

**Start:**

*Cover Page. Upper panel: LEE's hands holding zine near title.*

Lover's Press

*Lower panel: CHAS's hand holding near issue number and blurb:*

#2: Our Editor Reveals A Scarlet Letter...Carved Upon His Heart!!!

*Shots of eyes of our protagonists, CHAS and LEE, over top of zine.*

*LEE is reading the zine in a window booth in a coffee shop named West Grand Coffee Den, leaning back against the glass with his feet up on the seat. It's night, and raining outside. He's drinking coffee. He has unkempt hair, and dresses in sweaters, collared shirts and slacks mostly. Show only LEE during this sequence (as opposed to illustrating the author of the article or the characters described therein, as will be shown later). Sometimes the words on the page should be shown, maybe when a new paragraph begins (→).*

→ Every great voice is entitled to one great disclosure, so here's my confession: I have loved too much.

Yes, too much. I was the one who believed love both solvent and solution, but I have found this to be untrue.

As the former I know love to be hopelessly wasteful and at best, inconsistent;

and the latter is plainly false. We stand as separate as billiard balls.

→ And yet love can feel very good; oh, very good. I know you believe that, and I wish that was all I had to tell you today.

But I think I have trembled as much as any of you, and the fact is that tremor will go away so soon, so soon after it comes, and then we're left with something else, something much more dependable, and it's worse than despair.

*REA enters diner from the rain. LEE thinks to himself,*

LEE: (This is bullshit.)

*The text continues:*

But the real horror is that the trembling doesn't just leave with love. It leaves before, and love is powerless to make it stay. Powerless as you or me.

The truth about love is that it's inadequate, not hard or malicious, but simply inadequate to fill us up with what we need to feel okay.

I used to pretend it could work; I'd pull it around me like a blanket that's too small and try to make the edges touch.

But close as it might come, there was never quite enough. My chilled insides would rage with entitlement the next day, and, like any good habit-forming substance, the more I'd had the more I knew I'd need the next time.

*REA by this point has been standing over LEE taking off her wet things for awhile. Finally he looks up.*

LEE: This is bullshit. Hey, hon.

*They kiss and she sits down.*

REA: Thhppbbt.

LEE: Oh yeah?

REA: Yeah.

LEE: So, work was good?

REA: Isn't it always?

*She starts to smoke.*

What's bullshit? What you're reading?

LEE: It's just some zine. There were a bunch of copies sitting around at the show last night.

*REA takes the zine and starts flipping through it.*

REA: Oh, how'd the show go?

LEE: It went.

REA: Did a lot of people show up?

LEE: Decent turnout. Twenty or so.

REA: Any cute girls?

LEE: Would you have come out if there were?

REA *looks up*.

REA: I'm sorry I couldn't, baby. I had to work, you know?

LEE: Yeah, I know.

*Pause.*

I got to go second, so everybody didn't bail before I went on. But I didn't get to play my whole set. They cut me off after twenty minutes.

REA: Oh, that's lame.

LEE: Yeah, it stinks, man. I mean, a lot of these kids I know are writing songs that are really short, or at least standard three-minute pop tune length. So maybe for them that kind of slot is enough time get in, shoot your load, and pull out...

REA: That's beautiful, dear.

LEE: But, you know, for what I'm trying to do; I'm trying to actually take my time, build something, make it meaningful. I can't necessarily fit that into a twenty minute sound bite of a set. I barely got through my fourth song.

REA: Oh, they didn't cut you off in the middle of a song, did they?

LEE: No, they didn't. Some guy started talking on his cell phone in the middle of it though.

REA: What an asshole.

LEE: Yeah, well, I guess it's to be expected, with this scene.

REA: Did you sell any CDs?

LEE: No. I traded with one of the other guys who played though.

REA: Oh, that's cool.

LEE: Eh. He was kind of a tool.

REA: Lee! Don't be a prick.

LEE: No, I'm sorry. He was very friendly. And he took an honest interest in my art, which is all I can ask of anyone.

He just had no talent is all.

REA: Lee!

LEE: I'm sorry! It's just that, you know, there's more ways to be personal than by playing shitty acoustic guitar. There's more to life than strumming open chords. We have enough songs in 4/4 and C Major now. Western civilization can move forward once again.

REA: And who knew that people kept writing new ones because it moved them?

Jesus.

LEE: I'm sorry.

REA: No, it's fine...

LEE: I wasn't trying to be arrogant.

REA: I just didn't need you busting my ass right after work.

LEE: I wasn't trying to bust your ass, Rea, I was just talking...

REA: It's fine. But believe me, you should be glad that when you go to work, if that's what playing a show is for you, the worst thing that people do is talk on the phone when they're supposed to be paying attention to you. That's the least I can expect.

LEE: Yeah, no, I know. So what did they put you through today?

REA: This fucking guy...he kept motioning with his fingers to lean down so he could whisper in my ear.

LEE: Gross.

REA: Well, and of course, I know they're trying to look down my shirt. Of course, I'm a waitress. But this guy's getting drunk, and at some point he decides it's a good idea to start trying slip dollar bills into my shirt.

LEE: What a fucking asshole!

REA: And I'd shove his hand away, and tell him he needed to fucking stop it, but he wouldn't. He kept on.

LEE: What an ignorant, misogynistic...

REA: You can stick to 'fucking asshole', that's fine.

LEE: Well, I'm just saying that...okay, well, what a fucking asshole, then.

REA: Thank you.

*They sit in silence for a few moments. REA picks up Lover's Press and studies it again.*

So what is this, even? 'Lover's Press'? Is this for real?

LEE: I don't know. I'd never seen it before.

REA: Who does it?

*LEE takes it from her and looks it over.*

LEE: It looks like it's anonymous.

REA: Issue #2.

LEE: A series. Wonderful.

REA: Why'd you say it was bullshit?

LEE: Oh, just because the guy sounds like sort of a tool.

REA: Lee. I'm going to ask you to exercise more of your college-educated vocabulary than you have demonstrated thus far this evening.

LEE: Oh, Christ, Rea.

REA: I'm sorry, baby, it's just that everyone at the show couldn't have *all* been tools.

LEE: I just didn't like the way the guy wrote. I didn't like his voice.

REA: You read it?

LEE: No, just the beginning. But you know, he's just talking about love, and how love failed him, but he was such a great lover in his day, so if he fell off then obviously it can't work out for anyone else either. It's so patronizing, like whoever wrote this knows everything there is to know about love.

REA: And you do?

LEE: No, goddamnit, you know that's not what I mean. But I know something about it. I probably know more than this—how old do you figure the author is? eighteen? twenty? —I probably know more about love than this...

*REA looks at LEE intently.*

LEE: ...cock monster.

REA: Good save.

LEE: I know enough not to give up on it yet.

