

# THOUGHTWORM



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Hello,

One recent evening, Malinda and I took a walk down a trail near our house. As we walked, rabbits foraged at the edge of the mesquite trees. The trail winds along a small stream with steep grassy sides. It's not quite so idyllic as I make it sound, but it's a nice place to walk all the same. We continued walking, and as we looked down the hill to the stream, we saw a skunk ambling along purposefully. The skunk started climbing up the opposite bank of the stream from where we were. At the top of the bank, we saw some movement. I thought it was a rabbit, but Malinda said that it was larger than a rabbit. Meanwhile, the skunk continued to edge its way up the bank, heading toward the spot at the top where we saw this movement. All of a sudden, the creature that had been moving around rose up out of the tall grass to get a good look at the skunk. It was a coyote! The skunk crisscrossed back and forth, with its tail held high, trying to decide what its best course of action was. After a couple of minutes, the coyote lost interest, and the skunk moved farther along the bank before finally cresting the hill several yards away from where the coyote sat.

Being able to walk a few minutes down my street and witness such an encounter makes this place where I live special. But, I've still wrestled with my feelings for Wichita Falls for the entire nine months that we've lived here so far. There isn't any one single characteristic of this area that either makes me hate it or love it. It's very hard for me to describe how I feel here, and how much of it has to do with me personally, or my surroundings. These are the themes, though, that I've chosen to tackle in this issue. They are the ones that have been burdening my mind, and so I had no choice but to write about them.

A lot of factors contribute to my overall sense of well-being, and it's often difficult to isolate and examine individual ones. I am a mess of conflicting traits, tendencies, desires, and needs. For example, I tend to shun human contact because it often makes me feel both uncomfortable and inept, yet, at the same time, I know that it is this contact that I crave and require in order to feel alive and engaged in living my life. Lately, I've been trying to figure out the right combination of elements that's necessary to make me feel happy about myself and my life. It's still a long road ahead, but I think that this issue of the zine holds some of the pieces to the puzzle. I hope you enjoy the read. Malinda created the stunning cover, which continues to cause my jaw to drop. A very special thanks goes to her for everything!

Sean

## 1. First contact

My first impressions of this place came during my two-hour drive from the Dallas/Ft. Worth airport to the city of Wichita Falls, where I had an appointment to meet with my probable new employers. I had gotten directions from the Internet, and they led me on what began as a sketchy route through some tiny North Texas burghs that obviously registered as the most minuscule dots on a map. Horrified at the middle-of-nowhere-type features of these towns, I tried to start thinking more positively as I eventually navigated the rental car onto a 4-lane highway that at least appeared to be heading "somewhere."

As I drove, I looked around and wondered aloud, "Where the hell are all the trees?" The entire landscape appeared to have been flattened, beaten down, or stunted from further growth. The trees that I did see were short scraggly gnarled dark clumps, scattered here and there. I felt like I'd landed on another planet; I could not believe that people lived out here. And I kept driving and driving, and nothing seemed to change. The road kept going, but it wasn't getting anywhere. I began to doubt that a populated area would, in fact, appear along this stretch of desolation.

## 2. The city

Eventually, as the directions had promised (although I'd been eyeing them with increasing doubt as I appeared, on paper at least, to be getting closer to my destination), signs of modern 21<sup>st</sup> century America began to appear again. I stopped at a truck stop just outside of town, bought some orange juice, and contemplated my fate. I was to go directly to my hotel, "settle in" as they say, and call the guy who would eventually become my boss. Then we were going to check out the library.

I drove into the city proper, and promptly drove right through it and out of it without realizing what had happened. I saw what I thought was my hotel, as I was pulling back onto the freeway, heading on towards what would've shortly become Oklahoma, had I kept going. I pulled off the highway, turned around and tried again. Failed attempt number two. Once again I turned around and, this time, found the well-hidden unmarked entrance to the Econolodge that would be my home for the next three days.

The main reason for my difficulty in physically getting to the hotel can easily be chalked up to the ridiculous road infrastructure in this town. For some reason unbeknownst to probably 99.3% of the population of Wichita Falls, the city planners decided that what the city really needed was a set of crisscrossing bypasses that would enable commuters



to avoid that brutal imaginary traffic on the city streets. Of course, before they even built these ridiculous roadways, nobody could possibly have had a commute of more than 10-15 minutes. Staying on city streets, I was able to drive easily from one outer edge of town to the opposite edge in less than 20 minutes. As a result of this crazy system of elevated roadways with speed limits of 60 mph, though, I can get from my house to the library by car in 8 minutes flat. But it also meant that I was destined to get repeatedly lost while trying to get around town on my initial visit here last July.

As I looked around the city during my visit, I didn't think it was quite as ugly as the surrounding countryside I had driven through on the way in, but that didn't mean I was enthralled with the place. To begin with, the entire downtown section appeared to be virtually abandoned. This is where the library is located, and apparently its placement there was part of a hopeful initiative by the city to stimulate interest and growth downtown. Well, it hasn't worked yet. The area is still full of vacant buildings and hardly any functioning businesses. The south side of the city, where our house is located, is where all the new commercial growth has occurred. It's a pretty typical American strip-mall, chain store wasteland. The sort of thing you'd see in most small towns and cities across the country. Not a pretty sight, by any stretch of the imagination.

I should say here that I have previously lived exclusively on the east coast, most of those years having been spent living close to the Appalachian Mountains in one state or another. I've lived in a mid-sized city, in and on the outskirts of a small college town, and grew up in a small lakeside community. All of these places had their merits, both in natural beauty and in worthy businesses that I was more than happy to spend my money at (independent theatres, vegetarian restaurants, local natural food stores, etc.). Wichita Falls, on my first cursory and later more in-depth glances, has none of these things to offer. Well, Ok, there is a natural food store, but trust me, it's literally the worst one I've ever been in. This is a university town, yet it has none of the amenities that usually come with such a distinction. It's simply a town that happens to also have a university in it. In short, it doesn't have a lot going for it.

