

# Sparks 22



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# Sparks

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*photo by John Johnson*

## **Jonathan Lowe**

### **One Final Letter**

My post office box had been thick with it all week. Advertisements, election circulars, and assorted junk. I folded Debra's letter back into its pink envelope and dropped it absently into the trash with the rest. Even though the message hadn't contained the dramatic punctuation of my other mail, the tone was similar. Instead of a plea for money or votes, this one was a plea for my time. But since it was only her first letter to me in years, I suspected it might also be her last if I didn't reply. So the smile which hung on my face, long after reading and discarding it, was a mirthless one. The kind of smile you offer in passing to strangers.

I saw her the next day at the college library. Although she didn't see me, I could tell that the years had been generous to her. Even from where I stood outside the employee lounge, I could see that her complexion, framed by short black hair, was as beautiful as ever. And her figure was still as devastating too. She was a survivor, all right. There was never any doubt of that. It was only the disguised urgency of her search for me that gave me a new understanding of her vanity and of how little rejection she had experienced. So I reentered the lounge then—leaving the realm of Kafka and Eliot for the more immediate relevance of gossip, rumor, and an argument over the Arizona Wildcats. And when I came out again, she was gone.

It's funny how most reactions seem ready-made before you ever face them.

You don't even have to think about them, really. Instinct dictates what you will do. It's ironic perhaps, like discarding Debra's letter, but true.

I met Debra during my last year at the University. That was in 1985.

We were both journalism majors involved in student politics at the time. I was the editorial director of the student paper, while she covered the nitty-gritty functions of the campus social scene. Although the long hours I put into my studies by day and at a local pizzeria at night left me physically and emotionally exhausted, I enjoyed the brief time we worked together Tuesday afternoons and evenings in that cramped office on the third floor of the Student Union building. Because there was something unspoken between us there. Call it a mixture of fantasy and lust which thrived on not being identified, but this fragile yet persistent euphoria was kept alive with subtle glances and adeptly timed smiles which were independent of the surface content of what was said. It was like something assumed but hidden—an attraction which feared confrontation, and therefore became maddeningly stronger. Not to the point of love, exactly. Love is impossible to hide once it's realized, I discovered. No—what I felt was an unreal, all-enveloping warmth, not fire. We both yearned toward that warmth, but somehow remained uncannily free of the flame. And from being burned.

The letters first started coming to my dorm near the beginning of December during my senior year. Typed on purple stationery, the first was a short and rather stilted request to me after work outside Gino's on Wednesday night. The signature at the bottom was simply "D." Debra and I hadn't yet finished typing our segments for the latest biweekly installment of the school paper, so I assumed the rendezvous was strictly business.

Secretly, however, I began to wish otherwise, and spent the final hour or so of my shift either staring hypnotically into the ovens with something more than academic anticipation, or else peering abstractedly out the swinging kitchen doors at the rowdy college jocks ordering pitchers of draft and milling around the pinball machines Gino had backed against the wall. After Gino chased the stragglers dormward, I remember waiting nervously out by my VW in the lot. But Debra never showed.



The next day I confronted her in the hall outside our interpretive criticism class, which a cavernous-faced Dr. Stapleton taught—we all agreed—with a certain “robust didacticism.”

“Deb?”

She turned around toward me slowly, giving her profile an excruciatingly irresistible appeal for my inspection. But I didn’t lower my gaze for long. Her brown eyes were riveting enough—and yes, she knew how to look at someone in such a way as to induce shock and guilt and desire all at once.

“Oh. . . Brian,” she said, flashing her intimate, millisecond smile of recognition.

“You didn’t come by last night,” I told her, “like you said.”

“Like I SAID?”

My heart shot up several floors at the bewilderment of her response, and beat wildly there in my throat and temples. I fought it down as best I could, and in lieu of an awkward apology, unfolded the note in my coat pocket.

“Then . . . you didn’t write this?”

She read what was there and laughed. “Of course not.”

Still drunk with the stupidity of my assumption, I found, later in the afternoon, that a second letter had arrived in my box. This one read:

*Dear Brian,*

*I’m sorry about last night. I was there but I couldn’t speak to you. You don’t know how badly I wanted to, but what would I say? The truth? I love you, but I’m afraid. So afraid of how you’ll accept this. How could I make you believe that this might work? Writing is easier than facing you. Brian, I’m so confused and afraid. —D.*

That's how it began. With each day, a new letter from this unknown and irritating benefactor of emotion—and every one a little more intimate. Slowly the fear mentioned in the second letter began to subside as the strength of the feelings increased. I started getting packages at my dorm too—even during the Christmas break when I stayed on campus and worked full time on the “wax” crew, buffing the administration's hallways by day, and serving up pepperoni and sausage pizza to the faculty brats at night. The gifts were small: things like cassette tapes by my favorite, Spiro Gyra, and batches of homemade cookies. Always, a note or letter detailed her thoughts or reminding me of how she'd spent the day with me on her mind. But whether with a gift or not, all those letters had one thing in common. They each contained the solitary petal of a rose. “I'm sending you a bouquet one petal at a time,” she wrote. I don't know why, but I kept the letters. Maybe they seemed so unbelievable. . .