REA: Oh, sweetie.

*They kiss.*

LEE: I did only read the beginning. I suppose it wouldn't hurt my credibility to read the whole thing before talking a lot of shit.

REA: You've had worse ideas.

*They behold the zine another time. Transition to CHAS looking disdainfully yet intently at same issue on a table in the club, the Radio Lounge. He is in the middle of setting up for a show. He dresses primarily in tight jeans and beaters or other shirts that show off his guns, and sports piercings, tattoos and some kind of audacious hairstyle. ROBBY and KIRK, his bandmates, are carrying a Marshall Stack. ZEB, the old sound guy, is patching cords behind a mixer.*

CHAS: Fucking New-Romantic bullshit.

KIRK: Chas! What the fuck are you doing?

ROBBY: Help us lift this stack, you fucking woman!

CHAS: Fuck you guys, I'll lift it my goddamn self.

*He carries the stack onto the stage.*

Weak-ass motherfuckers.

KIRK: Now, Robby, I think if you take a close look at the tape here, you can see right when Johnston stepped on the stage, his balls swelled ever so slightly with manly pride. Unless that was just a hernia.

ROBBY: Actually, Kirk, I think you're mistaken this time. I think this particular swelling can be attributed to the last two weeks' worth of nut our star hasn't been having any luck in getting rid of.

ZEB: Chas, what's this the boys've been tellin' me, 'bout this broad you've been seeing? They say she's some sort of Feminazi.

CHAS: Zeb, you're my elder, my friend, and a damn fine engineer. I hold you in the highest esteem. But I *will* feed you your balls if I have to.

ZEB: Okay, big boy, easy.

CHAS: Just don't make me have to, Pops.

*The shot should show that all four of them are on one side of the bar, a humorless, burly barmaid being the only person on the other side.*

ZEB: Fine. And don't make *me* remind *you* who's got the biggest dick this side of the wet bar.

AND: And would that be me?

*AND walks up and kisses CHAS. She dresses considerably more punky and less traditionally feminine than REA, though REA is not necessarily 'girly', nor is AND necessarily 'dykey'. Not that it'd be a problem if they were.*

This one's 6'1" [adjust for actor's height]. And it's all mine. What do I win?

CHAS: And, this is Zeb. Zeb, this is my girlf—this is And.

ZEB: A pleasure, miss.

AND: Likewise. Chas, can I borrow your car?

CHAS: Ha. Now how did I know that you weren't here for the show?

AND: Because I've told you repeatedly that I'm not interested in your hypermasculinized display of aggression, and besides, you knew I had to work tonight.

CHAS: So I did. But what do you need the car for?

AND: I gotta move the last of the stuff from the clinic in Shrewsbury.

*He hands her the keys.*

CHAS: Take 'em.

KIRK: You know, Annie, I don't think you give your man here enough credit.

AND: Oh no?

KIRK: No, I don't think you do. Now I know when you see one of our shows, maybe you see a bunch of stinky dudes—men—having a good time, acting kind of rowdy—

AND: 'Violent' is the word I'd use—

KIRK: —but if you listen a little closer—if you can understand him—Chas sings about some pretty sensitive stuff. Feelings and stuff. Chick shit.

CHAS: Don't be an asshole, Kirk.

ROBBY: Yeah, you know, right before you walked in, we caught him reading—what's that shit called? *The Lover's Times*?

*CHAS starts to wrestle with ROBBY and KIRK as they goad him.*

CHAS: I was not even fucking reading that soft shit, dickbrain!

KIRK: Yeah, and your band in high school? What was the name?

ROBBY: The Velveteens!

*Though he makes a noble effort and at times puts one or the other of his opponents in a compromising position, eventually CHAS is wrestled to the ground on his stomach.*

KIRK: I don't know, little rabbit. I'd be hard pressed to think of anything softer than that tuft of white cotton that sits right above your cute bunny butt.

*CHAS attempts to kick backwards at them.*

ROBBY: The fact is, Andrea, he wouldn't be our Chas if he weren't a little bit of a pussy.

*CHAS struggles to get up, to no avail.*

CHAS: Your mom's a pussy, you fucking bitch!

KIRK: Hell, that's half of why we keep him around. Pussy is harder to come by these days. They're not putting them out like they used to.

AND: Chas, I'm leaving.

*CHAS is still struggling.*

CHAS: Okay...And...you'll bring the car back, right? I need it after the show.

*She's walking away.*

And?

ROBBY: Hey, don't forget your pitchfork. Loading that dumpster up can be real hard on the back after a busy day.

AND: Give me as much shit as you want, Robert. But I know that place has saved your ass as many times as any of our women patients.

ROBBY: And how.

AND: See you later, dicks.

*CHAS finally gets free, gives KIRK a shove, then looks to the doorway AND has just left by.*

KIRK: I like her.

ROBBY: She's fun.

CHAS: Huh.

ROBBY: What, is she mad, really?

CHAS: Never mind.

KIRK: Ah, forget about it, man.

CHAS: It's forgotten.

ZEB: Kid, I tell you what; I've seen a lot of women, through my years. And much as they change, change the way they dress, the way they walk, the way they talk...that's still just like a woman, to act like that.

CHAS: Zeb, that's ignorant.

ZEB: No, kid, you're the one that's ignorant. Know how many women I've known? Plenty. Know how much pussy I've gotten? Plenty, son. The Boy Scouts of America gave me a merit badge.

KIRK: Sorry, bro. Zeb's a vet.

ZEB: Now don't take this wrong, okay? Don't get offended. You think I hate women. Wrong. I love women, Chas. Love 'em like the day is long. And they wouldn't be women if they didn't act that way, sometimes.

But then sometimes, you gotta look inside, see if this is what you need.

CHAS: What are you trying to say, Zeb?

ZEB: You've been seeing this broa—what's her name?

CHAS: And.

ZEB: Ann?

CHAS: No, And. Like the word, and. The first three letters of Andrea.

ZEB: Right. Whatever. You've been seeing her for awhile now.

CHAS: Four months.

ZEB: Alright, that's awhile now. Boys've told me a lot about her, and now I just seen her in action. So you got to have a sense of the waters by now, kid.

CHAS: The water's fine, Zeb. It's fine for me.

ZEB: Chas—you want a girl who looks like that? Fine. You want a girl who talks like that, thinks like that, go ahead. But that girl—she ain't even like you, son. She don't even treat you nice. There's something we say in engineering, Chas, sometimes we say it's like you're polishing a turd.

*Pause.*

CHAS: Elaborate.

ZEB: We used to say it about recording disco tracks. Band'd come in, and we'd take hours just tuning the drums, getting 'em sounding crisp, then spend hours miking 'em, then spend hours mikin' the amps...

