the new guy in a western, when he walks in, his shadow spanning the floor of the bar. The other cowboys turn and stare, the place goes quiet. Then they decide he's not a threat and everything goes back to normal: the paino kicks back in and the conversation resumes its normal volume. That's what it felt like, at least. But, as with most things, I'm probably exaggerating.

I was the youngest customer by fifteen or twenty years. I sat down at the bar and ordered a beer from the bartender, who, to my suprise, is some rad punk rock girl. Patches on her pants and better tattoos than me. The beer is also substantially cheaper that I figured. I give her a tip when she lays the beer down, which, she tells me, is fairly uncommon there. We get to talking and it's nice; I'm one of the most one on one awkward motherfuckers ever but I'm able to have a good time.

There's some guy sitting next to me in a yellow checkered shirt. When she walks off, he tries to get me into a conversation. "She's a good looking peice of ass, hey?" It's not a conversation I want to get into, so I just shrug. When he steers clear of topics involving the fuckability of the bartender, I talk to him. He's fucking trashed, drinking from his own pitcher, but fairly lucid. I can tell that when he's not drinking, he's probably a fairly engaging conversationalist. As it is, when talking to me, he uses big words but slurs them.

It's getting late. The bartender comes by and talks when she can. She has bought me a couple of drinks. I'm fairly drunk and need to go to work the next day, so, suprise of all supprises, I ask for a can of pop; still wanting to talk to this woman, but not wanting to spray vomit every which way but loose. See? I'm resourceful: I plan ahead.

So the fun starts to begin. It's getting to be near last call and the guy has just bought his last pitcher of the night. He's been talking to some guy on the other side of him regarding how convenient the bartender's pigtails would serve as "handles" during a course of fellatio. I'm staring straight ahead with dead eyes. I've decided that I don't like the guy.

And apparently he's decided he doesn't like me, either. Sometime during the past sixty

minutes he's turned mean. He looks at me and squints, like I haven't been sitting there for the past two hours. He spies my can of soda and leans over and says, "What're you doing here?"

"What do you mean? I'm drunk and trying to sober up. Gotta work tomorrow."

"No," he says, leaning in close like he's got something on me that he doesn't want the rest of his comrades to know yet, "I mean, *what're you doing here?* Your little can of soda."

"Man, I've been drinking for the past two hours here. I've been sitting right next to you the whole time."

He leans in close. There's a bead of sweat running down the side of his face. Someone has just yelled out last call and they've brought in an additional bartender to wrangle all the drunks up and get them out of the place by closing time. "You look like one of those fucking ad guys, you know that? You work for Wyden Kennedy, don't you? Your little can of soda, looking around. Trying to see how the little people live, motherfucker?"

He's drunk, he's gotten to a place where, no matter what I say, there's no fucking way it's going to compute. There's no way I'm going to get through. I just tell him he's got it all wong. The whole thing it getting volatile, explosive; the guy leans in and his sweat smells like electricity.

"You know what? I've decided you're not a person of merit in my life. So get the fuck out of here."

I shrug. "Sorry, man, I don't want any trouble." I just look straight ahead, hoping to diffuse the situation, hoping he'll move on to his buddy on the other side.

"Did you hear me?" he snarls right into my ear. "*Get the fuck out of here.*"

"OK. See you later." I say and get up, walking towards the door right as the woman walks by. She's seen the whole thing. "What the fuck did you just say to him?" she says to checkered shirt. Then she walks over to me. I start telling her the whole story, how he's convinced I work for the local ad agency and am trolling the bar to see how the lower classes live. We are standing towards the end of the bar and suddenly the guy roars from across the room at me, "*You! Yeah, you! I'm talking to you, you George Orwellian cocksucker!*"

With that, the other bartender says, "Well, *someone's* cut off," and grabs the guy's nearly-full pitcher and pours it down the drain.

"You're out, guy," he says to checkered shirt. "Go home."