The first Tuesday after Christmas, Debra questioned me about my secret admirer. She found it all endlessly amusing, and began a deliberate giggling at the mention of my predicament. I told her what I knew about the girl, which wasn't much. She was a home economics major, 20 years old. She was obviously shy, and liked classical “romantic” music. Chopin, Brahms, Tchaikovsky—that kind of thing. When I mentioned that she also liked Italian food, Debra said, “Uh-oh!” and blew out her cheeks like a balloon. Then she smiled that killer smile of hers and winked. I took her advice and kept my eyes open for signs of someone watching me or following me. Because “D” certainly did seem to know my whereabouts and what I was doing with my time. She knew about Debra too, and seemed to become increasingly obsessed with our working relationship. Soon after this she started writing about her poor grades, her lack of sleep, and how it might be best if she dropped out.

Well, this news was too much. I had to get a message to this girl somehow. I resented the fact that she was forcing me to consider her feelings in my relationship to someone I felt physically attracted to, even

though I hadn't yet found the courage to make a move from where I was. Unfortunately, however, I kept picturing myself in the dean of women's office, asking Mrs. Pauli, "Could you, ah, tell me if there's, well, someone at the school in the home ec department who's flunking? Incidentally, she, ah, likes Chopin's Nocturnes and ravioli."

But that was when Debra got her letter. She came over to my dorm to show it to me. It was scrawled in black ink across an index card.

Dear Miss Hollis,

You must realize my feelings toward Brian. I can't tell you how much it would hurt me if he were hurt. So I'm asking you, please, please not to encourage him. You can have whoever you want, but you must give me a chance to talk to him first. Please help me, and don't let him know I've written you. Please, until I can get the courage to talk to him. —D.

"So what do I do now?" I said, after reading her note.

Debra looked at me in that way she always had, glancing down until she knew our eyes would meet. She was sitting on my bunk bed with crossed legs, and I remember she was wearing plaid, wool kneehighs and a tight, gray sweater that day when she said those fateful words.

"Why don't we try going out together?"

Strange how feelings can color the whole world for someone. In just as many ways as there are people, mysterious influences distill their irony into anything from a magical exhilaration to a sense of terrible, imprisoned futility.

From mid-January to mid-February, I dated Debra. We went everywhere together, and she made me discover a side of myself I never knew existed. A side both I and "D" were witness to for the first time. Debra and I were very open about it from the start, and made a point of walking together often across the crowded campus. We kissed passionately when-

ever we suspected we were being watched. It tasted deliciously evil somehow too, that taboo against realizing our long dormant attraction. Our favorite game even became guessing who “D” might be, and we looked for the most despondent faces eagerly, even after the letters stopped. In a secret way, I believe I was grateful to “D” for giving me the excuse I needed. Even though I felt—I knew—there was a very high wall between Debra and me.

Then one night, into the last hour of Valentine’s Day, Debra waited excitedly for me outside my dorm with a box of roses. I will never forget her face that night, getting back from Gino’s. So beautiful it scared me. But I kissed her anyway, losing myself in the unreal warmth of her lips just as I had many times lost myself, late at night, in the foreboding scent of her dark hair with a tie “D” had given me draped across the dorm room door. A late night fog had drifted over the campus, and holding Debra firmly against my chest, I remember distinctly—even now—seeing two rows of halos converging above the street from the lurid arc light, ending in a hazy silver moon which hung in a low scud of cloud. And Debra’s voice. . .

“The funniest thing happened tonight,” she said, breaking free and picking up the open box of roses from the hood of my VW.

“Tell me,” I said.

“That girl ‘D’ came to my room with these,” she said, with a studied flippancy. “Her name’s Darlene Gentry. She was in your music appreciation class.”

I couldn’t answer for a moment, and then I said, “What do you mean, was?”

“She’s gone now. All she wanted was to give you these flowers. Only I think she was still chicken. . .can you beat that?”

Debra was giggling when she told me about Darlene. I can’t forget that

part. Even now. It had all seemed like a game up to then, but then I knew her name, and suddenly I remembered her too: She'd sat just two rows behind my all year—a quiet girl with long brown hair who wore granny glasses and demure clothing. No one paid much attention to her. She was a “generic” student—the kind you never notice unless she wasn't there for a while. Unreal somehow, and always in the background. But I HAD wondered about her, and thinking about her again, I realized she hadn't been to class at all those last few days. Evidently she'd decided to leave school, and on the occasion of Valentine's Day, when the dorms were raucous with parties, to risk exposure and rejection by confronting me. Only the same thing had prevented her, because she took the flowers to Debra instead. Debra, who thought the whole thing so absurdly amusing.

Inside the box was her final letter.