...then do takes, dubs, and then we'd work on the track, getting the EQ just right, the reverb just right, everything would be just right. And then we'd be done, and you know what we'd have?

CHAS: A polished turd.

ZEB: A brand spankin' new, shiny, sparkly, polished turd. That's right. D'you understand what I'm saying?

CHAS: Yes. My girlfriend's a turd. I know. I'm into it.

ZEB: You're a little asshole, you know that, kid?

*CHAS punches ROBBY on the arm.*

CHAS: No, Zeb, I'm a pussy. There *is* a difference.

*Walking towards the bathroom.*

By the way, Robby, I plan on wanking all up and down this stage tonight. Expect two weeks worth of nut decorating your bass *and* your face before the set is through.

*Cut to shots of CHAS, ROBBY and KIRK rocking out fiercely and kids (almost exclusively males) slam dancing in the pit. Be sure to include at least a few shots of CHAS screaming and 'wanking' (figuratively, of course). After a few wordless panels, start to layer in Lover's Press #3.*

*Shot of some kid in the audience clobbering another.*

→ You mustn't think I've been abused, either.

Of course there's been hurt, but I've had wonderful lovers. Pure, fresh hearts, blooming souls that could really give everything. Yes, I've had many, but need to tell you only of a few to say what I mean. Of course you won't believe me.

The summer before I left my hometown I had one. Oh, and I had her. You can't tell me I didn't.

*Shot from the same angle as the last, except club is empty, or maybe has art or a film screening. It's the cover of Lover's Press #3.*

Experts Say Summer Loving Continues To Happen Fast

*The pictures are now following the article's story, depicting new nameless characters as necessary.*

I was working at a little club at Northwest and Magnolia. We had mostly punk shows, sometimes the odd art display or local film screening.

*Maybe one of these shots shows ZEB as a younger man, though this is just an imagined scene and not necessarily what any of it actually looked like.*

One night there was this three-piece noise group I was setting up.

Their faces were tough and pitted, and they had crests on their heads, but not from gel or any other artificial agent, just experience, and self-assurance.

They had been at it since the eighties, and came out looking like war veterans, or some crazy birds of paradise.

→ Look, I'll get to it. She stuck her head in the door like a reptile and then she walked in like she owned the place.

I tried to assert myself—this was my club—but she knew everyone who came to the show.

So when we watched the band, I stood next to her with a crowd that was no one but her surrounding me.

And when I looked at her a sine wave became my thought.

And then she looked at me and a drum machine throbbed, a pulse not at all like my heart. But maybe like hers; I wouldn't know.

The next day we tried to be fashionable and grab coffee, but West Grand was closed; so instead, I took her back to the now empty club and we made out on the shallow stage. We made out like bandits.

A night after that we sat on my trunk and saw stars.

I explained to her that *they* were responsible for our alienation, human insecurity, but through love we could remember ourselves, we could make amends. But it was on us; Nature wouldn't apologize, no matter how we killed her. She started it, too; she let us know what we are.

A day after that, she (the girl) offered to go down on me. After I told her that I wanted our actions to mean something she never treated me like I meant anything at all.

You'll want to tell me that I didn't, but the truth is that she knew as much meaning as she could pour into me, it would somehow never be enough.

So, she scooted out on the same horse she rode in on, but once away down the road the bandit looked in her sack and found only lead. Someone cheated me, too.

*Cut to shot of LEE and REA driving at night.*

LEE: You know, I talked to Bob today.

REA: Bob...?

LEE: Bob Fuller, my best friend in high school Bob?

REA: Oh, Bob...I didn't know you two still talked. So what's up with him?

LEE: He's still out in L.A. He's going to be in town this weekend, though.

REA: Is he doing well?

LEE: Yeah, seemed like. He said he was playing in a group now, they play like a hardcore, slash surf, slash math kind of thing.

*Shot of BOB, KIRK and GUITARIST (neither of whom LEE knows) rocking out, not unlike the shots of ROBBY, KIRK and CHAS.*

REA: Whoa.

LEE: Yeah, that's what he said, anyway.

REA: He went to that after being in the Velvetens with you?

LEE: No, no...you're not getting my history right at all tonight, hon.

REA: Baby, I'm sorry, I hardly even knew you in high school.

LEE: Well, Bob didn't start playing bass until later, after the Velvetens broke up. And we didn't even really start playing together until like the summer before I went to school.

REA: So what was the band you had with Bob called?

LEE: We didn't have a name. It wasn't even really a band. It was just me and him jamming with whoever was around. It was kind of a joke.

REA: You mean you *meant* it as a joke, or it *was* a joke?

LEE: Both.

REA: So what was so good about it that you almost didn't go to college?

LEE: I don't know, really. Just a lot of fun, I guess. And I think I was impatient too. I just wanted to *do* music, you know, not bother with sitting down and trying to learn it. Is this it up here?

REA: Yeah, I think so.

*They pull into the parking lot of a hip bar called The Muse and get out of the car.*

LEE: What's the name of your friend we're supposed to meet?

REA: Joel. And his new girlfriend, I think her name is...shit, I can't remember. Sylvia, maybe?

*They enter the bar. It's really crowded and noisy. REA skims the crowd for a few moments.*

REA: I don't see them yet. Do you want to find a table, and I can go get us a bucket?

LEE: Sure.

*LEE finds a booth pretty far from the entrance or the bar. Lover's Press #4 sits on the table. JOEL and CELIA enter, looking like a couple. JOEL is not particularly masculine. CELIA sees LEE across the room, but he doesn't see her.*

JOEL: Ce, I've got to use the bathroom. I don't see her here yet.

CELIA: Okay. I'm going to go say hi to someone.

*He heads off, CELIA starts to worm through the crowd towards LEE. She stops short of coming too close, though, looking somewhat tentative. After a few moments, he looks up, sees her and smiles slowly but warmly. She comes closer.*

CELIA: Hi.

LEE: Hi...

CELIA: You're Lie Johnston, right?

LEE: Um, yeah. Lee, actually.

CELIA: Lee? I'm sorry.

LEE: No worries. Do I know you from somewhere?

CELIA: No, I don't know. I've seen you around a few times. Do you play at the Radio Lounge ever?

LEE: Yeah, sometimes. Are you there a lot?

CELIA: I haven't been out in awhile, but I think I saw you perform once.

LEE: That's cool. Thanks for coming out, even if it wasn't to see me.

CELIA: I remembered liking your set though.

LEE: Oh, thank you. Um, did I get your name...?

CELIA: No, you didn't. It's Celia.

*They shake hands.*

LEE: Pleased to meet you.

*Pause.*

Do you want to sit down?

CELIA: Oh, I'm actually...well, sure.

LEE: You sure?

CELIA: Yes. Certain.

*She sits opposite him, then peers at the Lover's Press issue on the table.*

Oh, this.

LEE: Yeah, do you know it?

