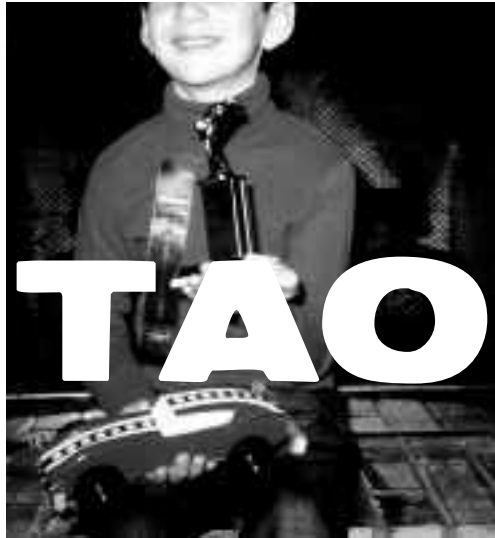


“[Watching Jason Pettus read] is like you’ve suddenly been thrown in a John Hughes film and there’s Duckie, standing right in front of you. Well, Duckie with a beer, a cigarette and a stiffy.” --*NewCity*

# THE TAO OF NOW



**STORIES BY JASON PETTUS**

“The Tao of Van Halen” and “The Tao of White Trash” were originally written for “White Trash Jubilee!” Mad Bar, Chicago. “The Tao of World Fairs” was originally written for “Nrrd Collective,” Albuquerque Poetry Festival. “The Tao of Touching” was originally written for “The Yammer 2nd Anniversary Show,” JoyBlue, Chicago. “The Tao of Nicotine” was originally written for “A Tribute to Tara Jepsen,” Uncommon Ground, Chicago.

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**[www.avantgo.com](http://www.avantgo.com)**

"If you look at a little stalk or point to a giant pillar, see a leper or the beautiful Hsi-shih, notice things which are funny and dubious or things hideous and strange, the Tao makes them all into one."

*The Chuang Tzu, Chapter 2*

"It is perhaps sad that so many people have failed to laugh with Chuang Tzu and have instead tried to treat every word of his as a coded message."

*Martin Palmer, The Elements of Tao*

This book is dedicated to Beth Lisick.

Why, the last time it snowed this hard, I had been in 5th grade and John Platt had been spending the night. Boys do not have slumber parties, or at least as far as I know boys in St. Charles Missouri in 1979 do not have slumber parties. Boys come over and spend the night, one boy, one night. In fact, the only person I ever knew who had a group of boys spend the night was Philip Wilhauk, his tenth birthday, and we all knew how weird Philip was, killing squirrels in his backyard and burying them by the big oak tree, pair of his mom's stolen underwear in a lunchbox in the back of his closet. Most boys do not have slumber parties in St. Charles in 1979, just John Platt, John over for one night, and it snowed, my God did it snow. Four feet high by the side of the house, I know this for a fact, I took the yardstick out and it disappeared in the drift, tall enough to kill a man, tall enough to kill a boy, a 5th grade boy in St. Charles in 1979.

Snow? You'd never seen this kind of snow. The plows came and pushed it all into our yard and the piles were five feet high, taller than my head, deep and compact and hard. John Platt and I took a shovel and we carved out the middle of one of those piles, like it was a pumpkin, scoop scoop scoop until we had ourselves an honest-to-God igloo, that's right, an igloo, coolest thing you ever did see, fit two people inside, it

**THE TAO OF SNOWSTORMS** was cold, damn cold, but cold was okay when you had your own house, your own goddamned icehouse right at the edge of the driveway.

Snow? We thought it'd never stop. 36 inches, 36 straight inches of snow that winter, 1979, St. Charles Missouri, schools closed for a week, dad off work for a week, everything and everyone trapped in their homes like it's Little House on the Fucking Prairie. John Platt was supposed to spend one night. He spent five nights. I was very happy. His parents were also very happy. John Platt and I played Dungeons and Dragons for twelve hours straight one day. It was the coolest. We even let my brother play even though he didn't know what the hell he was doing. I was a half-Elf Chaotic Good Magic-User. My brother was a half-Ogre Chaotic Evil Fighter, glimpses of the metalhead he was to become just a few short years later, 1979, St. Charles Missouri, spiritual home of Van Halen and Styx and Rush, not the suck Rush but the 2112, Today's Tom Sawyer, Exit Stage Right Rush. We played for twelve hours straight, mom in with the lunch and then in with the dinner. My brother had four hit points left when we finished the dungeon. I had one hit point left when we finished the dungeon. Lucky? I had the luck of the Irish that week. My parents had the patience of Job that week, the week of the storm, the Great and Powerful Storm, back before local

news stations wrote theme music for disasters, back before disasters had to have their own catchphrase and logo, snow? It snowed like the ninth circle of Hell that winter, 1979, St. Charles Missouri. John Platt and I and my brother sledded for eight hours straight one day. John Platt and I and my brother and every single person under the age of eighteen sledded for eight hours straight one day, hole 14, it was always hole 14 because that was the steepest one of the entire golf course, hole 14, you could feel the wind whip by your face on the way down like a car race, hole 14, the older kids would bring buckets of water and form ice slides all the way down, 35 miles an hour you'd hit, I shit you not, 35 miles an hour and the only thing between your ass and disaster was a ten dollar saucer of plastic with handles that had broken off a day after you bought the goddamned thing. Snow? My God did it snow that year, so much snow you'd keep sledding right down to the creek and you'd have to jump off your sled ten feet before, five feet before, two feet before, my brother, eight years old and scared to jump, right into the creek, soaked from head to toe, crying like a grieving mother as we walked him home, hypothermia settling in, chilled to the bone for two days straight, snow? My God, you've never seen snow like this.

Today is January 4, 1999. My name is Jason Pettus and I am 29 years old. I live in the Lakeview neighborhood of Chicago Illinois, County of Cook, USA, and it snowed this week. 21.6 inches. Second biggest storm this century. Drifts five feet high around my dumpster at the back of my building. Cars literally covered in their own igloos of pure ice. Snow? You've never seen such snow. My friends ask me to go frolic in the snow with them. I say boys in 1999 in Chicago Illinois do not frolic in the snow. 29 year old boys in 1999 in Chicago Illinois who smoke a pack a day and whose boots are a half-size too small and who don't own a dog or a kid do not frolic in the snow. They stay in their apartment and watch a lot of TV and do a lot of drugs. They trudge their ass to work at seven in the morning and silently resent the customers who have forced them to be there. They ride on half-frozen trains to meet their friends in bars and hope they get there before they get frostbite. They pick up the phone three times a day to call you just to see how you're doing, then put the phone back down because they know you don't want to hear from them. 29 year old boys in 1999 in Chicago Illinois sleep. They sleep a lot. Eleven hours a day. And they dream. They dream of igloos. They dream of Dungeons and Dragons. And they dream of hot pieces of plastic gliding 35 miles an hour down hole 14.

Ooh, don't touch me.

Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you. It's just that we just talking, just now, and you were laughing at a joke and you leaned in and put your hand on my arm and I just wanted to ask you if you would please not do that. You didn't insult me, you didn't piss me off, it's a perfectly natural thing to do, but it just makes me a little uncomfortable, when people touch me.

I don't know, I've been this way as long as I can remember. There are two types of people roaming this earth and those are touchy people and non-touchy people. I am a non-touchy person. There is a wall I imagine in front of me, no, not really a wall, more like a bubble, a bubble I imagine around me, tiny and flimsy and delicate to the touch, like a soap bubble, all around me. And this bubble expands and contracts depending on the person I'm interacting with but the bubble never disappears, you understand, it could be shrink-wrapped to my body but it never quite

Ooh, don't touch me.