### 3. My attitude

Ok, I'll admit at this point to having a bad attitude about a lot of things. I'm more likely to have a negative reaction than a positive one, in a lot of situations. And as much as I'd like to believe the opposite, I can be deeply affected by my physical environment. I have previously gone through the experience of trying to move away from my problems by

physically moving to another place. I've learned the lesson that this is not a viable solution for me. However, my surroundings still affect my mood from time to time, and especially when they are new, or have changed drastically in some way.

Something was preventing me from being happy when we first moved here. I later realized that it was me who was preventing myself from being happy, but, at the time, I was quick to look around and tell myself that this place was bringing me down. I was at odds with my surroundings, but was unwilling to even attempt to find a bright side. I closed myself up and removed myself from everyday life. I was a shell, a husk that neither absorbed nor contributed anything.

Meanwhile, Malinda was there the whole time, saying it's not that bad. She was grounded; she accepted that this was not our ideal of a place to live, but she was determined to make the best of it. Things would've been much better if we both had that attitude. But, unfortunately, as usual she had to be the cheerleader, while I was the player continually in a slump. A routine that we've both become weary of.

#### 4. Quiet beauty

I finally made somewhat of a breakthrough one day as I was driving home from work. And I should say here that the one single thing that struck me when I came down here to visit in July was how big the sky was. I remember commenting to Malinda on the phone about how the clouds looked. Anyway, as I drove home, the sun was setting and the sky was this incredible shade of purple, the clouds were scattered shreds of purplish white, edged with bright golden tinting from the sun behind and below them. I was literally in awe as I drove towards this scene in the sky, and I felt kind of humbled. I mean, here I had been looking around so critically at this place, determined to see the ugliness in it. And it's easy to find ugliness if your mood is black all the time. But I didn't even bother looking in places that I had previously taken for granted.

Our friend Ashley used the phrase "quiet beauty" when describing Texas (she lived outside of Ft. Worth during part of her childhood). For some reason, this phrase stuck in my head and I carried it around until I finally grasped the complete significance of it. A couple of conversations helped me to do this. One was with a coworker as we drove to Ft. Worth for a workshop. A couple of times during the trip she had tried to engage me in a discussion about the natural beauty, or lack thereof, in this area of Texas. I didn't really want to talk about it. Nobody was going to convince me that there was anything beautiful about this area. As we drove home, and the sun was setting, she tried again. "Look, see how the

sun is hitting those grasses right now?" At the time, it seemed kind of pathetic to me. Like she was trying too hard to show me how this place isn't that bad.

Later that month, my sister was down visiting us, and she and I went for a walk around Lake Wichita. It was November, and the lake was looking even less attractive than usual. The pretty wildflowers that had previously been blooming happily near the shoreline were dried up and brown. I could tell that Anne wasn't exactly impressed with the place. I couldn't really blame her; she's lived in the same areas that I have. She's used to big trees whose leaves change into brilliant colors during the fall. She likes hiking on mountain trails. All of the same things that I had begun to take for granted, until I moved to South Carolina and lost a few of them along the way. But, during our conversation, I found myself defending this place for some ridiculous reason. I felt the need to convince her that it wasn't really that bad, just like my coworker had been trying to convince me.

Soon after that, it all kind of came together and I felt some peace begin to grow between me and my surroundings. I took joy in staring at the stars as Malinda drove us to Denton to see a show. We ended up in the backyard one night counting shooting stars during a meteor shower. And I realized that there are a lot of places in the country where it would be impossible to observe a meteor shower from your backyard.

I watch the birds and that crazy squirrel in the backyard. I inspect trees, the few that exist around here, and breathe in the smell of the varieties of pine near the back door of the library. I've become convinced that if I'm going to be happy during the next few years that we live here, I need to have a better attitude about the place. I'm determined, once the weather warms a bit, to scour this town on foot. To engage myself in the community in some way, if even just by physically walking its streets.

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**A note on the following journal entries:** I don't usually keep journals. I've tried to over the years, and I usually end up abandoning them after a month or less. But my thoughts on the zine lately have made me want to experiment with my writing style. I grew tired of cranking out topical essays for every issue. While I was always writing about something that was important to me, I felt that my writing was lacking in spontaneity. The essays ended up clear and polished, but maybe a little too over-edited after I looked back over them later on. Last issue, I broke away from this format and printed one extended essay that I wrote fairly extemporaneously, without much editing. Keeping this journal was a further attempt to de-structure the zine. I'm happy with the result, and I hope you enjoy it, too.



4/18/03

Last night I slept poorly. I kept waking up, and, at one point, even though no wind was blowing, I thought that there was a tornado coming. I imagined hearing the tornado sirens, and thinking that I needed to wake Malinda up and get into the walk-in closet with some water and food. I cursed myself for not doing more research on tornado preparation. Either before or after this, I dreamt that I saw the ghost of my former co-worker who died this past December. I spent New Year's Day at his funeral. In the dream, I saw him very clearly as an apparition and, when I put my hand through him, it felt cold and tingly.

I picked some kale out of the garden early this morning to steam with dinner tonight. Everything in the garden is doing pretty well, although my tomato transplants didn't make it. A couple of days after I planted them outside, we had a massive rain/wind/hail storm. It's wacky weather time here in North Texas.

Today I rode my bike to work again. I really like riding to work; it makes me feel empowered and like I am doing something both useful and good for my body. It also offsets the fact that I sit on my ass all day in front of a computer. It's comforting to be able to sit at my desk and look over at my bike, my escape pod out of this cubicle.

Yesterday was my day off because this is my week to work on Saturday. Malinda cleaned our bikes while I replaced the heating element in the clothes dryer. Yep, those were the highlights.

4/21/03

It's a perfect day outside, and I'm stuck here at my desk. At least I can sit outside and eat my lunch, basking in the sun before I return to my bleak windowless work area. And I'll also be able to enjoy the bike ride home. My trusty bike is sitting over there, gleaming and squirming around (can a bike squirm?), anxious to get back out on the road. I wonder how long this nice weather will last, before it begins to get beastly hot.