CELIA: Oh, no...is this yours?

LEE: No, no, it was just sitting here when I got here. It's not mine.

What were you going to say?

CELIA: Well, I...nothing. Nothing nice.

LEE: No, me either.

CELIA: What were you going to say?

LEE: I just, I read a different issue of it the other day, and I thought it was pretty destitute, artistically.

CELIA: Yeah?

LEE: Yeah, I mean, I guess the voice was alright, and the style was alright...but there was no substance, you know? No meat on the bones. No direction.

CELIA: Yeah...

LEE: So all of the actual meaning ended up being pretty trite, and so then the voice and the style became pretentious...and triteness and pretension, one or the other can be tolerable, and sometimes even desirable. But they make foul bedfellows.

CELIA: Yeah.

LEE: Is that what you were going to say?

CELIA: No. Not quite. But I liked that you said it.

LEE: What *were* you going to say?

CELIA: I just...I think the voice in it is really very traditional, in a lot of ways.

LEE: What do you mean by traditional?

CELIA: I mean...I've read only a couple of these, but the voice has always seemed to be...very much a male's voice, a male narrator, talking about love, and I feel like the romantic lover-hero type has always, or usually been male.

Maybe in a lot of ways this type is different from other...models of traditional masculinity, but I still feel like there's so much...authority behind that viewpoint.

And all the while when he's talking about how sensitive he is and how much pain he's felt in his experiences, all the women in it become sort of criminalized, they're portrayed as being really insensitive and hurtful, and it doesn't seem quite fair, or accurate...or maybe it's just that it doesn't speak to me...

*Pause.*

That's just how it seemed to me though.

LEE: Yeah, no, I can see that.

CELIA: I've only read a few of them.

LEE: No, I guess I never picked up on that before, but...that's totally legitimate, for you to feel that way.

*REA walks up with a bucket of beers. Through the rest of the scene, people drink them.*

REA: Got these beers.

LEE: Rea, this is Celia. She saw one of my shows. Celia, Re—

REA: Celia. Are you Joel's—do you know Joel?

CELIA: Yeah, I came here with—you're Rea.

REA: Yeah. It's nice to finally meet you!

*They hug. LEE looks confused/estranged. REA sits on the side of the booth with CELIA.*

LEE: Oh, so you're Joel's—you know Joel.

CELIA: Yeah, do you know Joel too?

LEE: No, actually...no. Unless...did I ever meet him?

REA: No.

LEE: Then no.

REA: Celia, so...how long have you known Joel?

CELIA: We met when, I guess it was about three months ago, he came to a reading I did. Three or four months ago.

REA: Oh, what kind of reading was it?

CELIA: I read stories, at the one he came to.

LEE: Oh, I didn't...know you wrote.

CELIA: Yeah.

REA: So, what do you do? Do you work, or go to school, or what?

*LEE makes eye contact with JOEL across the room, makes some terse, masculine acknowledgement, like a nod. JOEL, of course, sees CELIA and REA, and moves toward the booth. LEE, not knowing who he is, unwittingly makes eye contact a few more times as JOEL gets closer, and each time is a little awkward.*

CELIA: I went to the Institute for almost four years, but I stopped before I graduated. I've just been doing my work study job and writing for a little while. Taking a little break.

REA: Yeah, I finished up last spring, but I've just been treading water with this boy, until we figure out where we're going to go next.

So I guess I've been on a break too. I just work a lot, trying to save money for wherever we set up.

CELIA: Oh, but that's exciting. Do you have any idea where you're going to go yet?

REA: Well, we were thinking about a couple—

*JOEL walks up.*

JOEL: Hi, Andrea.

*REA hugs him.*

REA: Oh, Joel! Hi! It's good to see you!

LEE: (Andrea?)

JOEL: It's good to see you, Dre. I see you guys found each other without my help.

REA: Oh, yeah—we were just talking about how you two—

JOEL: I'm Joel, by the way.

*Shakes hands with LEE.*

LEE: Lee. It's good to meet you.

JOEL: I've heard a lot about you from Andrea.

CELIA: Yeah, did you know, Joel, I saw him play once. At the Radio.

JOEL: Oh, what do you play?

LEE: Uh, guitar. And I sing. Sort of.

*JOEL sits down next to LEE. CELIA and REA continue talking in the background.*

JOEL: Do you have a band?

LEE: No, not right now. The past few years I've been mostly just playing solo shows. Just my songs.

JOEL: Right on. I used to have a band, couple years ago, we played at the Radio Lounge a lot.

LEE: Oh, yeah? What kind of group was it? What's your instrument?

JOEL: I'm a violist, actually. It was one of those slow rock, droning, lots of feedback, jamming kind of deals. It was me, and a guitar, upright bass, and percussion.

LEE: Sounds pretty cool. Viola's a neat instrument.

JOEL: Yeah, I mean, it wasn't anything special, just pretty-sounding noise, but it was fun to play, and people usually seemed to like just hanging out while we played.

LEE: You know, and that's the thing. A band is really special, because you don't doubt that what you're doing is worthwhile. Because if everybody in the group is feeling it, you can all tell, you know? And usually an audience can too. I miss that.

JOEL: I'd like to hear your stuff sometime. Do you play out often?

LEE: Well, I'm playing at Radio again this weekend. That's about the only place that kept giving me gigs when I was always out of town for school. Well, and Galactic, but they're fascists. What about you, are you in a band?

JOEL: No, I haven't done music for awhile now. Mostly sticking to art these days.

*REA and CELIA's conversation fades back in.*

CELIA: —think you should really look into it, though, because you're totally qualified for one of those paid intern positions. You said your major was Sociology?

REA: Anthropology.

CELIA: Yeah, no, that's really good. And the fact that you've worked in education and public service is really good too. But I know the clinic really needs people, and I think you'd find it really rewarding.

REA: Yeah, I bet I would. God, I know I would. Shit, to actually be helping women get a handle on their lives, instead of just these assholes day in and day out, that sounds amazing.

I swear—today there was this joker who tried to put his hand up my skirt—

LEE: Baby, I'm telling you, you've got to quit that job. It's degrading, I keep telling you that.

REA: And do what, Lee? How am I supposed to earn money?

LEE: That clinic you were just talking about, that sounds really good. And actually like really important work to be done—

REA: And it doesn't pay as well either, Lee. And not exactly the kind of job you can just leave if we move somewhere like you keep talking about. So unless I'm going to be a stripper, or a prostitute, I don't know how else you expect me to make—

LEE: Rea, that's ignorant. Don't do that.

REA: Don't do what?

LEE: Don't go off on sex workers. It's really judgmental, and you don't have any idea what their world is like.

*REA stares at him resentfully, thinks to herself:*

REA: (You hypocrite.)