*Dearest Brian,*

*Please forgive me for writing you again. And please accept this bouquet instead of the many more letters I would send if I could, if it mattered. When I play the Brahms, I seem to be with you now, as if you are here. Although it's painful, it must be enough to remember, to imagine you as happy as I've seen you. Goodbye, then, with love, from no one. —D.*

I left Debra standing by my car that night, and got on the phone. Claiming to be a relative, I managed to dial through to the women's dorm supervisor and ask about Darlene Gentry. There was a long pause, maybe ten minutes, and then I was being questioned. Darlene wasn't at bed check and some of her things were gone.

So that was the end of it, or almost the end. When the announcement came of Darlene's accidental death in Omaha two weeks later, I went out and purchased a copy of the Brahms first concerto we'd been studying in music appreciation class before she'd stopped attending. And when I laid the needle of my roommate's battered turntable—so used to blasting rock

in those days—down onto the second section of that record, I too thought I glimpsed a soul. One which might have loved sincerely—and been loved—but feared itself unworthy. I also recognized and remembered that plaintive melody as one which had once, and has since, haunted me.

Yet the girl whose image the music seemed to evoke was dead then. Struck down by a speeding motorist on a straight stretch of road in the middle of a clear, cloudless day. The driver couldn't quite pass the breathalyzer and claimed he never saw her step out, the report said. Her step-parents had just returned from vacation, and didn't even know she was in town. And there was something else. Something that makes me think it was no accident.

Her phonograph had been left on.

I can still see that sometimes too, in my dreams—the needle tracking endlessly against the center label. And no one has had to tell me what was imprinted on that label—any more than I have to be reminded what a rose symbolizes. Because I have a stack of letters in the bottom drawer of my dresser, and inside of each there is a pressed petal of that flower.

But there's one final letter to appraise—the one I threw away. When that stack in my drawer was ten years old, this woman sent it to me as if something had changed between us. As if what we shared was anything more than guilt. Not legal guilt, of course. I mean another kind.

She said she'd missed me at the reunion, and when she asked around, discovered I was working right on campus, at the library. She was in town for a full week, but already she'd been to the library several times to see me, and I was always out. Would I have lunch with her or something? There was so much to talk about. Her divorce from Greg Elford, a former chool quarterback, had just been finalized. And she heard I was still ingle. Now she just wanted to "make one of her old classmates jealous" before returning to the house she'd won in the settlement. Jealous, she said, like we once did with that girl from Omaha. . .what was her name?

I never answered Debra's letter. And the one time I walked by her on campus during the week of her stay, she didn't seem to recognize me. Although she might not have changed, perhaps I have. Among other things, what I feel for her now isn't fear or lust so much as pity. Maybe because she was never afraid. Maybe because, being dead inside, she had nothing to lose, and what you saw was all you got. Whatever the reason, I saw that she was even more a stranger to me, and an accusing reminder that Darlene Gentry had been a stranger to everyone then. Call it irony if you want to. Or instinct.

I saw someone wearing a tee shirt recently which read, proudly, PERHAPS YOU HAVE MISTAKEN ME FOR SOMEONE WHO GIVES A DAMN. That could have been me in that tee shirt, ten years ago.

And something told me there wouldn't be enough time to make Debra understand.

## **Ben Ohmart**

### **Sky Composite**

we'd be fall lovers, but couldn't help  
feeling the best when everything  
around us was dying  
I'd lay in her lap and think about the blue  
that had nothing in it  
but there were swirls of softness, touch, even  
reflections of my eyes when she bent over  
and I looked right thru her, and you realize  
you can't see which way the world turns



## **CD-ROM of my Girlfriend**

I said over-twice I didn't mind  
but then when I go in the book and media  
store to look for something that will =  
help with my taxes  
our taxes  
I see her smiling on the box, and how  
there's only one left, and I =  
think about the men who have bought her work  
her time  
my patience



*protesters (photo compositing by Jim Esch)*

# **Michael Williams**

## **Plates**

“How dare he speak to me that way!  
That was totally uncalled for!  
He just ignored my question and spoke  
in that tone of voice as if I didn’t know  
what I was talking about!”

Old fool  
Four eyed fool  
Old geezer fool  
Fool, fool, fool, fool.

I will hound you until the world’s end;  
Break plates and platters over your head.  
Red plates, blue plates, white china plates,  
porcelain plates, birthday plates.  
All I will throw and never miss.

I will break plates over your head in the morning.

## *Sparks*

I will break plates over your head in the afternoon.

I will break plates over

ad in the evening.

I will break plates over your head at midnight.

Run to China if you want to.

Run to Washington or the Eiffel tower

Run to Venice or Timbuktu if you want to.

But I will be there

breaking plates

over your head.

## **Why**

Why does a Japanese Leviathan wave an American flag?

Why does Menathenes and his army drive chariots of cucumbers?

Why do soul friends throw away what is good and wonderful?

Why are fairies soulless and democrats clueless?

Why has Pem broke the county?

Why do buffalo bankers refuse bill bond notes?

Why does Dr. Baker wrinkle his nose when he opens a book?

Why did Baum and Gaiman write of pumpkin men?

Why did Kabala crown Kinshasa with red leaves?