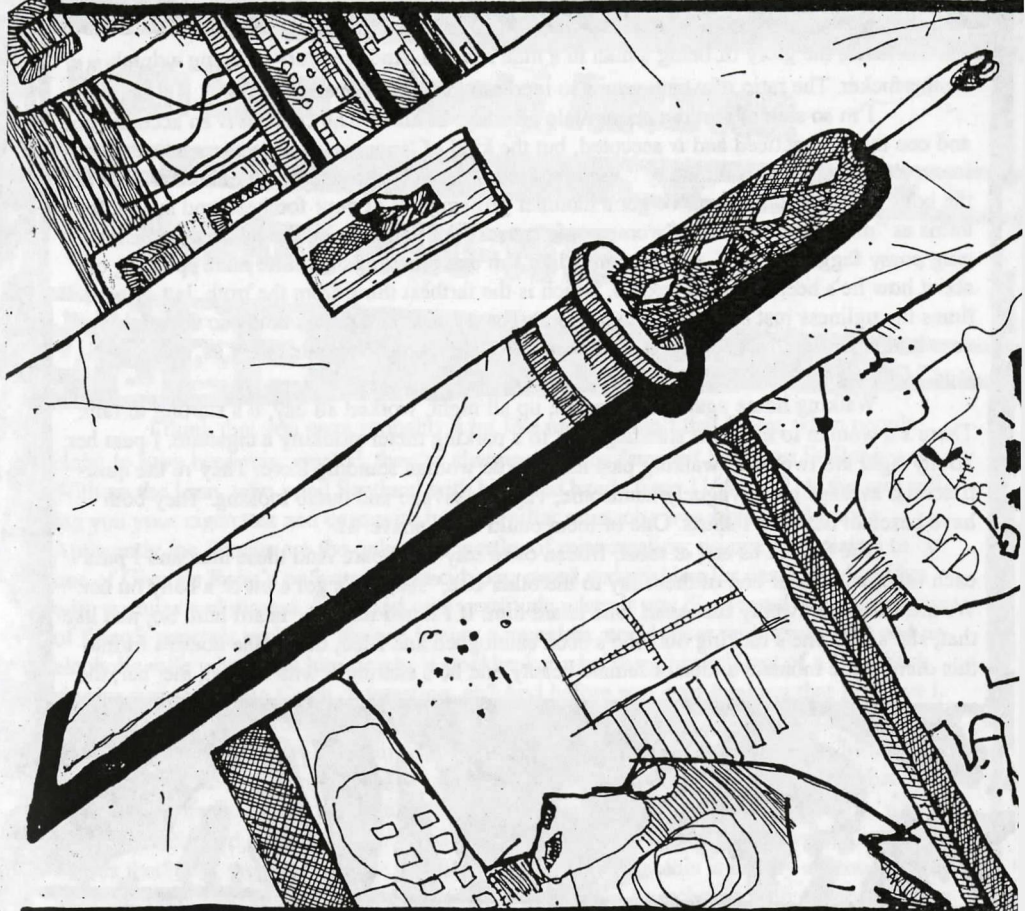
The guy snarls and storms past us out into the street.

And that's essentially it. I left, thanking her for the drinks. She told me the days she worked and said I should come back and see her. The other bartender apologized for the guy acting like that. I went back with Scott one night that she worked there and asked her out. She seemed interested and I gave her my number and she didn't call. I went there once or twice with Nick and the only person working the bar looked like Grizzly Adams, of which Nick informed him repeatedly. I don't think it was her. Checkered shirt eyed me and was silent.

One Little Sword

Lord, or Santa, just one little sword for me, one little sword for Christmas or my birthday, please. Or even on Memorial Day, or something, if you're feeling generous. Just a lit-

the sword to walk around the house with when I can't sleep or I'm out of cigarettes. Just something to walk around the house with every once in a while, something to hang on the wall and look at.



There was a guy that lived on Capitol Hill in Seattle, I'd see him every day on Broadway, some huge man with a trenchcoat and a beard and a ponytail and this monstrous sword in a sheath on his back. I saw him everyday and he never got fucked with, not by the cops or no one. But I wouldn't leave the house with mine, no way, just a nice house-sword. And I don't want one like he had; I don't want a barbarian sword, just a small katana with the handle wrapped in red and black silk. It doesn't even have to be a real one, a shitty reproduction of one, made somewhere in Mexico or even Kansas, is fine. I would be happy to have the Stratocaster reproduction of katana blades, no fucking problem, Santa. Or the Lord. Whichever.

I will not use the sword to cut down the unrighteous, or even to cut an onion. I'll just walk around the room with it, admire the needle of light running down the edge, the weight of it, silken handle against skin. Come on, I'm not asking for world peace or redemption from death. Just one little sword, that's all.

She's Got A Bit Of A Belly On Her

Ah, the glory of being a man in a man's world. And the glory of being a dumb motherfucker. The ratio of which seems to increase the more I open my eyes.

I'm so sick of reading about male privilege in zines. The concept *is* an accurate one and one that *is* practiced and *is* accepted, but the kind of language used seems applicable only in our little "hardcore community"; use that kind of language down on 13th and Burnside and the boys look at you like you've got a hammer growing out of your forehead and such lofty terms as "male privilege" and "women-safe spaces" get you, at best, the label of a treehugging pussy faggot. At best. And it sounds like I'm one more dipshit white male spouting off about how he's been cured of sexism, which is the farthest thing from the truth, but sometimes the ugliness just smacks me in the face. The offhanded ugliness that's so acceptable of men in this world, that's so casual, that seems to transcend such polite terms as "male privilege." I'm angry.

Walking home again. Tired again, up all night, worked all day, it's starting to rain. There's a woman to my right standing next to a parking meter smoking a cigarette. I pass her. To my right are two men, walking past me and the woman standing there. They're the quintessential average guys: vaguely handsome, vaguely savage and dumb looking. They both have baseball hats and t-shirts. One of them could use a shave.