*LEE's previous feeling of righteousness impairs him from responding with much more than a puzzled look back.*

CELIA: Anyway, all I was saying, Rea, is that there are openings, if you're interested. If it's something you think you would like doing.

REA: No, it sounds great. I would really like it.

CELIA: And I've been doing stuff there for years now, so I could totally recommend you.

REA: I'll definitely think about it.

JOEL: Speaking of things to think about, or maybe things to not think about and just do—you should not think about and just come to our party Thursday night.

REA: Oh—your new place, right?

JOEL: Well, her new place, really.

CELIA: My new place. Across the hall from his old place.

REA: So, what, is this like a halfway house, before you guys actually move in together?

CELIA: Well...no. I mean, it made sense...my lease was up, and the rent there was cheap, and it was a nice space...

REA: Uh huh. Yeah, we'll definitely be there, right, Lee?

LEE: Yeah. Absolutely.

*Overhead shot of table with Lover's Press #4 in center.*

Love Is The New Oxygen

→ Look, maybe that's a bad example.

I could tell you about high school and keeping track of how long you stayed on the phone with a girl like it was some fantastic tantric act (ten hours. one and one half spent asleep.)

Do you know what it feels like, to actually have your dream come to you, in the flesh?

I suppose it happens at least once to everybody, but that's the stuff that makes folks believe in gods. I believed in something.

No mention, of course, of the friend I destroyed: a mate, really, is what I would have called him,

and we spent our nights aching something fierce for The Woman, that drug we had never tried but were already addicts to,

and then we'd recess to talk tensely of fluidity, companionship, and the extensions of affection,

and even when we ached again, it was with such sympathy that our hearts were the same.

No, all that is peripheral. Against all odds love prevailed.

That night when she let me know that we were in the same place, I remember that.

My head was on fire and it was more imperative to get the words out than the oxygen in,

*The "I love you! I love you!" should overlap the narrator's text and the word bubble of the illustration.*

but like breath each one only sufficed for as long as it lasted. I love you! I love you! I remember that.

Let me tell you, I have known such potency, moments as heady as sunshine; but as transient too. Two months, two weeks, and she was gone.

I used to dream that I'd see them on the road, all of them, and point back towards the horizon which spawned us. There, I'd say. Back there. What the fuck was that?

I know better now. I know everything pulls apart on its own, no matter how much it might've melted and mixed, like disengaging lovers as their parts cool and relax, like the slick of life itself if left alone.

*Cut to shot of CHAS getting dropped off at apartment building. He goes in, climbs the stairs, enters AND's apartment with his own key, and heads to the bedroom.*

CHAS: And?

And? You asleep?

AND: No.

CHAS: Okay.

AND: I'm sorry I didn't bring the car back.

CHAS: It's okay.

AND: I ended up having to stay and do a lot more work than I planned though.

CHAS: It's okay. Zeb said I could leave my stuff at the Lounge overnight. I'll just get it tomorrow.

AND: Do you know why I left?

CHAS: Yes. I think. You hate my friends.

AND: No, Chas. I like your friends.

CHAS: That's not quite true, And.

AND: No, it's not. But I can tell how close you all are. I want to like them, and I want them to like me. But they don't seem at all interested in that.

CHAS: They *do* like you. They think you're funny, and smart too.

AND: And that's why they have to attack me and what I care about every time I see them?

CHAS: Exactly. You threaten them.

AND: Come on.

CHAS: You walked in right in the middle of a biggest-dick-this-side-of-the...contest, and stole it right out from under them. That's threatening.

AND: You guys are competing for dominance every time I see you, and I don't even care about that. If that makes you happy, then go ahead and do it. I was just teasing.

CHAS: They know that, And.

AND: I know they know that. And that's why it's ridiculous for them to start saying ignorant things just to try to offend me. That's bullshit, and I shouldn't have to be around it.

CHAS: I'm sorry, And. I tried to get them to stop.

AND: What, by fighting them? You weren't doing that for me, Chas. You were defending yourself, because they were insulting you. And what kind of absurd chivalrous gesture would that be anyway?

*Pause.*

CHAS: Well, I'm sorry if it wasn't the most thoughtful response. But I hope you'll believe that I was thinking for your sake.

AND: I do believe that. But none of this is what I was really upset about.

CHAS: Then what was it?

AND: It was when Robby said, "we wouldn't like Chas if he wasn't such a pussy".

*Pause.*

CHAS: And then I said, "your mom's a pussy".

AND: I believe the full quote was, "your mom's a pussy, you fucking bitch."

CHAS: I'm sorry, And.

AND: I can take a lot of shit from your friends, Chas, but I can't stand to hear that from you.

CHAS: I usually don't say those things. You know that. I was just...

...defending myself.

AND: Chas, look...I'm not trying to reduce what you did to incriminate you in some...'paradigm of misogynistic behavioral programming', or some shit like that. You're my lover, and I know you better than that. I know that you did what you did because you wanted to do the right thing and stick up for me.

But if you really want to do right by me, really—as your lover, as a woman, as your equal

---

CHAS: You know I do.

AND: I mean, if you really believe in what I'm fighting for—if you're willing to fight for it by my side, on my terms—

CHAS: You know I am, And.

AND: Then I need you to push your boundaries.

I need you to stand up to your male friends in a way that challenges them. *Really* challenges them, in their lives, not just in this arena of masculine competition. *Really* makes them defend their actions, in the long term, not just in a routine scrimmage that will be forgotten by the end of the day.

CHAS: I really try, And. I do.

AND: Just promise me you won't give up on it, okay?

CHAS: Okay. I promise you.

AND: Thank you.

CHAS: I'm sorry it's not always easy for me to do on my own.

AND: Don't apologize anymore, Chas. Come to bed.

*CHAS gets undressed, crawls behind AND, spooning her. Then, after a moment:*

Do you really think I don't give you enough credit?

CHAS: Kirk said that, not me.

AND: I know. But do you think that?

CHAS: Well...

AND: You do.

CHAS: No. Not exactly. I know you put up with a lot of bullshit, with my friends. And I know I should be better by now at getting them to lay the fuck off.

But I guess it doesn't always reflect that I really do try hard, to stop them.

AND: I know you try hard, Chas. You don't know how much I appreciate that, every day.

I know how sincere your morality is. I know how capable you are of critical thought. I know how willing you are to consider the ethics of everything you do in life.

I get shit from my feminist friends for being with a man, period, let alone one who exhibits, on the surface at least, a lot of conventional masculinity. Believe me, I wouldn't be with you if I didn't know you to be as honest and as brave as you are.

CHAS: Okay, now as long as we're talking about getting shit from each other's friends...

AND: I didn't mean it like that. They're really just kidding.

CHAS: Yeah, but...are they?

AND: They are. Trust me. You want me to believe that your friends like me, don't you?

