

COMPLETE PERFORMANCE WORK 1996-2004

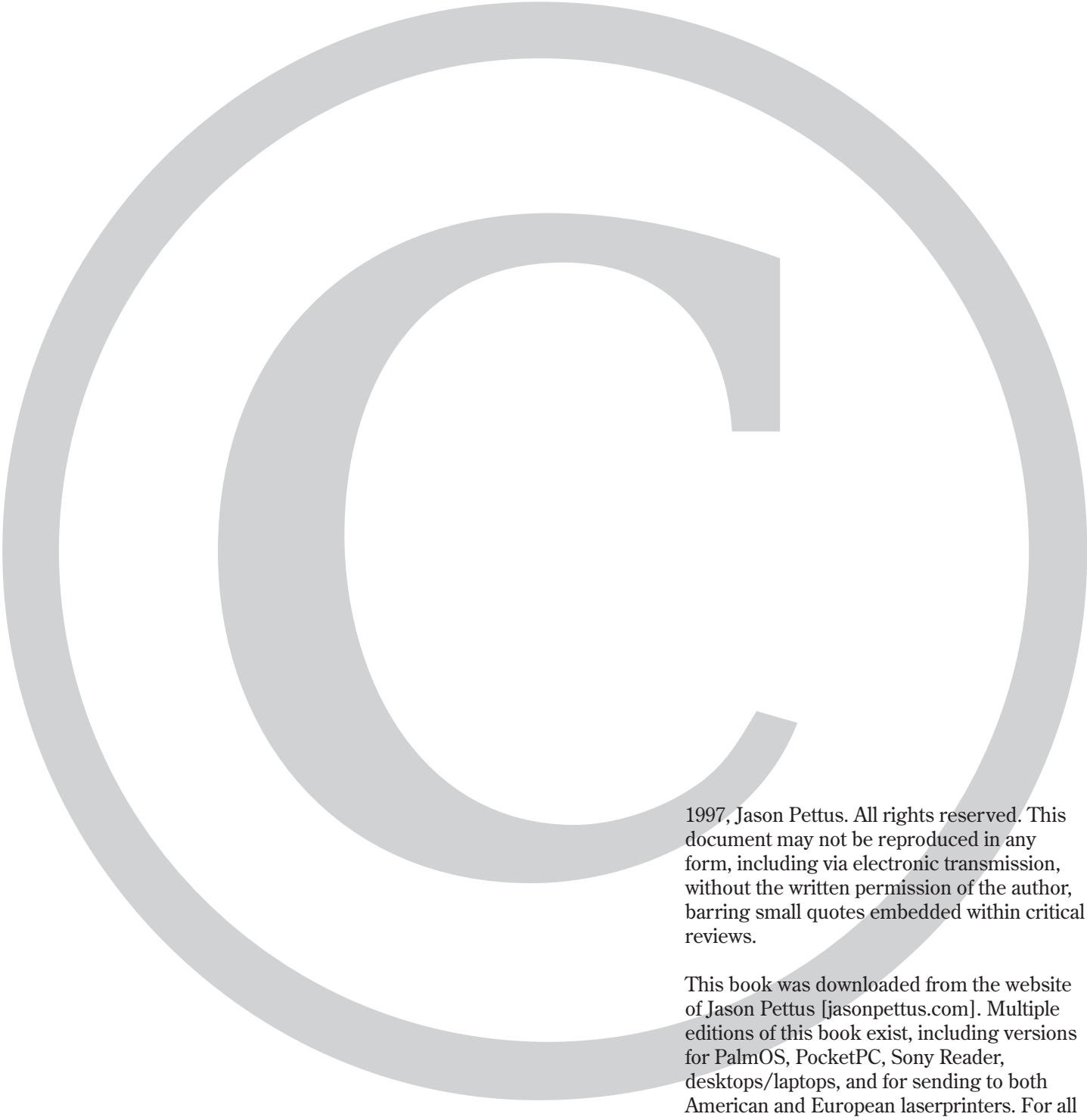
GAD Publishing Company Chicago USA

02 OF 13

JASON PETTUS



CHICAGO STORIES 1997



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CONTENTS.

04	Introduction to the 2007 Edition
06	175113
07	All the dykes
09	Ballad of the battles lost
19	Blah blah
20	Celebrating with dignity
21	Chicago mantra
22	The dog who loved too much
25	Down with the pigeons
27	A found poem that demonstrates my lack of faith in humanity
28	How dare you, Mr. Luplow
30	How to tell you're about to turn thirty
31	I wanna be your spleen
32	In Excalibur
34	A job I'd really like to have
35	Jokes my grandpa used to tell me
38	A man
40	Missouri dreams
42	The night we pretended we were married
44	The only homeless person I've ever given money to
45	An open letter to Jerry Springer
46	Poetry on the el
47	The potential, the kinetic
50	Princess my princess
51	Scraping the sky
52	She's eating a bagel
53	Sitting in the coffeehouse now
54	Skylab is falling, the chicken told me
57	They can have my Macintosh when they pry it from my cold, dead fingers
58	Two minutes to talk with Jack Kerouac
59	Typing on keyboards in bars
60	The very first time I ever performed at the Green Mill poetry slam
62	Well, Steve Albini was nice to me
63	What really happened between the end of <i>The Empire Strikes Back</i> and the beginning of <i>Return of the Jedi</i>
64	Biographical notes
67	Notes about individual pieces

Since 1996 I have owned and operated a basement press in Chicago called GAD, dedicated mostly to the self-publishing of my own work (and with a brief detour in 2001, publishing a dozen books by my friends, before giving up the pursuit again for lack of community interest). As of 2004 GAD had ended up publishing over forty books, both full-length and miniature in nature, dealing with everything from poetry to prose, essays, interviews, science-fiction, erotica and travel. Being the sole employee of GAD, of course, especially while continuing to write new material on a regular basis, unfortunately meant that many of these books ended up being published on a less-than-professional basis, with dozens of typos and grammatical errors found in each. It was something that always slightly bothered me about the GAD catalog; as long as I was an active writer, though, this worry was always trumped by the stronger desire to keep writing new material, and to devote the majority of my energy to these new projects instead of cleaning up the old ones.

INTRODUCTION TO THE 2007 EDITION

In late 2004, however, I made the decision to put this literary career on indefinite hold, in order to open and operate an arts center here in Chicago instead. Given the chance for the first time to take a detailed look at the existing GAD catalog, I decided at that point to dedicate the next few years of my life to going through these old books, giving each of them the thorough editing they deserved, and republishing them in electronic form, standardizing not only the look of each publication but also the options for downloading and viewing them. This was complicated enough when it came to the nonfiction and prose projects, but especially tricky in the case of my performance poetry and monologues, of which I had never attempted to publish a pervasive, chronological record. Since the 2007 edition of these poetry/monologue books makes certain older titles now obsolete, as well as introduces several new titles, I thought I'd take a moment and explain the entire process, for committed readers who wish to own the complete, definitive collection.

Prior to 2002, the vast majority of GAD poetry/monologue books available were of special projects, including: *Psycho Poets* (1997), a collection of poems about women I slept with in 1997, when I was a member of the Chicago poetry-slam team; *Jasonettes* (1998), *The Heatseeker* (1999), *Notes From My Grandmother's Funeral* (2000) and *Celibate* (2001), all of them written transcripts of special half-hour themed performances I gave over the years, all of them for the old "Mental Graffiti" poetry show here in Chicago; *[Andi.]* (1999), a collection of poetry about a specific ex-girlfriend; and *The Tao of Now* (2000), a literary experiment of sorts, combining the length and structure of traditional short stories with the language and rhythm of slam poetry. The only exceptions were GAD's oldest two books, *The Sweet Alice Sessions* and *Kathie Lee Gifford Likes to Fuck!*, both from 1996, both collecting not special themed work but merely the general pieces I was writing and performing for the open mics that year. In addition there was a "greatest hits" collection also available, called *The Jason Pettus Portable Reader* (2001) and consisting of around twenty of my audience's absolute favorite pieces over the years, published exclusively to sell at live shows. These ten books reprinted approximately 100 of the poems and monologues I had written over the years; the vast majority of the 300 others I had written were simply unavailable in published form, save for those found on individual HTML pages at my website.

In 2002, the first year after "retiring" from the poetry community, I decided to make my first attempt at publishing a comprehensive series of these pieces; the result was the four-book series *Chicago Stories 1997-2000*, as well as a new "greatest hits" book, *More Poems about Blowjob*s, collecting my favorite sexually-explicit poems and monologues from over the years. These five new books went a long way towards getting more of my old performance work out to the public, but with still a number of inconsistencies: for example, technically the contents of both *Sweet Alice* and *Kathie Lee Gifford* should've been included in the "Chicago Stories" series, not as their own stand-alone books; the series was still missing the poems I wrote in 2001 and 2002, important for posterity's sake but not a large enough collection to publish as their own book; and of course even the current "Chicago Stories" series was missing several pieces that had become audience favorites over the years.

For this 2007 edition, therefore, I have declared both *Sweet Alice* and *Kathie Lee Gifford* as "out-of-print" titles, neither of which will ever be printed in their original forms again; instead, they have been consolidated and are now known collectively as *Chicago Stories 1996*, fitting better into the overall theme of the entire series. I've also compiled a short *Chicago Stories 2001-2004* book, including the smattering of poems I wrote after retiring from the literary community. The new six-book "Chicago Stories" collection (including expanded edi-

tions of the four volumes that had previously existed) now reprints all of the general work from my years as an active performer; the seven special themed books already mentioned have also been reedited and republished, meaning that owning this thirteen-book series now gives you access to nearly every poem and monologue I wrote between 1996 and 2004. The two “greatest hits” compilations have also been republished, along with two new ones; one’s called *Love Blender*, a collection of pieces about relationships, compiled originally as a feature for the electronic magazine LoveBlender.com, and the other’s simply entitled *Personal Favorites*, along with a new introduction concerning why they are. And finally, a new omnibus edition has been published for 2007 as well, called *Complete Performance Work 1996-2004*, collecting the content of all thirteen previously-mentioned books into one volume (and in fact, owning that volume makes owning the thirteen individual books unnecessary).

Those who enjoyed this book may also want to check out the following related volumes, all currently available through GAD: *How to Win a Poetry Slam* (2000), a half-humorous, half-critical look at this unique literary genre; *Smells Like Sweat* (1997), a memoir of the 1997 National Poetry Slam, written entirely as a series of haikus (from an original concept by Jerry Quickley); and *The Tunnel Rat Sessions* (2002), a collection of long-form interviews with other slam poets that I originally conducted for the Chicago-based poetry newsletter *Tunnel Rat* in the mid-1990s. Of course, I also encourage you to check out the other books in the GAD catalog; as of this writing there are 55 books altogether, with more being added each year, covering almost every literary genre and style imaginable. As always, I urge you to drop me a line if you wish to discuss these pieces further; my latest contact information can always be found at my website, itself found at jasonpettus.com.

175113

That was my grandfather's number.

I would see it below his rolled up cuff when we would play on the swings when I was a child. And when I was four years old I learned my numbers, and I would practice by pointing at my grandfather's arm one stubby finger at a time. "175113. What does that mean?"

"Ah. It is from the war. A story for later, yes? Let's get some ice cream."

175113.

That was not my grandfather's number.

My grandfather was a Baptist from southern Missouri. He had a bad foot, didn't even go to war. He stayed behind and tended to the lead mines, trained the women and teenagers and even the Hungarians who suddenly were employees.

My grandfather, when he was a child, used to sneak off into the woods with his brother and watch the Klan meetings. He told me about this, before he died. My grandfather snuck into the woods and watched his father, his uncles, the town businessmen, sit around in their white robes and play rummy and drink hooch. You see, there was nothing for the Klan to do. There were no black people in St. Francois County, Missouri.

"I'll tell you why your great-grandfather was in the Klan," my grandfather told me once. "It was so he could get away from his wife one night a week."

175113.

That's what I say when someone at a party cracks open his eighth Miller Genuine Draft and says, "Man, I heard the greatest joke the other day. This Jew walks into a bar and...oh. Um. I'm sorry. Are you...Jewish?"

I want to say, "Does it fucking matter? If you're asking me, don't you think there's some more important questions you should be asking yourself?" But I know it would fall on deaf ears, so instead I say, "175113." Then they get really quiet and walk away.

175113.

That's what I repeated to myself for six hours straight once, the night that I called a man a nigger for the first time in my life, three months after moving to Chicago, terrified of the city, confused, lonely, angry at the world, angry at the things I saw around me.

When I lived in a bigoted town with no black people, I would have never fathomed the day when I would call someone a nigger, or a faggot, or a kike, or a wetback. And now, in Chicago, I've used all those words.

Oh, not out loud.

175113.

That's what I repeated to myself for six hours, because they told me never to forget, and I was. And I am. And I can't take on the weight of the world, but by God, you can bet your ass that I can take on myself.

175113.

That was my grandfather's number.

ALL THE DYKES

FOR PATRICIA BARBER

All the dykes line up in a circle around you
They put their asses on that barstool
and don't move
don't budge an
inch
until you are finished

They show up in droves, Patricia
They sit there and give you googly-eyes
They, dressed in your clunky black suits
They, dressed in your clunky black glasses
They, with your straight black haircut
like a pack of Mods
like a pack of Morrissey fans
not content to just listen to you
but wanting, needing, forcing to

dress like you
look like you
because it's not just music, Patricia
it's a lifestyle, Patricia

And the dykes, Patricia, the tough beautiful dykes
that sit at the curved bar
get fidgety when it's 11:03
and you still haven't started playing yet

And the dykes, Patricia, the wonderful dysfunctional dykes
that sit at the curved bar
get angry when you so much as dare
to whisper your drink order to your waitress
(a bourbon and coke, please)
they turn and glare at you
and let you know that yes,
they WILL come over and kick your fuckin' ass
if you don't shut the fuck up!

And how can I write a poem about music, Patricia?
Because it's kind of beside the point
If you had wanted to get your point across with words
then you would have written it down already

How do you describe chills that go down your spine?
How do you describe plucks on ivory executed in such a way,
such a rhythm,
such a pattern,
that it produces hot salt water running down my cheeks?
How do you describe sound that enters my ears
travels through my bones
settles in my soul
and never dissipates
but swells
and swells
and SWELLS
AND SWELLS
and gets lighter
the heavier it gets
until I am filled with helium
and floating two inches off my padded booth
my legs bouncing off the furniture

How do you describe this?

You don't.

Your music completely nullifies an entire subset of artistic expression,
the world of words I like to throw myself so much into –

“So what's Patricia Barber like?”