The four of us are, at most, fifteen or twenty feet apart. And these men and I pass each other and I hear one of them say to the other one, "Ah, she's got a bit of a belly on her." We are fifteen or twenty feet apart. She heard him. If I heard him, *she* heard him. So, just like that, she's out. She's fucking out; she's been catalogued and filed, dear. She doesn't fit into this dumb little monster's idea of female beauty and he's sharing it with his pal, me, her, the

fucking world. His tone and offhandedness suggest he's looking at the motor in his truck or a show on the television. He's an American male, he probably couldn't spell 'privilege' if his cock depended on it.

So, tell me if this guy is acting on his male privilege, please. Or if he's just a stupid little peice of shit. Tell me if he's an average man or an average American, please. Tell me that talk minus action equals zero and then look her in the face and repeat yourself. And then, even as I contradict myself, tell me some more about privilege and male guilt. Come on, man, we know the buzzwords. You can write about it in your zine and I'll write about it in mine and we'll all be sensitive males working like crazy on our sexism while those two dumbfucks go down the street to watch the game and that woman cries against the parking meter, cut down one more time.

An Interview Via The Astral Plane

With Egon Schiele, Austrian

Painter, 1890-1918

I think that you were probably a lot like me, sir. (Isn't that funny, when people claim to have been reincarnated, they're always someone famous? Sylvester Stallone was William the Lion, who ruled Scotland with bloodied hands from 1165 to 1214, the guy selling you your cigarettes and eggs with his caterpillar mustache was Abraham Lincoln. Apparently the famous are the only ones worthy of reincarnation; no one ever claims to be one of Ghengis Kahn's unfortunate concubines, raped and wishing for death at 14, ridden with pustules and disease, beheaded with gratitude when it was discovered she's given one of Khan's generals syphilis. No one is ever a nameless stockbroker with stinky feet and an alcoholic wife who loved him dearly, a stockbroker who flung himself out of a New York skyscraper during the Big Crash. Interesting, eh? And before you start thinking that I believe I am the living embodiment of Schiele, please let me clear this up: I'm making no allusions to being the *reincarnation* of Egon Schiele, merely that I feel a kinship with the little fop. How, if I were the reincarnation of the aforementioned, could a blob of ectoplasm that bears vague resemblance to him be floating here in my apartment, alongside another blob, who, I've been informed, will act as his translator throughout this interview? Hmmm, I ask you, how is that? OK, then. Meanwhile, I'd like to inform you that this is merely an annoying sidenote, certainly not centrifugal to the Main Rant, hence I've chosen with candor to place this paragraph in parentheses; these sentences are meant to be lightly mused over and then discarded, nothing more. I apologize for the inconvenience, but I certainly don't promise that it won't happen again. One never knows when such practices might seem suitable, does one? So, let's simply move on, shall we? At the very least, I promise to make an effort not to *over-use* the Old Parentheses Mini-Rant Trick *too* often, OK? No, please, let's go. Time, as they say, is a-wastin.)

So, where was I? Ah, yes, Mr. Schiele, *Egon*, if I may, spoken with the utmost respect for the dead and the talented. Egon, I imagine that you and I were probably quite a bit alike. I doubt we would've gotten along well because of this. I look at your paintings and they scream out SEX! and DEATH! and I think you were probably lusting and terrified of both of them. You would've made a great American, Egon; I look at our billboards here in

the States, over 80 years after you've died and they all seem to scream out SEX! and DEATH! too. I imagine the Austrian nights did not treat you well, I figure you had a hard time sleeping, like me. When you spoke of the desire that artists be ranked in prestige right up there with cops and cardinals, I can see an elevated sense of self-importance so similar to mine, though I have a hard time finding the odd, contradictory sense of self-loathing that I myself walk around with. My friend says that I've been known to lay in the gutter and look down on the world and I understand what he means. Where is your self-loathing, Egon? Where is your belief that you were a monster with angel wings taped to your back? Could it be drawn there in your numerous self-portraits in which you stand or crouch, emaciated and screaming, the teeth in your mouth as jagged as a busted bottle of Henry's Dark? Could that be it?

(Egon and his translator confer. After Egon spits a wad of German onto the floor, the translator, who's voice I find quite pleasant, translates for him: *You pretty much hit the nail on the head there, skipper. Been doin your homework, ain't ya?*)

Terrific. But another thing I don't get is that, even though you were considered one of Austria's most prominent artists by the time you were nineteen, twenty, and even though your nudes are charged, absolutely exploding, with eroticism, dare say I *lust*, you couldn't seem to get laid to save your life. Here too, sir, are we able to draw a correlation between you and myself. The difference is, I'm just some guy with a shitload of paintings in his closet and bad tattoos that seem to blur more and more each passing day, while you were both the Basquiat and David Lee Roth of Vienna in 1911, 1912. There must've been dozens of young Austrian women who felt more than a slight stir in their knickers when gazing upon your countenance, but by all accounts it seems that you remained a virgin until your early twenties. You were a good looking dude, Egon, I've seen pictures, what made the journey so difficult or terrifying to you? Were you so abrasive that you couldn't even work out one or two rolls in the hay with a few society women, daughters of the men who commissioned your paintings? Were you scared or just so arrogant no one but the most diehard of fans could stand to be around you?