Sorry, it's just that you did it again. I understand that there's touchy people in the world. A lot of my friends are touchy people, big hug when they see you, big hug again when they leave, kisses on your cheek, head in your lap, grasping your shoulder to make a point, hand on your arm when they like one of your jokes. I understand that there are touchy people in the world. It's just that I am not a touchy person. It just makes me a little uncomfortable, when people touch me.

I think maybe I think about it differently than most do. To me a human touch, skin on skin, flesh on flesh, is an incredibly powerful and intimate thing. To me a human touch, fingers on arm, head in lap, is an action which should be confined to lovers, or at the very least very very good friends. I suspect that this belief is wrong. I suspect that this belief is dysfunctional. I suspect that this belief is a big part of why I have so many dating problems. But I've learned that to embrace myself I have to accept my faults as well as my strengths and that's what

Ooh. Don't touch me.

I'm sorry. It's just that when I touch someone it is a heavily codified statement that I am interested in them. When I put my hand on your arm what I am really saying is that I like you. I'm attracted to you. I

# THE TAO OF TOUCHING

am interested in spending more time with you and possibly entering into an intimate relationship.

And see, when someone does that back to me I get confused. I mistake other people's actions for my own actions, which as we all know is wrong. You may or may not like me. You may or may not be attracted to me. You may or may not be a touchy person. I don't know. I only met you ten minutes ago. You act like you're attracted to me. You maintain a steady eye contact with me as we talk. You laugh at all my jokes whether or not they're funny. You slyly change the topic of conversation each time the current topic has run out of new things to be said about it. You act slightly pissed off when your friends tell you that they're bored and that they want to leave. But if life has taught me one thing it is that you cannot rely on any of these things as a guarantee that someone is attracted to you and

Ooh. Please. Don't touch me.

I'm sorry. It's just that every time you touch me it gives me a slightly uncomfortable feeling, like when you're at some hipster bar and they show pornography on the overhead televisions. We all roam this earth terribly sad and lonely and afraid and. I'm sorry. I'm speaking in generalizations again. I roam this earth terribly sad and lonely and afraid and every time you put your hand on my arm you remind me of all the people in the past I've ever been intimate with and you remind me of all the people in the future I will eventually be intimate with and you remind me of how terribly sad and lonely and afraid I am right now, right this second. Every time you put your hand on my arm and laugh at one of my unfunny jokes I want to grab your hand and whisk you away and make love to you on an empty el train. Every time you put your hand on my arm you make me want to burst into tears, and lord knows I cry enough on my own without anyone else's help.

If you really are attracted to me I encourage you to just say so. I'm certainly attracted to you and I've been telling you in the strongest and clearest possible way that I know how. I know that it's easier said than done. Courage should be a difficult thing to achieve, because if it wasn't then every asshole would be courageous and there'd be nothing special about it at all. But please, if you're doing these things for reasons of your own design, then I'm asking you. I'm begging you. Please.

Don't touch me.

This is the story of the greatest concert I ever saw. This is the story of the greatest concert that ever was, better than the Beatles, better than Pink Floyd, better than Cheap Trick in Japan. This is the story of Van Halen, Herra Arena, Dayton Ohio, August 18, 1984.

Me and Greg and Jeff slept outside Marshall Field's in sleeping bags all night waiting for the box office to open, sipping on a fifth of Jack Daniels to keep us warm. There was a big rumor going around that Van Halen was filming their new video live at our show, our show Dayton Ohio, and we were determined to be up there where the action was. Besides, it's Van Halen. Dude, we are so there. Eighth row center, holy motherfucking God, eighth row center, beating my previous record of twelfth row right for the Rush show last year, Grace Under Pressure tour, dude, that show fuckin' rocked, Neil Peart man! Neil Peart's a fuckin' God! Eighth row center, we couldn't fuckin' believe it. We talked about the concert for weeks, what song they're gonna open with, which guitar Eddie would use, what song they're filming the video for, what we were gonna wear.

**THE TAO OF VAN HALEN** Jeff decided to wear his Sabbath shirt to show he had street cred. Greg wore his senior shirt 'cause in case we got in the video our high school's name would be right there, right in front of the rest of the world, fuckin' kick ass! I wore my 1982 Diver Down concert shirt, white front, black sides, three-quarter-length sleeves, to show I'm a real fan, to show I ain't one of those little spandex-wearing faggots jumping on the bandwagon now that MTV loves metal. I've been following Van Halen since "Jamie's Crying," dude, put that in your bong and smoke it!

Head out down I-98 in Jeff's '74 Nova. We're kicking back, drinking some brews, smoking a little weed. I can feel the excitement in the air. Holy fuckin' shit, dude, Van Halen. Get to the arena. There are hotties everywhere you look. I spy one over by the t-shirt booth. Black parachute pants, red and white checkered bandanna tied around her leg, black leather fringe jacket, Porsche racing gloves with the tips cut off, matching fold-up Porsche sunglasses, Panama hat, roach clips in her feathered hair with purple and blue feathers hanging off them. I tell her to meet us after the show and we'll go party over at Needleman's house, Needleman, 24 years old, owns his own apartment down by the mall, buys us beer whenever we want, Needleman fuckin' rocks, dude.

Make our way down to the floor, the fuckin' floor of Herra Arena, dude, this is the greatest. Special open-

ing guests Skid Row open. We are not impressed. Greg chucks a disposable lighter at the lead singer's head and yells, "Go back to L.A., you fuckin' glam-rock pussies!" Dude, Greg is so wasted. He's been taking swigs of Jack off this little bottle he snuck in, won't give us any, the little fag, but that's okay. I don't wanna be passed out when the cameras start rolling.

We're waiting, we're waiting, we're waiting waiting waiting. Finally the house lights suddenly go black. 14,000 fans erupt in synchronous harmony. 14,000 lighters are held up in the air at once. Smoke is billowing out from the stage. There's a low bass note echoing out from the 150 speakers around the arena, that's right, 150 fuckin' speakers, dude. Suddenly fireworks explode in front of us, I hear the opening chords of "Jump," and there they are, holy fuckin' God, there they are, twenty fuckin' feet away from me. Diamond Dave is spinning and dancing and gyrating across the stage, igniting the crowd. Alex Van Halen is pounding away on the skins, man, ten-foot-high gong suspended behind his head. Mark Anthony is...uh, well, he's being Mark Anthony, right? And Eddie. Fuckin' Eddie Van Halen is throwing down licks like the guitar is part of his body. Eddie is looking at his fingers in amazement like he can't believe it's his own two hands playing this solo! Eddie Van Halen is the greatest fuckin' guitar player in history! And don't give me any of that Joe Satriani shit, Joe Satriani's a fuckin' pussy, man! Silver Surfer my ass!

Van Halen is working the crowd into a frenzy. 17-year-old girls are up on their boyfriends' shoulders, showing everyone their tits! Right on, dude! Finally near the end of the show David Lee Roth stops the concert and has the arena lights turned on. He shouts out to the crowd, "Everybody on this side of the arena, let me hear you say Yeah! Everybody on this side of the arena, let me hear you say Hell Yeah! And all of you, all of you in the back of the arena, let me hear you say Rock N Roll Will Never Die!" And that's when Van Halen breaks into the most ear-splitting, head-banging, balls to the wall, For Those About To Rock version of "Panama" I have ever heard in my life! Dude, on August 18 1984 I was witness to the greatest moment in the history of rock and roll!

You watch the video, dude. Watch very closely and on the 89th second you will see a kid in the audience, Diver Down t-shirt, covered in sweat, Bic lighter in one outstretched hand, devil sign with the other. Greatest fuckin' concert in the history of time. Panama-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah! Panama!