“Well, she's like... well... fuck, man... she's... and then... shit... you see, it's... FUCK, man!
You just gotta... you just gotta go see her yourself.”

The dykes, Patricia, the petite sing-song dykes
that crowd around you at the curved bar
They mimic the actions of fifteen year old boys
They dream of asking you to the prom
They dream of holding your sweaty hand in theirs
They dream of soft lips and perfume-laced pillows

You make lesbians dream of perfume-laced pillows!

And I don't know if you're a dyke, Patricia
It never occurred to me to ask
but if you're not a dyke, Patricia, you really should be
because even though it's self-incriminating
I can't stand the thought of sharing that with a man
I can't stand the thought of songs written
ideas formed
energy spent
heaven idealized
for the sake of one of me's

All the dykes, Patricia, all the bright, beautiful dykes
that sit at the curved bar
they love you, Patricia, they adore you,
they worship you
they are like an army
ready to go out and die for you

But I watch you play
I close my eyes and listen
and I wonder
if you realize
that all of us
in the back booths
are here too
and that
we are also
foot soldiers
in your army

I.
The battles lost

Someday I'll be dead.

It might come tonight
when I cross the street against the light
It might come a hundred years from now,
when my body finally says
after ten million heartbeats
"I'm tired."
"I've had enough."

BALLAD OF THE BATTLES LOST

I wonder, sometimes, what you will say about me.

"He was a good writer
He was a bad writer
He was an important artist

He was a forgettable artist
He was a good fuck
He was a bad fuck

I sit in my room and I type
and I type and I type and I type
I sit in the coffeehouse and I type
and I type and I type and I type
I sit in my lover's room and I

"Why did he have to die
Bout time that asshole kicked off
He was my teacher
He was my student

We wage the war everyday,
the artists do
The war of creation
fighting god
inch
by every inch
fighting inertia
fighting plagues
fighting famine
inch
by
every

"I loved him
I hated him
Who?

We wage the war
evvvv
errrrr
eeeeee
day
and I have seen the battles
the battles that have been won
and I have seen the battles
the battles that have been lost

I've seen them,
seen the battles
with these
two eyes too

What will you say about me when I'm dead?

When do I become immortal?

The war never ends
The privates just become corporals
the corporals become sergeants
the sergeants, lieutenants
the lieutenants, captains
captains majors
majors colonels
colonelsgenerals

and the generals?
Well, they just die
and pray that they have become Patton
or will turn into one soon

I have seen the battles won
and I have seen the battles lost

I have seen my comrades fall
and they are not the Pattons
they are not the generals
but the lost, innocent kids from Alabama

He lied on his registration card so they'd take him
worked and sweated and
dreamed at night
of killing the enemy
dreamed at night
of being wrapped
in the holy shroud
of an American flag

and was shot in the back
behind a tree
while taking a piss

I have seen this with my own eyes
the battles won
and the battles lost

"He was a genius
He was a hack
He was a saint
He was the Devil

No one sings ballads about privates
No one sings praises about

What will you say about me when I'm dead?

When do I become immortal?
please tell me

And I sing now
I sing the ballads for my
fallen comrades
I sing for
the battles lost
I sing for the private
shot in the back
while taking a piss

What will you say about me when I'm dead?

Will you sing a ballad for me?

II. The Plague

Children, please,
stop horsing around
stop running around
you're giving your grandpa a headache
Come, children,
come sit on your grandpa's lap
and he will tell you about the plague
the plague that ravaged him and his brothers for years

1983 is the first memory I have of the plague
but I must've known about it before
because my first memory of the plague
is sitting around
talking about
what can be done about the plague

and who would've ever guessed
that the one guaranteed good free thing in life
would become the one guaranteed most dreaded thing in life

(We met through mutual friends
and hung out at the bar that night
We kept buying each other drinks
and that look
that look
kept passing between us
we talked about art
and artists
we talked about writing
and writers
and everything clicked
and I really liked her)

Do they forget to tell you now
why the plague got so bad?
Is it revisionist history?
Are they too ashamed to tell you
that the government didn't want to
admit
that the plague existed
because it was little boys
getting the plague

from other little boys?

And when did it happen
that the one most precious thing in life
became the one most deadly?

“They deserve it
God’s telling them something
He’s weeding, he’s tending to the garden

(and I asked her if she had a portfolio
and she said sure back at her apartment
which of course it would be there
that’s why I asked
and we weaved our way down the brick streets
arm in arm
and
hand in hand)

The best part about gay sex
used to be
that no one was going to get pregnant
so there was never a need for a condom

And we all know, children,
don’t we,
we all know that little boys
who like little boys
don’t necessarily
like
just
little boys
but many times they like little girls

“Get a piece of the rock

(I’m not even sure now
if we even got the door closed
if we even got inside the apartment
before we were making out
This sexual tension had been
churning
inside us all night
and I knew it about myself
and I suspected it about her
but was never really sure
until she had her keys out
then unexpectedly
jumped me
in the hallway)

And we all know, children,
don’t we,
that my brothers-in-arms,
my comrades,
well...
many times
they are little boys
who like little boys
and little girls

who like little girls
or little boys and little girls
who like
EVERYONE

We fought against the plague
for so long
that the fight became an institution

The walk was sponsored
by Pepsi
The quilt was sponsored
by Microsoft
The parade was sponsored
by Miller Genuine Draft

They were planned a year in advance
because no one ever
suspected
or hoped
or dreamed
that the plague would be eradicated

The battles became formalized
stylized

(the first plague ever to have its own logo)

and was scanned
drawn
designed on Quark desktops
and copied
and emailed
and manufactured
and Hollywood celebrities
would wear the logo
proudly
because no one believed the plague could be fought
no one believed the war could be won

(and the next thing I know
clothes are sort of flying
and I have lips across my belly
nipples in my mouth
locks of her hair gripped in my closing fist
pushing
pushing down
skin meeting skin
elbow meeting neck)

People took on the fight
the war
as part of their life
so much so
that when you suggested that we might be winning
they would scream at you
yell at you
“How can you DARE suggest such a thing”
the plague became so pervasive
so overwhelming

that people forgot
that the entire point
was to wipe it out
People forgot
that the walks
and the runs
and the bikes
and the parades
and the quilts
the entire point
was to wipe it out

“I heard some guy fucked a monkey
and that’s how it started
I heard that
I don’t know if it’s true
but I heard that
and it wouldn’t surprise me
not in the least”

(I could feel the inside of her vagina
on my penis
the hot, moist walls
of her gender
her
sex
we were looking right into each other’s eyes
it was like we were becoming one
it was a transcendent moment
just like it was meant to be)

Lots and lots and lots and lots and lots and lots and lots and lots and lots and lots
and lots and lots and lots and lots and lots and lots and lots and lots and lots
of my comrades died
Their bodies laid strewn
across the battlefield
like a Civil War photograph
Their carcasses were hoisted
high into the air
by my living brothers
Hoisted high in the air
for the rest of the world to see
and they would shout

“You did this
You, the silent
You, the weak
You, the uncaring
You, the scared
You did this
You killed them”

(I came up inside of her
all the way up
I could feel my sperm
shooting all the way up
to her heart
her lungs
her neck
her brain)

Gather round, children,
please, form a circle
and let me tell you about
The Great and Terrible Plague
that ravaged my comrades
that killed them off
by the thousands
Let me tell you about a disease
that no one expected
and no one knew how to deal with
The perfect disease
The perfect plague
Couldn't be any more sinister
if Tom Clancy decided to make it up in his head
for his next technothriller novel

(and after it was over
we were lying in bed
and she simply asked,
"Have you been tested?"
and I got real quiet
for a minute or two
and then I said,
"Have YOU been tested?"
and she got real quiet
for a minute or two
and then we rolled inwards
and held each other
and stayed quiet
the rest of the night,
not saying a word

just
holding
each
other)

III. Robert (the first casualty)

You were the first to die
after I enlisted
after I started to fight the war

You made me cry a lot

You made me cry the very first time
I ever saw one of your pieces
Saw an actual physical piece
with my own eyes
for the first time

It was St. Louis
It was 1989
It was the piece
with the two men
with no body hair
side by side

black and white
like two crescent moons
peeking over the edge
of a Tattoine horizon

The piece glowed
this is what no one warned me about

I had been told of your new technique
of printing on fabric
so that the ink bled just the
tiniest bit
so that it looked like
an aura
around the subject matters
I had been told about this
It was in all my classes

But when I saw it with my own eyes

Your piece came alive
right in the front of me
in the silent, white room
Your piece came alive
Shimmered and shaked
in front of my eyes

And sure
I didn't like the pieces
that were the pieces
that no one else liked either
and that made you the martyr
but does that matter?
You made flowers dance in front of my eyes
You made celebrities come alive
You made cocks turn into
maybe the most fascinating thing I had ever seen in my life
(well, I mean,
besides my own)

I cried
in St. Louis
in 1989
in the middle of a white room
surrounded by white people
I cried
because the men
the moons
danced
in front of my eyes
and I suddenly realized
what you had done for me
without you even knowing me

I suddenly realized
This Is What I Want To Do
I want to make strangers cry

And just like Woodstock will
never mean the same thing again

for my parents
Cincinnati will
never mean the same thing again
for me

I cried at Cincinnati
at the injustice
at the people making a career
out of trashing your career
and what I wanted to scream
into a bullhorn
in front of all the people
was

“Haven’t you people seen the photos?
How could you see the photos
and still be out here protesting?”

I cried
because you suddenly made me understand
how careful you have to be
when fighting god
how crafty he can be
when he starts to lose

Your book used to be small
and cost twenty bucks
and then it got bigger
and cost fifty
and bigger
and a hundred
and bigger
and a hundred and fifty

and the last photo
was in Time, I remember this
I remember this
how strange it was to
see your photo in Time
a cane
a skull
and you
staring straight at me
telling me

“You’ve been warned

And I cried
and I cried and I cried and I cried
I cried with Ann
I drank with Ann
I toasted with Ann
and then we
both
cried
some
more

And sometimes, Robert,
sometimes

I pray to you
even though I'm an atheist

to tell you
that they told me
that if you affect one person
then you've succeeded
and you succeeded

that I understand
that you never wanted to be a hero
but you were one anyway

that you were the first casualty
of the war
after I joined
after I went to draft office
stood in my line
got my fatigues

you were the first casualty
and I will never forget you
and I will never let them forget you

Robert
Robert was his name
He died of the plague
He made photographs that sang
and danced
He made a lot of people happy
and he made a lot of other people cry

Robert
Robert was his name

BLAH BLAH

and
BLAH BLAH
the hip hop beat won't leave me
and
BLAH BLAH
the beautiful women won't leave me
and
BLAH BLAH
blow jobs with champagne
and
BLAH BLAH
boys are dumb
and
BLAH BLAH
kids are breakdancing again and when the hell did that happen
and
BLAH BLAH
the Beastie Boys are the same age as me
and
BLAH BLAH
I can't get my head to stop nodding to the music
and
BLAH BLAH
my keyboard on my lap makes me global
and
BLAH BLAH
so what
and
BLAH BLAH
the kids in the bar make fun of me because I'm a geezer
and
BLAH BLAH
and because I'm a dork
and
BLAH BLAH
and because there was another guy in the other corner with a laptop
and
BLAH BLAH
and he was playing Duke Nukem
and
BLAH BLAH
and
BLAH BLAH
I am tonight officially old
for the first time in my life
tonight I am officially old
and
BLAH BLAH
BLAH BLAH
blah

blah

CELEBRATING WITH DIGNITY

Have we really gotten to the point
where Michael Jordan has to politely ask us
to not riot?

Have we really gotten to the point
where tennis shoes have to be offered
to get people to turn in illegal guns?

And really, have we really gotten to the point
where the President has nothing better to worry about
than if Kate Moss glamourizes heroin?

Have we really gotten to the point
where we have become such collectively bad parents
that smooth talkers on the internet can convince children to run away from home?
And teenagers need a magnetic strip to go to school?
And a girl gives birth at Prom and stuffs the baby down the toilet?
And newborns have computer chips surgically implanted to keep track of them?

Have we really gotten to this point?

And tell me, have we really gotten to the point
where our pets are put on Prozac
along with a third of our nation's youth?

Have we really gotten to the point
where we need retinal scans to use our ATMs?

Tell me if we've really gotten to the point
where a five year old is accused of sexual harrassment
and it takes Tiger Woods to make us realize
"You know what? Most people playing golf
are middle-aged white-trash bigots!"

My GOD, have we really gotten to the point
where people are getting sued for second-hand smoke?
Where all three network news divisions are owned by private companies?
Where burning the flag is against the law
but listening to your employee's phone calls isn't?

And tell me, will you please tell me,
have we really gotten to the point
where a black man has to root for another black man's innocence
even if privately he thinks he is guilty?
Where defending your rights means defending Andrew Dice Clay?
Where the budget of a movie is larger than the budget of Norway?

Please tell me if we have really gotten to this point.
Because I'd really...
I'd really like...
I'd really like to know.

CHICAGO MANTRA

Hypothermia:

The point where your body can no longer produce the minimum heat necessary to sustain life.
Damen and North Currency Exchange.

Time: 3:02 a.m.

Temperature: 12 degrees.

Where's the fucking bus.

Hypothermia:

The point where your body can no longer produce the minimum heat necessary to sustain life.
Damen and North Currency Exchange.

Time: 3:03 a.m.

Temperature: 12 degrees.

Where's the fucking bus.

Hypothermia:

The point where your body can no longer produce the minimum heat necessary to sustain life.
Damen and North Currency Exchange.

Time: 3:04 a.m.

Temperature: 11 degrees.

Where's the fucking bus.

Hypothermia:

The point where your body can no longer produce the minimum heat necessary to sustain life.
Damen and North Currency Exchange.

Time: 3:05 a.m.

Temperature: 10 degrees.

Where's the fucking bus.

So I'm hanging out in her apartment
with this dog.
This crazy fuckin' dog
who can't go thirty seconds
without getting petted
and stroked
and told
"Oh you want some loving, don't you, yes you DO, you want some loving!"

An entirely appropriate metaphor.

THE DOG WHO LOVED TOO MUCH

I look around and I notice things
that I haven't before
which is easy with her
because her house is like one of those puzzles
from the old "Highlights" magazines
where there's a dozen things
hidden
in the picture of the farmhouse

I notice
that she's the only person besides me
that I've ever met
who owns a hardback copy of "Vox"

I notice
that she has a restaurant check
sitting on her computer
that says
"No shots
No cigarettes
Not tonite"

and I've spent the night
throwing up in her bathroom
and there are many things I want to tell her

like I wouldn't've thrown up
if it wasn't for the fact
that I haven't eaten in 24 hours
and I wouldn't've thrown up
if it wasn't for the fact
that I had a 40 of St. Ives last night
and then a something and cranberry
and then a bourbon and coke

and that
if I had gone home last night
I don't know what would have happened to me

But I can't tell her these things.