Why did Bernstein never conduct a symphony of desk and chairs?

Why does the Honorable Senator Minotaur wear a bowtie?

Why don't you call me?

## Paul Ford

### Excerpts from the *Subway Diary*

*editor's note: Here's a small collection of work from Paul's Subway Diary, an ongoing daily web project, published jointly by Combined Effect and Orange Street Press. Check it out at <http://www.interactive.net/~ford/metdiary/>*



23 oct 97

I pissed my pants today. At work.

An agonizing accident. I was reading the Voice in the toilet and mis-aligned myself; long after I could prevent any damage I realized urine had sprayed from between the toilet and the seat, coming out between my knees and all over my jeans.

Saying "oh, God," over and over, I began to cry little gasping tears,



kicking off my shoes and yanking my jeans into the air. Soaked. Jesus. All my co-workers were right outside the door, laughing, completing their assigned tasks while I sat shaking, soaked like a baby. I could run out to Central Park and dry out, but I had just returned from lunch. It would look bad.

Careful, forced-calm inspection showed the problem was topical; between the legs and below the belt above the ass the light blue jeans were the color of the Mighty Hudson. But, praise Jesus, I had kept away from broccoli or asparagus and the damage was offset by a very long shirt.

The choice pained me but, after I sniffed the jeans and reassured myself they did not smell noisomely of piss, I patted them with paper towels, and stretched my shirt behind me. As fast as I could smoothly move I left the bathroom and ran up the stairs, sitting tight in my chair, praying for low humidity.

I left early, mostly dry, darting out of the office like a salamander. On the way home I did post-piss checking; I'd sneak up to a woman on the crowded subway and stand in front of her. No noses crinkled, no eyes closed in a grimace. At home, safe, musty, filthy, feeling stupid and horrible, I ran into the shower, thanking God for a painless, shameless deliverance from possible deep humiliation.

29 oct 97

I got bored at work and looked up names in the national on-line phone book. The sophomoric will be glad to know, as I was, that people survive with the surnames Hitler, Ass, Nipple, Nazi, and Satan (Tom Satan, of Michigan). But it's also worth noting that Johnny Superstar lives in Pennsylvania, not far from Michael Hero. There are, very literally, Nuclear and Atomic families. And not far from the Hero family lives Hulda Villain.

Fred Alone lives by himself in Washington State under the watchful eye of Marvin God. Perhaps he is friends with Bridget Empty and Barbara Hollow, and has met Michael Lonely. Ethel Catholic, her friend Kim Fidelity, and Kim's acquaintance Divyne Truth often go to the bar with Mr. God. Their house is near the monestary where Abbot Joy smilingly tends his medicinal plants.

Adam Touch and Osborne Feelings have long known one another, while Osborne still spends a portion of his time with Harold Sad. Peggy Space (who should marry David Flight and hyphenate her name) and Amelia Pluto are good friends with Benny Jetson and George Astro. But none of them, not even Anthony Legend, who feels his stories are always blown out of proportion, feel so satisfied in their lives as Edward Complete, who has long ago resolved the issues that keep Amina Rage and Time Fletcher preoccupied, and lives a peaceful, small life, married, with a job and many children, and just enough money, right outside of Chicago.

20 nov 97 - Genre Studies

New Yorkers throw away a lot of books, and picking through the trash uptown, I found a historical smut novel, called *The Kamikaze Myth*. It opens with Marco Polo going off with Kubla Khan's son to pick a new harem for the Khan. Naked tomfoolery ensues.



I think I might have a good smut novel in me; I could write it in a couple of weeks and make a little money. But where would I sell it? How long would things need to be, in inches and pages? Lifting his battered jeans from the floor, Carol realized the shower was running. Licking her lips in anticipation, she put her soft palm on the brass doorknob and twisted it--much as she would soon be twisting his glistening, veined man hammer. That would tire after a few dozen paragraphs. How many euphemisms can you create to describe the relevant anatomy? You've got alabaster mammal-mountains, thrusting meat popsicles, hot feminine chasms, and then what? Not to mention the verb shortage: pushing, throbbing, shoving, releasing, spreading, etc. Better to make it a horror novel. "Matt," she said, just loud enough to be heard above the shower. "You're home early." She pulled her robe from her body and let it fall to the tiled floor, stepping out of the heap of terrycloth and pulling the plastic curtain back.

Matt's body stretched across the porcelain bathtub, naked and wet. She met his gaping eyes, and followed his body to see his neck slashed, his chest a gristle, as if some animal had feasted there. The shower had washed his blood away, leaving the rainbow of organs sloppily exposed.

Above her, she heard a rasping, dry voice, her father's voice. "I'm coming right down, Carol." As Carol looked up, her mouth opening in a scream, she met the eyes of her father, dead seven years, naked, descending the high bathroom wall like a spider, his open, grinning mouth smeared with gore. Well, but then, the whole purpose of a horror novel is in scenes like the above, with naked women and blood. I'd probably like something with more dialogue and a different kind of variety, more character driven. She woke with sudden breath, jerking up like a triggered mousetrap, still feeling the eyes of her scuttling dream-father. "Jesus, Carol, what?" said Matt, pulling himself up in the bed, his large hand pressing into her uncovered back.