Last night we ate salads with spinach and radishes from the garden. Food does taste better when you grow it yourself! Malinda won the online auction for the commuter bike she wanted. Now she doesn't have to worry about riding her road bike to school in the fall and run the risk of it being stolen. After the auction, we went up the road and skateboarded a bit. It

was not too warm and not too cool, perfect weather for skating. I feel like I'm getting better again, after so many years of not skating. Malinda is improving, too.

My co-worker back here is listening to a CD or tape that is causing her to laugh out loud quite frequently. Normally this would annoy the hell out of me, but since I listen to music CDs all day, that noise usually drowns her out. I am curious as to what she's listening to, because this is the second day in a row that she's been laughing hysterically. I'm not really curious enough to ask, though.

4/23/03

These slow rolling melodies cascading through my ears right now do nothing to help my motivation toward work. They make me want to crawl into bed, as does the grey weather and the sub-arctic temperatures in this damn library. This reaction is just one more reminder that listening to music at work is fraught with any number of complications. When I feel depressed, I listen to sad music to match my mood. This rarely aids my work. If I get to work feeling energetic, having just ridden my bike 5 miles and ready to continue exerting myself, I might select a favorite hardcore or punk disc in order to match my energy level. The effect nearly drives me insane, as I struggle to control my body from writhing out of its sedate position in front of the monitor. But the perils far outweigh the alternative, which is to sit quietly and listen to the pulsing sounds of the Senior Zone jukebox upstairs as it repeatedly belts out the same tired old country-western tune.

4/24/03

Last night when Malinda picked me up from work, there were hailstones falling from the sky and lightning was flashing. When we got to our side of town, a mere seven or eight minutes away by car, there was no hail or rain at all. This weather is really strange.

A week from today my mom is coming to visit. I haven't seen her in almost a year. Since Malinda will be working during part of her visit, we'll get to spend a good amount of time together alone, which is something we haven't been able to do in many years. I'm really looking forward to seeing her and getting to talk face to face. She and my dad separated last fall, and we've been talking a lot by phone since then. I wish that I lived closer to her, particularly now that she is living alone. But it seems like I



just keep moving farther and farther away from all of my family members. It's not intentional; I guess I'm just more willing to take geographical leaps. I'm not sure why this is. Neither my brother or sister seem to be passionately tied to the northeast or at least they don't talk about it to me, yet they both continue to live there, and it looks unlikely that they will leave. It's funny; they both live in states bordering the state in which we all grew up in, but none of us would ever live in that state again. I've put some serious distance between myself and New Jersey, and not just physical distance. I feel like I left behind a whole lifetime in New Jersey, and with it some parts of myself that I wasn't interested in keeping.

4/25/03

Last night we went to the gym. Going to the gym is an interesting experience. I kind of think of it as a way to get out into the community a bit, and it makes me feel less isolated. We talk to some of the people there, and others we just see all the time and maybe say hello. It's kind of weird, like a little microcosm of Wichita Falls. I'm helping a guy who we met there find a couple of books that he has been searching for since the 1970s. I'm not sure how hard he has been searching, but he really wants those books. I think I found one of them, and he's supposed to be following up to see if the place actually has it. It's kind of like freelance librarianship, but offered free of charge.

Many people at the gym either get nicknames or reputations in our heads. There's the lady that sings out loud and horribly off-key when she's on the elliptical trainer. Then there's the lady who Malinda thinks looks like my mom. The guy who is the spitting image of Charles Bukowski practices Tai chi there. It's funny to think of Charles Bukowski doing Tai chi, and I wouldn't believe it either, if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. Another bizarre thing about going to the gym is when you see people from the gym out in public in their street clothes. I'm always thinking, why aren't they wearing those shorts and that orange shirt I always see them wear?

I feel comfortable at the gym because I feel like we're all slightly vulnerable while we're there. Each of us is capable of doing different physical activities, and we're all there at the same time, unabashedly struggling to do what we can. Nobody mocks anyone else for not lifting as much weight. Nobody makes fun of people because their bodies are different from someone else's. I think it takes a certain amount of trust in human nature to be able to go into a gym wearing short shorts and a thin t-shirt

and display your physical strength in front of a bunch of other people who you don't really know. This is especially the case if you have a history of not feeling exactly comfortable with your own body. Maybe other gyms aren't as friendly and accepting as ours, but I'm sure glad that we chose the one we did.

4/28/03

I was just outside eating my lunch and reading, sitting on a bench next to the library, when I looked up to find a fairly large dog sitting right next to me. His tongue hung out of his mouth, and he sat perfectly still. I greeted him, and observed with interest his coloration: grey with black splotches or black with grey splotches, depending on your point of view. I offered him a section of my orange, but he wasn't interested and left immediately. Later, he approached me again out of nowhere. No tags or collar, just roaming around the area. When I left, he was lying in front of the door to the Parks & Recreation office.

Yesterday, the alley behind our house caught on fire! Malinda and I were out in front of the house, cleaning the car, when we smelled smoke. Figuring that it was a barbecue, we kept on cleaning. Then I stuck my head out of the car and noticed all the smoke. I ran around the side of the house and saw that it was coming from our backyard! Malinda ran to call 911 and I ran out back. Sure enough, the grass behind our fence and our neighbor's shed was ablaze. I went and told the neighbors, who hadn't noticed yet, and then I ran back to the backyard. Luckily, we've got a 100-foot garden hose, so I pulled it out back and started spraying left and right. Part of our fence had caught on fire, so I put that out, and then pointed the hose over the fence at the grass. Right about then, the fire truck showed up (in a matter of minutes after Malinda had called) and the firefighters finished the job. No real damage done, except for a couple of boards on our fence. Our house smelled like smoke, and so do our clothes since the smoke was blowing in our windows and into our closet. Quite an adventure!

As if that wasn't enough excitement for the day, we went to the movies later on that night, and about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the way through the movie, the lights started coming on and the picture began to cut in and out. The power kept flickering and the movie wouldn't play, so we decided to leave. They gave us free passes as we were leaving (the theatre was mostly closed by this time, about 11:15 PM). We walked outside and it was really windy. We figured a storm was coming, but as we drove home, we realized that

the storm had already happened! Entire trees were scattered around roads and parking lots. We saw one of those metal UPS shipping center boxes turned over and blown across a parking lot. As we approached a traffic light near our house, it and all the surrounding lights went dark. The wind was still fairly strong as we drove home, but the majority of the storm was over by that point. Now, as a result, our entire network at work is down and we can't access the Internet. Luckily I'm in the back so I don't have to deal with the patrons frothing at the mouth over it.