The dog whines at the door
when I sit in her den
and type on her computer
try to get online
but realize that I need a password

Realize that I need a password
and what is the password?

love
trust
vomit
friend
pickmeup

I've been searching for the password
for months now
and well, jeez, I just
can't
seem
to
find
it

She admits to me last night
in our drunken berlin stupor
that when she's interested in a man
she sits around and observes them
for a bit
before making her move

"How long?" I ask

"Oh, about four or five months."

"But,"
I say,
"If you wait four or five months
you can pretty much convince yourself
out of dating anyone"

"I know,"
she says,
and laughs

This dog demands that I love it
even when it's eleven in the morning
and I am still drunk
and still depressed
and still sick
and the light from the windows
hurts
and the nicotine
worming its way to my lungs
hurts

On her shelves
Bukowski sits next to
Sabine's notebook

of course

She's asleep
in the other room
and I have just read
her poem about me
which I've heard before
but not in the form
that's in her book

which is so much more personal
more intimate
more sad
more powerful
than what she's let me see before

and she's named her book
after the poem
that's about me.

And if I knew what was good for me
I'd walk right into her room
and sneak in under the covers
demand that she pet me
stroke me under my chin
rub her long fingers over my belly
and tell me what a good boy I am

And I would whine
and grovel
and thank her for letting me stay here last night
for giving a damn
and yes I know
that I'm always seeming to vomit
in your company
but I don't mean anything by it
it's just those goddamn free drinks is all
and that whole not eating thing
but I don't mean to say anything bad
about you

Thank her
for giving a damn
and doing the only thing
she knows how to do
when confronted at night
with a life full of baggage
unexpectedly

If I knew what was good for me
I'd sneak into her bed right now
and act like the dog that I am

But I know what's good for me
which is why I sit in her den
and type away on her computer
and sequester myself from the dog
and look through her Highlights puzzle
and desperately seek out aspirin

woof woof woof woof woof woof woof woof woof woof woof woof woof

DOWN WITH THE PIGEONS

I am down with the pigeons today.

I mean... I am DOWN with the pigeons, like "You down with O.P.P.?"

Yeah... you know me. I'm down with the pigeons today.

It is a beautiful August day, the token one beautiful August day that comes to Chicago each year, and I happen to not be working today so I decide to just head down to the loop and... hang out.

I feel a little weird, going all the way down to the loop and spending the whole day down there with no purpose in mind. Usually I'm down in the loop because I've got something to do, ya know, heading to a job or picking up a paycheck, seeing the occasional play at Goodman or the occasional movie at Fine Arts or checking out the action at Marshall Field's where my friend Steve works. Usually I'm down in the loop because I've got something to do, ya know, but today I don't and I feel a little weird about it.

So I get off at Washington. I've got a pen in my front left pocket, my wallet and about 54 bucks in my front right pocket, a notebook in my back left pocket, and a paperback book in my back right pocket. I've got a brand new pack of Marlboro Reds in my left shirt pocket, a couple of cassettes in my right shirt pocket, my pager clipped to my belt, my Walkman clipped to my belt, currently blasting the Pixies, "Bossanova," at ear-bleeding level into my ears. I am UrbanMan, ready for another day of fighting evil. I am Hotshot Big City Boy, bumping and grinding with the rest of the millions downtown today, no backpack today, no encumbrances today, no hindrances today, just me, my bulging pockets, and the world at my feet.

And I head out.

Teeming masses on State street right as I get off the el, the teeming masses who have forgiven the city for the horrible State Street Experiment of 1977 and now finally have come back to the street now that the city tore the fuckin' thing down and rebuilt it the way it was supposed to be. A State street come to life, a Great street come to life, a stately street for a stately town, new construction bulging from every corner, pushing out to the sidewalk and forcing themselves to build giant scaffolded barriers to protect us little citizens.

And the pigeons come. They hang with me, walk down the street with me, the State street, the Great street. I am down with the pigeons. They show me what I am doing, which is beating the pavement, not exactly looking for something to do, just... waiting for it to happen.

And I stop in Marshall Fields, ponder with awe for exactly the one millionth time in my life that I actually have a friend who works in Marshall Field's, the harbinger of commerce, the stanchion of retail, the Store of Departments, not only still alive but still so important to this city that people will bypass their malls and come all the way downtown on Saturdays just to buy something there.

I wander around, pretend that I'm from Cleveland, Christmas time, 1948, and we have come to have our annual dinner in the Walnut Room, the old women in the pressed whites bringing the cornucopia of flavor to the table. I find Steve, we decide to make an early lunch out of it, head out onto Wabash, pick up some grubby grub and hang with Picasso for an hour.

And I watch. I watch the kids that slide down the sculpture, wonder out loud to Steve if Picasso had any idea that children would get so much playtime fun from his creation, if he built it that way just for that purpose. And I watch the hurried, harried boys and girls in the thousand dollar suits and the tennis shoes, the boys and girls with the furrowed brows and the manila envelopes they pour through as they stuff a Big Mac down their throats. I watch them obsessively glance at clocks, suck down nicotine, and I wonder again, this time inside myself, how glad I am that I got nowhere to go today, how magical it is to just sit in a plaza and have nowhere to be.

And I am hanging with the pigeons. I am hanging with them as they all take their little huddled naps around me, the pigeons just enjoying the weather, enjoying the scene, scurrying around every time a six year old decides he's just got to have one o' them.

And Steve has to go work again, so he does, and I'm like, "hmm," read a bit, decide what to do, when it occurs to me... oh shit! It's Tuesday!

Bumbling down Boul Mich, watching the slicksters con the tourists out of not-too-hard-earned money, money the tourists are better off without, "Look, we went to Chicago this weekend and we bought this newspaper from a homeless person!" "Oh Roger, don't gloat!" Watch the lost faces, watch the shuffling feet, and then I am there, Michigan and Adams, rub the lions' noses for good luck, in the door, plunk down my quarter, flash my

expired student ID, and I am in. Spend two hours watching Jackson Pollack dance in front of my eyes, watching Edward Hopper whisper sweet nothings into my ear, watching Jeff Koons light up around me like pogo neon. I am dancing the jig, flirting with beautiful, un-touchable 20 year old Parisian art history majors, telling them where to get the best pizza, telling them how to get to Wicker Park, telling them about all the wonderful, magical things they'll be able to find that night if they can just ditch their chaperone and get on the god-damn el.

And I hang outside on the steps for awhile, and I am down with the pigeons. The pigeons who know they're natives but choose to hang with the tourists for a bit anyway, just to remember what it was exactly that made them go "Fuck man" the first time they hit the big-shouldered city too. The pigeons and me, we hang, we just hang and listen to the thousand tiny excited voices exploding all around us.

And then I get... brave. Crane my neck upwards, look at the skybound landscape, pick out one building I've always wanted to be in but have never been in. Amoco... Don-nally... no, wait, Prudential, yeah... oh no, shit, no, shit man, wait... Coal and Carbide!"

Oh fuck yeah. I am down with the Coal and Carbide.

Stroll in the front door, saunter to the front desk like they should be kissing MY ass, sign a fake name, sign a fake destination, easy as pie, I'm in the elevator, hit the top button, the top top button... tick... tick... tick... tick... tick... ding. Wander around, try to find some trouble when suddenly it comes finding me, an unmarked, unlocked door that I try and I move and suddenly...

I am on the roof. My own personal Sears Tower, looming at all the ants WAAY down below. Holy shit, man. And here, even here, I am down with the pigeons, man, down with them as they welcome me to their sanctuary, their sacred secret place where they can hang when the city gets just a little too much, when just exactly one too many scary guys asks them for change, when just exactly one too many cabs scream their angry horn even though they are crossing with the light, just when... they need a little break. They need a little rest.

But soon enough, it's time for a little action again, and I'm up, pocket a shard of black brick as a souvenir, brush myself off, and I'm on the streets again, part of the huddling multitudes, a little window shopping,

I check my watch, realize that I have just missed the magic window, now it's too late to get on the el without getting on the el with the four million other people who are in the loop, so I pop in a coffeehouse at the corner of State and Wabash, sit at an outside table, let the sun tan me, let the sun coax beads of sweat from my skin, let the sun slowly melt my iced coffee. And I am down with the pigeons, the pigeons who coo and scoot around me, hoping I have something to give them.

And eventually it becomes 6:30 and it's safe to get on the train... so I do. And I go home. And I get off the el, and there's a pigeon there. And I swear, I swear to GOD to you... that pigeon winked at me.

A FOUND POEM THAT DEMONSTRATES MY LACK OF FAITH IN HUMANITY

Jergen's Hand Soap.

Directions.

Wet hands.

Squeeze small amount of soap, roughly the size of a dime, into palm.

Rub hands vigorously.

Rinse.

Jergen's Hand Soap is not intended for internal ingestion.

Contact with eyes may cause irritation.

Questions?

Call 1-800-JERGENS.

HOW DARE YOU
Mr. Luplow

HOW DARE YOU
pretend that
Bukowski
is the
only way
to be
a writer

HOW DARE YOU

HOW DARE YOU, MR. LUPLOW

live in
Uptown just
so you
could be
closer to
the heroin

HOW DARE YOU
Mr. Luplow,
how dare you

HOW DARE YOU
Mr. Luplow,
HOW DARE YOU
deride me
for being
cursed with
a suburban
childhood so
that like
the Calvinists
I was
predestined never
to be
a writer

HOW DARE YOU
tell us
that you
had kicked?

and
HOW DARE YOU
Mr. Luplow,
HOW DARE YOU
think that
the only
way for
a writer
to be
good is
for a
writer to
die

HOW DARE YOU
not learn
Mr. Bukowski's

most important
lesson, that
if you
live through
it you
will enjoy
immortality a
lot more

HOW DARE YOU
assume that
you had
to be
a martyr
to the
war without
anyone knowing
who you
were

and
HOW DARE YOU
Mr. Luplow,
HOW DARE YOU
make me
care about
you anyway?

HOW TO TELL YOU'RE ABOUT TO TURN THIRTY

So I'm watching Conan O'Brien one night and James Taylor comes on. And I'm watching James Taylor perform, and all of a sudden, I get it. I totally get it.

And I sit there and say out loud to myself, "Jesus Christ, where's this guy BEEN all my life?"

And then I realize what I just said.

And then I get very, very quiet.

I WANNA BE YOUR SPLEEN

I haven't told you this yet, but since I have you here, let me just tell you:
I wanna be your spleen.

I want be one of your weird, mysterious internal organs
one of those things that lies somewhere between here and here,
where exactly, we're not sure
I want to be inside you
and somehow be a vital part in your physical survival
without you knowing exactly why

I want to know that you would die without me
but that you don't know exactly how that would happen without me
only that it would

I wanna be your spleen,
not your lungs, no
and not your heart
or any of those other "famous" organs
that any decent fifth-grader knows all the ins and outs of

I don't want you to know the intimate details
of why you wouldn't survive without me –
"Well, you provide oxygen to my body,
and you aerate my red blood cells
which then course their way through my body,
spreading the precious oxygen to all needed parts."
No, I don't want to be that,
because if I was, then before you know it, you'll have figured out
how the organ is defective
and how to fix it
or God forbid, how to replace it
with a newer,
stronger,
better
one

I don't want to be replaced by a baboon heart
and left in some giant biotissue trash can
I don't want to be attached to a pacemaker
and have my movements, my actions regulated
by a plastic, battery-operated machine
No, I wanna be your small intestine, baby,
I wanna be your extra kidney,
I wanna be your spleen,
just this simple little nondescript organ of yours
that lets you live your life happily
that lets you explore the world in new ways
without you even knowing, realizing
that I am helping you

until, of course, I become inflamed

In Excalibur
the boys are boys
and the girls are girls

In Excalibur
the cheesy Spanish pop music
is king

In Excalibur
huge groups of co-workers
huddle around tables in corners
and talk about how great it is

IN EXCALIBUR that they've finally gotten to go out
and see each other out of the
work environment

In Excalibur
hearts are broken
people run home crying
women get on the stage
and try to win contests
by walking sexy
by feigning pornographic
lesbian poses

because maybe they're lesbians

but can't quite make the jump

and one of the stage walkers
comes over
and looks over my shoulder
and I
am
extremely
embarrassed

She could be one of my friends
who works for a living
you know,
(next page)

WORKS
for a living
because that's who she is

maybe she's one of my friends
who dances on the stage
because she fucking likes dance music
and likes dancing

and the rest
all of the rest
is just an annoyance
to deal with

when all she really wants to do
is dance
to let the music
fill up inside of her

move her

I shouldn't make presumptions
I hate it when people do it to me
so why do I do it?

Because I get scared sometimes.

Just like I think we all do.

We get scared of the people who aren't like us
We get scared of the people who are doing the thing
we want to do

I'm scared of her because she's up on the stage
dancing away
which is exactly what I want to be doing

Maybe she's scared of me
because I'm sitting in the corner
typing away
and maybe that's what she wants to be doing

I'll let her write.

maybe because shes just like you sitten here just trying to be like everyone else.
dont know who she is just trying to get along with this crazy world of fucked up l
people just trying to fit in but how do we fit in all different people in all
just trying to find what it is in life that is calling us.

i am always looking but it is yet to be found because i am lost in my world i created

A JOB I'D REALLY LIKE TO HAVE

I'd like to be that really good-looking guy that's brought in on the last season of a television show to save it from being cancelled. You know, like that Sweathog from Alabama, or the Love Boat's cruise photographer, or Fonzie's cousin who comes to town to be the dean of the local boys' school. I would make my living, buy my cars, attend exclusive Hollywood parties and have sex with Sandra Bullock all based on role after role of "Oh Mork, you act so funny sometimes. Come on, let's head to the beach." I would have an entire career, a proud, long one. I would become the subject of snotty Generation X poems worshipping the mindless popular culture they were raised on.

I, Jason Pettus! would be the savior of shows that don't need saving, the fucker of art for the sake of commerce. Regular casts would see me report for work on the first day and give each other looks, serious longing depressing looks, looks they gave each other last year when the adorable precocious child actor was brought on board. I, Jason Pettus, harbinger of doom, secret acknowledger of yes, you do have exactly 22 episodes left, so don't buy that Malibu ranch house you were eyeing last week!