Of course, there's many, many stories about you. I've heard them from many sources, though needless to say, few of them have been in books. Even then, when it comes to the annals of history, that malleable and elusive toad in the witchgrass, what's true and what isn't? Is something more true because it was published by Knopf Books, rather than spoken by a man who needed his teeth brushed? Anyways, Egon, the rumors: Your father died of syphilis and you also had it and gave it to your sister, or she gave it to you. You drew a lot of little kids, did a lot of prepubescent female nudes, and of course it's been spoken that you housed them, drew them, molested them, street urchins all. How about it, Egon? What rings hollow and what rings true?

(Egon, and his astral German to English translator, choose silence on these points. Unfortunately, and on quite a sour and dark note, and so similar to the questions *How the fuck did Mellencamp smoke five packs a day and still manage to sing?* and *How do they get the creme filling in Twinkies?*, the world may never know.)

Well, then, sir, onto better things. When you showed Klimt your portfolio and asked him, at seventeen, if you had talent, he stroked his great beard and said, "Yes. Too much, in fact." He was a mentor, but by your early twenties you'd surpassed him in bravery and style, if not in decorativeness. You were a screaming tiger to Klimt's goldenrod. Though you drew from Klimt early on, learned from him, you were a spearhead of your own within a very short time. You were capable, in paint, in pencil, of incredible savagery and stunning gentleness; Klimt never got much beyond painting socialite women in pastel colors with patterns adorning the background.

But enough asskissing; your ego, it's well known, was monstrous. Your ego, if it was food, could've fed the multitudes for years. Your ego is a steak dinner for everyone in New

York. Your ego is Top Ramen on my shelf for the rest of my life, so I'll quit, as they say, blowing smoke up your ass and actually get down to a bit of critical analysis of your character, if not your art.

(A groan from the grave, vague guttural mutterings that the translator tells me equates to, *Oh, Jesus Christ, here we go again.*)

What was the year, Egon? 1915? I think so. After living with your wife for a few years in a small town outside Vienna, you were finally busted on obscenity charges. It was bound to happen sometime; you just flaunted one too many charcoal drawings around of ten year old girls wearing no clothes. And being that the town was as small as it was, there just wasn't that much room for debauchery, you couldn't go out and get drunk and act like a crazy motherfucker in the east end of town and then hole up in the west end til things cooled down a bit. It was a village, you and your wife lived as hermits lived. You did not entertain people, you did not go out much, just you, your wife, the occasional visitor, the even more occasional person of the Upper Crust who would go to your place to sit for a portrait. You were not well liked there, you in your painters smock, glowering and handsome and full of yourself, an ego fifty miles wide, shunning the town you lived in. The town took it personally and someone finally reported you to the magistrate. Needless to say, your studio housed hundreds of drawings and paintings, years and years of charcoal, pencil, gouache, oil, canvas, paper and the vast majority of them naked women with bared genitalia and lavisious smiles upon their painted faces, the vast majority of them a questionable age. You were in court immediately thereafter, the judge ruled your work "obscene" and actually burned two of your canvasses there in the courtroom. You were thrown in the pokey, of which much has been written. You kept a journal, excerpts of which have been included in the many books penned and compiled since your death. Unfortunately, in my opinion, the journal and the work you did there is nothing more than a testament to what a fucking little wimp you were.

(A roar from the Other Side! Screams and bellows from a long ago disintegrated throat! An ego wounded! The translator calmy hurls obscenities at me, via Egon, sounding like an R-rated version of the guy in the Micro Machines commercials of yesteryear.)

Well, look, Egon, give me a break. You did twenty eight days. Less than a month, for God's sake. You had your own room, your own bed, a window. They kept your door open half the time, with a guard sitting outside your cell reading the paper. You were given pens, a notebook, paper, pencils, charcoal, gouache. Jesus Christ. Do you know what prisons in America were like at the turn of the century? You did your little twenty eight days and whined like a motherfucker the entire time. Your journal entries are all about how you are dying in a cage, how the artist must be free, blah blah and blah. The drawings you did there are some of the worst of your career, portraying you as an emaciated skeleton hurled and crouching against the corner of the room. Give me a break, Mr. Door Open Half The Time. Mr. Three Squares A Day. If you were a Sioux Indian, Egon, say a Blackfoot or an Oglala, what would your name be? Ah, the tribe needs a new letterhead designed for it's stationary! Let's have old Piss And Moan do it, he's good with a pen if you can put up with his whining.

I'm sorry, maybe I've judged you a bit too harshly. *Maybe*. It's just that your cries of anguish don't seem exponential to the amount of suffering that such a place could have put upon you. Of course, that's a judgement of ultimate unfairness, isn't it? To judge one person's suffering by your own meter. I certainly haven't walked a mile in your shoes, so perhaps it's better if I said nothing. Perhaps we should just move on, to the final point, the final thrust of this discussion (albeit a somewhat *one-sided* discussion, Egon, I must say) that we've been having. So, I'm sorry, I judged you too harshly. Chums?

(Silence from Egon and his otherworldly assistant. Since he hasn't told me to shut the hell up, or that he's leaving, etc., I take his silence as an acknowledgement that we may move on to the final, and possibly most important, point.)