Hello, he said.  
Hi, she replied.  
I hope I'm not interrupting.  
No. I'm just sitting here.  
I wanted to tell you that you're about the most beautiful woman I've seen in the last five years.  
I have no response to that.  
You're not expected to have one.  
Why did you just tell me that?  
Because I want to sleep with you and I've never been one to engage in typical bar banter.  
Oh, you haven't, have you?  
No.  
So you just walk over here and tell me I'm the most beautiful woman you've met in five years and expect me to go home with you.  
No. In fact, I'm expecting you not to go home with me. It very rarely happens.  
This is the strangest pick-up I've ever been a witness to.

# THE TAO OF FLIRTING

Well, I'm a pretty strange guy.  
Buy me a drink.

Okay.  
Thanks, she said.  
You're welcome, he replied.  
So convince me why I should go home with you.  
I'm not going to convince you of anything. You'll either go home with me or not, based entirely on your own judgement.  
What do you do?  
What do I do?  
What do you do.  
Huh. I walk along the razor's edge between genius and idiocy. I drink a lot of soda. I eat coupons for breakfast and shit revolutionary jargon before going to bed at night.  
I mean, what do you do for a living?  
Oh. I used to kill Russian spies before the Soviet Union collapsed.  
And now?  
Now I work for Starbucks.

Tough life.  
Ah, it's a living.  
And what do you do for Starbucks?  
Corporate espionage. I plant stink bombs in the bathrooms of Caribou, sabotage annual reports...  
Bombing raids over suburban Seattle?  
Well, I could tell you about it but then I'd have to kill you.  
Secret agent man.  
I dance too close to the fire, baby. You know how it is.  
And yet you drink Sam Adams.  
I like to keep in touch with the common people. So what do you do?  
What do I do?  
What do you do.  
I'm a professional writer of bumper stickers, t-shirts and plastic-mesh baseball caps.  
Anything I've read before?  
Bomb the Shiite out of Saddam?  
Yeah?  
That's mine.  
Congratulations.  
Ah, it's a living.  
It pays well?  
I made my first million when I was fifteen. "When the van's a-rocking don't come a-knocking."  
Impressive.  
I made my second million with Baby on Board. I don't need the money anymore. I just do it now for the sexual thrill of high-risk adventure.  
You're the queen of retirement party gag gifts.  
I also wrote the theme music for the Rikki Lake show.  
Da-da-daa...da-da-da-da.  
Yeah, that's it.  
You go, girl.  
Syndication will hire anyone, believe me. Why, I'm in a development deal with UPN as we speak.  
Would you like to come home with me?  
I haven't decided yet. Buy me another drink.

You buy me a drink, Ms. Twice-Over Millionaire.

Fair enough.

Thanks, he said.

You're welcome, she replied.

So what's a nice girl like you doing on a continent like this?

I am single-handedly embarking on a mission to lull the Western hemisphere into a docile state of chemical lobotomy.

And what is the instrument of your nefarious and evil plan?

Teletubbies.

Ah, so you're the infamous Dr. X the agency's been chasing for three years with no success.

And you've fallen right into my trap, Mr. Bond.

You know, I've always believed Teletubbies to be a good model for flirting in bars. Instead of the calculated vapid bullshit banter that lasts for hours...

Like us right now?

Exactly. Instead of that I could just walk up to a woman and say, "Laa-Laa! Hello! Big hug!"

See? My plan is working.

Uh-Oh!

Am I really the most beautiful woman you've met in five years?

Yes. I really meant that.

Who was the woman from five years ago?

My sister.

No, seriously.

My mom.

No, seriously.

Dr. Laura Schlessinger.

No, seriously.

Jewel.

No, seriously.

Seriously. Jewel.

Jewel the earnest folk-rock singer.

Yes.

Jewel the Alaskan earnest folk-rock singer slash poet.

Yes. I met her five years ago at this coffeehouse where she was doing a show.

Did you sleep with her?

Yes.

Impressive.

It's not meant to be. You asked, I answered.

I slept with Jeremy Pivens.

Really.

A New Years party when we were undergraduates.

Why did you just tell me that?

An irrational fear that I'm losing this game somehow.

Would you like to come home with me?

I'll go home with you on one condition.

Neighborhood?

No.

Pets?

No.

Penis size?

No no no. Do you own a cappuccino machine?

A what?

A cappuccino machine. Do you own a cappuccino machine. I only sleep with people who own a cappuccino machine.

You seem to forget. I'm a corporate terrorist for Starbucks. Not only do I have an industrial cappuccino machine in my apartment, but three underpaid teenagers to serve it to you.

Rock and roll.

Plus, as an added incentive, I also have videotapes of every Teletubbies episode ever made.

Uh-oh!

So what do you say?

I say if you don't like my driving call 1-800-EAT-SHIT.

Rock and roll.

Let's go, she said.

Okay, he replied.

She had become obsessed with the Bruce Springsteen album Nebraska these days. She'd sit in her studio apartment week after week, playing the album, over and over, hour after hour, it's on vinyl, always vinyl, always analog, always scratchy, always loud. She had become obsessed with music about places musicians have never been to these days. Bruce Springsteen singing about Nebraska, R.E.M. singing about Cuyahoga, Billy Joel and Saigon, U2 and God's Country, Uncle Tupelo and New Madrid, Brian Setzer and the Hopi Indian reservation. She liked touching the album covers, feeling the stark, barren black and white photos under her fingers, smelling the faux-neo-new-wave-No-Depression-alt-dot-country sub-sub-genre that was the mid 1980s. In a world where reality leads to nothing but bitterness and disappointment, she had come to believe, why, the only sensible choice left was to invent your own reality about real places you've never been to, real people you've never met, real events you'll never attend.

**THE TAO OF SPRINGSTEEN** She had become obsessed with her bathtub these days. She took two baths a day, every day, 11 a.m., 7 p.m., scented oil from the Body Shop, scented candles from Pier One, Bruce Springsteen singing the ballad of Tom Joad as loud as her junior high school record player would go, flipping from side A to side B with soggy naked fingers. Life looked pretty good from the bottom of a bathtub, she had come to believe. White tile, white ceiling, white porcelain, silver nozzle hovering in the sky about a million billion miles away from her trembling, nicotine-addled soggy naked body. You could get lost from the bottom of a bathtub, she had come to believe. You could drown from the bottom of a bathtub, she had come to believe. Literally, you could drown from the bottom of a bathtub.

She had become obsessed with concepts from science fiction comic books these days. She wondered if there really has existed a night when every single human on earth has simultaneously dreamt of the person they love. She wondered if the Devil really did look vaguely like David Bowie, and the master of Dreams

like that guy from Echo and the Bunnymen. She sat in her bathtub and felt the beads of sweat trickle down her back and wondered if, while she'd been walking around the city today, people could just look at her face and tell she'd gotten fucked last night. And make no mistake, she had gotten fucked last night, good and fucked. Nine months was an awfully long time to wait for Mr. Right but it was even a longer awful time to wait for Mr. Wrong, so she had gone out last night and gotten as drunk as a poet on payday and she had grabbed the boy who always made slightly lecherous and neurotic suggestions every time he saw her and she had gone home with him and gotten herself good and fucked. She liked saying this out loud to the echoes of the white tile. She hadn't made love, she hadn't had sex, she had "gotten fucked." She had gotten nine months of libido fucked right out of her body last night. She had gotten nine months of cynicism and fear and masturbation and yelling at random strangers on the street, nine months of binges and staring at the walls and crying during every single episode of Felicity simply fucked right out of her body last night, six hours of red-hot Marlboros and white-cold Culligan, six hours of tattoos and Jane's Addiction and kissing and then some more kissing. And life looked pretty good from the bottom of a bathtub, she had come to believe, but she suddenly realized that life looked a hell of a lot better from the corner of Belmont and Clark on a warm spring day, holding a bag of donuts in your hand and staring straight up at the sun.