4/29/03

I haven't been feeling well over the last couple of days, so I've driven to work. I don't like it. Not only do I feel guilty about doing it, I also feel sad to be missing out on such beautiful weather for riding. And I also feel so much less safe driving in the car than I do on my bike. I feel in control of my motion while riding because I am physically expending the energy needed to move, while in the car all I do is push down a pedal and it makes me go really fast, which is scary. I don't know; I just don't like it.

Last night Malinda and I ate dinner in our backyard. It was nice, adding a whole new dimension to the dinner experience. This was the second time we've eaten out there since we've gotten our lawn chairs. I think we're pretty lucky to have such a nice backyard.

So, yesterday it was the dog that visited me at lunch. Today it was a man wearing Hawaiian shorts, flip-flops, and no shirt. Luckily, he didn't come as close to me as the dog did, but he did say, "excuse me" when I looked up. For what I'm not sure, perhaps his lack of clothing? Luckily, he moved on without lingering.

Damn, I just got "asked" to work the circulation desk for an hour after lunch. I hate working out there because I have not much clue of what I'm doing. It's not like I can really say no, because I have no valid excuse for refusing. Ah, shit...

4/30/03

It turned out that working at the desk wasn't so bad after all. I always dread it, and gripe about it, but then it turns out fine and I get practice at doing transactions that I usually don't have to do. Plus the time goes by faster out there when you're helping people.



I think I really am getting sick, which is too bad since my mom is coming tomorrow and I've got 4 days off in a row. Hopefully I'll be feeling better by tomorrow. It's always weird feeling sick when it's warm outside. It doesn't feel right; sickness is for the nasty cold grey days of winter.

I'm at the reference desk right now, and it's been a fairly slow night. I helped this girl A LOT with setting up an email account. Not too much in the way of actual reference questions. Oh well, I'm not complaining. It lets me get my book ordering done, at least.

5/01/03

At work. Still sick. Earlier this morning, when I swallowed, my throat felt like it was full of broken glass. Nice. Malinda called from the road, as she drove to Ft. Worth to pick up my mom at the airport. She said it was hot as blazes. Here, the temperature has actually dropped to a mild 73 or so, with breezes that almost gave me a chill. Inside is death: cold, stale air circulates around me as I hunch over my desk under artificial lights. It makes me feel sicker than I am. Outside is life: sitting on my favorite bench, with the sun shining, I breathe deeply of the warm, fresh air and my lungs respond positively. Now, I'm inside again after lunch and the sickness returns. My nose starts running and my throat fills with glass. Only 3 hours and 43 minutes until I can leave. And then, 4 days of freedom.

5/06/03

Mom left today. We had a great visit, despite my cold. At least by Sunday I was feeling much better. We went up to see my uncle and cousins in Lawton, Oklahoma. I hadn't seen some of my cousins in over 20 years, which was pretty surreal. They are all nice folks, and we had a good afternoon of visiting.

I rode my bike to work today for the first time in over a week. That felt good. It was really nice having 4 days straight off from work, and especially nice to be able to spend it hanging out with my mom. On Friday we went to Booked Up, which is Larry McMurtry's used and antiquarian bookshop down in Archer City. It's only about a 15-20 minute drive from our house. Larry wasn't working but there were a lot of people shopping in there. It's kind of funny to see a steady stream of visitors, because Archer City is a tiny town with one blinking stoplight and not

much else. As a librarian and book lover I feel kind of embarrassed to report that I didn't buy anything. I did see some books I would like, but they were too expensive. I haven't been buying books lately anyway, except for cookbooks. I figure I can get most anything I want at the library, either through ordering it or getting it through interlibrary loan.

05/07/03

Still have some residual phlegm, but on the whole I'm back to normal. That was by far the nastiest cold I've had in several years. I'm usually really healthy, which is why getting sick like this irritates me so much.

It's tornado season, but we've escaped so far. The Midwest and the southeast have gotten hit pretty hard, though, so we're keeping our fingers crossed. We keep meaning to make provisions for a storm, but haven't gotten around to it.

Malinda thought of a name for her zine, and I think it's a good one. I'm so excited for her!

05/13/03

Well, it appears it's been a while since I wrote in here, so I'll give you a brief recap. I passed on my cold to Malinda, and she was hit pretty hard. So, I've been trying to take care of her as best that I can. One of my bike tires was pierced by a shard of glass while I was riding to work. Luckily, the tire didn't go flat until I was already at work. So, I bought some new tires that are supposed to be relatively puncture-proof. I'd been planning on doing this anyway, because I ride through broken glass on a daily basis. Malinda has these same tires on her bike, and she rode to work all last fall and winter and didn't get a single flat. Hopefully, I'll be so lucky.

I worked at the reference desk all day on Saturday. No weird questions this week. On Sunday, I went to the gym by myself since Malinda was sick. I ran a six-minute mile, which I was pretty happy about. On the walk home, this kid rode past me on a tricked-out lowrider bike. It was shiny chrome and even had one of those chain steering wheels mounted on the frame. After I got home, I mowed the lawn.

Yesterday, I went to the dentist and had a filling replaced and a temporary crown put on. I've decided that getting dental work such as filling re-

placements and crowns is just another rite of passage into adulthood. I'm getting a crown, and so now I'm an adult. Does that sound reasonable? Anyway, I have to go back in a few weeks to get two more fillings re-placed, and have my permanent crown attached. I even got to pick out what shade of aging, yellowed porcelain I want my crown to be constructed from. This morning the dentist's office called me at work to make sure I was Ok. How nice.