Egon, you're dead.

(A momentary pause, a blob of ectoplasm blabs and is translated to English, impatience written all over it: *Right. What's your fucking point, hombre?*)

Goodness, I never knew you to be so joyous and free with expletives. Death, it appears, has put you in touch with those of quite a lower standard of vernacular, I must say. Anyway, you're dead. Upon this we both agree. You croaked along with a fair portion of Europe throughout that time period, stricken down when a nice little case of influenza came rolling its jolly fangs and pincers through your town, your country, your continent. These are the facts as I understand them, please feel free to correct me if these little tidbits do not ring true. OK:

1) Dead in 1918, at twenty eight years old. Influenza.

2) Died three days after your wife, whom you drew on her deathbed.

3) She was seven months pregnant with your first child.

4) And now here we are, you with unfinished canvasses and a sailor's mouth, me with cigarette lungs and a face like a scarecrow. Similar in our temper and our taste for incendiary allegories; *Cardinal And Nun*, for example, in which a cardinal in red clutches a woman of the Cloth, his calves flexing as they embrace on their knees. I bet you stirred some shit up with that one. But one of my absolute favorites is when some church commissioned you to do a portrait of a young girl, 18, 19, that would be then transferred to stained-glass and adorn one of the Church's windows. I forget her social standing, or why she should be allowed the very unhumble honor of being on a church window, but I sure remember your painting. Boy howdy, do I. You painted her in a very proper dress, a straight-ahead view, the only flesh showing was that of her face and hands. Proper in every way. Except you had rendered on her mouth a smile of the most unacceptable sort; the leering smile of a Trollop, the gleam of many a sexual tryst, the twinkle of many a carnal incident, in her big baby blues. And the capper: Her hands, those bony and elongated hands that you seemed to draw so joyously, that you drew so fucking well, are placed squarley over her knees, clasped loosely together, and the negative space between the two palms, right in the spot that it should be, looks suspiciously like the shape of a vagina. The church, needless to say, never used the painting as a prototype for the window.

(Much laughing, a gleeful giggling, that doesn't need a German to English translation in the least, nor does the sound of Egon slapping his knee in merriment.)

Egon, despite all I said about your jail time and your ego and all that, I'll be honest, you're a fucking genius. When you were on, you were *on* like no one else, living dead or inbetween.

(*You're fuckin'-A right, turbo. Ahem.*)

So, to end this interview, provide me with a nice capper for the whole thing to put in the zine, and simply out of my own curiousness, I have one final question for you: What was your secret? Do you have any tidbit or gem of wisdom, any advice to impart to a sea of Struggling Artists here in the New Millenium, that look to your body of work for encouragement or inspiration? In a nutshell, what should we, the Living, do? And after this, I'll let you get back to your golf game or whatever it is you're doing these days, and thank you very much in advance for taking the time to speak to me.

(A lengthy pause. The ectoplasm, if it was not a big ball of astral goo, and had a chin that could be scratched and fingers that *could* scratch, might have done so at this point in the time continuum. The translator and I wait patiently. After a time, the goo speaks, in what sounds like an earnest and sincere German voice, lacking the tone of arrogance and condescencion that one might expect when asking Mr. Schiele to give one final comment. The translator translates and I scribble furiously in my notebook and when I look up, they're gone, both of them, leaving nothing but a brief whiff of what smells like rubbing alcohol and

me sitting there with an overloaded brain.)

(Well, the translator had said, *just do it*. Schiele was apparently unaware that Nike, a corporation conglomerated and capitalised long after his death, has been saying this for a while now. *If you're going to paint, then paint. Through syphilis and sorrow, good reviews, bad reviews or no reviews at all, paint up a storm. Paint up a fury. Paint up one wall and down the other in your underwear. Just do it; do it and live like your ass is on fire. Trust me, porkchop, when I say that life is too fuckin'-A short. If you want to stare out the window eating Rice-A-Roni, then do it. Because you want to. Be anxious, but never ever be bored. Paint or go bowl-ing, but do it with grace, godammit.*

The Spectres Of Fifth Avenue

We are the ghosts of 3 a.m. We spit on the windows of the fashion stores, the clothing stores, long after the last bus has run. While neon burns. While we burn.

Yeah, while neon burns and the last promise of who we are has finally come true, we spit on the windows of the fashion store in the dark of night, the mannequins following our steps under their cones of light there. We spit on the windows; you show us what beauty is and then put it behind glass for us to see and not touch, not be. You tell us *this is what beautiful is* and then say if the price is right boys and girls, sons and daughters, it's yours. But it's a high price. An impossible one, a wide, yawning mouth of a price, ever consuming. More clothes, new clothes, ripped clothes, no clothes.