She got out of the bathtub without bothering to towel off, leaving little wet traces of herself on the hardwood floor as she walked across the room. She took the Bruce Springsteen album and she snapped it over her knee like a 1950s anti-rock-n-roll preacher. She was tired of made-up stories about real places, she had decided. She was ready to go record her own critically-acclaimed solo project, she had decided. She put on a CD of the Spinanes. She turned it up to 10. And she danced naked around her studio apartment, she danced and danced and danced, flinging water all over stark black and white photos and science fiction comic books.

I remember with absolute crystal clarity the day I decided to become cool because it just so happens to be the day that I almost knocked over the king of the country of Jordan which just so happened to all take place in my thirteenth year of existence and just so happened to be in of all places Knoxville Tennessee.

If you wish to send a 13-year-old boy into geek heaven, if you wish to send a nerdy 13-year-old boy who already owns his own computer in 1982 and is already online in 1982 into a nerd Valhalla from which he will never completely return the rest of his life, then you send the 13-year-old boy to a world's fair, which was exactly where I was, August 1982, Knoxville Tennessee, me and my dad and my mom and my little brother, trapped in the early 80s like a political prisoner in one of those countries on the Amnesty International Shit List, Blondie on one side of my Walkman, Billy Joel on the other, all the way to Tennessee, Friday night I crashed your party, Saturday I said I'm sorry, you may be wrong but oh I know that you may be right. Thirteen year olds don't ask the same astute pressing questions that adults do, like how in the hell did a world's fair end up taking a wrong turn on the freeway and land somehow in Knoxville Tennessee? And, given the modern age of satellite communication and global economy we live in, isn't the antiquated notion of a world's fair simply an exercise in futility and imminent bankruptcy for the host city in question? No.

## **THE TAO OF WORLD FAIRS**

Thirteen-year-olds do not ask these kinds of questions. A thirteen-year-old's vision of the future is all utopia and no dystopia. Brave New World is not an ironic statement to a thirteen-year-old. 1984 to a thirteen-year-old is simply the year the most kick-ass album of Van Halen's career was released.

Oh, the things I saw in Knoxville, Tennessee. Television screens you could touch with your finger to change channels. 25 Apple ][ computers wired together in a big glass box. An entire home hard-wired to voice recognition software. "Computer, turn up the heat. Computer, dim kitchen lights." Solar-powered public telephones. 150 bricks from the Great Wall of China. The world's largest Ferris Wheel. Robots that could build cars. A thirty-foot-high Rubik's Cube. A live theatre built right into the middle of a giant oak tree, where kabuki was being performed by an honest-to-God Japanese kabuki theatre company. I ate french onion soup for the first time in Knoxville Tennessee. I listened to New Orleans jazz for the first time in Knoxville Tennessee. I fell in love with a northern European for the first time in Knoxville Tennessee.

Me and my dad and my mom and my little brother were on our way to lunch on the other side of the fairgrounds, hot and sweaty and tired, worn out from the international cornucopia, worn out from the micro melting pot we found ourselves in. We're taking a shortcut behind the USA pavilion, around the

Sunsphere, next to the manmade lake, when suddenly I'm eating a face full of black imported Italian silk, starting to fall over backwards from the force of the blow. Strong hands grip my shoulders, I look up, and I am confronted with a powerful yet gentle mustachioed Mediterranean face.

The man looks down at me and says with a genuine air of alarm and concern, "Are you alright, young man?"

I stare back up at the face and say, "... Yeah, I'm fine."

I untangle myself from the impossibly expensive looking man and his entourage of a dozen black-Italian-silk-wearing friends and we continue our quest for a Chinese lunch. A few minutes later my dad looks into the air for a contemplative moment and says, "Now I know. That was King Hussein." Hussein? King? What king? What are you talking about? "That man you ran into. He's the King of Jordan." Jordan? Hussein? King? My thirteen-year-old brain, already overloaded with the unvirtual reality being thrown at me, decides instead to tuck this packet of information into a hidden corner, to be pulled out and examined at a later point in life.

We make it to the Chinese restaurant. We stop by the souvenir stand on the way out. My brother, in his ten-year-old glory, spends his money on a pair of fake Martian antennae, glittery Sunsphere logos atop springy metal coils glued to a plastic skull-gripping barrette. I, the mature thirteen-year-old that I am, opt for a more subdued, more tasteful memento of the vacation--a four-inch-high silver pewter belt buckle, featuring the USA Pavilion, the Sunsphere, the snappy fair logo and helvetica lettering all the way around. It made a perfect compliment to my Dungeons and Dragons magic-user belt buckle I had received for Christmas the year before. I was also a little miffed about the sun being in my eyes all week, so I purchase the equally sophisticated partner for my new belt buckle--a new baseball cap red, white and blue, polyester front, plastic mesh back, the ubiquitous Sunsphere logo on my forehead like a third eye, brim so flat and so new and so untainted you could balance a hardboiled egg up there. I was not only styling...I was profiling.

It was later in the afternoon when I had The Moment. Have you ever seen the movie American Pop? It's a cartoon by Ralph Bakshi. It came out in the early 80s. It's about four generations of Italian-Americans and how the popular music of each generation influenced their lives and loves and struggles. I had seen the movie. I saw it at midnight on Showtime the previous year. Showtime in the early 80s provided an entire generation of teenage boys two equally important and profound experiences that would shape all of our lives in the years to come. One, Showtime in the early 80s gave us our first-ever exposure to underground

art films. American Pop, 2001, Clockwork Orange, Eraserhead, Felix the Cat, Wizards, Heavy Metal, The Tin Drum, Dr. Strangelove, all of these I saw for the first time on Showtime at midnight in the early 80s. Two, Showtime in the early 80s gave us our first-ever exposure to cheesy European softcore pornography. I saw every Emmanuelle movie ever made on Showtime at midnight in the early 80s. I masturbated to every Emmanuelle movie ever made on Showtime at 12:07 in the early 80s. God bless midnight on Showtime in the early 80s!

We're making our way across the fairgrounds again when I spy The Dude. The Dude is the same general age as me, early teenage little shit age. He's got a headful of mopy blonde hair, designer jeans, muted red jacket and mirrored sunglasses. He's looking bored and jaded and like it's mortifying him to be seen with his dorky family. My very first thought when I see The Dude is, "That guy looks just like one of the characters from American Pop, the rock-n-roll singer who everyone was in love with." My second thought when I see The Dude is, "That guy...looks...cool." No one can tell where you're looking when you're wearing mirrored sunglasses. No one can see your eyes at all when you're wearing mirrored sunglasses. It was not the first time in my life when I acknowledged that cool people existed in the world. It was the first time in my life when I acknowledged that with a little work I, Jason Pettus, could actually look like a cool guy. It was my first moment of puberic self-sentiency, the first of hundreds of moments that would eventually haunt me throughout high school. Why, for the price of this stupid polyester baseball cap, I could've bought a pair of mirrored sunglasses and then I'd be looking like a cool guy, not like a nerdy loser idiot standing next to a ten-year-old child with springs coming out of his head.

That one single moment in Knoxville Tennessee set off a chain of events that would eventually obsess me over the next decade. I announced to my mother that from now on I would be choosing my own clothes when we went shopping and that I hope this wasn't too much of a problem for her. I threw away my Dungeons and Dragons regalia and started wearing Polo shirts. True, they were from JC Penny's, but it's the spirit of the law that counts, not the letter. I picked up fashion fetishes in that year, 1982, that have not left me to this day--baggy pants, white socks for everything, mirrored sunglasses.