"Nothing, God. Sorry. What a fucking dream." She checked the ceiling,

the four dark corners. Empty. Nothing in the room but the bed and a Magritte print, and the looming desk in the corner.

"You okay?" With no emergency to attend to, he was heading back into sleep.

"Yeah. Just scared."

He leaned back, mumbling, "You want to talk about it?"

She did, but it was silly to keep him awake. His alarm would ring in three hours.

"No," she said, "I'm fine." But she nestled into his sleeping body, pressing her back against his chest and locking her legs into his. "Is this okay?"

"Good, warm," he said, in the primitive speech of the exhausted. They kept the heat low to save, and the night was cold. He wrapped his arm across her bare stomach. She stared at the curtains, luminous with the half-glow from the porchlight, and heard his familiar sleeping breath. Her hand gripped his arm as tightly as it could without waking him. Now what? Character-driven pieces are awfully restrictive. I could go for magic realism: That night, a talking butterfly appeared to Carol. But, really, who wants that? Besides, I don't have a mystical heritage like Louise Erdrich or Gabriel Garcia Marquez. I need to stick where I'm useful. I could go for science fiction: When he woke up she felt him pull away and head to the kitchen, walking on cat's feet to keep from waking her. He'd make himself some eggs and read the news stat, then jack in for a little pre-day research.

Matt was a biowave worker, a well-paid one. He specialized in Ultra Low Variable Frequency [Emotional Bandwidth Range] transmissions, which was spelled ULVFEBR and pronounced "You'll Fever." He could tune a palm-radio to keep a party together or break one apart, or dial it so that enemies would be overcome with sudden forgiveness. He specialized

in political and business summits, working freelance, the man behind the curtain. That his work was considered barely legal did not bother him; he thought the job a calling and himself an artist. There are about a million genres left--Mysteries, Romance Novels, Bildungsromans--that I'll need to come to later, but first I'm going to finish that historical smut novel. I'll let you know how it turns out.

23 nov 97

It's Sunday. Here's an anagram for the Lord's Prayer:

HELP ROSY RETARD

Warfare haunt thine Hoover!

By the lewd, mean halo,

Bed the lily now.

Spoof myth; elude God.

Hi, non-edible owl! Coy theme?

Tie a nerve, NASA whore. I've a gutsy dish.

Dial your nervous red B.A.--

Gross fetus paradise:

Vassar stung testes.

Splendid attention, Automaton, but

Vassar, I shit vile sin from India Ink.

Prank midget woodhen, weigh

Hydrangea forever molten.

30 nov 97

For Immediate Release

### Combined Effect Center Opens Center to Treat "Cereal Problem"

Oren, Utah. The Combined Effect Center for Treatment of Compulsive Disorders today announced a new program for breakfast foods addiction, meeting a growing concern over what United States Secretary of Health Don Winelgrad recently called "the cereal problem."

"Quite honestly, this is something we should have done many years ago," said Edward Bayliss, director at the Oren, Utah-based center. "We haven't had the resources to treat this properly, and this new center provides us with those resources."

At a press conference, Tony the Tiger, who lobbied for legal recognition of Exaggerated Sugar and Starch Response Syndrome (ESSRS) as a medical condition as early as eight years ago, read a prepared statement via satellite from his home outside of Bombay: "For about sixteen years, to feel the confidence I needed, I ate the cereal I was paid to promote. In the late 1980's, on the set for commercial shoots, I'd eat sixty to seventy bowls before tape rolled. My self-reliance and pride disappeared. The message we sent to America's children is horrifying to contemplate. I want to congratulate the Combined Effect Center for its revolutionary work in treating this condition."

Mr. Tiger has since left his lucrative commercial career and returned to his prior occupation, savagely attacking villagers in India.

Other workers in the industry tell similar stories. "I wouldn't trade my new life for anything," said the Trix Rabbit, interviewed for this article at his home in Neptune, New Jersey. From 1975 to 1994, he was one of the most highly paid commercial talents in food promotions.

"Money! Amazing money! But how do you think they got me into that frenzy for every commercial? Every day I got a regular payola injection of Trix cereal, and before shooting they'd take me off the injections for a week. By the time the cameras rolled I was crazy for the cereal, absolutely off my gourd to get some. And they'd pay those bastard kids to keep it from me. 'Trix is for kids. Trix is for kids. Trix is for kids.' A living hell, with cameras rolling."

Mr. Rabbit, whose real name is Dwayne Schlaussenberg, is currently suing the General Foods corporation for emotional and physical distress; the trial will begin next October. "The day I filed my lawsuit, Ellis Martin died of an overdose. I took it as a sign that I narrowly missed my own death," said Mr. Schlaussenberg. "That was a wake-up call for the entire industry." Martin, considered one of the most talented performers in breakfast cereal commercials, was better known for going "cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs" than for his short-lived Broadway stage career, in which, for a run of six months during 1967, he concurrently played Oliver Twist in *Oliver!* at the Imperion theater, and Anne Frank in *The Diary of Anne Frank* across the street at the Royal.