Oh, it wouldn't be enough work to completely sustain me. I'd have to pick up other jobs - I'd have to become that guy that always does those things in the commercials that you're NOT supposed to do. "Well, Jason, you did rent the car from Avis, didn't you?" "Well... not EXACTLY!" I would be the endless martyr, the guy who constantly dies so that the main character can have an emotional breakthrough. I would be that AIDS patient who dies in George Clooney's arms, that smackhead who dies in Dennis Franz's arms, that conspiracy theorist who dies in Gillian Anderson's arms!

And my friends would complain, I know. They would endlessly bitch at me after a dozen dollar beers at Estelle's on a Tuesday night, "Oh Jason, you sell-out, oh JASON, you purveyor of bad culture, oh JASON, you back-turner on the intelligent world in which we live." And I would have exactly one thing to say to them, one thing to say to each and every one of them, which is... "FUCK YOU!" It sure as hell beats the ten dollar an hour type a mindless memo from an adulterous executive to be ignored by another adulterous executive and sneak off to have another smoke break but who cares 'cause he's just a temp and will be gone on Friday anyway job! FUCK YOU, I say, FUCK YOU because I am Jason Pettus, smasher of worlds! Jason Pettus, demigod of late night Channel 9! FUCK YOU, for I am Jason Pettus, bad television actor!

JOKES MY GRANDPA USED TO TELL ME

Originally performed with Monica Kendrick

Monica:

You see, there once was this Baptist preacher and this Methodist preacher. And they were old fishin' buddies, see? Used to go out to the lake every Saturday and go after catfish all day. And the Baptist preacher says one day, "You know, why don't you ever come over to my church? Tell you what, the next Sunday you have off, you and your deacons just come on by and you'll be our guest." And the Methodist preacher, he says, "Well, it's a done deal. And any Saturday you have off, well, you and the boys feel free to come on by yourself."

(Monica starts playing fiddle)

Jason:

I'm from southern Missouri. Deep... deep... southern Missouri. I'm from the town where the TV show "Grace Under Fire" is supposed to take place. No, really. I'm from the same county that the movie "Roadhouse" with Patrick Swayze was set. I'm serious.

Well, I wasn't born there. I was born in St. Charles, Missouri, a rural suburb of St. Louis. But every single relative besides my mom and dad lived – live – died in southern Missouri, and from the day of my birth until I was 22 years old, I traveled to southern Missouri at least four times, every year – Christmas, Thanksgiving, Easter, and a week in the summer to spend with my grandparents – so yes, I count southern Missouri as an integral part of my growing up.

I had two grandmothers, two grandfathers and one step-grandfather. My grandmothers were both housewives, as the women of that time in that area tended to be. They were kept very busy raising their children, two on my dad's side, three on my mom's, a handful for anyone but nonetheless a severely lesser amount than the number of siblings my grandmothers had been raised with – eleven on my dad's side, nine on my mom's.

All three of my grandfathers were lead miners. Each of them spent about forty years – together, over a century – down under the deep black Missouri earth, carving giant holes through Ozark rock and extracting the precious galena. These men spent their entire adult lives twisting their large hands into claws, wiping chat out of their eyes, watching themselves slowly lose digits over the course of decades. This is what they did. This is what everyone did – my dad was literally the first male in my 150-odd year American family history to not be a lead miner. And I was the second male.

My family, my "kinfolk," are what could be called, for lack of a better term, "white trash." They drive pickup trucks with rifles in the windows. They kill deer in the winter and hang the carcasses from giant hooks in their sheds. They listen to country music, and I don't mean cool Patsy Cline doing a gentle two-step across the gently flowing hills to be wrapped up by the glorious midwestern sun country music. I mean Brooks and Dunn country music. My kinfolk are what could be called, for lack of a better term, white trash.

(Monica stops playing fiddle)

Monica:

So. One week in August the big revival took place over at the Baptist church and the preacher did find himself with a Sunday off, so him and his two deacons headed over to the Methodist church. Well, they got over to the church and found out that they just happened to be visiting on one of the busiest Sundays of the whole year for the Methodists. They walked in that back door to see that every single pew was completely filled up. And, well, they just stood around there in the back of the church, trying to figure out what to do.

(Monica starts playing fiddle)

Jason:

My grandpa, on my mom's side, was a real fan of Ozark jokes. He had a whole pocketful of them, collected from eighty years of Ozark living. I don't remember most of them because, frankly, most of them were bad, a Garrison Keilor monologue written in hell, strange stories about evil Methodists and little boys who keep worms in their mouths in the winter to keep the fish biting.

My grandpa would do a lot of these things, things that would annoy and frustrate me. He would lead us on rambling car tours that would expand throughout the entire county of St. Francois, for hours on end, which he would then totally forget about the next time we visited and end up taking us on the exact same tour – "Oh, did I show you kids where the old high school used to be?" "Yes, Grandpa." "Oh, well now, that was the house where your Aunt Rose used to live." "Yes, Grandpa."

My grandpa used to make little sculptures, whereby he'd glue roly-eyes onto walnuts and situate several of them on a wooden stand like a family or a barbershop quartet, and give them as gifts – "We're all a little nutty in southern Missouri!" My grandpa would listen to Burl Ives on his eight-track stereo, he would rail for hours about those damn Germans and I don't care if they did take down that damn wall, they're a bunch of Nazis and we'll never be able to trust 'em. My grandpa would talk to ugly, ugly teenage checkout girls at the Walmart and ask them that wouldn't they agree that his strapping young grandson Jason here was a mighty handsome young man and would make quite a catch.

It wasn't until I was older, of course, that I began to appreciate my grandpa for what he was and actually wanted to start hearing the old stories. But by then it was too late – he was in a retirement home full-time by then, his drivers license revoked by the state, his stories gone and his mind now filled with the latest report from his doctor on his colon, plus curiously enough, an obsession in the last year of his life that the entire US Congress was now being run by five supercomputers buried deep in the earth under the Capitol building, which admittedly is a little insane but would clear up a whole lot of questions.

You know, my parents once visited me up here in Chicago a couple of years ago and we ended up getting fairly tipsy at the top of the John Hancock building one night. The conversation turned philosophical as it is wont to do these days between me and my parents, and I asked them if they think they would've ever been happy staying in St. Francois county, if they think they could've enjoyed living a long adult life in their smalltowns of their youth. My dad was quick to answer and his loose lips burst that night with a resounding, "Hell NO, I'd been trying to get out of that fuckin' town since I was thirteen!" But my mom paused a moment, looked out the window and down onto the twinkling buildings below with a misty look in her eyes and said, "Yeah. Yeah, I think I could've been very happy staying in St. Francois my whole life." And right at that moment, I could see my mom suddenly in a green taffodila prom dress, standing at the corner of the high school gym, slowly swaying across the floor with a pimply-faced boy in a pressed white tuxedo jacket to the seductive rhythms of Bobby Vinton. Tell you the truth, I could even see my mom sneaking around the back of the gym to secretly take a snort or two of hooch and maybe make out for a while in the backseat of dad's Oldsmobile.

My grandpa, on my mom's side, was the very first eagle scout in Missouri history, not to mention Missouri's first recipient of the Order of the Arrow. He was the first person in the history of my family to take a college class. He completely redesigned and resodded his town's public square in the 70s, by himself, by hand. He cooked and delivered meals on wheels to a dozen infirmed people, for ten years without ever missing. My grandpa, on my mom's side, saved a man's life once, actually saved another human being's life, down in the lead mines in the 1940s.

And I swear to you, I swear to God, I would give anything to hear one of his stupid Ozark jokes again.

(Monica stops playing fiddle)

Monica:

So the Methodist preacher, he's up at the front of the church, getting ready to start the service when he spies his Baptist buddy in the back. So he leans down to his deacon and whispers in his ear, "Quick, go get three chairs for the Baptists." And this deacon, he just gives the preacher a look like he'd suddenly gone crazy, yells out a "What!" The preacher leans in again, says, "You heard me. Go out there and get three chairs for the Baptists." So that poor deacon just walks right up to that pulpit and yells out in this sorry, confused voice, "Okay, everybody... three cheers for the Baptists!"

(Monica starts playing the fiddle)

Jason:

I'm not sure why I'm telling you all this. Part of it, I think, is the fact that the last time we hung out at Estelle's a couple of weeks ago, I realized that I really do like you, that it's not just a stupid crush like I'd always assumed it was, but I actually sat and talked to you for hours and realized that I really do find you funny and smart and attractive and talented and sexy, just so damn sexy. And you know this because we got really drunk that night and talked precisely about how much I like you. And I know you don't like me – well, not that way – but still, at the end of the night you reached in of your own free will and planted a quiet, soft kiss on my face and I know that you have no clue what that kiss meant to me.

You and I, we go to these open mics and we sit there and watch Chuck go up on stage and talk about his African heritage and we see Ben go up there and talk about his

Latino heritage, the generations strung out on a line like antique clothes being dried by the warmth of a Mexico sun. And I've bitched about this, talked about how great it would be if I could get up there and talk about my heritage, how inspired I get hearing my friends talk about these families that I'll never have.

This is my heritage. It's a heritage of trailer homes, of broken cars on cinderblocks in front yards. My heritage is of Klan meetings in the woods, moonshine being distilled in cellars. My heritage is Sam Hildebrandt, the most notorious criminal in the entire Civil War, who would wait in the woods until the Unions and Confederates were done killing each other off in an Ozark town, then calmly stroll in and rob the empty houses blind, slitting the throats of any random passersby and raping any of the women left behind.

My kinfolk are, for lack of a better term, white trash. But my kinfolk are also noble, they're gentle and they're kind. My family is a family of quiet, proud laborers, women who never once felt the need to apologize for their priorities, men who could tell you more with a turn of the head than I ever could in a snotty six minute generation x monologue drunkenly delivered on a smoky Chicago stage. My heritage is a heritage of calico summer dresses, of volunteer firemen. It's a heritage of store credit and free candy to children during union strikes, a heritage of sweaty, laugh-filled square dances at the harvest festival, of passionate couplings in the hay, in the barn, on lazy August afternoons.

Who my relatives are is who I am. And in my more egotistical moments, I like to think that perhaps I am just a little more calm than most of my friends, that I am just a little more polite, a little more old-fashioned. And when I see those snotty, obvious movies and TV shows that the west and east coasts churn out about the midwest, when they show the bumbling Barney Fifes and make that joke about fucking your sister for officially the one millionth time without it ever having been funny one single time – when I see these smug condemnations of my family sprayed across the movie screen, it occurs to me once again how much they'll never get it, and how, if I was to tell them one of my grandpa's Ozark jokes, they would never, in their entire lives, laugh once.

I'm from southern Missouri. Deep, deep southern Missouri. I am, for lack of a better term, white trash. And never, in a million years, would I ever change that.

(Monica finishes fiddle song)

A MAN

He is a man
a man of the 60s
a child of the 40s
a child of the immigrants
the Germans
with dirt
black dirt
black Missouri dirt
under their fingernails
the large, coarse, gnarled hands of the lead-mining Germans
the Germans
the German wives
kneading these hands
under ice water
by the light of a harsh American moon
kneading the dough for their pumpkin pies
kneading this flesh
strong gnarled German Missouri flesh
back out to its straight and narrow form
He is a man
a man of the 60s
Lies in his room at night
dreams of Camelot
dreams of rockets to the moon
lies in his dorm room
dreams the pipe dream
of a life without gnarled flesh
of a life without pumpkin pies
Lies in his pipe dream of a dorm room
dreams of dorm rooms
dreams of skinny ties
dreams of women serving drinks in St. Louis
with bunny ears on their heads
and cotton balls on their ass
He dreams
He dreams
He dreams
this man of the 70s
dreams of
where it went wrong
Late for the cub scout meeting
'cause the car broke down
and traffic was a mess
and John Kennedy died
and Robert Kennedy died
and Martin Luther King died
and Jimi Hendrix
and Janis Joplin
and Spiro Agnew
and Richard Nixon
and Vietnam, Vietnam,
Jesus Christ, how do you get to the little league game
in the middle of Vietnam
but he is a man
a man of the 70s
doing exactly what King Arthur told him
work hard
raise your children
own a home
buy on credit

drive a car
keep reaching for the stars
and never mind that King Arthur's dead
and never mind this nagging, fleeting, pulling, pushing feeling
that something is wrong
horribly wrong
because he is a man
he is a man of the 80s
The Jones's have bought a swimming pool
he's not going to get one
the Jones's have bought a satellite dish
he's not going to get one
this man
this man of the 80s
seems to be the only man in the entire kingdom
this fading, crumbling Camelot
who realizes
that something's wrong when you and your dad like the same president
that something's wrong when the paint rubs off your credit card
this man
is the only man
in this stinking, rotting, choking decline of the Reagan Empire
who seems to know
that the bottom's about to fall out
and then... it does
He is a man
a man of the 90s
built rocketships that went to the moon
for thirty five years
and in the blink of an eye
a snap of the finger
the rug of Camelot
is whipped out from under his feet
The Jones's have filed for bankruptcy
he's not going to get one
the Jones's have filed for divorce
he's not going to get one
his kids have a better resume than he does
his kids with the pierced
ear and
nose and
chest and
clit
his kids whining about their g-g-g-generation
X marks the spot
of where Camelot was
and is no more
but he keeps trudging
he keeps pushing
he keeps loving laughing losing and winning
because he is a man
he is a man
he
is
a
man.

MISSOURI DREAMS

I.

I dreamt that she got back to the apartment
at four in the morning
really drunk
when I was already asleep
in the living room
and that she took all of her clothes off
except for her t-shirt
and crept into the living room
and unbuckled my pants
and fucked me right there
on the port-a-cot
right there
and then

II.

There's been this cat
hanging out on my friends' porch
all weekend
It's not their cat
It's somebody's cat
'cause it's got a collar
but somebody who is not
taking care of the cat

Anyway, the cat hangs out on the porch
all day, all night
and just meows up a storm
every time I step out
for a cigarette

Meow meow meow

And purrs
and rubs itself all over my legs
and headbutts its face into my hands

And I sit out there and smoke
and I say,
"What is it, kitty?
Why are you meowing?
I can't understand you.
I'm not a cat.
What are you trying to say to me, kitty?"

I dreamt last night that the cat told me.