05/14/03

A coworker was telling me the other day that when members of a certain Apache tribe (I believe it was the Chiricahua) were forcibly removed from Arizona and New Mexico to Alabama, they were upset about, among other things, the fact that they couldn't see the sky because of all the tall trees. I was thinking about this on my way to work today, continuing my obsessive analysis of my present surroundings in contrast to my previous ones. If there's one single characteristic about my new geographical home that stands out, it is the fact that it's virtually impossible to not see the sky. Not only does the sky dominate the view here, it's almost staggeringly overwhelming. It's so big; it's just so damn big. It makes the puny trees seem even more insignificant, and it causes the land to appear flatter than it really is. I'm not used to this. Living in a city filled with tall trees for the last few years, I felt like I was trapped in a little self-contained biosphere. Now I feel exposed, like there are no boundaries to the city, as if the surrounding land is just waiting for the city to lose enough of its population so the land can reclaim what once was part of it. Living on the edge of town, I can see it creeping in. All I have to do is go less than a mile south and I'm out there in the wild.

05/16/03

I'm at work right now, on my lunch break, and it sounds like a mariachi band is playing upstairs at the Senior Zone. I'm kind of tired today because of bad thunderstorms last night. I kept waking up because of that, and also because the ceiling fan in our bedroom was making this extremely irritating noise. I tried to get it to stop, and finally just turned it off. So, it felt like I only slept in a couple of short bursts before waking up early, since I had to take a shower before riding to work.

Last night there was a lunar eclipse and the moon was supposed to turn red, but it was so cloudy that I couldn't see it at all. I'm glad we got the



rain, though, even if the wind from the storms did temporarily flatten the tomato plants. This weekend I have to tie them to their stakes.

So, I drank a cup of coffee here at work this morning because I felt so sluggish. I usually don't drink coffee anymore, especially at work, but I needed a boost. I kind of developed a renewed interest in coffee after my mom came down to visit. She likes a cup of coffee in the morning, and so I figured if I was making one for her, I might as well make one for me. So, we drank our coffee together each morning that she was here. It was nice. To me, there's something about sharing coffee together that fosters a cozy social feeling. It's similar to the feeling I used to get from having a beer with someone. For some reason, though, it doesn't really work for me with any beverages other than beer or coffee. Anyway, the coffee I had at work here this morning was pretty horrible. I never considered myself a coffee snob, but I guess since I only drink it occasionally now, I want it to be good. The few times I've had it here at work, it's always been nasty. But it did the trick and woke me up, so I can't complain too much.

05/19/03

Yesterday morning was beautiful so Malinda and I went on a 30-mile bike ride out to the Allred state prison unit, which is right outside the city limits. I wanted to see it again, after just having read *Going Up the River: Travels in a Prison Nation*. It's on a farm road, with not much else around it, except, strangely enough, the Red River Speedway, which sits right in front of the prison. There's a handscrawled wooden sign pointing the way toward the go-kart pits. As I rode past the prison, I could see the coiled razor wire gleaming in the late morning sun. I have to give Joseph Hallinan credit for the research he did for that book. Visiting prisons all around the country must have been one of the more stressful and difficult ways to gather information to write a book. Still, reading the book really made me want to go inside a prison, just to see what it looks like firsthand. After I finished reading it, I talked a little bit with Malinda about it, because she's read it, too. We both agreed that it's truly amazing how many people in this country are behind bars, and what a gigantic industry the prison industry is, and yet it's still like a big secret. I hardly ever hear anyone talking about prisons or about the number of people that are being warehoused in them. It appears that the topic is either taboo, or that no one wants to think about it. Lock them up and forget about them.

As an aside, right now my ankles feel like they are on fire. Fire ants bit the hell out of them, and now I'm suffering. These bites almost itch worse than poison ivy. Arrgh, I guess I better get back to work and hope that I'll be distracted enough to ignore the itch.

05/20/03

We lucked out and got rain again last night. It continued into the morning, along with high winds, and so I had to wake Malinda up to take me to work. No biking for me today. But, at least it gave me some time in the morning to enjoy a leisurely breakfast while reading my book on the history of heavy metal. It's a good book; I'm finding out a lot of information that I didn't know or only knew parts of. It helps that the author is obviously an enthusiastic fan.

5/23/03

Well, after Malinda and I had been talking about how we don't hear much about prisons, we found out that the Mississippi state prison system got in big trouble recently for providing poor living conditions for inmates. Most of the trouble was on death row, I believe, and had to do with lack of air conditioning, malfunctioning sewage systems, and neglect of mentally ill inmates.

We've altered our workout schedule at the gym a bit. We used to do weight training first, then run, and then work out on the elliptical training. Now we've started running first, which I think makes weight training a lot easier and more productive. I feel much more loosened up by the time I get to the weight room after running a mile or two.

Today is my last day before a three-day weekend. Hell, yeah. I'm so looking forward to this. Tomorrow I'm going to make some bread and bake a pie. I also hope to work on Malinda's commuter bike, and do a little work in the garden, hopefully avoiding any run-ins with fire ants this time. I'll probably mow the lawn, too, since we've had some rain. On Monday, we're going up to the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge. They are really large hills, not mountains, but they are the closest we've got to mountains in the general vicinity. One of the few remaining herds of buffalo live on the refuge, as well as longhorn cattle, elk, prairie dogs, and a lot of other plant and animal species. We'll probably hike around, and possibly bring the bikes along.

05/27/03

Oh, it was a good weekend! Saturday morning, I baked the best loaf of wheat bread and wheat sandwich rolls that I ever have. For quite some time, Malinda and I have been trying to find the right recipe for everyday wheat bread. We also wanted to be able to bake wheat rolls to use with homemade veggie burgers and other sandwiches. But we were having trouble. We'd had some edible success, but we were still dissatisfied. So, this time I consulted old Brother Ron, author of the *Friendly Foods* cookbook, and used one of his secrets for bread making. I couldn't have been happier with the results. This bread rocks! I also baked a pumpkin pie, and made some whipped topping for it.