"But the payoff for commercials was too great," related Mr. Schlaussenberg, "and Ellis figured the chances on

Broadway were limited for a bird, so he went over to Kelloggs. At first, it's exciting, meeting all the big names, like the Corn Flakes Rooster, but once you're trapped. You're getting in on the ground floor with a big name like Cocoa Puffs, but you might as well be in prison."

While fondly remembered by many, Mr. Martin lived a life of excess "that put the members of [rock group] the Who to shame," said Count Chocula, at home on Fire Island, NY with his companion, Frankenberry. Chocula, who retired from General Mills last year, related that Mr. Martin would "show up with cartoon characters from Ralph Bakshi movies and beat up the Sugar Smacks Frog. It was worse than anything in Midnight Cowboy. He would just go crazy, eat six boxes of those goddamned puffs and lose control."

The Combined Effect center will "address the underlying issues that lead to this extreme behavior," said Dr. Bayliss. Awareness is raising in other quarters, as well. A two hour drama about ESSRS aired last June on ABC. "Purple Horseshoes," starring Matthew Broderick, followed the life of Donald O'Leary, the Lucky Charms Leprechaun, from the slums of Ireland to the commercial animation studios of Los Angeles, to a sad downfall in which Mr. O'Leary allowed perverted thrill seekers to urinate on him in exchange for the brightly colored marshmallows on which he was dependent.

On another front, ESSRS testing is making its way into medical textbooks, a sign that, despite the propaganda efforts of the cereal cartel, the medical community sees this condition as genuine. "Admitting the problem takes one closer to a solution," said Mr. O'Leary, now a social

worker for the Combined Effect center. "It's the only way to resolve the issues. My own story proves the dangers of a life of addiction, but it also proves that there's a way out. The Combined Effect center

should show many suffering individuals a glimmer of hope at the end of that dark and winding tunnel of dependence."

More information on ESSRS can be received by sending email to Combined Effect Center for Treatment of Compulsive Disorders, or by calling (718) 488 9095.

20 dec 97 - Manhood, 1994

For three months in 1994, Iron John was the window through which I saw the world. Robert Bly salvaged my sunken truths. Chest expanded with masculine pride, I wandered through the bare woods in upstate New York, breath blowing hot and smoky, mythic energy rising through my thrift store boots.

Feminists mocked. Jane, who ran with the wolves, called me "Copper Paul." Needing no approval from emasculating women, I suffered her double standard with pride. Her mockery was anger--it angered them to see another puppet to their feminine wiles slip his strings. I ate hamburgers and grew an embarrassing fuzzy beard that blurred my face.

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THRIFT STORE BOOTS.**

Iron John's timing was perfect. Presbyterianism didn't jibe emotionally, I was on the outs with my family, and I was surrounded by friends on their own spiritual quests. Some searched with improvised candlelit ceremonies, others buried ceramic sculptures at midnight, looking for God or God's distant cousin. Before I became Iron Paul, I solved my emotional frustrations by drawing long, smooth gashes into my arms with a hunting knife. I'd take masculine bullshit over that any day, and I did.

The members of the men's movement, those half-naked professors and accountants who beat drums in Maine, must feel the same way. They say "leave me alone" to the women they live with, then turned and say, "I'm deeply lonely," and head to a retreat, or into the embrace of a twenty-six year old. Those two magnetic emotions, spinning in opposition, keep everyone around them off balance.

For my own case of push-me-pull-you, I credit my mother. We replayed the same drama until I stopped speaking to her in 1994, right before the cutting ended and Robert Bly began. We would fight, and suddenly--I don't know how--I would literally end up in a slumped in a corner, sobbing, limp as a doll, arm over my head, begging her to leave me alone. Then, she'd descend and say, "Paul, I love you, I just want to hold you and make it all right." This, and similar things, happened at least once a month when I lived with her.

I've met dozens of men with similar dramas, who would rather come home to an apartment on fire than a phone message from their mom. I replay the drama through other women, asking for solid love, then clamming up when it's not offered on my exacting conditions. I want their deep affection, but fear the consequences, and I usually retreat, insisting that what's offered wasn't what I requested. If loves were Christmas presents, I'd find the stockings stuffed wrong and the sweater too scratchy.

These are recent uncoverings, but during my Iron John time, I just



needed a way to say "fuck off" to the people who sent me back to the hunting knife, like my mother and a girl named Jenny who decided she'd help me get over my virginity, then refused to touch me after the awful event. I needed to feel larger and more important than I was, part of some great cosmic hive-mind. Before my experiment with spiritual manhood ended, I wrote to Robert Bly, a two page letter of shy thanks. He wrote back with a compliment--"you seem awfully wise for 19." I have the letter filed somewhere; its importance is dimmed, my unwashed masculinity passed, and most women friends gave up running with the wolves to jog with border collies. The mystical flame extinguished in favor of forgiveness. I speak once a month, with only mild dread, to my mother. I replaced God and faith with a dull nihilism that seems more honest by merit of its total blandness.