"Meow meow REM has sucked ever since 'Lifes Rich Pageant'"
"Meow meow meow I don't have any opposable digits and can't pick off these damn fleas I
have meow meow"
"Meow meow meow I keep getting the bad shift at work it's like the owner has it out for me
meow meow"
"Meow meow meow why doesn't Pavement ever play in Columbia anymore meow meow"
"Meow meow I'm hungry can't you tell MEOW meow MEOW I'm hungry gimme some
fuckin' food MEOW MEOW!"
"Meow meow I never wanna see another Bauhaus t-shirt as long as I live meow meow"

and then I woke up.

III.

I dreamt that I went to college with Parker Posey
and actually dated her for a little bit

and I was back in Columbia
and everyone wanted to know what she was like

and I said,
“Well...
you know...
she was a little crazy.
But she was nice.
She was nice.”

IV.

I dreamt that
instead of hanging up the phone
she told me to come over
right then
at five in the morning

“Come over,”
she said

“I need you over here right now”

THE NIGHT WE PRETENDED WE WERE MARRIED

It started simply enough. We were both home for Thanksgiving in the same sleepy middle-class suburb. We had both been born and raised in this suburb, even though we had not met for the first time until we were both living in Chicago. We both took the coincidence as a good sign when we discovered it and decided that this coincidence must be indicative of some sort of good karma to come our way in the future, so in fact the sleepy middle-class suburb incidentally became a big reason why we ended up dating in the first place.

It was Thanksgiving and we were both home and we were bored after spending all week with our respective families, so we decided to get together Saturday night and have dinner out somewhere. The problem, of course, is that the only restaurants in sleepy middle-class suburbs are these horrible little franchised themed restaurants, low-rent versions of the Hard Rock Cafe if such a thing is possible, overbright quaint collections of knick-knacks sprayed across the walls, bought in bulk from some warehouse in New Jersey, pathetic attempts to attach a specific culture or region or idea to the restaurant without ever once making the references too intelligent for the white trash denizens of the community, without ever once making the references too cultural or too regional or presenting anything other than in a Disneyfied, middle-of-the-afternoon-local-talk-show way.

So. We're at the mall making reservations at "The Happy Aussie," a place with all the down-under charm of a Yahoo Serious movie – stuffed dolls shaped like koala bears dotting the interior in random locations, off-tan menu with the phrase "G'day Mate!" happily printed across the front in that very professional sort of rustic typeset that screams ad agency and market research to all of us overly cynical media-weary slackers in the know.

We get on the waiting list – the waiting list – and the hostess says, "You and your wife can wait in the bar if you'd like and we'll call you when your table's ready," and she looks at me and I look at her and I say, "Yes, I think we'll do that."

So we're sitting in the bar and looking through the beer list and notice that the Australian restaurant doesn't even serve Fosters, which should come as a surprise to no one because we are in Missouri where there is a state law that says you're required to drink Budweiser products, all violaters subject to a sharp fine and possible jail time, depending on the severity of the illegal beer being drank.

"What can I get you?" the bartender asks.

"I'll take a bourbon and coke," I say, "and my wife will have..."

She looks at the menu again and says, "I'll take a rum and coke."

We have not dated very long. We have not known each other very long, perhaps two months on the outside at this point. She stands up and says, "Watch my purse, honey, I have to use the bathroom."

We hold hands during dinner. We talk about various drugs we used in our high school days in the suburban wasteland, and she comes up with the killer phrase, "Nitrus oxide really is the perfect drug for 16-year-olds to take." I am constantly amazed when she utters such pearls of wisdom almost randomly. But then again, that's why I married her in the first place.

At the end of dinner the check is presented to me, which I take, because we are no longer in Chicago and no one ever is so gauche as to believe that the woman would be in charge of paying for a meal. I feel chivalrous and sexist and very manly as I plop the cash into the little faux-beaten-up-leather-Indiana-Jones envelope our bill is in.

We walk around the mall after dinner, hand still in hand, pop our heads into the B. Dalton, the Fudge Factory, the Merry-Go-Round. We get into a big argument in front of the Gap because I say I'm not going in because every time I'm in the Gap I end up wanting to buy everything and can't afford to buy anything and it gets me really depressed knowing how good I could be looking if I just had the finances to go along with my lifestyle. She convinces me to go in anyway. A saleswoman asks if we need help and she says, "I've just got to get a new outfit together for my husband here. I mean, look at him." She and the saleswoman share a secret feminine laugh, a laugh directed at all us poor clueless men, and the two walk around the store, picking out shirts and pants and scarves and underwear and socks. She keeps making me go into the dressing room and try stuff on, then coming out and modeling as she stands in front of me with a critical eye. She picks out blue plaid

combed cotton boxer shorts and says, "I better go in with you to see if these work." We make out in the dressing room for a minute or two and then decide we'll seem suspicious if we stay in much longer. She picks out a pair of socks and a tie and says, "Honey, should we use my credit card or yours? Oh never mind, I'll just use mine," pulls out her credit card, buys the socks and tie.

We walk down the hallway again, discuss what things we need to get for the house soon, talk about the new underwear and how I really should be changing over to new sets now, not necessarily suddenly, it can be a gradual change, but a complete turnover nonetheless. I kiss her at the front door of the mall before heading out to the cold November air. We drive home. And I make tender love that night to my wife, my betrothed, my beloved, the woman I've sworn in front of God to honor and cherish, till death do I part.

“Carl Sandburg said I could ask you for money.”

This is what made me stop.

“Excuse me?”

“Carl Sandburg. Big shoulders. You know.”

“Yes...”

“I always worried about asking people for money. On the streets, you know. But I’ve been reading a lot of Sandburg lately. I’ve got a lot of time now. And he says that in Chicago, it’s okay to ask for money on the street.”

“Oh.”

“I was built in with this inherent guilt about asking for money, you know? I was raised in Winnetka.”

“...Really?”

THE ONLY HOMELESS PERSON I’VE EVER GIVEN MONEY TO

“Oh yeah. Went to U of I. Art major. Four years. Get my ability, get my education, make my living on my own, you know? Don’t depend on anyone.”

“So... what happened?”

“Ah... I got behind in rent. I was temping. Went exactly two weeks too long not working, you know?”

“Yeah...”

“And I lost my apartment.”

“Why... why didn’t you borrow money from your parents?”

“My parents aren’t exactly... speaking to me right now. You know?”

“Yeah.”

“And I thought, you know, that’s cool. I’ll ask around, ask my friends, I can scrape up four hundred bucks somehow. Sold my stuff. Asked my friends. Shit, my friends are as poor as I am.”

“Yeah...”

“So... I lost my apartment. And I sold everything. So. Here I am.”

“On the street.”

“On the street.”

“Why didn’t you...” I paused, then thought of my blanket answer to every question. “Ah-hah, why don’t you go to a shelter?” I asked, already starting to walk away.

“I went. I got stabbed.”

This stopped me for the second time. “Excuse me?”

The boy lifted his shirt, showed a ragged scar on his abdomen.

“What happened?” I asked.

“I’m white. I’m educated. I looked like an easy target. What can I say?”

“Jesus...”

“It happens, you know? That always used to be my excuse, too. Go to a shelter, go a shelter. I never realized what went on there, though. Have you actually been to a shelter?”

“Um... no.”

“Horrible. Nightmare. Anyway, I knew if I went back, I’d get killed. So I was trying to decide what to do.”

“Mm-hmm...”

“And I started reading Sandburg. Did you know during the Great Depression, there were 100,000 homeless people living on Lower Wacker Drive?”

“No.”

“Oh yeah. Shut down traffic for about twelve years. So I read my history, I read my Sandburg, and I decided, it’s not so bad in Chicago, asking for change.”

“Yeah.”

“People understand what you’re talking about here, you know? They understand that everyone’s about one, maybe two steps away from being where I am right now.”

“Yeah.”

“So whaddya say? You got some change for me?”

And I gave him my paycheck – \$791.93. And I headed home.

And I called my parents. And I told them how much I love them, how much I sincerely love them.

And I called my friends. And I told them how much I love them, how much I sincerely love them.

And I laid down in my bed, my twin-mattress, Pier-One framed bed. And I cried.

And I cried, and I cried, and I cried.

AN OPEN LETTER TO JERRY SPRINGER

May 6, 1997

Dear Mr. Springer:

You pompous, arrogant little prick.

Just who the fuck do you think you are, waltzing into Chicago, my Chicago, my town that I love and treasure? Just who the fuck do you think you are, declaring yourself “qualified” and “competent” to deliver political commentary for Channel 5, my Channel 5, my NBC affiliate that I watch on a daily basis, that I have spent lonely Saturday afternoons with, that I have fallen asleep with in the intimacy of my own bed, for Chrissakes?

You smug, self-important piece of shit.

How dare you remind us of your stint as the mayor of Cincinnati. Wait, wait, was this before or after you got caught writing a personal check to a prostitute and got booted out of office? And how dare you try to justify yourself by reminding us that you sued to be a news anchor. Was this before or after you deliberately gave up that credential of your own free will because local news just wasn't paying you enough FUCKING MONEY! And how dare you, how DARE you, Jerry Springer, how fucking DARE you compare me to Hitler in your first commentary when I have the gall to criticize Channel 5 for giving you fucking airspace to begin with! In my eyes, six million dead Jews is a far, far cry from that self-righteous piece of trash you called your first “commentary” and would have been more aptly titled, “Why I Think Carol Marin Is a Bitch!”

You low-down, muck-racking, trash-talking, gutter-licking, rock-throwing son of a bitch!

Where do you get off telling me I have a problem if I can't separate your “day job” from your “night job?” Okay, if you were the host of a wacky morning news show, I could cut you a little slack. A little. But, Jerry... come on! I mean... mothers who sleep with their sons, fathers who sleep with their daughters, brothers who sleep with their sisters, uncles who sleep with their nieces, cousins who sleep with their pets, GRANDMOTHERS WHO SLEEP WITH THEMSELVES, MY GOD, JERRY, not only should you not be allowed on the air, you should be taken out to the Daley Center one fine afternoon and be publicly flogged in front of the fucking Picasso sculpture!

And tell me, Mr. Springer, you tell me where you get off defending your industry, trying to explain that tabloid talk shows are nothing but “fun and games,” an industry that has sparked thirty-two lawsuits in the last three years, an industry that has sparked a fucking death, and forgive me if I'm wrong, Jerry, but the last time I checked, Fox Thing in the Morning was making a lot of people nauseous, but it wasn't prompting anyone to go on a fucking killing spree, you fucking... you, you... you fucking... FUCK!

So you're sick of not being taken seriously, Mr. Springer? Think you should get a fair shot at voicing your opinions? Then I dare you... no, I challenge you to come down to this very stage, this very one I'm standing on, next week with one of your “commentaries.” Let's see you wax poetic without your jumble of illiterate, backwards, racist, homophobic, sheeplike white trash you call your audience. That's right, Jerry! I challenge you to bring your big ol' hair and your little tiny dick down to this stage, where we'll go head-to-head, brain-to-brain, mano-y-fuckin'-MANO, and we'll just see who has the most insightful commentary to offer the city of Chicago.

Sincerely,
Jason Pettus

POETRY ON THE EL

The problem with
composing poetry
on your computer
on the el

is that

whoever's sitting
next to you
wants to watch
you type

and reads over your shoulder as you go

and since this guy
doesn't know
exactly what
you're doing

you
feel
a
little
stupid

THE POTENTIAL, THE KINETIC

I seem to remember some sort of
hazy snippet of memory from
some junior high school science class somewhere:

that there are two forms of energy,
the potential, which is the energy being stored up,
and the kinetic, which is the energy in action.

And when I asked her what she did
she said she was a dance therapist
which of course intrigued me
and confused me

just like she intrigued me
and confused me

and so of course I asked her out

And she sat at the table and had nothing to drink
and explained dance therapy to me
which apparently revolves around the concept of

kineticism,

of energy in action.

Of the idea that there are literal, physical ways
that one can put one's body parts
so that they align with or against one another
to produce
actual,
tangible,
specific,
emotional reactions.

Which, of course, I thought was complete new age bullshit.

And she sat there
and still had nothing to drink
and took her glasses off
and put them back on
and took them back off
and put them back on
and she talked about the energy inherent in a physical action
before the action is perpetrated,
the potential energy behind every action we take

so I invite her back to my place.

And when she leaned back on the couch,
leaned back and casually brushed her shoulder with mine
and turned her face so that it was full on to mine,
that's when I knew to kiss her.

And when I looked up
and she was straddling me
her shirt off
her left leg squished between the cushions of my couch
her right leg straight out against the floor, supporting her weight,
that's when I knew to ask her to spend the night.

Somewhere, I think junior high it was, they told me about energy:
the potential, which is the energy being stored up;
and the kinetic, which is the energy in action.

I told her that she looked like one of those old
Nazi propaganda photographs
taken during the 1936 Olympics,
photos taken by mad geniuses
to prove the physical superiority
and purity of the Aryan race.
When she leaned over me
with her clothes off
and that 1920's haircut of hers
draped into my face,
like a flapper gone insane,
she looked like the perfect
Hitlerian ideal.

I meant it as a compliment.
And we moved in tandem that night
our bodies literally danced as one

Every time I curved my arm
she knew the exact and precise counterpoint
that would perfectly
elegantly
precisely
compliment my action.

Every time our hips would mutually thrust
they would be in exact
and machinelike
patterns
timed precisely to
always
meet
together
at each others' upthrusts

We moved with a synchronicity
that usually takes me years of practice
to learn with a lover

We would wait for each other
She would lie beneath me
her face buried in my elbow
sweating
frowning
lie completely still
for thirty seconds
sixty seconds
ninety seconds
waiting for that next thrust from behind
that she knew was coming

and I would wait
those thirty seconds
those sixty seconds
those ninety seconds
before thrusting again

because that is what old, familiar lovers do
they build the tension
they let the potential build
and build
and build
and suddenly let the kinetic explode
without warning

and it was a transcendental experience for me
I was filled with joy
and with awe
and with reverence
I felt like I had met a past life lover
I felt like I could do no wrong
I felt like I had met my soulmate

I fucking saw God that night
and I'm a fucking atheist!

And we lied in bed
and she pushed her toes against mine
apologizing profusely for their coldness
and I laid my fingers on her back
and I told her
what I just told you
about the past life lover
about doing no wrong
about my soulmate

and she said,
"Yes."
"That's what I do."
"Like I said."
"That's kineticism."
"That's what I do."

Somewhere, sometime, I think in junior high it was, I was told about energy:
The potential, which is energy being stored;
and the kinetic, which is energy in action.

I'm not a skeptic anymore.