This is what beautiful is, we're told, and that's what we remember when we walk down the street in the daytime and size each other up, gauge each other, without even knowing it, without even meaning to. Divided by class, divided by pants and shirts and shoes and skirts. I do it all the time, all all all the time. So do you. The mannequins are pretty the way people are pretty: unmoving, unapproachable, blank. Tell me what beautiful is and then affix a price tag and code. Holes in my pants, holes in our heads. How many pairs of pants can I fit in my wallet? How many wallets can I fit in the barrier we place between each other, the judgements that we act upon ten seconds after we see each other, what our faces and hair and clothes look like? Is our judgement bigger than a breadbox or smaller than the very small idea that we've been sold, that fashion should matter one fucking iota?

Forty hours a week, twenty hours, an odd job or an old job or no job, over there is always better than here for us. The shine of the magazine, the smiling people in the magazine with the bright eyes, they are better than our real dull eyes. A busload of dull eyes going to a job we've been at for too long to do things we don't want to do around people that maybe we don't care for too much all so that we can still not be able to afford the things in the window that we're told will bring us closer, ever closer to that impossible beyond of *there*, success, America's greatest gift of unyielding potential and dismal and false returns. One tenth of one percent of all the people are in the magazines and the rest of us just burn with the neon. The rest of us are on this bus this morning or doing the ghost dance of a downtown 3 a.m. And another one tenth of one percent, or some number, some number, *they* are the ones that tell us this is what beautiful is, the goal is on Saks Fifth Avenue, the goal is behind a pane of glass, the goal is a moaning spectre shaking its chains all the way from here to the food stamp office to skid row to the filthy pitched curb.

They tell us what beautiful is and they give us men and women as icons and idols to worship, men and women who will never ever have any idea what its like on this bus at 7 am with hungover day laborers and waitress mothers and me and you. And they will never under-

stand or even care about the rest of us, too, the ghosts with empty pockets and emptier guts, haunting downtown like visions, staring in the window of fashion stores. The dream is an impossible valley.

And we, under the guise of dressing according to our personalities, allow the way we dress to *become* our personalities. And allow each other to be viewed as less than or more, according to that code. Fashion and judgement and dismissal, all of them making out in the confines of our skulls and too-narrow lives.

A Cacaphony Of Bird Wings In

Three Parts

1. Somewhere between the foot of the Hawthorne Bridge and my apartment, mildly drunk, it hits me; all those bad dreams I try to forget about, try to ignore or paint through or drink through, they just come down all at once, sounding like a cacaphony of bird wings, and I end up sagging against the wall of some nameless hotpocket restaurant downtown, still fifteen blocks from home, spent. An old man in a young man's body. Christ, I need more sleep. As if I *could* sleep.

I've been on a 2-hour kick, what Bill used to call a "disco nap." Between rails of coke and changing your bellbottoms and hitting the dance floor, you take these small two hour naps, I guess. Fortunately or unfortunately, I don't do the coke and all my pants are ripped out and torn at the cuffs, but I'm well versed in the act of the two hour nap, and let me tell you, porkchop, they don't do one fucking bit of good.

I'm leaning against the wall of that restaurant or office building or whatever the fuck it is, down around 2nd Avenue, when a cop car drives by, slowing when he sees me. I nod to him and fish in my pockets for a smoke, start walking. *And just where the hell do you think it is you're going?* I ask myself.

Home, I guess.

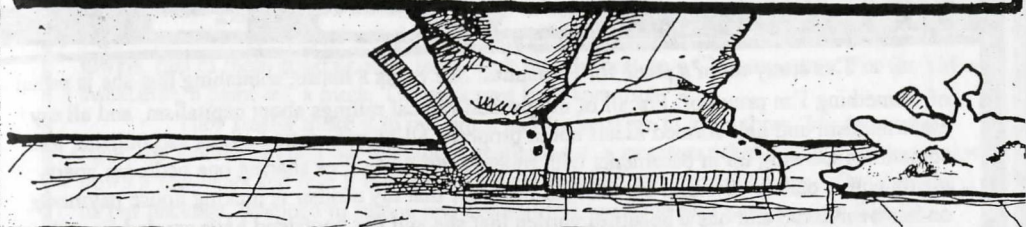
Oh yeah? And where might that be?

That's when I roll my eyes and start moving; bad poetry and poorly-written stories are one thing, but when you start telling lines like that to *yourself*, it's best just to put one foot in front of the other and start going *somewhere*. And so I do.

2. Welcome to this, this hangover life. Under fire, but living under a rock at the same time. This hangover life: ash on the floor, the membrane inside your skull pulled tight with dehydration, your brain feeling like it's speared with bits of glass. You live here.

Throwing up in the john, nothing but bile and the two aspirin you tried your best to hold down. The beer bottles sit on the coffee table, the counter and the floor like the bones of some animal. You did not fall down walking home from the bar last night. This hangover life: feeling like a banished and glorious king the night before, now you just feel like shit. You're becoming a caricature of yourself. For all the times you've railed against the Dylan Thomas Syndrome, against pseudo-artist hipster motherfuckers wallowing in their pain and booze and self-pity, there you are gagging at the kitchen sink, shivering and using both hands to hold your coffee cup.

You artist, you. You alcoholic, you.