CHAS: And, it's a fact. They do.

AND: And mine like you.

CHAS: But they still don't like that you're with a guy.

AND: They don't hold that against you. They still think you're swell. I'm sure if any of them liked dick even a little bit they'd be all over yours before any other.

CHAS: Well, shucks. I guess I'll take your word for it then.

AND: You know, none of them chose their sexual identity based on their politics. It's just the other way around. They loved who they loved and fucked who they wanted to fuck, and then tried to make a place in the world for themselves.

That's where politics come from, for everyone really; just trying to find a place. But when your place falls on the margins of society, for a lot of people every part of your sense of self and your lifestyle necessarily become part of your struggle. Just living as you wish to in a world that won't tolerate it is a radical act. But it wouldn't be a means if it weren't an end first.

CHAS: So they don't think you have to crave cunt to be a feminist?

AND: No. They don't.

CHAS: All the same, I'm sorry I can't give you a relationship that will prepare you for the revolution.

AND: Well, we'll just have to figure out a way to be radical within the constraints of our heterosexual monogamous one.

*CHAS begins kissing AND on the neck. Throughout the rest of the scene, alternate shots of AND's face close up and CHAS's.*

CHAS: Okay. How do we do that?

AND: We have to start by divorcing ourselves from the historical implications of monogamy.

*CHAS is kissing AND's shoulder.*

CHAS: An arm of the patriarchy.

AND: Exactly. An institution that confers ownership of women to men.

*He is kissing her back/side behind her armpit.*

CHAS: The most heinous of property crimes.

AND: And has also condemned generations of womankind to servitude and subordination.

*He is further down her side.*

CHAS: A sure sign that a society has failed its species.

AND: A woman is the permanent sole proprietor of her body. She is born with it as her only belonging and retains it until her return to the earth.

*He is at her waist.*

CHAS: It's my privilege even to behold.

AND: There must be no unwilling obligation in our radical relationship. Any service that I, a woman, offer to you, a man, must give me pleasure first and equally.

*He is kissing below her belly button, looking up at her.*

CHAS: May I derive no pleasure otherwise.

AND: Furthermore, no service you offer me, however valuable, shall entitle you the aforementioned body or deeds...oh.

*Pause.*

Mm.

*From outside of panel.*

CHAS: Go on, I'm still listening...

AND: What I mean, Chas...is just that...being able to make me come, doesn't make me your trophy...and it doesn't mean I owe you anything...

CHAS: It's my pleasure, first...

...and equally...

AND: Mm.

*A few wordless panels of AND's face; first expressions of pleasure, then contemplation. Then, suddenly and clearly:*

It doesn't mean that men make better lovers for women, either.

*CHAS seems somewhat surprised, looks up and wipes his mouth.*

CHAS: Nobody said that it did.

AND: Well, you know, a lot of people have this attitude, like "nothing gets a girl off like a good deep dickin'..."

*He pulls back up to her level, putting the lovin' on pause.*

CHAS: I never said that. I let you be the judge of that.

AND: Well, that's just me. But nothing a strap-on won't do the trick for, for my friends.

CHAS: Whatever works for them, then.

AND: But there *are* things about a woman's body that no man will ever know as well as another woman.

CHAS: Is that so?

AND: That is so.

CHAS: Then what is it?

AND: What is what?

CHAS: If it's not the dick and it's not any particular talent, then why do you like men? Why not women?

*She thinks for a moment.*

AND: Well, of course I could never completely explain that.

CHAS: Okay.

AND: But...maybe it is the unfamiliarity of the hand that touches you. Knowing that there's things about you, secrets your body has, that there's no way they could know, even if you told them. But letting them try to find them anyway.

*She re-initiates sexual contact.*

And then the other way, too, in this body in front of me, so unlike my own. Maybe it's also the thrill of trying to find secrets like that myself.

CHAS: And...

*Sequence of wordless shots of CHAS and AND making love. It's passionate and righteous. Segue somehow to LEE and REA immediately post-coitus.*

LEE: So...did you...?

REA: Mm?

LEE: Did you come?

REA: Uh. Uh huh.

LEE: I'm sorry, I finished sooner than I thought I—

REA: Lee. Shh.

LEE: Right. Sorry.

*A few moments pass.*

REA: How come you always do that?

LEE: I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to spoil the moment.

REA: No, it's not a big deal or anything. It's just—baby, you've been making me come for over three years. I figured you'd be able to tell by now.

LEE: Yeah, I mean, I can. Sort of. I don't always know.

REA: You know I don't believe in faking, especially not with anyone I'm fucking for any extended period of time. Meaning you.

LEE: I just want to make sure everyone is having a good time is all.

REA: Well Lee, I don't have to get off to enjoy myself. I like just being intimate with you, and pleasuring you.

LEE: Yeah, I know, but...equity is really important to me. You know that. I think that's an important part of any relationship.

REA: I know you do.

LEE: Maybe it sounds really formal and weird, but I feel a lot of sense of responsibility, to know that both parties are getting their needs met.

REA: Are you sure it's not just that you want to be able to say you made me come?

LEE: There are guys out there, Rea, who don't give a shit if you get yours or not.

REA: Don't be one of those guys.

LEE: I never wanted to be.

REA: You don't have to threaten me though. I was just busting your balls.

LEE: I know. So was I.

REA: Busting my balls?

LEE: Sure. You liked it, right?

REA: Mm-hmm. I always forget I just need to get you drunk if I want you to put out.

LEE: It is not even like that, Rea.

REA: I know, it's not.

LEE: Just because I'm not turned on as frequently as you are, it doesn't mean I need some artificial input to be intimate.

REA: No, I know. But it can make the flow of things a little less awkward. And not just sex either.

LEE: I gather that's why most people do it.

REA: For example, after you and Joel got a few in you, you were fast friends.

LEE: Well, we had some interests in common, so we had enough to talk about.

REA: Lee, I think your slow dance slash harmonized duet on "Tequila Sunrise" constitutes a little more than enough to talk about.

*Shot of LEE and JOEL in each other's arms, singing, maybe also with sheet music showing the harmony.*

LEE and JOEL: "...wonder why the right words never come..."

*Back to present scene.*

REA: You don't even like the Eagles.

LEE: I said he seemed like a good guy.

REA: Yeah, he is. We've been through a lot together.

LEE: You know him from art camp?

REA: Yeah, though he was only there my first year. He was really just above their level. They had nothing to teach him.

LEE: Hot shit, huh?

REA: For sure. And he wasn't just a natural at visual stuff, either. He was really a great fiddle player, and he dabbled in poetry too, wrote some really good stuff. Very creative, all around.

LEE: Huh.

REA: Yeah...God, there was a long time when he was the main person, who I talked to about everything. All through high school, when I was depressed and all fucked up. Jesus.