I read in the paper today that the king of Jordan has just died. Cancer complications at the Mayo Clinic. The paper said that he was the most perfect of kings--a born leader who commanded respect from the rest of the world, yet had a gentle, kind touch when it came to the common man. I still own my belt buckle and on days when I'm particularly feeling like the smarmy slacker little shit I am, I still wear it. I've been told that the postmodern irony of it all makes me cool. And sometimes, late at night when I'm drunk and no one's around, I talk to my Macintosh. "Computer, draw me a bath. Computer, turn down the stereo."

Someone had once said this to him at a birthday party at a bar on Lincoln Avenue on a warm summer night. They had remarked that for every album ever released through the mainstream music industry, there exists at least one person on the planet for which that album was the first they ever bought. Every album. Ever released. He thought about this a lot. It haunted him in his dreams. It gave him small moments of disquiet as he rode the train in the middle of the night back home from yet another poetry open mic.

It was a party game he played often. The Police, Synchronicity, Christmas 1983, Northwest Plaza Musicland, St. Louis Missouri. The feel of opening shrink-wrapped plastic with your thumbnail is a sensation that will never be duplicated again in music history. The jet black of the vinyl. Sting posing pretentiously with books of psychiatry by C.G. Jung. Put the needle on the record, put the needle on the record, put the needle on the record and the music goes like. He had always been irrationally proud of the fact that his first album had randomly turned out to be a good one, not the usual teenage bubblegum top-40 flotsam and jetsam most party games turn out to be. He was proud of the fact that his first album was one that

**THE TAO OF OPEN MICS** the musicians themselves could look at fifteen years later and still be proud of the fact.

Someone had read a poem about him tonight. It was a poem she'd written about a poem he'd written about a poem she'd written about two years ago. It had been in the halcyon days, as he liked to call it, back when everybody was writing poems about everybody writing poems about everybody writing poems. Back before everybody had slept with everybody and everybody had hated everybody. Back in the salad days, as he liked to call it, before his circle of friends had collapsed on itself from the weight of all those one-night-stands. She had written a mean and hateful poem about a poem he had written about a poem she had written, and in response he had also written a mean and hateful poem about her mean and hateful poem, and they both put out chapbooks titled after the mean and hateful poems and everyone bought their chapbooks and laughed and laughed. And that was the end until tonight when, for an all-female open mic, she had dragged out the two-year mean and hateful poem and rewrote it so it was even more mean and more hateful, and with a wink and a nod in his direction she had read it. Again.

He had gone to the all-female open mic to support his female friends. By the end of the open mic he had been told twelve times that he was a tool of the patriarchal oppression inflicted on this world. He had been told that he thinks with his tool, that he acts with his tool, that his tool is the source of all problems and that his tool should be snipped off like a weed in a rose garden. He had heard the word "goddess" thirty-four times and he had been told that the one thing that almost all women the world over can agree on is their hatred of men. The sins of the past, he thought, are like rusty cans tied to the back of a limousine with fishing wire, clanging their way down the street as the bride and groom quietly kiss in the back seat. The sins of the past, he thought, are like the first album you and your band makes when you're nineteen years old and know nothing about music and nothing about life and you need to make that album so you can make your next album, the one that's slightly better and the next one that's better than that, and better than that, and better than that until finally one day all your albums are winning Grammys and selling a million copies but there will always be one schmuck at an interview who will stand up and say "Yeah, but how about that first album you ever put out? Hoo boy, did that suck!"

He had wanted to say mean and hateful things to her tonight when she had read her mean and hateful poem, a wink and nod in his direction, a nudge and a wink and all his friends had glanced at him out of the corners of their eyes because they knew, they all knew. He had wanted to tell her how much he wished there could be an all-male open mic once a month. He had wanted to tell her how the squeals of delight coming from the audience after her poem reminded him of the desperate, shrill screams of 12-year-olds at an ice skating competition after a successful triple-axle by Nancy Kerrigan. He had wanted to tell her that he was having sex with men now because of her. But it'd be a lie. He hadn't had sex with anyone for about a year now, a fact that was ignored by everyone whenever it was inconvenient to making their point.

It was his opinion that Sting is bucking the usual artistic convention and actually puts out worse and worse albums the older he gets. He thought all the albums the Police put out in their six-year history were amazing, barring the stupid remake they made for their Greatest Hits debacle. And from that point on it just started going downhill; Sting's first solo album was pretty good, the second alright, the third pretty

bad, until they had reached the point where he no longer even knew when Sting put out new albums or whether they were good or not. He liked to see himself more like Bob Mould. Bob Mould had started putting out punk albums at the same time as the Police, raw and atrocious things that nonetheless had the spark of genius impregnated within them. And as Bob had gotten older his albums had become better and better until they had reached the point where he simply wanted to run out in traffic and yell at the top of his lungs when he listened to them on his Walkman heading down the sidewalk on his way home from yet another open mic.

He thought about writing a new mean and hateful poem about her new mean and hateful poem and reading it at her open mic the next night to the squeals and boos of the audience members. But he didn't. The sins of the past, he thought, are just that. Her poem tonight had made him flushed, flushed with embarrassment and shame and anger, and did he want to return the favor? What would be the point? What would it accomplish? He would never give up the sins of the past, he thought, never bury them in a deep hole in the deep desert, because our sins are what make us better. Embracing our mistakes and learning from them and vowing never to repeat them is what makes us better people, he thought, and just because his ex-lovers can't seem to understand this concept doesn't mean that he is required to fail at the concept too. Putting a microphone in a room full of female poets, he thought, was much like putting a stripper in a room full of drunk frat guys--things are guaranteed to get very ugly for the opposite sex by the end of the evening. However, he was neither a female poet nor a frat guy. He was simply himself.

He got home and made himself a cup of tea. And he went over to the corner of his apartment where his scratchy vinyl had slowly been collecting dust over the years. He pulled out that Police album, the one he had bought in 1983 at the Musicland in Northwest Plaza in St. Louis Missouri. He pulled it out of its beat-up paper cover and he plopped it on his stereo. And he played the album that night, over and over and over and over and over and over and over.

Punk rock, punk rock in the corner, in the white walled corner of the punk rock party over on the WEST side, rocknroll, punk rock party in the corner of the room. There's a heart, a heart of wax on the table, dripping from a candle, some punk rocker has picked up the candle and dripped it around the table and made a big ol' red drippy heart and written FUCK ME in the middle of it. I am not punk rock. I am Gap, a gap in the hole keeping the raging storm outside and not in here, punk rock loft, punk rock loft with holes in the wall what am I doing here? I am not punk rock, just sitting in the corner trying to be ignored by everyone, doing my goddamn best impression of 16 year old me, in the corner, at the party, please don't look at me, please don't look at me, please ignore the man behind the iron curtain, he is not punk rock, he is Gap, you don't need to see his identification, he is not the punk rocker you are looking for, you can go about your business, move along, move along.

Punk rock party, punk rock party in the corner, the corner of the room, the kitchen-cum-dance party where all the coolest of the coolest are taking refuge from the punk rock band in the living room-cum-rehearsal-hall, blasting away, blasting away. Secret underground dance party has been created within the

# **THE TAO OF PUNK ROCK** secret underground party, hippest of the hippest, baddest of the baddest, and

yours truly, not cool, not hip, not bad, but tired, tired of not finding a chair in the living room, tired of his ears hurting from the punk rock, punk rock, 1-2-3-4! punk rock party in the living room. I'm sitting on a chair made out of a tractor seat. Little brass thingy in the middle pushing, pushing right up against my groin, thank you! I don't need to be reminded! Punk ROCK in the CORNER, woman at 11:00, black as the night is long, little late-80s dreads, complaining about the lack of 70s soul artists at the dance party, rocknroll, rocknroll.