Before I finished this entry, I took a look in my box of Pauls, and found Iron Paul next to Depressed Paul and Christian Paul, and Industrial Music Fan Paul with Dyed Black Hair. He still holds that letter from Bly, and it's sad to see him, four years younger and very different from New York City Paul. His attitudes and hopes are not my attitudes and hopes; his emotions did not carry on to me. Time has rusted him through.



*"rickety chair, ricketts glen" by Jim Esch*

# REVIEWS

Send us your tapes, books, CD's, website URLs, etc., and we'll review them here. Everything we get we'll review, for better or worse. Choice reviews will be included in our bi-monthly zine Sparks. Submit your artistic overflowings along with any pertinent information that might be helpful to Jim Esch, 450 Cardigan Terrace E., West Chester, PA 19380

## Music

### Gargoyle Wings

**Bob Xark**

reviewed February 24, 1998

Bomb Sniffing Dog Records

PO Box 217, Old Chelsea Station, New York, NY

10113

[www.frankmedia.com](http://www.frankmedia.com)



A proto-apocalyptic, post-industrial 20-track CD -- a jumble of grooves, samples, noise, guitar distortion and poetry. Xark is plugged into the wasteland, circa 1997, defiantly spitting in the face of spoon-fed sanitized culture. The musical backdrops -- throbbing, hypnotic, techno-pulsing, trashily intense -- set the mood for Xark's beat-influenced, post-punk observations. It'll remind you of everything you hate about American politics and culture, but does it with a beat you can dance to. Check the web site for words and accompanying anims. Highlights: Global Warming Blues, Bomb Sniffing Dog Symbol, Weird Gleeps in the Shopping Mall, Denying People Medicine, In the Halls of Corporate Culture.

## **The Crayon Theatrical**

***Michael Homyk***

reviewed February 16, 1998

659 Natalie Lane, Lebanon, Ohio 45036

michael@erinet.com

<http://www.accroya.com/crayon/>



Michael Homyk's Crayon Theatrical is his first self-produced cassette, and it oozes with warm grooves. A mix of chorused guitars, wah-wah style effects, thick bass lines, and solid drum machine tracks. Homyk's vocals go down easy and remind me a lot of Phish, in its mellower moments. The melodies are polished, the songs tightly constructed. The production, for a DIY tape, is impressive, with lots of quirky studio tricks that keeps your attention piqued. The songs tend not to linger longer than they need to -- they get in, smoke the groove, and get out. One criticism -- all the songs tend toward the same tempo range. Also, there's only six songs; Homyk leaves me wishing for more.

## **Michael J. Bowman**

***C'mon Slacker***

reviewed February 16, 1998

Semper Lo-Fi Recordings

11 Orchard Street, Cold Spring, NY 10516

76365.400@compuserve.com

<http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/mjbowman>



Oh, the glories of 4-track lo-fi home taping! Michael J. Bowman's C'mon Slacker cassette has 20 songs that bristle with post-pop exuberance. Live drumming, catchy riffs, witty lyrics -- all the elements that make pop/rock worthwhile. The lead vocals are a bit thin (in a Neil Young kinda way) and buried in the mix more than I'd like, but aside from that they're endearingly cheesy. There's

always surprises in store here -- with lots of loose instrumental snatches inserted amongst the more tightly-crafted songs. This is the kind of music that you'll want to play again and again. His arrangements are extremely well crafted. There's so many highlights, it's hard to single out any songs. Guitar is surely the foremost instrument (both acoustic and electric), but the way Bowman incorporates energetic drumming, playful bass lines and rhythmic keyboard stabs prove just how multi-talented he is. His pop instincts are dead-on. C'mon Slacker will get your feet tapping, and your head nodding. You really get the sense of a creative genius at play in his own element. It reminds me of why I started DIY recording myself -- because it's so f\*cking fun! Highly recommended...

## Smoking Catapillar

### *Out of the Cocoon*

reviewed February 16, 1998

Catapillar Records, 2252 S. 17th Street,  
Tacoma, WA 98405

mailto:Catapill@Sprynet.com



Smoking Catapillar, a collaboration between Kevin Michael Cady and Brian Hutchison, is a CD of jokey, sometimes tasteless, irreverent, gutsy rock workouts. The more spicy, cynical dishes are set off by sobering insights into suicide, futility of war, mutability, & dead loved ones. Many of the songs tend to hit one sentiment/tone but don't develop their lyrical/melodic ideas much beyond that (which can be good or bad, depending on your perspective). The band confines itself to crunchy guitars most of the time, with occasional sidetrips into unplugged/acoustical and keyboard-based territory. Cady sings with lots of venom and passion, sometimes even too sincere when delivering a punch line, and his phrasing is sometimes forced. More memorable cuts include "The Pussy God" (a song you'd imagine Howard Stern appreciating); "Kennedy's Head," (sure to please conspiracy buffs); "Hitler is a Jerk" (an effective anti-fascist smear-job); "Communicate and Compromise" (a simple but catchy pop rocker); "The Ballad of Dorian Gray," (uncannily David Bowie-esque); "Before You're Gone" (an acoustic ballad, and the best crafted song on the album, IMHO).