PRINCESS, MY PRINCESS

I fell in love with you when I was twelve years old. It was the year you got married, and I'm not sure, but I believe the entire country was in love with you. And how could they not be? Sprayed across the pages of PEOPLE magazine, how could anyone not be mesmerized by the 19 year old future queen, the new wave haircut, the demure glancing at the floor when out with the present royalty? You were something we had never experienced before, didn't know how to experience – a princess, a real, live, honest-to-God princess.

I never thought you'd be able to get more beautiful than you were that day, that day with the wedding dress dragging all the way across the British empire. But I got a little older and a little wiser, and you did too, and you proved me wrong. You got more beautiful with each passing year, to the point that you were positively glowing by the time of your first child, yet another heir to the throne that seemed with each passing day would never be passed on. Just how long can that woman live, anyway?

The thing that seemed to surprise the British most was how endearing you became to us ugly Americans AFTER the scandals, AFTER the kiss-and-tell, AFTER the divorce. Why would that surprise you? You turned out to be the first British person in history to publicly talk about their dysfunctional childhood, their dysfunctional marriage, be able to stand up and say that you came out the other side still standing. Hell, in America, that's a way of life! And we know how difficult it is to walk away from it, even when you're just walking away from the security of having someone to keep the bed warm on cold January nights. When you walked away from being the Queen of England for it – well, that's when you stopped being a princess, and started being a goddess.

I fell in love with you when I was twelve years old. And I remained in love with you, ever since, all the way through the new photos of you in Vanity Fair two months ago that just made us all pause in the 7-11 and go, "That's YOU?"

And now.

And now you are something again that I have never experienced before – you are my first James Dean, my first Marilyn Monroe, and don't give me any of that Kurt Cobain shit, 'cause he was a smackhead and fated to die and brought the whole thing on himself. No, you were the woman I was going to grow old with, the woman to check my passage in life against. You were the woman who was going to grow into the regal mother, grandmother, ambassador, that you were already shaping yourself to be.

And now you are already a montage of video clips and glossy photos, you are a tender coffeetable memorial waiting to happen. You are forever stuck in an endless loop, starting at a new wave haircut and ending with a tunnel in Paris and a dozen paparazzi on racing motorcycles. And how, tell me how, when eight years from now I hit your death age, how I will be able to stop my clock and not slowly age on way past the time you never had, how I will be able to stop forever wondering in my head what you would be looking like now, right now, whatever age of mine that might be?

I can't.

I fell in love with you when I was twelve years old. I'm not sure, but I believe the whole world did.

I don't believe in leaving flowers on iron-clad gates. I don't believe in declaring, like it's some kind of surprise, that I was shocked and dismayed by your death. I believe in writing. I believe in love. And I believed in you.

SCRAPING THE SKY

FOR MARC SMITH

What I want you to do is push all the el tracks up about 100 feet
and build them so they zoom in and out of the buildings
build an entire second city up in the air
like utopias in 1950's science fiction comics
needle-nosed train cars and pastel colored uniforms

What I want you to do is rename all the buildings
not to reflect the companies who paid for them, but the gods who inspired them
so that when I am trudging along the sidewalk everyday, I can say
'I need this messengered to Zeus right away'
or 'today I'm temping in Venus'

And when I teeter
on the edge
of the Mighty Sears Tower
and gaze
down on you
like a giant, deadly flower
you hold me
like a baby
and I cringe, and I cower
'cause I know your weaknesses
and I know your power

What I want you to do is kick out all the executives
sitting so close to heaven that they can literally reach out and scrape the sky
They never look out, they close their curtains, they don't deserve that spot
fill yourself with artists and poets and musicians
and others who would appreciate the view

And what I want, what I really want is for you to love me
I'd like the slightest indication that you are glad that I'm here
But that's not your style, is it, my big shouldered lover,
my windy flower, my hog-butcherer whore
and I guess that's why I stay and love you even the more.

SHE'S EATING A BAGEL

She's sitting about thirty feet away from me, eating a bagel. And I don't know what's on the bagel, and I don't know what she's drinking in her plain mug, and I don't know whether the boy she's sitting with is her lover or her friend or her co-worker or her brother or her partner in crime. And I don't know if she keeps looking at me because she's intrigued in me or wants to fuck me or is worried because she keeps catching me looking at her or she's bored or is actually looking at something on the wall directly behind me. And I don't know if we were introduced at a party if she'd listen in rapt attention to my life story or exchange pleasantries and be on her way or innocently flirt with me and then get to know me a little and get scared and excuse herself for another drink or push herself on me like I ain't leaving tonight without getting her phone number. And if we dated I don't know if she'd be a skater or a student or an office worker or an artist or a slacker or a psycho or a sorority girl (well okay probably not a sorority girl) but if she'd be selfish or giving or sex-crazed or prudish or boring or happy or passionate. And if we got married and had a child I don't know if she'd be caring or controlling or overprotective or underprotective or suburban or urban or rural or give up smoking or take up martinis at three in the afternoon or a leader or a follower or a den mother or a little league coach or celebrate anniversaries or file for divorce. And if we lived a long and full life and one day I finally got that cancer my mom insists I'm going to get I don't know if she'd curse me or cry for me or enter a period of self-imposed exile from humanity or try to get on with her life or marry again or raise our children to always carry a little piece of their daddy in their heart always or blow her inheritance on a trip to Bermuda and drink Mai Tais on the beach and flirt with twenty-one year old cabana boys.

However, she is eating a bagel. That much I know for sure.

SITTING IN THE COFFEEHOUSE NOW

I used to sit in the coffeehouse
and when a beautiful woman
across the room
kept giving me the eye
I thought

“Maybe this woman is interested
in sleeping with me”

and now I sit in the coffeehouse
and when a beautiful woman
across the room
keeps giving me the eye
I think

“Maybe I’ve already slept with this woman
and I don’t remember it
and that’s why she keeps looking at me”

I know it’s not true
but then again, maybe it is

A black and white photo
is all I have
of her
and her dog
standing and squatting
on the booming baggy crag rocks
of the black and white seashore
which I'll never taste
with my own salty tongue
the brine
jumping out in crystalline sharp relief
of a Photoshop enhanced icon

SKYLAB IS FALLING, THE CHICKEN TOLD ME

when I'm not supposed to
white cotton
ll bean sweaters
draped naughtingly around
muscled tan flesh waist
which I dream of gripping
with naked hand

she is squatting
like taking a shit
but instead my cock inside her
which is what I call it
when we soliloquy each other
over copper wires
and bounce each other's libidos
off a gold-foil covered wing
of a NASA drawing
high in the sky
with pie
stars a glob of white pinpricks
my prick pinpricking her
I want to say
but call it 'cock' instead
for fear
of the gold-foiled wing
dropping like a hot potato
and screaming forward
backward
into time
into the sea
Africans wearing souvenir hardhats
combing their countryside
for evidence of the wreckage
to sell to Dynamite magazine
and we are fucking right now
but she doesn't know it
She is off in Sydney
fucking the boyfriend she wished she didn't have
who I will never meet
in a city I will never see
rocks I will never stumble on
and rip open my knee

of sex and flesh and
six am runnings on the beach
Malibu dreams
as a kid
watching Blake Edwards movies
on late night cable television

the blood trickling down my leg
looking like a bad horror flick
minus the pain
I will never cut my knee on the black and white
craggly skedaggly bas-relief rocks
of a Photoshop moon
and she loves me
and she loves me not
and did you know
the game ring around the rosie
is a rhyme about the black plague?

I dream under fluttering eyelids
and hot laptop
of her curly girl hair
flying to the ring around the rosie
backyard
of an Australian barbeque
I dream
behind barbituate-addled fluttering eyelids
of shrimp thrown on a blazing hot fire
the sweet smells of frying flesh
wafting over the craggly rocks
which will never suck my blood
calling to us
'god, is that the barbeque?
god, I'm so hungry, come on'
wait
just
no
hey
wait
just kiss me again
kiss me one more time
it's a dream, it can't possibly be happening
because we are living in black and white
we are artificially sharpened
by a Photoshop dream
so as long as I have you here
let me tell you at this point to kiss me again
and you'll say okay
because you can't help yourself
because you are a dream
and this is a dream
a dream electronically transferred
over copper wire
and gold-foiled NASA wings
bounced like a bad heavy-metal album cover
over the land and sea and air and
w
a
t
e
r
to find you
or at least to find a parking spot
until you get back from fucking your boyfriend
and find me still standing
still waiting
still kissing

and
don't go yet
my poem's not done
it can't be
just kiss me one more time, okay?
I know you're not really here
I know I can't kiss black and white flesh
but just kiss me one more time and whisper that you love me

okay.
I love you.
Let's go eat.

I will not use your damn PC.
I will not use it, Jason I be.

I will not use it on my desk,
I will not use it on a test.
I will not use it with my toes,
I will not use it with Windows.

I will not use your damn PC,
I will not use it, Jason I be.

I will not give Bill Gates my time,

I won't let him commit that crime.
And yes, Netscape may sometimes fail,
but I WILL NOT use his MS Mail!

I will not use his damn PC,
I will not use it, Jason I be.

And don't tell ME the Mac is dead,
'cause frankly, that makes me see red.
Just who spoons out this shit you're fed?
Oh, Bill Gates, I think I said,
who whored himself and got in bed
with IBM, so full of dread,
well Mac still leads, as Mac has led,

so GET IT THROUGH YOUR FUCKING HEAD!

And burn it on your own CD,
I will not use your damn PC!

And I know it's Windows down at work...
but whaddya expect from those lousy jerks?
Who in their quest to save a cent
invented middle management?
Heads up their asses, worried about taxes,
they can't even send their own damn faxes.
That's how Dilbert came to be!
And they're going to choose a computer for me?

I will not use their damn PC,
I will not use it, Jason I be.

"Oh, I've got the solution!" you proudly say,
"Make all your troubles go away!
No more bullshit, no c: drive,
two words -- Windows 95."

AUGH!
The very thought just gives me hives!

I will not use your damn PC,
I will not use it, Jason I be.

I will not use it in my house,
I won't use that two-button mouse,
and if you think my poem crass,
well guess what, folks... you can KISS MY ASS!
For I will not use your damn PC,
I will not use it, Jason... I... be!

**THEY CAN HAVE MY
MACINTOSH WHEN
THEY PRY IT FROM
MY COLD, DEAD
FINGERS**

TWO MINUTES TO TALK WITH JACK KEROUAC

FOR LISA HEMMINGER

You see, I like the fact that you lived with your aunt. It is the crucial element, the epiphany to your epiphany which is the classic which is the so-much-more which is "On The Road." You had an out, you see. That is the beauty of it. That is the genius of it. Your bus-ticket-waiting-for-you-just-a-phone-call-away was more than just a ticket home, it was a ticket to the luxury which is writing, the luxury of contemplation and inspiration and consternation and flagellation, intoxication and masturbation – your ticket is what separated your homeless ass from the truly homeless, your dispossessed ass from the truly dispossessed... huh, your drunk ass from Neal Cassady's drunk ass, and when the contrite, uptight, likes-to-write but loves-to-fight high-as-a-kite pretentious west-side drink-til-four-in-the-a-m po... et likes to bitch at me about how I don't have the "street cred" to write what I do, it is your ticket-owning daddy-o ass, Jack, that allows me the luxury to say, "Kiss my ass!"

And now, Jack, you have cashed in your ticket and you are sitting in beat heaven... where the coffee is always free...

and the speed is never cut with strychnine...

and I can hear ya, Jack, I can hear you laughing, laughing at all the fools who just don't get it, the fools who open a sports bar in Ravenswood in your name, where frat boys sip on regurgitated urine and talk about their K's... all 401 of them. But you also laugh at all the fools who don't realize that the only book you ever considered good was your first one, the only one not written in the style that made you the patron saint of the fools to begin with. And how can I tell you, Jackie boy, how can I tell anyone that you are the only person in creation who would make me renounce my atheism, just so I could believe in reincarnation, just so I could believe that on cold, dark, rainy nights, sometimes, some-times, you invade me. You bring with you that beat, that sweet sweet beat so full of heat, like the salty meat of my lover's teat.

How can I tell you this, Jack? 'Cause all you'd do is call me a fool, take another drink, and laugh...

...and laugh and laugh and laugh...

TYPING ON KEYBOARDS IN BARS

You asked me once, “Why are you always pulling your computer out at bars and typing on it like some big ol’ nerd?”

Because I AM a nerd! I’ve been one since I was seven years old! Jesus Christ, can’t you see that?

And when I was toiling away on my eight color, grey boxed, green screen, 4K, don’t even have a disk drive 1979 TRS-80,
it was like an epiphany.

When I ten years old and programmed my own Dungeons and Dragons game,
it was like I was walking on clouds.

Why do I type on keyboards in bars? Because computers were the end-all be-all of me, you see, the thing that made me the person I always knew I WOULD be, someday.

And you – called me a faggot

And you – beat me up

And you – yes, yes, you! – took out the girl I wanted to ask to prom

and you fucked her in your backseat

against her will

and you made her cry

and you made her bleed

and I... typed

And when I got my first Internet account in 1986 and you were walking by the dorm computer lab, on your way to another fraternity party and another beer bong and another fag bash and another date rape and another football riot and you turned to your friend and said “Look at the fuckin’ geeks” and laughed... didn’t you realize that I could hear you? Didn’t you realize that I would remember?

And when we work together now, when we stand around a conference room on the 40th floor on some building that was designed by a nerd, built by a laborer and rented by... you... when you talk about fighting fires and killing the messenger, when you laugh and clap me on the back and invite me for beers on Friday nights... don’t you realize that I could hear you? Don’t you realize that I would remember?

Don’t you realize that I can still hear you, yelling and screaming all the way up and down Lincoln Avenue, where YOU still call me a faggot and YOU still beat me up, and YOU still fuck the girls in your backseat?

Why do I type on keyboards in bars? Because I CAN! Because I don’t know if you’ve noticed or not, but slowly and surely I am taking over. Because I don’t know if you’ve noticed or not, but now I’M the one on stage, telling my stories, and YOU’RE the one sitting in the audience, listening to me tell my stories. Because I don’t know if you’ve noticed or not, but I’m writing the books you read, I’m recording the music you listen to, I’m making the films you watch, I own the skyboxes of your precious sports arenas, I TOOK your job and I’m DRINKING your liquor and I’m SMOKING your cigars and yes, I’m FUCKING your WOMEN!

Wait, excuse me.

I’m tenderly making love to your women in a way you can only dream of.

Why do I type on keyboards in bars? I’ve always been typing on keyboards in bars.

THE VERY FIRST TIME I EVER PERFORMED AT THE GREEN MILL POETRY SLAM

(long pause) Marc Smith is... staring at me.