Punk rock party in the corner, my friends run by, the punk rockers who invited me to the party, the punk rockers who own the loft-cum-collective, punk rockers running by me, my arm follows them like a radar gun follows a drunk 16 year old in a 74 Duster, Hey. Uh. Hey. Hey! They just keep walking by me, cause they're PUNK ROCK! I am not punk rock. I am a hole, in the corner, a nonperson tonight, dead weight holding down the chair, donchaknow, donchaknow, I am a dead man, a dead man walking, and I don't mean the David Bowie song, I mean the Jim Jarmusch film, this is how not punk I am.

And then she comes in.

Earth goddess slacker mother of a million punk rock daughters and sisters. I mean, holy shit, ladies and

gentlemen of the jury, shufflin' along in her clunky Doc Martens, bad posture, bad haircut, bad clothes, cheap as fuck glasses to make her look uglier than she is, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I implore you, am I not a human being? Our God in Heaven in all Your Infinite Wisdom, what have I done to deserve such a perfection of beauty to walk into my life on a night when I am feeling so fucking sorry for myself? I will change my ways, God, I will repent, I will stop being an atheist, just take this vision of delight and sweep her out of my world, make her hate 70s soul artists and turn on her tiny, slender, black-hosed ankles and walk right out of the party, Please, my Father, I beseech you, in your name I pray, Amen.

She sits down.

She is barely a woman, she says to me, holy shit, all this and she can read my mind too! She is barely a woman, she says to me. I'm like five percent over the minimum standard requirements to be a woman. All my friends and I decided to dress girlie tonight. And there's twenty-three of them out there, out there, who are running around in cocktail dresses and boas and high heel shoes, they're looking girlie, they're looking very girlie. And look at me. And I do. Look at me, she says, do I look girlie to you? I can't fucking do anything right!

Punk rock party in the corner, rocknroll, rocknroll.

She says Can I have your beer? I say Of course you can. She says So what band are you in? I say I'm a writer! intending it to be a scathing self-deprecating remark. Punk rock queen is impressed. She doesn't know any writers. All her loser friends hang out at Fireside three times a week and are all teaching themselves to play bass. It's so cool to finally meet someone who's finally doing something with their life. Oh benevolent and fearful Lord in all your Infinite Wisdom and Grace, what have I done that has angered you so? Why do you taunt me with these pleasures of the flesh when we all know that tonight in the bedroom it will be me and the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, once again, 244th day in a row? God, what have I do to anger you so? I make my solemn promise, here and now, you make the punk rock queen get up and leave this very second, I will stop masturbating. I will throw away my pornography and dedicate my life to celibacy and faithful prayer. Please God, please.

So, she says, have any of your books been published? I am an atheist once again.

Punk rock, punk rock party in the corner, wax heart slowly being chipped away by black-painted fingernails, we are talking, we are talking and laughing and drinking, and drinking and smoking and laughing and

talking, talking laughing drinking smoking I ran into some guys from Nebraska! she says to me. I ask her why this gets her so excited. She says because she's from Nebraska, donchaknow, rocknroll. Omaha or Lincoln? I ask her. She grew up in Omaha, went to college in Lincoln, rocknroll, rocknroll. She's a punk rock queen, editor of a thousand zines, each slightly more popular than the last, drummer of a thousand riot grrrl bands with names like Toxic Shock Syndrome and Go-Gos Suck Ass, breaker of a thousand hearts, reviewer of a thousand twelve-inches, attendee of a thousand punk rock parties, rocknroll, rocknroll. I think I'm in love.

She asks where I went to school. I say Columbia Missouri. Really, she says? Our band played in Columbia Missouri. I say, I know, I SAW your band play in Columbia Missouri. It was a punk rock club, owned by a couple of high schoolers, a converted storage space, bring your own liquor, smoke outside, won't you please donate to Food Not Bombs? Your band fucking rocked! She says pay the piper boy, ladedah ladedah. Punk rock may never die but bands sure do. She's in Chicago now, hanging out, sitting in, trying to decide what to do with her life post-Nebraska, post-punk band, post-22-and-sitting-on-top-of-the-world phase of her life. I tell her I know what you mean, sister.

Punk rock party in the corner. There's a commotion in the living room. Everyone starts yelling 5-4-3-2-1 and suddenly a Prince song shakes the very foundations of the building. Happy new year, she says to me, and I say To you also, and she reaches over, reaches over and plants two soft firm punk rock lips onto mine and sends me into heaven.

I ask her what her name is. Amy, she says. Amy the Nebraska Punk Rock Queen. We are out of beer.

Punk rock party, punk rock party in the living room, line for the keg, crowd for the keg, ugly amoebae floating in space in front of the holy silver barrel I am trying to reach. There are a LOT of WOMEN in BOAS. They are all dancing in a big drunken circle on stage to the croons of early-80s disasters. The worse it is the better it is at the punk rock party! Xanadu? Bring it on! Rush? Gimme more! Diver Down? ALL-RIGHT, punk rock new year, 1-2-3-4!

I run into Jean, my punk rock bassist friend who's invited me to the party. She asks how I'm doing. I reply that one, I'm no longer believing in God again, fuck him if he can't take a joke, and two, a woman from Nebraska named Amy just kissed me in the kitchen. Oh, Aaaaammy, she drawls out, signals so clear I could read them off the screen of an IBM laptop. Now you just watch yourself, her drawl says to me. This Amy's dangerous, her drawl says to me. Dangerous? If it wasn't for dangerous women I'd have no love at

all. Amy, the dangerous Nebraska Punk Rock Queen. Bring it on, rocknroll, rocknroll.

I go back with the beers. She's still there. She's been wondering what took me so long, ladedah ladedah. She says Wouldn't it be nice for once if a beautiful but empty airhead hit on us, just to prove that we could do it if we wanted to? I ask her to go home with me. She takes a drink of her beer and asks what do I mean? I say Baby, I'm a timebomb waiting to go off. I say Baby, I dance too close to the flame. There are things you don't want to know about me, donchaknow, donchaknow, or at least that's what I want you to believe. In reality, you know everything there is to know about me, this half-hour we've been talking, each and every single thing there is to know about me. I dance too close to the flame, baby, except when I burn my finger and then I blow out the candle and crawl under the covers and cry myself to sleep. I'm no punk rocker, and that's what makes me dangerous. After all, who in their right mind would go to a punk rock party if they weren't punk rock? I'll tell you, baby, it's the cold and lonely and afraid. So get your coat on, Punk Rock Queen! You and I are hitting the coffeehouses! We're gonna get wired on double espressos and have an animated discussion about the new Banana Yoshimoto novel! I'm taking you home and I'm making love to you all night long, I'm making love to you to the blaring of Sonic Youth, and I'm talking old-school Sonic Youth, Daydream Nation, scratchy vinyl on a beat-up Fisher-Price stereo.

Rocknroll, she says. Give me a minute while I get my coat.

Punk rock, punk rock party in the corner, wax heart now gone, just FUCK ME in its place. Twenty minutes pass. Rocknroll, donchaknow. I wander into the living room, run into Jean again. Now she's wearing a boa and dancing, flinging a glass of Makers Mark every which way but loose. Have you seen Amy? I ask her. Amy who? she slurs. Amy the Dangerous Nebraska Punk Rock Queen, I reply. Oh, Aaaaammmy, she drawls again, then points in the corner.

Amy. Amy, the dangerous, Nebraska, passed-out Punk Rock Queen. Amy, being carried by three of her friends, one under each arm, one under both legs. Amy, completely unconscious, tongue hanging out of her mouth like a cartoon dog on an August day.