## **Julie Ann Bailey**

### ***Words Keep Falling***

reviewed February 6, 1998

Soap Box Records, 317 Vincent, St. Croix Falls,  
Wisconsin 54024

<http://proudmama.com>



Minneapolis/St. Paul native Julie Ann Bailey has worked up a catchy collection of bright adult alternative pop songs. Julie's voice is akin to Rosanne Cash, especially on the title cut. Her backup musicians provide fine support and the songwriting is anything but amateurish, despite its DIY origins. Julie's songs flirt with a diverse set of styles, from acoustic-edged adult pop, to more keyboard-based compositions, and even some danceable tunes. The diversity keeps things interesting, even when not all the songs "work" as well as others. Highlights include the aforementioned title track; "Highway to You" with its infectious chorus of harmonies that had my two year old daughter swaying to the music; "Like a Fever", with its nice keyboard arrangement; "Say the Word", (pop love songwriting at its purest); and "I Can't Be Your Savior". Some of the lower points on the album are those songs that sound like warmed over 80's dance pop. But why quibble? This is a slickly produced, professional effort that holds a lot of promise for mainstream success.

## **High Risk**

### ***Fast & Cheap***

reviewed: January 30, 1998

High Risk, 325 E. Cook St., Portage, WI, 53901,  
[zamboni@palacenet.net](mailto:zamboni@palacenet.net),

<http://www.palacenet.net/home/zamboni>



High Risk's debut CD is a 10 song romp through straight-ahead guitar/bass/drums rock and roll turf. It's a mostly successful hybrid between grunge, punk, and hard rock. This is one road-tested band -- 7 years and over 700 gigs, and it shows. The musicianship is tight and

solid and the album has a live, jumpy feel. Sonically they're reminiscent of Cheap Trick, I think, while the song lyrics edge out into more punkish "in your face" sentiments. The album's last track is an instrumental medley -- probably the only time you're ever going to hear the Pink Panther Theme, Peter Gunn, Purple Haze, The Star Spangled Banner, and Yankee Doodle in the same song. Lots of energy and spunk here that makes for an entertaining listen.

## Ernesto Diaz-Infante

*itz'at*

reviewed: January 26, 1997

Pax Recordings, PO Box 697, Pacific Grove,  
CA, 93950

Price for CD is \$15 (includes shipping &  
handling).



A lovely sounding solo piano album. The music is meditative, introspective, searching. It's definitely on the minimalist/new age continuum, but to label it "new age" is to kinda sell it short. There's more dissonance here; Ernesto applies lots of pedal work, allowing harmonics and overtones to blend and ring. It's the kind of stuff that wouldn't go down well at your sister's sweet sixteen party, but perfect for moments of reflection -- rainy Sunday afternoons, or late at night, or any time you need to give your mind some space to think. Besides the obvious minimalist slant to the compositions, there are hints of Debussy, Ravel, and Satie too. For more info,

contact [itzat@earthlink.net](mailto:itzat@earthlink.net).

## **Bob Torres**

reviewed: January 19, 1998

website address: <http://www2.netcom.com/~tower17/torres.html>

This site contains about three songs from independent rock singer/songwriter Bob Torres. Classify this under hard rock, polished metal, and competent musicianship. Torres has some vintage rock idol pipes -- reminiscent of Robert Plant and that Guns 'n Roses guy..what was his name, Axl Rose? (Man did that dude ever fade into obscurity). The two songs featured are "Wings of Flame", a frantic speedy rocker; and "Rise" an uptempo power ballad with humph.



## Contributors

Jonathan Lowe's ([www.mirror.org/commerce/hmspress/lowe.html](http://www.mirror.org/commerce/hmspress/lowe.html)) book of stories "Snapshots—Tales of Mystery & Horror For People With Little Time To Kill" is at [www.mirror.org/commerce/hmspress/snap.html](http://www.mirror.org/commerce/hmspress/snap.html)

Ben Ohmart ([findline@aol.com](mailto:findline@aol.com))

Michael Williams, [Macbeth101@aol.com](mailto:Macbeth101@aol.com) [th101@aol.com](mailto:th101@aol.com) writes poetry or what passes as poetry because he can. He considers his poetry as some sort of fairy tale -- twisted beings, nonsense gods, and stegosaur saints populate his poems. Williams just graduated from college with an English degree and has left his plantation job of the last seven years. He has been previously published in Caliope, The Voice, Through Glass Darkly, Eclectica, Poetry Magazine, Galapagos Magazine, and Word Salad Magazine.

John Johnson's photography can be glimpsed at <http://www.cybermaze.com/graphics/tlog.html>

Paul Ford, ([ford@interactive.net](mailto:ford@interactive.net))







<http://www.keystonenet.com~jesch/osp/>