LEE: So why didn't I ever meet him before?

REA: Oh, I don't know, I mean, we stopped talking as much when I left for school. I didn't even know he went to the Institute right here in town until like our third year. Still, it was really good to see him again, finally.

LEE: Yeah.

REA: Good to know someone's still doing art, anyway.

LEE: Baby, don't say it like that. You still do stuff sometimes too.

REA: But not like Joel does. Not selling in venues all over the city. Not supporting myself with it *and* having a really bold voice that actually gets people's attention.

LEE: That's two of us, then.

REA: Anyway, I'm really happy for him. Also because he finally met someone.

LEE: Oh, yeah. She was really cool.

REA: You hardly talked to her, Lee.

LEE: Well, she seemed like a sweet person.

REA: What is that?

LEE: What is what?

REA: I introduce you to one of my closest, old good friends, you guys get along great, but I have to pull teeth to get you to admit that you like him. You also meet his girlfriend, who you hardly talk to, but you take to her in a second.

LEE: Hey, look, I talked to Celia for like five minutes before you got to the table. And she'd seen me play before, so we sort of knew each other like that.

REA: But this isn't the first time you've been like this. Anytime you meet one of my friends, if it's a guy, you're brusque and aloof. But if it's one of my girl friends, then you're all outgoing and affectionate.

LEE: I don't know what to tell you, Rea. I try to get along with all your friends, and I do, with most of them. Maybe I feel a little more comfortable around girls at first, but...

REA: Are you jealous of my male friends?

LEE: No. Seriously, no.

REA: What about Joel? Because he and I are so close?

LEE: I'm not. Look, it has nothing to do with you. I just don't do well with guys, especially not right off the bat. Guys are combative and insensitive and arrogant and offensive and a whole slew of other things I always tried to avoid in myself.

REA: Joel's not like that, though.

LEE: I know he's not. And I like him. There, I said it.

REA: Okay. I'm sorry I touched a nerve.

LEE: No, it's not you, it's just...I get really frustrated.

I feel really alienated from other males because of how they act, so I try to distance myself from that. But that makes it even worse.

I mean, that's one of the main reasons why Bob and I aren't that close anymore, or even maybe why I have a hard time finding anyone to play music with, period. But I didn't want it to be that way.

REA: Why can't you play music with chicks?

LEE: I swear I would if I met any, Rea.

REA: Okay. Well, now you know Joel, and he's really talented.

LEE: So I've heard.

REA: I think you really are jealous, Lee.

LEE: I was completely kidding.

REA: No, I know you were, but I still think you're jealous.

LEE: Of what?

REA: Celia.

LEE: What about her?

REA: Come on.

LEE: Rea.

REA: Lee.

*Pause.*

LEE: Okay, so what? She was cute and nice and fun to talk to.

REA: Okay, that's fine.

LEE: You're not mad, are you? A crush is just a crush. I have about a dozen a day.

REA: I know you do. No, I'm not mad.

LEE: And we had met before. Sort of.

REA: Her having seen you play to a near empty South City bar does not count as you having met her, Lee.

LEE: I said sort of. Enough to warrant a reintroduction, at least.

REA: What did you guys talk about anyway?

LEE: Nothing, really. Just that stupid zine, *Lover's Press*.

REA: Yeah, I saw it on the table. Is that like a big deal now?

LEE: I guess so, I've been seeing it all over town, in shops and stuff.

REA: So, does she hold it in the same contempt that you do?

LEE: Not the same contempt. A different sort. She thinks it's sexist.

REA: What? I didn't get that at all from it.

LEE: Well, I didn't either, before. But she pointed out how it affirmed this male point-of-view's dominance in the discourse on love, and the demonization of women from that perspective.

REA: Yeah, sure, I guess...that doesn't mean it's sexist though. I mean, it doesn't challenge the patriarchy to a fistfight. But it's not like it says that women belong to men or anything like that.

LEE: I guess she thinks the challenge is necessary. I used to have some teachers who thought that, that art was only art if it was radical. If a work of art wasn't clearly contesting the status quo, it wasn't doing its job, wasn't worth your time.

REA: Yeah, I had teachers like that, too. And I still think that's bullshit.

LEE: Well, maybe. She's not wrong, though.

REA: No, she's not. But this is the same thing that gets me about the way you talk about music, Lee. Whatever your education may tell you, for a great deal of people, artists and audiences alike, art is about expression. Natural, intuitive, unselfconscious expression.

Expressing feelings, experiences, hardships, dreams; shit that other people can relate to, and it helps them get through the day. I suspect it has been like this for many people in ages past as well.

So when you say that a work of art doesn't have worth just because it doesn't serve a particular agenda, then no matter how righteous that goal might be, I think that's bullshit. We're just not that important, Lee. Our generation is simply not that much more special than all the ones that came before. Our revolution is not that much more permanent or profound.

Maybe artists have to ignore that to do what they do. But you can't let yourself forget where it all came from, that initial inspiration. You lose that, you lose something very human about art.

*Pause.*

LEE: Well goddam.

REA: Sorry.

LEE: No, you're fine. Well spoken.

*Pause.*

I don't have anything to say to that, right now at least.

REA: Okay.

LEE: It doesn't mean that you're right, though.

REA: No. It just means that I win.

LEE: Fair. So do you like the zine?

REA: No, that's not what I was arguing about, at all.

LEE: No, I know, but do you?

REA: I mean, I don't know...I guess. Not that much. Like you said, it's pretty immature and all. Why?

*Pause.*

What, do you?

LEE: No, not really...

REA: I thought you thought it was the most contrived, uninspired, artless thing you'd ever seen.

LEE: Yeah. I did. I do. All the same, there's something sweet...

REA: Lee! Just two seconds ago you were saying that it was misogynistic, too!

LEE: Hey, you don't even believe that.

REA: No, I don't, but...what the hell?

LEE: Baby, I'm a Romantic. You know that. And so's this asshole.

REA: So what does that mean, that you feel like you have to like it?

LEE: No, but, it means—well, first of all it means that it has an immediate appeal, in spite of all its contrivance and artlessness.

REA: Okay, fine.

LEE: But it also means that in order to assert myself as a true Romantic I sometimes have to preemptively attack the legitimacy of my peers.

REA: Oh, you have to?

LEE: As a matter of course.

REA: Lee, you don't *have* to do anything.

LEE: Yeah...but that's how it's always seemed to work throughout history. I mean, it doesn't matter who. Composers did it. Jazzmen did it. Punks did it. You wanted to be recognized, get respect, you wanted to respect yourself, you had to take the piss out of someone else first.

REA: Lee. This, too, is shit.

LEE: Well—look, I don't even want to argue about it. All I'm trying to say is, my bile was perhaps more bitter than what went into it.

REA: Oh, baby. It always is.