Marc Smith is... staring at me, and now the whole audience is staring at me, hundreds of eager eyes waiting for me to regale and entertain, to offer words of profundity and profanity, to make them feel their five bucks went to something worthwhile.

This is why I've never performed here.

Oh, I'll perform everywhere else – Estelle's and Weeds and Aloha, and No Exit and Joy Blue and Yo Mama's and Lounge Ax and Poop Studios and the list goes on and on and on like an unending nightmare. Oh, I'll perform there, for a room full of smackheads and macho boys in the back with Chicago Police leather jackets playing pool 'cause "I didn't come here for no fuckin' poetry reading, dude, I came here to play pool, dude, and if you don't like that you're just gonna have to try to stop me, dude." Oh, I'll perform there, where it don't matter if you fuck up or get too drunk or skip your turn to flirt with a beautiful

woman who's way too impressed with the fact that you write novels for a living. Oh, I'll perform there, where you don't have hundreds of eyes staring at you, patiently waiting and waiting and WAITING! for you to say something.

(long pause) Marc Smith is... frowning at me.

This is why I've never performed here, (takes mic out of mic stand and starts slowly crawling under piano on stage) 'cause Marc Smith is the end-all-be-all of the scene, and once he hates you, forever he hates you, and your career is pretty much over. Oh, that's not what they

say at the other open mikes – "Oh that Marc Smith what an asshole he is," "Oh that Green Mill it's nothing but hacks and failed actors over there" but I've learned the hard way that an entire city of six point four million people don't make fun of you unless you're the shit, man, and I know just enough history to know that without the Green Mill, there'd be no Chicago poetry scene.

(pause) Maybe they've forgotten I'm here. (looks over his shoulder at audience)

(whispering) Fuck.

The audience is... snapping their fingers at me, and the timer is ticking, tick-tick-tick, three minutes, three minutes and counting to zero, and my God I can't even take a decent shit in three minutes, much less read a decent piece and I've been standing on this stage for exactly one minute and forty two seconds now and haven't even said a fucking word yet, which is why select audience members in the back of the room are now stomping their feet, they're getting fidgety and nervous about this guy who just keeps... standing there.

Maybe I can fool them.

(in suave voice) Ladies and gentlemen, the Green Mill is proud to now present...

Ms. Patricia Barber. (pause) Start playing, Patricia. (pause) Come on, Patricia, start playing. (pause, then screaming at the top of his lungs) FOR THE LOVE OF GOD, PATRICIA, START PLAYING!

No good. (stands up) Forty five seconds left. I gotta come up with a plan. (stares at audience for a moment, then runs into bathroom)

(from inside bathroom, still with mic in hand, running water in the sink) I actually have a really good piece to do tonight. I've been working on it all week, I wrote it just for the Green Mill, it's about my childhood in Missouri and how I have a lingering guilt over not being a lead miner like my whole family before me. (pause) Maybe now they've forgotten me. Maybe Marc has already introduced the next poet. (opens bathroom door, peers out at audience)

(closes door, still in the bathroom, then whispers into mic) Fuck.

Twenty eight seconds left. My mind flies into a panic, starts racing with possible ways to save my already pathetically low score. I'll... I'll... I'll flirt with one of the judges, that's what I'll do.

(comes bursting out of the bathroom and starts ad libbing with one of the judges – "Hi, your name's (so-and-so), right? I'm Jason. Mind if I sit down? So, you're a (lists judge's occupation). That's very interesting..." and then back into mic) Oh, it's no good! (walks back onto stage while speaking) She thinks I look like Mr. Bean! I'll... I'll... (scans audience in panic) If I just go sit down and act like an audience member, I'll... (runs over to audience table and sits down, starts joking nervously with audience member, "Ha-ha, this guy sucks,

doesn't he?" then screams at stage, "YOU SUCK!") No good! The microphone cord's giving me away!

(runs back on stage, starts putting mic back into mic stand) I have ten seconds left! Marc Smith now officially hates me! The audience is screaming "BELMONT" and throwing wadded up napkins at me! My entire career as a performance poet has in the space of three minutes gone up in flames! And suddenly... and suddenly... and suddenly I get my nerve.

(immediately calms voice, like he's about to perform) When I was a boy in southern Missouri, my friends and I used to always... (looks suddenly at side of stage, like he's just been interrupted) Time? (looks out at audience pathetically for a few seconds) Um. Thank you.

WELL, STEVE ALBINI WAS NICE TO ME

(Lounge Ax, March 29, 1998)

We are trading Steve Albini stories.

This is a popular pastime in Chicago.

"I shared a table with Smashing Pumpkins at a Morphine show at the Double Door last year. They drank a lot of Grolsch. They were cool but quiet."

"Liz Phair used to eat at this restaurant I waitressed at all the time. She'd come in and make out with her boyfriend. She was an asshole."

"I fucked Nash Kato in 1994 in the bathtub at some party in Uptown. He was a bad fuck. Wouldn't take off his medallion."

So we are exchanging Steve Albini stories, Thax and I. I name him because this is a story of name-dropping.

Steve Albini is djing tonight

and we're surrounded

by the slackerazzi

and Thax and I

are exchanging Steve Albini stories

watching the short-haired short-statured blue tee-shirted man

spin the rockabilly in the booth

directly in front of me.

"I had a crush on him in 1983," Thax says. "And then I did an album with him a couple of years later."

This shocks me. Thax has single-handedly outreferenced almost everyone in the room.

"But now I can't talk to him because it's like running into a guy you had a crush on in high school. Your chest tightens and your heart goes pitter-patter and your throat closes up. You know."

I know.

I just told her tonight that I think I'm falling in love with her. She's told me the same back. And then it got really quiet.

I watch the cardigan boys. I watch the Kitty girls. I think about how they should all know me. I think about how they should all be whispering to each other when I walk in the room, "Dude, fuckin' Jason Pettus showed up."

I have a good Steve Albini story. I met him the very first night I moved to Chicago. It was a party in Logan Square and he was in the kitchen and I didn't know who he was and I was all excited about being a new citizen to the Windy City and I introduced myself and we talked small talk for about a half-hour and he gave me a beer, Steve Albini gave me a beer.

She asks, "Who's Steve Albini?" That's why I love her.

The slackers give my laptop strange looks. They give my tie strange looks. They are confused. They don't know if I'm some sort of yuppie weirdo or Important Guy they're supposed to recognize.

I like this.

Steve Albini comes up a lot in Chicago conversations, always with some distressful story from some body in the crowd about what an asshole he is. And I don't know what ever to say to this. So I say the only thing I can say: "Well, Steve Albini was nice to me."

She laughs. I wonder what's going to happen. I wonder when I'm going to be famous. I wonder when slacker kids will flock anytime my name is in the Reader.

"Yeah, Jason Pettus used to go into this bar all the time I hung out at. He was nice, but he was always bumming beer off me. But he was alright. Yeah, he was alright."

Luke and Leia decide they've gone through too much shit in the last 24 hours, and they deserve to have a drink. So they go up to the space station cantina and get trashed.

That night they ended up fucking.

And they lied in their aluminum bed, the glow of the mother planet softly illuminating the curves of their faces, the curves of their bodies, and Luke said, "God, it's like you fill this hole that's been missing my whole life. It's like we moved as one. You're like my lost soulmate who I've finally found."

And Leia said, "I have many issues. I think I may be so domineering because I was abandoned as a child. I resent my mother for going away before I really knew her. I'm glad I've met you, Luke, because you bring out the sensitive, caring side of me I always knew was there."

And Luke said, "Yes. I come from a dysfunctional childhood too. I think maybe you and I could sense that, and it's why we sought each other out."

And Leia said, "Yes. I don't want this to be a one-night-stand. Let's continue this, and see where it goes."

So Luke and Leia became an item, and soon they were seen showing up to all the strategy meetings together, and soon C-3PO stopped thinking of his master as Luke and started thinking of it as "Lukeandleia."

Oh, and Leia started dragging Luke along to the Rebel Alliance open mic, where she espoused such verse as:

my heart

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED BETWEEN THE END OF *THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK* AND THE BEGINNING OF *RETURN OF THE JEDI*

is like a Wookiee
hairy and
screaming with a
pathetic yowl

And Luke was constantly trying to impress Leia – "Look, I built a new light saber! Look, I can shoot down laser beams with my eyes closed!" And Luke was constantly asking her questions in bed – "Come on, baby, admit it, I've got the biggest power of the Force of any guy you've ever been with." And she'd giggle and roll her eyes at his obvious attempts to woo her, and was charmed by it, and she'd whisper back, "Yes, but remember, never be seduced by the dark side," and their late-night rollings and kissings would begin all over again.

And all was fine and good in the fight against the evil empire. But one day Luke started noticing how much Leia would bring Han into the conversation. "Oh, poor Han," she'd say over dinner at the royal palace. "He seems to have gotten in over his head." "Oh, that Han," she'd murmur as they practiced their x-wing skills. "I just feel so guilty. I just feel like maybe I was part of the problem."

Luke finally got angry one day. "Han this and Han that," he yelled. "Jeez, it's like you want to get back together with the guy!"

"No, no, baby," Leia said, putting her arms around him. "It's just that... well, you and I seem to be doing so well these days. And Han just seems to be in such a pickle. Don't you think we could just help him out a little? You know, give him a hand with that whole situation he's got, all that money he owes the mafia."

"Well..." Luke said.

"Come on. Just because I'm dating you doesn't mean I can't stop caring about Han. He's a good friend. And I just hate to see a friend get in so much trouble, especially when we were partly to blame. Come on, let's help him out."

"Well..." Luke said. "Let me think about it."

Luke started dressing all in black. And he start fixating on his relationship with his dad. And finally, after a lone weekend hanging out with old friends of his from the Force, he sat Leia down.

"Okay, I'll do it. I'll help him out. But you have to promise me that this doesn't change anything. I mean, we'll still be together when all of this is over, right?"

"Oh, absolutely, honey. You know I love you. Han is old news, just a guy from my past. Now," she said, unrolling a blueprint. "I've been thinking of a plan. It involves me wearing a bikini..."

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

By January 1997 I had already been a member of the Chicago poetry community for a year, mostly through the open mics at Sweet Alice and Estelle's, both in the pre-gentrified Wicker Park, mostly as a rather long-winded monologist who often read complete short stories from the stage. This all quickly changed, however, after being taken by my friend John Biederman to my first-ever poetry slam - coincidentally held at the Green Mill, where the poetry slam was actually invented, and hosted by Marc Smith, the guy who actually invented the poetry slam.

The very first time I ever saw a slam, in fact, I immediately realized that my literary destiny laid with it, and that both my writing and performance style would soon be going through a radical transformation. I'm not sure exactly what it was about the slam that spoke so passionately to me; after all, I've also been an outspoken critic of the format, also from the first day I experienced it. I suppose it was the strong performance dynamic of it all that

appealed to me - the fact that you had to have some basic acting skills in order to do well in a slam, but that you didn't have to in fact be an actor. I had taken an acting class as an undergraduate, had been in a comedy improv troupe, and had acted in a whole slew of student films; I was terrible at all of them, as any old collegemate can attest, but there was something about the pursuit

that I simply enjoyed. The slam, I thought that first night, as I sat drinking at the booth that was supposedly Al Capone's during Prohibition, was something I could do. And even more, something I thought I might be really good at. After all, I thought, what the best performers were really doing on that stage were not reading poetry at all, but rather little stories, little three-minute stories that happened to be very literate and had a strong sense of pattern and rhythm, and were being performed as an actor might perform a monologue. I could do that. In fact, I was pretty sure I could do that and win. Consistently. And maybe even make the finals at the end of the spring, and get on the four-person team going to that year's national competition.

You see, I had been sitting on a completed novel for almost a year at that point, and had tried to get an agent for it, and had made the 'maybe' list at nine different agencies, and the final round at three of them. None of the three ended up picking it up, but it had been enough encouragement for me to decide to go ahead and raise the money to self-publish it as a full-color trade-paperback book. And so January 1997, the same time I started attending the slam, was also the time I started raising the \$3,000 I would need to properly publish the novel. And the plan was to have the money raised and the book ready to sell by August of that year, which just so happened to be when the national competition was going to take place. And I thought, what better way to get a bunch of free publicity for the novel but to win the Chicago slam finals and to go to the national tournament? Even at this point, in fact, the slam was already starting to catch on fire nationally, and certain members of the press (like National Public Radio, for example) were already attending each year's national tournament and doing a little field report for Fresh Aire or whatever. Given that I would have almost no money whatsoever with which to promote the thousand copies of the novel when it finally came out, I thought that a good showing at the national tournament would probably go a long way towards getting those copies into actual paying readers' hands. I did have \$3,000 to pay back to friends and family members, after all.

With the goal in mind of winning consistently and decisively, I ended up spending the first few months of 1997 simply attending the slam as an audience member and never actually performing, nor even letting anyone at the slam know I was a writer. Even in those early days, I could tell that there were certain things performers could do on stage that would immediately appeal to a crowd, certain gimmicks that could convince a roomful of drunks to give you better scores in the immediacy of the moment. It was this acknowledgement, in fact, that was to start the complex relationship with the slam that I would have over my entire career as a performer. To this day, I am still one of the only slammers to do well on the national level who openly admits that the slam is primarily built around a system of gimmicks, certain visual and aural tricks you can enact during your performance that will virtually guarantee higher scores from typical slam audiences.

The moral implications of this fact lie shakily with me at best; I recognize that this reliance on gimmicks is not necessarily an inherently evil thing on its own, and certainly makes for an entertaining performance (which I believe to be the main role of a slam piece), but also think that a lot of slammers exploit these gimmicks in order to pass something off as literary when it usually isn't, or to make the slam a more important-sounding thing than

what it is, which ultimately is just another fun gimmicky thing to do in bars for the drunken enjoyment of overeducated slackers. I've never had a problem using these gimmicks myself, in the service of larger projects that I felt were of real importance - like generating free publicity for my novel, which I actually was rather proud of and thought that people would sincerely enjoy reading. But I've never tried passing off my slam work as anything other than what it is - cheap, gimmicky little pieces, designed expressly to inspire higher scores, free drinks, and easy sex with hot intellectual women. And indeed, my slam work in 1997 got me a plethora of all three. (See the standalone book "Psycho Poets" from the same year for more.)