Farewell, my Amy. Farewell, my dangerous Nebraska Punk Rock Queen. One day we shall meet again under the harsh lights of a bowling alley and you will have no idea who the fuck I am and I will make a fool of myself attempting to recount the story to you. But until that day, I hope you party like it's 1999.

Ann-Marie Wilkens has a problem.

Ann-Marie Wilkens, Ann to most, has a pretty big ol' problem. Ann-Marie Wilkens is pregnant.

Ann-Marie's not sure how this happened. She's been practicing safe sex with her boyfriend, Bobby Harland, for over a year now. You know, despite Bobby's best efforts to change the situation. "Ann-Marie," he'd say, "Ann-Marie, you and me's been a couple for awhile now. We know we ain't gonna be getting no diseases from each other. Come on, Ann-Marie," he always called her Ann-Marie, "Come on, Ann-Marie, let's do the forbidden dance without our raincoats for once."

But Ann-Marie Wilkens was adamant. Raincoats would be doffed or no dancing at all would take place in the back of Bobby's pickup, long warm nights overlooking the Ozarks, overlooking the gentle curving mountains frosted with trees like a big green cloud. You see, Ann-Marie Wilkens has a secret. One that she hasn't told no one about. One that she can't tell no one about.

Ann-Marie Wilkens, Ann to most, Marie to her mother, has a problem. The problem is how does one continue going to junior college when one has a little breather forming inside your tummy? Because, believe you me, Ann-Marie is not quitting college. It took her two long years to get there, two long years to get the money, get the grades, get the car, get the permission, get the courage, two long years, and come hell or high-water, she is not going to be leaving now. Because Ann-Marie has a secret. One she's terrified of telling, for fear that it will no longer come true.

Ann-Marie Wilkens, A.M. to her sister, Anna-Maria to her grandma, has a problem. The problem is that everyone's going to be thrilled when they find out she's pregnant. Tears of joy will fill her mother's eyes and she will say, "I knew it! I knew it, Marie!" Ann-Marie's mother always called her Marie. Ann-Marie's mother got to pick the middle name when her child was born. "Marie, I knew the day would finally come. All the kinfolk kept saying to me 'When's that child gonna get herself a family?' You know, they said it discreetly but the whispers always did continue. And you know what I told 'em, Marie? I told 'em that girl takes her own sweet time about things. Always did, always will. Marie, you got a head on you that's stubborn like Aunt Rose's old mule, back in the days, back in the days before Aunt Rose broke her hip and ol' Bessie was sold to the glue factory. Marie, you've always done things your own way and you always will. Patience, I told 'em. Marie will find her family in her own sweet time."

Ann-Marie Wilkens, Ann to most, Annabelle to her father, has a problem. The problem is Bobby Harland, who's going to be beside himself when he finds out. Bobby's been screaming and hollerin' all the time recently about starting a family. "We're not getting any younger, Ann-Marie," Bobby would say over a tuna fish sandwich and cup of black coffee at the Double R Diner. "Ann-Marie, high school's about a mil-

# THE TAO OF WHITE TRASH

lion years behind us and neither of us are getting any younger. Now doncha think it's about time to give up this stupid school idea of yours and settle down and do what you know you're gonna do anyway? Come on, Ann-Marie. You know what's right." And she did. Ann-Marie knows what's right. And that's her secret.

Ann-Marie Wilkens, Ann to most, Annie to no one, has a problem. The problem is Elizabeth Joyce Wilkens-Polk, her older sister, almost thirty and still as beautiful as the day she was crowned Queen of the County Fair, back near a decade ago. Elizabeth used to be like Ann-Marie. Elizabeth Joyce Wilkens-Polk used to have the fire in her too, cruising the strip on Saturday nights, getting in deep with the bad boys, the ones who rode the motorcycles and shot out road signs on the back lanes late at night by the light of the Missouri moon. But Elizabeth done got herself knocked up, and it was thought to be in the best interest by everyone involved that Elizabeth get herself married and get that child on the way before any more time was spent contemplating a future for Elizabeth Joyce Wilkens-Polk. Elizabeth brought her own controversy to the family history, her own little gossip to the town charter when she refused to surrender her maiden name, instead tacking it on to her husband's with a short little hyphen. Elizabeth's dad, when informed of the decision, sighed and shifted in his chair and put down his paper and said, "What. Like Hillary Rodham-Clinton? Jeezis Christ." Then Elizabeth's mom told him not to take the Lord's name in vain and that was pretty much the end of the conversation.

Ann-Marie knew what Elizabeth was going to say. Elizabeth would sit in her favorite chair, bouncing her daughter on her knee while her other daughter watched Barney six inches away from the television and her other daughter scribbled all over the phone book with her crayons at the dining room table. "A.M.," Elizabeth would say, "A.M., now you just face facts. There are certain things that a person can do in life and certain things that they just can't. And when you're young and you think you're never gonna die, the world lays open to you like an oyster. But believe me, A.M., children can be a wonderful blessing. I mean, not mine in particular, but you get my meaning. A family is not necessarily the worst thing in the world that can happen to you. Staying here is not necessarily the worst thing in the world that can happen to you. You've become a woman, A.M., and you better put out the goddamn fire and open your eyes and realize what you've become." But Ann-Marie already knows what she's become. Which is why it's so important that she keep her secret secret.

Ann-Marie Wilkens, Ann to most, Ms. Wilkens to her teachers, knows what she's become. She's become yet another pregnant 21-year-old white trash waif, destined one day for a trailer home and a guest spot on Jerry Springer. Ann-Marie Wilkens is not stupid. She's not some hillbilly in a burlap sack sitting on the porch of her cabin drinking moonshine and waiting for her daddy to come fuck her later. Ann-Marie Wilkens has a Saturn and a pager and a subscription to Details magazine. She has a Macintosh Performa

6100 on her desk at home and she's on the Internet every week without fail. Ann-Marie Wilkens is not some ignorant backwater yokel. She could wear the exact same clothes the big city folks wear, drink the same coffee, own the same furniture. All it takes anymore is a phone and a credit card number, both of which she has, thank-you-very-much. Why, she even owns a pair of black shiny skin-tight patent leather pants from Victoria's Secret. She got them for a Halloween costume one year and she made quite an impression, felt pretty damn sexy tell the truth, but now they sit folded up in the back of her closet. The problem for Ann-Marie Wilkens is not owning the possessions but finding a context in which to use them. I mean, just about the only people in town who can get away with dressing like that are the angry little high-school skaters who sit outside the 7-11 every night, and I mean, Lordy, who wants to be one of them?

Ann-Marie Wilkens is not stupid. She reads the books. She watches the t.v. She sees the movies. She sees how her life is one big joke to all those people making those movies and t.v. shows and books. She understands that they find it funny that the only thing keeping her life from falling apart is an associate's degree in dental hygiene from the junior college. Hell, she laughs about it herself. Ann-Marie and all her friends laugh every time they crack open another Budweiser around the campfire deep in the back woods of her father's farm, the fresh dusty smell of hay surrounding them like a Confederate ghost coming back to reclaim what is rightly his. White Trash Jubilee! they yell, laughing, as they clink their aluminum cans to each other again and again and get blitzed out of their minds again and contemplate driving down to Poplar Bluff for a night on the town again and end up cruising the strip. Again.

Ann-Marie Wilkens, Ann to most, Claire to no one but herself, has a secret. The secret is that one day soon Ann-Marie is going to load down the trunk of her Saturn with all her worldly possessions. She's going to cram everything that means anything to her in that trunk and she's going to whistle for her dog to hop in the back seat. And Ann-Marie Wilkens is going to stick her Blues Traveler cassette into her stereo and she's gonna drive, she's gonna drive as long and as far as her money and her Saturn can carry her. And then she's going to stop. Ann-Marie's going to stop and start a new life, right then and there. She's going to lose her accent and she's going to dress in black leather pants all the time. Ann-Marie's going to hang out in coffeehouses and make love to sensitive guys with goatees and sweaters, not do the forbidden dance in the back of a pickup but make love, in a white bed at the top of a high rise building. And there'll be no more Bobby Harland and no more Elizabeth Joyce and no more gun racks, no more snooping relatives and no more cruising the strip on Saturday nights. Ann-Marie's life will suddenly be a million miles away and she will finally open her eyes and realize what she's become.