I just love baking. There's something so satisfactory about making baked goods. Maybe it's that they go through such a radical transformation during the cooking process. One minute I'm staring at a big glob of dough, and then 30 minutes later I'm pulling a golden-brown loaf of perfectly risen bread out of the oven. When I worked at Rosewood Market, all the bakers would talk about having good baking days and bad baking days. Some days, the magic would flow through your fingers and everything you baked would be perfect. Other days, you might as well just quit after the first batch of failed biscuits. I know it sounds kind of new-age, but I've always kind of agreed with people who spoke about channeling good energy into their baking and cooking. I really do think that it helps if you're in a good mood and excited about what you're making in the kitchen.

Anyway, later that day, after I worked on Malinda's bike, I wrote a couple of songs on my bass. It had been awhile since I had last played, but things were clicking and so I wrote the songs down and recorded them. Maybe someday I'll get some use out of them. At any rate, I had a fun time writing and playing them.

On Sunday morning, I made French toast and French fries for breakfast. Later that night we went to see the new *Matrix* movie. I thought it was pretty good, although I think I liked the first one better. It had more of an element of mystery to it.

Yesterday the weather wasn't that great, but we went up to Oklahoma anyway. We hiked in the wildlife refuge, and had the trails to ourselves, not counting the wildlife. The Wichita pincushion and prickly pear cacti were in full bloom. The pincushions look like what they're named for,



and they have beautiful light purple flowers blooming out of the top of their cylindrical stalks. The prickly pears sprout bright yellow flowers out of their paddles. As we walked, we saw a mouse, a lot of turtles, a kingfisher, and some geese. Out on the road through the refuge, we encountered parts of both the bison and longhorn herds. Both the bison and the longhorns have had calves recently, so there were lots of cute small animals around. We also stopped by and watched the prairie dogs scampering around their town. They've had babies recently, too. The young ones race around chasing each other and climbing all over the adults. It's quite a sight!

Of course I didn't want to come to work today, especially after waking up to a sunny and clear blue sky. We went to the gym early today, since I'm working late, so I got to see some of the morning gym people. Then I rode my bike to work. And now I'm here typing this at the end of my lunch break. In an hour, I'll be out at the reference desk, counting the hours until I get to tear on out of here.

06/02/03

Wow, last night we had golf-ball sized hail! We were just sitting around, and we heard these loud thumps on the roof. I thought some kids were throwing rocks or something, but then we looked outside and this stuff was falling from the sky! We ran outside and picked a couple of them up and brought them back inside. I had never seen large hail like this before. Each piece was extremely thick and icy cold, mottled with these deep pits, which gave them a weird alien appearance. Strange, one minute the weather was fine and the sky was clear, and then the next minute, these balls of hail were raining from the sky.

06/03/03

I drop Sonic Youth *Daydream Nation* into my computer's CD drive after listening to the Melvins all morning. As "Teen Age Riot" starts, chills run up and down my spine. I recall driving the back roads of northern New Jersey with this tape blaring in high school. Then I jump ahead to October of 1992 at Brown's Island in Richmond. The Boredoms, Superchunk, and Sonic Youth. I was underdressed for the cold weather, and I think it started raining. Back at school a couple of days later, I was sick, but satisfied. Seeing Sonic Youth standing up there all in a line, abusing their guitars, it was worth it. Ah, the nostalgia of music.

## Journal postscript

There's something that I wanted to mention that happened before I started keeping the journal. It relates to how I continue to feel about Wichita Falls, particularly the people who live here. It has to do with the conservative attitudes that pervade this place. About the niceness and warmth that people are willing to extend, as long as you're not too different from them, in either your appearance or your beliefs.

Malinda and I were opposed to the recent war in Iraq. This was most definitely a minority opinion to hold in flag-waving Wichita Falls, a town that prides itself on its military affiliation (Sheppard Air Force Base is located on the edge of the city). Anyway, Malinda and I grew tired of the local rallies to support the troops and the rest of the patriotic overkill. One house downtown had even turned its yard into an eyesore of a shrine dedicated to the troops, complete with blatant military overtones. The residents were rewarded with a glowing report on a local news channel.

We decided we'd like to let people know that there were other opinions represented in town. So, we constructed a sign to put in our front yard, which faces one of the busiest streets in the city. The sign read No War For Greed. It was a good sign, well-made, and we put it out near the road one Thursday morning, strongly secured with several piles of bricks.

By Friday evening some people were honking as they passed. These were not friendly toots of support, but long extended blasts of obvious disagreement. And that was fine with us. We were hoping to get some reaction, and figuring that we were in the minority around here regarding our opinion on the war, we weren't surprised to hear those horns.

We awoke on Saturday morning to find our sign gone from the front yard. So we went out to see if we could find any clues as to its whereabouts. Because of the way that we had secured it, it was obvious to us that someone had stolen the sign. It had been up for less than 48 hours.

Highly irritated by this suppression of our completely valid statement regarding the war, we decided to write a letter to the local paper. It was a short letter, explaining what happened, and expressing our disappointment with how our opinions had essentially been censored right out of our own front yard. They never printed it, although day after day, the local opinion page was full of pro-war sentiments coming from every direction.

Later that month, we decided to strike again. This time we printed out some anti-war flyers and went around town posting them in

prominent locations. Within a couple of days, all but a few had been ripped down, though not without some difficulty due to our techniques for attachment. Although I was pissed to see them torn down, I still smirked every time I passed by a partially ripped one and thought about how enraged the person who tried to remove it must've been.

Both of these incidents have made it clear to me that there are certain ideas that aren't welcome in this community, or at least not to what sometimes seems to me to be a significant percentage of the community. As a result, I feel reluctant to embrace the community or give anything of myself to it. I feel at odds with the community as a whole, although I have met a few people here who are open-minded. Even some of the supposed liberals I've met, though, seemed both inhibited and inflexible. As for the general population, I have to admit, it is somewhat difficult to gauge the levels of acceptance around here. I have a theory that there are more people here than I first thought that are open to, or at least not interested enough to object to, diversity in general. At times, I sense kind of an "I don't care what you do or think as long as it's not around me" attitude. I don't know; maybe I just need to meet more people. Or maybe I should just give up and focus on other things. At any rate, these experiences have contributed to my continued mixed feelings about life here in Wichita Falls. I just feel very temporary and transient, even though we've been here for almost a year already and I know we'll continue living here for at least a few more years. And I wonder if the feeling will ever completely go away before I leave this place for good.