3. Three days down, you've been working and you don't drink when you work but it's your Friday night now and here you are. This house is full of people, the band in the basement was terrible. You have somehow managed to kiss a girl on the back steps of this house with everyone watching. The keg does not end. A friend will tell you later that people were talking a lot of shit and that you were the official Drunk Guy of the party but for now you're a piece of driftwood, being pulled in and out with the tide. You try your luck with another girl that has been flirting with you all night, but apparently you've been mistaken; when you ask her if a kiss or two might not be in order she recoils and turns savage. "No," she says. "I have a boyfriend. I love my boyfriend." She says that to you three more times in quick succession while you stand there nodding with your cup of bitter beer. You say, "OK, sorry I bothered you, ma'am," not unkindly and wander off, hoping vaguely that her loving boyfriend does not want to beat you up later.

In the basement are two other girls, acquaintances more than friends, and somehow in the course of conversation one of them throws her cup of beer on you and the other follows suit. "Well, what the shit," you say, "I sense a theme here," and throw your own beer on yourself as well. You stagger off with their laughter rolling off your back and fall down there, in the basement. You stay there on the floor a moment, the cement cool against your cheek, grateful that you went down with a plastic cup instead of a bottle. You rise. You are covered in filth. It's time to go; the tide's growing deeper and the people are thinning out. You know less and less of them and the few you do know seem less and less willing to put up with you. On the front porch, Scott is talking to a woman and they are laughing and you talk to them briefly. Then you take a piss off the porch and wind up accidentally pissing on the woman's bicycle. You apologize profusely and then kick Scott's beer over. They are both very gracious. The woman, named Jeanette, is kind and Scott is forgiving as he's been known to reach the level of drunkenness that you're at now. As of this writing, the two of them are officially "going out" and you feel an odd mixture of pride and embarrassment when recalling your moments there on the porch, seeing the act of urination on her bicycle as a kind of catalyst for them on the night they met.

You stagger off to go pass out on the couch of Castle Grayskull. Otis will come out of his bedroom the next morning to see you there, just woken up, dirty from your fall in the basement, sick and savage and he'll tell you later that he'd never seen anyone so hungover. You will buy a banana and try not to throw it up on the busride home, wanting to apologize to the kind elderly woman beside you for the way you smell. You will think of skulls and death and the sentimentality of drunks, the curse of searching for meaning in the most mundane of things.

Life just *is*, and yours is not a sad or noble or even interesting one. The beat of bird wings in your skull, they ring out like bombshells.

Cats In Velvet Dresses

I'm at my mom's place for Christmas. She owns a house, something that she is proud of, something I'm proud of. For all of my psuedo-radical railings about capitalism, and all my emotionalism and half-formed ideals about property, all of my contradictions and bullshit, after sometimes growing up in basements with rodents and spiders, or sharing one bedroom apartments with a curtain dividing our "rooms", the fact that my mother is making house payments on her own home and has a beautiful garden that she and her boyfriend have created from their own sweat and their own time means something to me.

And it's Christmas. Christmas was probably the best time of year in my house as a kid; no one drank for those few days, there were no fistfights, very little screaming. In a place where madness and addiction was considered normal, Christmas was serene, the summer breeze between tornadoes. Each year Christmas seems to mean less and less to me, my own madnesses and addictions possibly beginning to fill the gaps. Or maybe it's just the natural evolution of growing older. Getting tired. During the few days I'm at my mom's place, I stay up long after she and Larry have gone to bed, sitting in the darkened living room, looking at the roses of color the Christmas lights throw off the ornaments, struggling to smell the smells of my youth, hold on to that sense of serenity. Self-pity, that dumb but persistent killer. He's hard to shake. I stay up like that each night I'm there and while the chanting and poisonous crowd in my head doesn't shut up, its volume lessens. Every once in a while, it leaves entirely. For which I'm grateful.

Another reason I'm proud of my mother? She knows her neighbors. We grew up in apartments and kept to ourselves in regards to our community. Now my mother lives on a fairly quiet street and she knows the people that she lives among. The people across the street, for example. See, it's the afternoon of Christmas Eve and I look out the window and there is the little boy and his mother. She is holding his hand as they walk down the street, both of them laden with small packages in their free hands. My mother has told me about them and this trip they're making on Christmas Eve has become somewhat of a tradition there on Hiatt Street.

The woman, my mom's neighbor, is raising that small boy and about twenty cats. "She's a simple woman," my mom says, "she's just an incredibly peaceful, simple woman." Though her one quirk: she dresses her cats up. There are cat houses, cat *mansions*, in their backyard that the woman's boyfriend has made. She buys dresses at garage and estate sales and dresses her cats up. The cats, even in frilly dresses and bonnets, are as calm and docile as the woman herself there in the cradle of her arms. She sometimes brings her finds over to my mom's place to admire, or occassionally a cat in a new outfit. She recently brought over a small red velvet dress and my mom *oohed* and *ahhed* appropriately. She told my mom, her plain face beaming, which cat would be given such a gift and then said, "But she only gets to wear it on Christmas. It's just a Christmas dress."