And Ann-Marie Wilkens, Ann to most, will name her child Claire. Unless of course it's a boy, in which case she'll name him David.

I've been on nicotine patches for two and a half years now, they seem to work, I don't know, I can't really tell, I mean, I still smoke, I still have a cigarette now and then, well, maybe five a day, so I don't know. I'm probably too close to it to tell, you know, like, you need to be able to step back from a situation to really get a good, uh, good, uh, overall look at the picture, right, and so like I'm right in the middle so it's probably not up to me to judge. I just always thought that, you know, nicotine patches were supposed to be a finite thing, right? Nicorette gives you the power to quit, that's what they always say on the commercials, I mean, the things are fucking expensive, you know, sixty bucks for a box of them, I mean, shit, if I'm going to be addicted to nicotine, right, I should just say fuck it and go back to cigarettes. That's what I tell myself sometimes, you know, late at night in my apartment by myself, that's what I say to myself. I don't really talk to myself, I mean just like that's what one part of my brain is saying to the other part of my brain while I'm sitting there in my apartment totally fuckin' jonesing for a cigarette, I mean, what's the fucking point? Okay, I mean, yes, I do talk to myself sometimes when I'm in my apartment by myself, but who doesn't, you know? Well, I don't mean that literally, I mean, how can we tell exactly how many people talk to themselves in their apartments alone, we're not there, right? That's the definition of being alone. Except for, you know, if you like wired everybody's houses like some sort of CIA police state, you know, we're peeping in everybody's windows and we're videotaping all our neighbors, right, you know, why can't we all just get along, yeah, you know, you know. It's like, fucking, like Big Brother or something, you know, like that book,

## THE TAO OF NICOTINE

you know, that one book, the book with all the, you know, like Big Brother and the videoscreens and the rats and all that shit. I read that book in high school, well, I kinda read that book in high school, skipped around a lot, just sort of, you know, read enough to get through the tests, actually that's when I actually started smoking, now that I think about it, I started smoking right when I started that book, this guy named Tab started me smoking, well, his name wasn't really Tab, it was Mark or Mike or Matt or fuckin' Mitzi or something, I don't know, it doesn't matter, we all called him Tab 'cause he was the one with the fuckin' tabs, know what I mean? Fuckin' tabs, right on. And the teachers would ask why we called him Tab and we'd say 'cause he was always drinking Tab soda all the time, which incidentally, he was always drinking Tab soda all the time, but I think it was because so our lame cover story would look right, I mean, teachers are fuckin' idiots, right? I mean, there was so much shit you could get away with in my high school, I spent half my life in high school fuckin' stoned and the other half tripping my balls off, right? And look at me, I got a degree, you know, doesn't take a fuckin' rocket scientist to get a high school diploma, just show up to class every day and don't make a scene, just sit in the back and slouch down real low and just keep your mouth shut and they'll just pass you right on through, teachers are so fuckin' stupid, you know? But, like, Tab, right, Tab was the one who got me smoking for the first time, Marlboro Lights, he always had these, I'll never forget this, as long as I live, Tab always had like a thousand empty crumpled up packs of Marlboro Lights on the floor of his Nova, shit, this 74 primer gray Nova, we'd just fuckin' drive around, we'd get high as a kite and just drive around, cruise the movie theatre parking lot on Saturday nights, try

to pick up a couple of girls, you know, we never would of course, we weren't big jocks, we weren't big football players, we were just a couple of the freaks driving around in this 74 Nova blasting Dark Side of the Moon out of Tab's fuckin' 17-inch woofers, yeah, that's right, these fuckin' kick-ass 17-inch woofers, it was crazy man, his stereo took up like half the back seat and you'd turn it up to like, just like 7 and the fuckin' windows would shake, you could feel the fillings in your teeth just rattle and Tab would just look over at me and just nod his head and smile and give me another Marlboro Light. Well, I mean, sometimes some girls would go party with us, right? 'cause Tab was fuckin' hooked up, right? I mean, the dude was amazing, he could just get like anything under the sun, I don't know how he did it, man, he could get you pot or speed or acid or shrooms or crank or rush or coke or x or payote or mescaline, I mean, the only thing he'd ever refuse to get was angel dust cause he was always talking about how that shit would mess you up, and he was right, I guess, I never really knew anyone who did angel dust but we heard about this guy, this dude we used to party with and Jack had said that Mark had told him about Brian being at a party with this guy and the guy just totally fuckin' flipped out on dust one night at this party and just like fuckin' like picked up the refrigerator with his own two hands, just fuckin' hoisted this seven foot tall refrigerator into the air and fuckin' everyone freaked out and I guess like the cops had to come or something and they fuckin' shot him like three times or something before the dude finally calmed down. But I mean, you couldn't really trust anything Jack would tell you, Jack was full of shit most of the time, he was always talking about how he went out to L.A. in the 70s and got totally wasted with Kristy McNichol at some party and fucked her in the back of a pickup and we were like, whatever, that dude, you never knew when he was blowing shit up your ass, which is why I liked hanging out with Tab, cause you know, Tab may have been a total waste case, right, and he was, don't get me wrong, Tab could hardly fuckin'...well, you know what I'm saying, he could hardly fuckin' get through life, but the thing was, the thing was that Tab would never steer you wrong. Tab never lied and he never stole and he never tried to sell you a bag of stink weed or anything, I mean, Tab was right on, you know? He was right on, which is why I hung out with him. Yeah, just like cruising the mall, dropping off bags, fuckin' blasting Zeppelin on summer nights, you know, man, like, what happens to our youth, you know? Where does it all go? One day you're fuckin' cruising around, time of your life, party every night, and the next day you sell coke to the wrong fuckin' guy and bang, you got a bullet in your chest at 22. I mean, who gets a bullet in their chest at 22? Tab never did anything wrong, you know he never caused anyone harm, he'd always give me a dime bag on spec, he was that kind of guy, you know? Had the high score on Galaga for five years straight, he was that kind of guy. And then all of sudden they're putting him in the ground and man, the party's over, you know what I mean, and the next thing I know I'm waking up and I'm 28 years old and I'm the night manager at Kwiikee Mart and I've been wearing goddamn nicotine patches for two and a half years. Where does the time go? Anyway, here's your receipt. I need you to sign next to the X here. Yeah, you have a good day too. Come again.



Jason Pettus (shown here in 1983) is the author of three novels and, to date, over forty self-published books of short work. His performance credits include National Public Radio, the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art, WGN-TV, the Albuquerque Poetry Festival, and the National Poetry Slam, where he placed second in 1997 as part of the Chicago-Green Mill team. His nonfiction has appeared in such publications as About.com, *Broken Pencil* and the Quimby's Bookstore online catalog, as well as being nominated for the 2001 *Zine Yearbook*. Mr. Pettus has been written about in such diverse publications as the *Chicago Tribune*, *Arbyte* and *Hustler* magazines, and his experimental writing garnered him a grant from the Illinois Arts Council in 1999. He runs his own publishing company and also maintains his own website, including a daily journal that is read by over 15,000 people.

When not busy writing, Mr. Pettus enjoys taking too much speed, obsessively watching *The Empire Strikes Back*, and complaining about how "they don't make metal bands like they used to." He lives in Chicago.

**END**