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## Book Reviews

*Going Up the River: Travels in a Prison Nation* by Joseph T. Hallinan

The current state of this nation's prison industrial complex is a frightening one. Acquiring a prison has become the latest economic boon for communities suffering from lack of employment opportunities and business for existing commercial enterprises. Much of this prison growth can be attributed to the number of nonviolent drug-related offenders who are increasingly ending up shut away in prison for a very long time. Joseph Hallinan, who's written about prisons for many years, traveled around the country and visited many of the most notorious prisons, and many lesser-known ones. During his travels, he interviewed inmates, wardens, guards, and members of the communities that are increasingly grateful for the chance to have a prison built nearby. Hallinan's book provides a compre-



hensive look at prisons and the prison industrial complex in the U.S. today, and it's an eye opening one that I believe many Americans might find surprising. Highly recommended.

*Sound of the Beast: The Complete Headbanging History of Heavy Metal* by Ian Christe

Wow, this was some book to read! I listened to my first heavy metal albums during 8th grade, which ended up being an early musical milestone of utmost importance. My flirtation with metal continued on from there, and continues to this day, helping to fuel my excitement over reading this book. Filled with pictures (some color) and packed with chapters based on interviews with members of hundreds of metal bands over the years, *Sound of the Beast* delivers a thorough and definitive history of this fascinating genre of music. Ian Christe covers it all, from the early beginnings of Black Sabbath to the amazing career of Metallica, stopping along the way to chronicle the subgenres that have splintered off through the years, including thrash, speed, doom, black, glam, death, and power metal. I particularly enjoyed hearing the full story on the Norwegian black metal scene, as well as reading the histories of bands like Slayer, Iron Maiden, and Anthrax. Christe's enthusiasm for metal as a true fan shines through, and gives the book a life of its own. Believe me, if you have any interest in heavy metal and its place in musical culture, you must read this book!

*That Old Ace in the Hole* by E. Annie Proulx

When I got out of graduate school, I found I had developed a newfound taste for nonfiction. So, this book ended up being the first novel I had picked up in quite a while. I've enjoyed Proulx's writing over the years, and was excited to hear that she had a new novel out. The book also attracted me because most of it is set in the Texas and Oklahoma panhandles. Since I was new to Texas, and those places are fairly close by, I thought I'd enjoy what seemed to be a fairly authentic portrayal of life around those parts. Well, I wasn't disappointed. Proulx's protagonist in this novel is Bob Dollar, an intrepid scout for a corporate hog farm operation. Although Bob remains persistent in his scouting for a new farm location in the panhandle, his heart still doesn't seem quite in his work. Along the way, he develops close relationships with many of the folks who live in the particular area that he's working. Full of Proulx's trademark slow meandering character and plot development, *That Old Ace in the Hole* delivers a solid read, with enough intrigue to keep you turning the pages.

## More Books:

*The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* by Bernard Lewis

*Gig: Americans Talk About their Jobs* edited by John Bowe, Marisa Bowe, and Sabin Streeter

*Sex and Single Girls: Straight and Queer Women on Sexuality* edited by Lee Damsky

## Music:

Black Eyes *s/t*

Blood Brothers *Burn, Piano Island, Burn*

Chicks on Speed *The Re-releases of the Unreleases*

Elliott Smith *s/t*

Folk Implosion *One Part Lullaby*

New Order *Get Ready*

Rex C

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## Attention Metalheads:

I'm trying to reclaim a lost segment of my musical history. Heavy metal reached my ears at an early age, and continued to exert influence on me through my late teens and into my early twenties, at which point I mostly abandoned it. Help me get the metal back in my life. If you have any of the following bands/albums and would be willing to trade CD copies for copies of anything in my collection, please get in touch. Let me know what you've got and what you're looking for, and we'll try to strike a deal. My CDs include punk, hardcore, indie, classic rock, Southern rock, alternative, jazz, bluegrass, and other genres in between. Here's what I'm primarily looking for:

**Anthrax** (*Among the Living*)

**Iron Maiden** (*Killers, Piece of Mind, The Number of the Beast, Powerslave*)

**Megadeth** (*Peace Sells...But Who's Buying?*)

**Metallica** (*Kill 'Em All, Ride the Lightning, Master of Puppets*)

**Slayer** (*Reign in Blood, South of Heaven, Seasons in the Abyss*)

Also interested in trading for copies of these:

**Paris** *Sleeping with the Enemy*

**Public Enemy** *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*

## Zine Reviews

I haven't been reading as many zines as usual because of the books that have been taking up my time. However, the ones I have read have all been good, so here you go:

**Baptism River** Chris kept an eight-day journal during his travels along the Superior Hiking Trail in his current home state of Minnesota. At some points, I felt like I was right there behind Chris as he navigated a particularly steep stretch of trail, or next to him as he gazed out the window of his cabin at the latest visitors to the bird feeder out back. [5.5" x 8.5", no price (\$1-2?), C. Dodge, 2712 Pillsbury, #105, Minneapolis, MN 55408, [curvyedge@yahoo.com](mailto:curvyedge@yahoo.com)]

**Brainscan #19** Inside the screen-printed cardstock cover of this zine, the typewritten pages mostly document Alex's thoughts, impressions, and experiences related to being a part of last summer's Zine Symposium in Portland. I liked this zine because it struck a good balance between being informative and personal. [5" x 6 3/4", \$2 + 2 stamps from: Microcosm, PO Box 14332, Portland, OR 97293, [brainscanzine@ureach.com](mailto:brainscanzine@ureach.com), [www.microcosmpublishing.com](http://www.microcosmpublishing.com)]

**Chumpire** (various issues) The most recent issue I've received is #161. That's impressive for any zine to achieve, whether it's a good one or not. *Chumpire* is a good one, though, and I've thoroughly enjoyed the issues that Greg has sent my way. In a nutshell, based on the issues I've read, this zine covers a couple of key topics. First is Greg's job as a teacher, and second is his passion for punk rock, with focus on various Pennsylvania regional scenes. Offers interesting insight into and commentary on the much-maligned punk experience. [various sizes, free/1 stamp/or trade to: PO Box 27, Annville, PA 17003-0027, [chumpire@hotmail.com](mailto:chumpire@hotmail.com)]