And her son. Despite what you or I may think of her penchant for dressing up cats in dresses, she seems to be doing OK with her son. He seems to have inherited her calmness, the sense of simple joy she walks around with. She threw him a birthday party last year and when

Larry walked over with a present and a salad with tomatoes and cucumbers from their garden, the kid came barrelling out of the yard and gave him a big hug. "Hi, Lawwy!" he exclaimed. And when he saw the bowl, "Oh boy, *sawad!*" She seems to be raising him with love and it shows: no five year old can fake getting excited over a goddam salad.

So it's the afternoon of Christmas Eve there on old Hiatt Street and the woman and her son are walking up and down the street. Say what you want about Christmas, but today is the day of tradition and ritual: they have small packages, gifts to their neighbors, in their hands and they go from house to house, delivering them. Mom and Larry have been expecting the woman and her son and they have gifts to give as well. For the woman, two sets of towels, one of them appropriately laden with cats decorating a Christmas tree. For the kid, a sweatshirt, a paint set, a truck. The packages look beautiful.

They finally make it to our place and we're there to greet them. My mom was right; the woman is plain but exuding a gentleness, a *sweetness* that makes your heart slow down a few beats and take a breather. They are shocked and suprised when, after they hand us our package, wrapped in ribbon and colored foil, we have packages as well. The kid exclaims "*Wow!*" when we hand him his gifts. We stand out in the driveway for a few minutes and talk, me mostly quiet and just feeling some of that peace that'd been elusive for so long; just hanging out among these people. My friends and I seem to live so fast, it's nice to just sit there, to feel a part of the moment. I've never met these people but have heard about them, and I just want to watch them and be there.

They get ready to leave and the boy gives my mom a hug, then Larry. Then he looks at my mom while pointing at me and says quietly, "Can I give him a hug, too?" And just like that, something breaks inside me, or maybe something gets fixed. That crowd of vipers in my head, that always sings out and negates every good thing I've ever done, shuts up in shock. *What's this? Who, me? Kid, are you sure?* This kid. Me with my tattoos and corkscrew hair and needing a shave.

"You sure can, honey," she says and he looks at me and smiles and opens his arms like bird wings.

I crouch down and hug him, this little boy, this little boy giving me such a shock with his kindness. Just like that, this little kid breaks my heart. A little boy so full of love that he's got enough to share with me and not want a fucking thing in return. Just like that, he teaches me about honesty and passion and living inside the moment. I'm a selfish man; nine times out of ten, when I do something, I've calculated the possible repercussions, good or bad. It's a fine line between "logic" and selfishness. It's a dog eat dog punch dog in its face and take its wallet world. Much of the time, I feel like I'm not such a great guy and this kid is looking up at me with his arms out like he's Superman and he's smiling at me.

I crouch down and hug him, his arms are a circle around me. A sometimes ugly life, this one, an often desperate and sad and mundane one and the kid circled me in his tiny arms and when I was looking for that fleeting sense of peace and kindness and couldn't find it, he gave it to me in the simple act of a goddam hug. Gave me mine back and some of his to spare for when the seas got rough.

They leave and I excuse myself from Mom and Larry and go into the garage. I smoke a cigarette and marvel at that kid, that family, this life. Like I said at the beginning, if you stay out in the open, life hands you these moments, sometimes brutal, sometimes beautiful, sometimes just fucking hilarious and it's up to all of us to *see* them and then do what we will with them. What I did was I stood in that garage smoking and shaking my head, and was I smiling a little bit? Yes, I was. And did I cry a little bit? Yes, I did that, too. Waves of something broke over this stupid and stubborn heart: I realized just how often I cling to exaggerated wars, wars on the battlefields of my own insecurities, my own fears, wars in the head that I

can't shake, wars in the heart that have been there for years and years, that hardly ever leave. How often I feel guilty when I haven't done a thing wrong, how much guilt and shame act like a snakeskin or a mask, fear holding me down and away from so many things. Oftentimes feeling bitter and dirty and tired, much of the time feeling ugly, most of the time just feeling like a jackass, the kid brought me to tears there in the garage; joy or hope or peace, something *good*, something *pure*, the things I felt when I was his age, blossomed in the folds of this heart.

I snuffed the smoke in the ashtray and walked into my mother's house to help her with dinner.

Everything, absolutely everything, is forgiven.

So, i've been wanting to do an AVOW issue made up of just stories, and here they are. several days writing them, several hours editing, cutting and pasting. i bet there's still mistakes here and there, but oh well. do with it what you will.

jeff and i got into a punching match the other night at castle grayskull.

i would've finished this thing 2 nights ago, but i couldn't even sit down in a chair without groaning in pain or laughing at the ridiculousness of it. and i still think something is wrong with one of my ribs, this one right here. what's next? wrist burns? jeff putting on armor and us hitting him with croquet mallets in the front yard? oh, wait...

as always, there's lots and lots of folks on the periphery, friends for sure, but then there's the handful that

constitute the tried and true lightmakers and rumpshakers: ELI, JAKE, JEFF, JOHN HOWARD, JOSH, MOLLY, NATHAN, NINA, OTIS, SAL, SCOTT and TYLER.

THANK YOU.

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