Unsurprisingly, the very first piece I did perform at the Green Mill poetry slam (called "The very first time I performed at the Green Mill poetry slam," included in this book, and full of the exact gimmicks I've been talking about) garnered a perfect score of 30. I was off and running at that point, winning almost every weekly slam in which I participated, rapidly expanding my "open-mic circuit" of the city each week from two to six or seven, getting involved with a local poetry newsletter being published at the time called "Tunnel Rat," generating a lot of advance buzz about my upcoming novel (many in the poetry scene, of course, impressed that I was able to raise \$3,000 in the first place), and in general becoming the unbearable little shit that comes from being 28 and getting laid all the damn time because of the poetry you write. I qualified for the city finals that summer (the Green Mill at the time being the only slam in Chicago), and ended up making the team, although not without some controversy - Reggie Gibson, the man expected to win it all that year, was heckled during his performance by a woman I was sleeping with at the time, which rattled him and knocked him out of the tournament, allowing me to take the fourth-place spot that I did and make the team. And then "Yammer" host and admitted slam-hater Lisa Hemminger may or may not have gotten into a drunken fistfight with Marc Smith, depending on with whom you speak. Did I mention that we were all unbearable little shits back then?

In any case, I did make the team, and ended up traveling to Middletown, Connecticut, for that year's national tournament. (Reggie Gibson came along, in fact - there was never any bad blood between the two of us over what had happened.) There was controversy at that year's nationals as well - a man named Bob Holman (currently the owner of New York's Bowery Poetry Club), who had produced a popular PBS miniseries called "The United States of Poetry" a year before, had just started a spoken-word label called Mouth Almighty, which had just been bought by Mercury Records, and he had sponsored a "ringer" slam team consisting only of people on his label. It was the first time a team at the national competition had had a corporate sponsor, and its method of selecting members had violated the spirit of openness and random participation that was a hallmark of the slam, neither of which went down very well with many of the others in attendance that year. The team ended up winning that year's nationals, of course, with us coming in second, and with a lot of bad blood having already passed the year before between Mouth Almighty's Taylor Mali and our team's Dan Ferri (captured in the excellent 1996 documentary SlamNation, which anyone with an interest in slam should see), so needless to say it was a highly-charged tournament, with a lot of passion flowing between the two teams and the various members of the public who were aligning behind one or the other as the final round approached.

All of this, of course, did nothing but provide a profoundly larger amount of free publicity for my novel than I had even been expecting; by the end of the week I had been interviewed by Esquire magazine and had performed (via tape) for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, had been featured on National Public Radio for the second time of my career (see Chicago Stories 1996 for details on the first appearance), and was intimately known by almost every person associated with the tournament. Of course, it helped that I had been emailing back and forth all summer with a woman named Juliette Torrez, introduced to me through our mutual friend Shappy Seasholtz. Juliette is one of those super-indie hipsters in the world of underground literature, who knows everyone and does freelance work for half of them, and has slept with or at least gotten drunk with the other half. Juliette and I had hit it off that summer over the internet before actually meeting, and unbeknownst to me, she had been spending the summer emailing all the movers and shakers of the slam community and telling them that "the Chicago team is bringing a secret weapon this year, and his name is Jason Pettus."

It was flattering, to be sure, and more importantly had established this intensely impressive and mysterious reputation for me before I had even shown up. And being the unbearable little shit that I was that year (see above), I went to the tournament packing only black

t-shirts and black pairs of jeans, and wore these trendy little sunglasses everywhere I went, daytime and night, and got wasted every night and hit on every single woman associated with the tournament, and in general just tried to live up to the intense and mysterious reputation that Juliette had already built for me.

It was because of having such an insanely great experience my first year as a slammer that I decided to stick with it, and indeed to throw myself so whole-heartedly into it over the next two years, easily the most proficient period of my career as a performer and containing the majority of my best work. And because of all the connections I had made nationally during the 1997 tournament, 1998 was also when I first started traveling throughout America, mostly in the never-ending quest to keep getting rid of more of those thousand copies of my damn novel all stacked up in the corner of my bedroom. (I finally sold them all about a year after they first went on sale, which made me happy, but was such a pain in the ass that as of yet I have not again taken on such a large project.) And the great experiences nationally also inspired me to continue working in the format, as well as to start writing travelogues, which eventually inspired me to start traveling to Europe and doing the same, which I am still currently doing as of the preparing of these notes.

But in the meanwhile, here are the pieces from 1997, which were the first to be embraced by a national audience and create a reputation for me in the first place. The list is scattered here and there with the occasional good piece that I think still holds up over time; a lot of it, however, suffers from the same problem as the 1996 work does, of being too literal, too whiny, too navel-gazing. I suppose it's natural for artists in their twenties to be extremely self-reflective and -referential, especially when both your professional and social circles are filled with other artists in their twenties doing the same. I'm embarrassed now by the naivete of some of the work I read at the national tournament that year (especially the dreadful "Typing on keyboards in bars," the piece I read for 1,500 people in the final round, which was well-received at the time but now just makes me cringe in horror when I read it). But as I also said in the notes for 1996, they are an honest and accurate record of what I was going through and who I was at the time - this geeky little writer who had always had problems with women, who was suddenly the center of attention precisely because of my geeky qualities, and constantly getting laid because of them as well (or as the aforementioned Lisa Hemminger called me in those days, 'Goldenboy'). These things would eventually catch up and bite me in the ass the following year - but that's another story for another time.

NOTES ABOUT INDIVIDUAL PIECES

175113: One of many poems from the beginning years of my career that I believe has failed to stand the test of time. The problem when I first started writing was not coming up with interesting ideas, but rather of finding unique ways of expressing those ideas, and in particular being much too literal in my work instead of finding strong metaphors. It's been interesting to put this new long-form collection of my work together, a couple of years after I stopped writing poetry, and be able to see exactly how my style changed rather quickly in the years I was an active performer. For trivia fans, "175113" is the number of Art Spiegelman's father's tattoo, as revealed in the graphic novel *Maus*.

All the dykes: Meant to be a simple tribute poem to a jazz singer in Chicago named Patricia Barber, who in the 1990s always did a late-night show directly following the Sunday poetry slam at the Green Mill. She took offense at some of the language I used, though, and her fans took great offense at the idea of a male writing a tribute poem to their lesbian hero, so it eventually got all uncomfortable and awkward. I'm still a big fan, though.

Celebrating with dignity: By 1997, the Chicago Bulls were in the midst of their record-breaking winning streak that marked that decade. Chicago was also well-acquainted with the citywide rioting and looting that took place after each year's championship, to the point that in that particular year they were running television commercials from Michael Jordan, politely pleading with people not to start riots this year. The whole concept of having to run commercials to convince people not to riot was upsetting to me, which is where this piece came from.

The dog who loved too much: A famous and often-repeated story from the '90s poetry scene. The woman who was the subject of this poem didn't like this poem much, and ended up writing a response poem to the original poem, which everyone knew was about me and my poem. I wrote a response poem back, and the whole thing got more notorious, and she ended up publishing a book titled after her response poem to me, and in the meanwhile we were still going out in the middle of the night together, having too much to drink, sleeping in the same bed and endlessly debating whether or not we were going to have sex. Ah, to be a poet in my twenties again. I laugh and cringe now when I read poems like this and remember what a drunken, drama-loving lothario I was back in those days, and how every little experience in my life was required to be turned into a public performance piece, and how frequently this habit would get me in trouble. What can I say? I was in my twenties!

How dare you, Mr. Luplow: Written for Tom Luplow, who died from a heroin overdose in 1997. Everyone's relationship with Luplow was difficult, including mine, because you could never quite guess how much of his self-destructive lifestyle was due to being legitimately self-destructive, and how much of it was the fact that he was a big fan of Charles Bukowski and felt that a writer needed to take on a certain amount of self-destructiveness in order to be authentic. In any case, one night he finally took too much heroin, and no one in the scene quite knew how to feel about it.

I wanna be your spleen: Written for one of many themed shows organized over the years by Greg Gillam, held in a variety of venues and known as a variety of names. This particular show was entitled "The Amazing Gut Carnival," and all pieces performed were required to be based on an internal organ. For trivia fans, the subject of this poem is the same subject of the poem "The potential, the kinetic," found elsewhere in this book.

A job I'd really like to have: One of many attempts over the years to capture the frenetic, pop-culture-laced writing style of my friend Shappy Seasholtz. I never was as good at it as him.

Jokes my grandpa used to tell me: A special long-form performance piece, written specifically for the exquisite old variety show "Thax After Dark," held at the legendary indie-rock club Lounge Ax and hosted by the enigmatic Thax Douglas. This was written with my friend Monica Kendrick in mind, because I knew that she played country-western fiddle. If her name sounds familiar, it's because she writes a weekly music column in the Chicago Reader, and occasionally publishes articles in the national media as well.

A man: Written for the "I, I, I" poetry slam, held once a year at the Green Mill and hosted by the always charming Bob Chico; the gimmick is that you cannot use the words I, me, my, we, us or ours even once in any of your poems.

Missouri dreams: Written while on the second road trip I took that year to my old collegetown of Columbia, Missouri. The first trip inspired the nonfiction book *Slacker Wedding*, also published by GAD.

The night we pretended we were married: Based on a true story, although embellished for literary sake. The subject of this story was also the subject of the poem “Yo La Tengo,” found in the book *Jasonettes*.

An open letter to Jerry Springer: In 1997, the Chicago NBC made this monumentally stupid decision: they decided to hire shlockmaster Jerry Springer to deliver a sincere thirty-second editorial opinion, every night at the end of the 5:00 news, because they were desperate for ratings and had recently brought in a new “cutting-edge” producer. The anchors quit in protest, ratings dropped in half, and they yanked him again after only three nights. This was my response to that specific situation, not an overall critique of the show itself.

Princess my princess: Although it’s been overplayed and overanalyzed to death by now, the killing of Princess Diana was a real shock to our systems when it first happened in 1997. I wrote this the afternoon of her funeral, and read it that night.

She’s eating a bagel: One of my first pieces to really strike a strong chord with large amounts of audience members. It’s also one the only pieces from this early part of my career that I can still perform in public and not be horribly embarrassed by.

Skylab is falling, the chicken told me: One of my first internet penpals was a woman named MeL (spelling intentional) who lived in Australia. At the time I had done no international traveling, and Australia seemed so far away from me as to be physically impossible to actually reach. The only visual image I had of her was this black-and-white photograph of her on a beach with her dog, a little pixelated and with a cap pulled down low on her face, so that you couldn’t quite tell what she looked like. I used to have these weird dreams about that photograph and about the idea of meeting her; this piece is an attempt to write the dream down literally, in the sometimes nonsensical way that dreams come to us.

They can have my Macintosh when they pry it from my cold, dead fingers: In 1997, Apple Computers was on the wane, Steve Jobs had not been hired back yet, and the company had yet to introduce the iMac, G processor or iPod. In fact, many in that time period were predicting the death of Apple, and seeing a day when Mac would be no more relevant than old Commodore 64s. This is my outraged response to that time period - thank God it’s over.

Two minutes to talk with Jack Kerouac: In the 1990s there was an immensely popular poetry show in Chicago called “Yammer,” hosted by this life-loving, substance-abusing, 300-pound lesbian named Lisa Hemminger. Lisa had this strange childhood which involved both of her parents dying at a young age, and over the years had become obsessed with the 19th-century recluse Emily Dickinson as a result. One night she dreamt that Dickinson came to visit her in her apartment, and gave her exactly two minutes to say whatever she wanted to her. Lisa had written a poem lasting exactly two minutes that purportedly records what she said; the poem became very popular in Chicago, and soon other poets were writing their own two-minute odes to their own literary heroes. This was mine.

Typing on keyboards in bars: A little throwaway poem I wrote in ten minutes one night, when I couldn’t get to sleep. I happened to have written this, though, a week before the National Poetry Slam, in which I was competing that year; our team inexplicably got into the finals, in fact, and this was the piece I performed at it, which meant that for years I was saddled in the national poetry community as “that dude with that laptop who’s always typing in bars and getting all sensitive and shit.” If I had known how much a single poem can haunt you when performed in the right circumstances, I would’ve never performed this poem at the NPS finals.

The very first time I ever performed at the Green Mill poetry slam: The actual piece I read the very first time I ever performed at the Green Mill poetry slam. I had, in fact, been attending the slam for a good nine months before ever performing for the first time; I had become obsessed with the competitive aspect of it, and had decided that winning that year’s tournament would be a great way to promote my first novel, which was coming out just a few weeks after the tournament. So, I simply attended as an audience member for nine months at first, and did nothing but study what kinds of little things could be added or avoided at the slam in order to get big scores. And then I wrote this piece, which with no shame exploits every single tiny little gimmicky thing one can do in a slam to increase your score: be self-referential, break the fourth wall, flatter your audience, flatter the host, scream and yell and curse, refer to your own sexual prowess, etc. Unsurprisingly, it received a perfect score of 30. I was to indeed win the tournament that year (well, I took fourth, which “won” me a spot on the national team), and the team itself placed second at that

year's national tournament; see the book *Smells Like Sweat*, also published by GAD, for a memoir of those experiences.

Well, Steve Albini was nice to me: Written in Lounge Ax one night when legendary music producer Steve Albini (a Chicago resident) was a special DJ. The place was packed with overdressed indie-rock slackers, all of them there to see Albini but none of them wanting to be so gauche as to actually look at him, which meant that he was being ignored by 300 people all there to see him. I was there with the woman I was...er, dating... at the time, as well as local scenester Thax Douglas. Thax started telling us about a spoken-word album he had done in the 1980s, produced by Albini, which is what led to this poem being written.

What really happened between the end of *The Empire Strikes Back* and the beginning of *Return of the Jedi*: Written for the first of what would become many Star Wars-themed poetry shows, all of them organized and hosted by my friend Shappy Seasholtz. Star Wars poems are always a guilty pleasure for me; I feel like an idiot for taking the energy to write them in the first place, but they're always so much fun to perform.

COMPLETE PERFORMANCE WORK 1996-2004

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For the first time ever, a comprehensive and chronological set of books is now available from GAD, publishing nearly all of the 400 slam poems, monologues and dialogues Jason Pettus wrote between 1996 and 2004. This new collection starts with the six-book series **Chicago Stories 1996-2004**, gathering all the unthemed work Pettus performed at open mics and special events in those years, now with an expanded series of notes concerning not only each piece, but what was happening in the Chicago arts in that period to influence the work. Move on to the four reprints of special commissioned **half-hour performance projects** Pettus created over the years; and then to the three other **special themed books** he wrote during his time as a performer as well (*Psycho Poets*, about various real Chicago female artists; *[Andi.]*, stories about an ex-girlfriend; and *The Tao of Now*, an attempt at combining the rhythm and energy of slam poetry with longer, more narrative stories).

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- 12 **[ANDI.]**
- 13 **THE TAO OF NOW**

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