**Comixville** is a handy little guide to self-published comix. The latest issue (#6) includes an interview I conducted with Dave Kiersh, publisher of a variety of wonderful comix, such as *Dirtbag* and *Unicorns*. *Comixville* is an excellent resource for finding out about new comix, and it's available for the low price of one first-class stamp. [5.5" x 4.25", 1 stamp to: Comixville, PO Box 697, Portland, OR 97207-0697]

**The Constant Rider #3** Zines that contain good writing, and I mean really good writing, stand out easily from the rest of the pack. This is one



of them. Kate relays stories of her experiences with public transportation in a lively engaging style that reads both smoothly and easily. Bonus points for well-reproduced graphics and photos. Another winner from Portland! [5.5" X 8.5", \$1/stamps/or trade to: Kate Lopresti, PO Box 6753, Portland, OR 97228, [depesto@earthlink.net](mailto:depesto@earthlink.net)]

**Dirt and Sky** A thick volume of solely text, *Dirt and Sky* chronicles Mark's feelings and experiences associated with his dad's illness and eventual death. Mark's honesty and sincerity in relating his emotions moved me in a significant way. The lucidity with which he was able to reconstruct the months surrounding his dad's death drew me into his life, and kept me engrossed until the very end of the zine. [5.5" X 8.5", \$3 to: Mark Hain, PO Box 411, Swarthmore, PA 19081, [giant\\_turu@hotmail.com](mailto:giant_turu@hotmail.com)]

**Girl~Boy/Boy~Girl #4** A continuing split zine, in which one female editor and one male editor discuss issues of sexuality and gender. This one is all about sexual "firsts." Email first to check on the address. [5.5" x 8.5", \$3 to: Robnoxious, 2441 Lyundale Ave. South, Minneapolis, MN 55405, [therobnoxious@hotmail.com](mailto:therobnoxious@hotmail.com)]

**Go Metric!** This is what I would call a good punk zine. It's written by intelligent people who are more than capable of putting sentences together into a legible paragraph, its pages ring with a true passion for the subject matter that sadly is missing from many punk zines today, and it manages to stay fairly original in its ideas. [7" x 8.5", \$2 to: Go Metric!, 15A South Bedford Road, Pound Round, NY 10576 (email first if ordering after 7/1/03), also available through [www.vitalmusic.net](http://www.vitalmusic.net), [www.insound.com](http://www.insound.com), and [www.quimbys.com](http://www.quimbys.com), [gogometric@yahoo.com](mailto:gogometric@yahoo.com)]

**I Was a Teenage Mormon** A young woman looks back on her experiences in the Mormon church as a teenager. Personal and enlightening. Offers insight into Mormonism and organized religion in general, from the viewpoint of a younger person who is questioning her faith. [4.25" x 5.25", \$3 to Caitlin, 11901 4th St. N. #810, St. Petersburg, FL 33716]

**Kitty!** This zine is written by a cat-lover, and it's even named after her cat. Some of the articles are also written by the cat, including an analysis of the merits and disadvantages of both paper and plastic bags. *Kitty!* is a contributor-based zine, so it also features profiles of other people's cats, as well as entertaining anecdotes. [7" X 8.5", \$1 to Kitty! Zine, PO Box 6681, Portsmouth, NH 03802, [kittyzine@yahoo.com](mailto:kittyzine@yahoo.com)]

**Ladylike #2** Typewritten perzine with cute illustrations and cool clip-art. Essays cover quitting drinking, Christians and punk rock, dropping out of Internet society, and other topics. Also zine reviews, "cool things," and "dumb things." Wish it had been a little longer. [mini, \$2 (plus extra for postage if mailing from outside N.Z.) to Megaphone Productions, PO Box 68939, Newton, Auckland, New Zealand]

**Meniscus #10** There are quite a number of personal essays in here, and mixed in are some comix, too. What I found to be the most engrossing reading was Matt's personal struggles with creating art, and evaluating why he creates it. This is really good writing, and readers should take away a healthy dose of insight into Matt's personality. [5.5" X 8.5", \$3 to: Matt Fagan, 1573 N. Milwaukee Ave., PMB 464, Chicago, IL 60622, [www.geocities.com/depotdevoid/meniscus/inside](http://www.geocities.com/depotdevoid/meniscus/inside), [hadmatter@hotmail.com](mailto:hadmatter@hotmail.com)]

**Razorcake #14** This arrived mysteriously in my mailbox one day, and I'm glad it did. Yet another punk zine that rises above the rest of the punk zine swill out there, *Razorcake* delivers quality columns from such familiar names (to some) as Ben Weasel, Ayn Imperato, and Rev. Norb. The usual punk band interviews and record reviews are here, as well as an investigative article by Joe Beil on the assassination of MLK, Jr. A good read. [8.5" x 11", \$3 to Razorcake, PO Box 42129, Los Angeles, CA 90042, [www.razorcake.com](http://www.razorcake.com)]

**Semibold #8** This is Kathy's New York City tribute issue, laid out in a kind of scrapbook format, complete with nicely photocopied graphics and photos to augment the text. Another very well-written zine that does a good job of conveying Kathy's feelings about and experiences in New York. [7" x 8.5", \$2 to Kathy Moseley, 1573 N. Milwaukee Ave., #403, Chicago, IL 60622, [semibold@aol.com](mailto:semibold@aol.com)]

**Thoughtworm** is published on an increasingly less structured timetable. Issues 7-10 are \$2 each postpaid. I accept trades that have been set up in advance. Issues 4-6 are \$1 each ppd. People who have ordered in the past will be notified about new issues. News, zine and book reviews, other writing, and lots of links can be found at [www.thoughtworm.com](http://www.thoughtworm.com), which is updated on a semi-regular basis. Write me: Thoughtworm c/o Sean Stewart, 1703 Southwest Pkwy, Wichita Falls, TX 76302. Email: [sean@thoughtworm.com](mailto:sean@thoughtworm.com).

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