*Cut to cover of Lover's Press #5.*

Giant Pink Raisin Found in Punch Bowl: Boy's Whereabouts Unknown

→ Look, it's all wrong. Now you just think I didn't strike the good stuff. I did, but I'm not paid to have you counsel me. I'm telling you I had the good stuff, had it right inside, had it to give and had it given to me, and still it came up short.

Listen to this: her name was Sylvia.

She worked at KDHY, and we met at this banquet for 'communications' types. Sharing a disdain for the futility and irony of such a field as ours, we had both abandoned our assigned seats to perch on the edge of the ballroom stage near the punch bowl.

For lack of love to soften us, we substituted alcohol, and that was how it began. That was how it continued, too, for some time, and we learned each other all the way through while never really believing there was anything to learn at all.

Then one day we stopped drinking and I thought she was beautiful.

She was made of beautiful things, of course, I'd always known that, but they were the same things every other girl was made of, and it's simple fact that a hand can't tell one cheek, collarbone or breast from countless others. Yet suddenly they were novel and breathtaking to me. Yes, this time breath was more demanding; I'd grown older.

Sometimes when I touched her I'd inhale so sharply it would give me a start, and when she touched me it was even worse; trembling was all I could do to bear it. But then my mind would clear, and I'd realize that she was trembling too, at just the same pitch, and if I held onto her it was like there was no motion at all.

A perfect still; that's when I knew we were returning to Nature. First to each other, then to something more. I never believed any of that nonsense about the stars, really, until I met Sylvia, and then suddenly I was one of them, at once a light tower and lost at sea.

*Cut to shot of CHAS and AND getting out of car.*

CHAS: So am I going to know anybody here at all?

AND: Yeah, lots of people, Chas. Everyone from my work.

CHAS: Which everyone? Anyone that likes me?

AND: Well, let's see; Ella'll be there, and Ica should...

CHAS: I don't know either of them.

AND: Chas, you know Ica. Oh, and you know John.

CHAS: John...I don't...wait, Jean?

AND: No, but—well, yeah, but pronounced John. Like Jean Luc Picard.

CHAS: Right, I got it. Didn't it used to be Jean, though?

AND: Yeah.

CHAS: But now...did she—did John switch pronouns?

AND: No. Just pronunciations.

CHAS: Okay. Well, she's cool. I think she hates me though.

AND: Chas, don't start that.

CHAS: Okay. I said I liked her.

AND: So, that's two people you can talk to at least.

CHAS: That's just one.

AND: Plus you have to meet CeCe, of course.

*They're outside of an indie performance space.*

CHAS: Right, of course.

AND: You have to believe me, Chas. You guys are going to like each other a lot, I know.

CHAS: She's your girl, huh?

AND: Yeah. We go back.

CHAS: Well, yeah, man. Then let's go.

AND: Okay?

CHAS: Yeah.

*They enter. Amidst a small crowd, they immediately encounter ELLA and ICA, holding hands.*

ICA: Oh, look at these two.

ELLA: Yeah, look at this bitch!

*Starting to introduce CHAS.*

AND: Hey, you guys, this is—

ICA: Uh, and did you see that guy she was with?

ELLA: Yeah, I hear he's a pussy!

ICA: I hear his mom's a pussy!

CHAS: My reputation precedes me, does it.

AND: I'm sorry, Chas, they were there at work the other day. I had to blow off steam is all.

ELLA: No, really. Hi. I'm Ella. And I've really only heard good things about you.

CHAS: Hi. Nice to meet you.

AND: Chas, you know—

ICA: Ica. We met once before.

CHAS: Yeah, I'm sorry...

ICA: It was a fundraiser at Galactic, about two months ago? We were sitting on the couch near the back...

CHAS: Oh, god.

ICA: We were talking about Led Zeppelin...

CHAS: No, I remember now.

ICA: Yeah, hi.

CHAS: Hi, wow. I'm sorry about that. I was being an asshole, huh?

ICA: Hey, nothing I couldn't handle.

CHAS: I'd tell you how drunk I was, but I guess you hear that excuse often enough where you work.

ELLA: Chas, what did you do?

CHAS: Well, you know, I really like Zeppelin a lot...

ICA: He really does.

AND: I'm aware. He always wants to put on II every time we get it on.

ICA: Well, it started when I expressed some annoyance at what I perceived to be rather chauvinistic elements in the music I'd heard.

AND: Yeah, I know how this goes.

ICA: He made some defense about expressions of love and sexuality in the blues tradition...I don't remember exactly...

CHAS: That wasn't the issue though. It was when she asserted that guitar-oriented rock music—

ICA: The element of the guitar solo in particular—

CHAS: —was an overly masculinized, masturbatory and fundamentally phallogocentric paradigm. Is that basically right?

ELLA: It *sounds* basically right.

AND: Chas, I tell you this about your music all the time.

CHAS: Well, okay, a bunch of half-naked, sweaty, rank, hormonal male youths hurling themselves against everything in sight, I can see that more as a manifestation of what you're talking about.

ELLA: I can see that as more than a little homoerotic.

CHAS: But, you know, I didn't necessarily see the guitar solo as being exactly analogous to that...

ICA: Which is to say, he starts screaming that by dismissing technical ability, I'm eroding our ability to appreciate art, and—

CHAS: I was not screa—was I really screaming?

ICA: Screaming. “Are there to be no more aesthetics? Shall we distinguish beauty from fakery nevermore?” And shit like that.

CHAS: Oh, I couldn't have been talking like that. Not as drunk as I was.

AND: Oh, I think you could, Chas. You slur like a poet.

CHAS: Well. I really am sorry for my absurd manner on the night in question.

ICA: It's nothing.

CHAS: All the same...the guitar solo...

AND: Don't start any shit, Chas.

ICA: No, it's fine. He seems to have recalled a sense of civility since then.

CHAS: Yeah, man, I don't know. I mean, a lot of the shit I like is total cock-rock, I admit it. Totally macho and belligerent and stupid. But the guitar solo, it's different for me. That was the first time this young rocker learned what beauty was.

ELLA: But that's a measure of beauty that's always been defined by males.

CHAS: But I'm not even talking about ripping, or wanking, I can see all that. I'm talking about singing with the instrument. Making *song*, man's first—the first music of our species. I'm talking about the most soulful sounds I've ever heard.

ICA: But Chas...

CHAS: "Samba Pa Ti", you know? "No Woman No Cry". "Since I've Been Loving—

AND: Chas. Shut up a second and listen.

*Pause.*

CHAS: Sorry.

ICA: No, it's just...it's not about what's being expressed. It's about the fact that women have never been a part of the history of that expression. Maybe we were not always explicitly excluded, but we were certainly never encouraged.

ELLA: Yeah, nobody ever said, "You're a teenager now, here's a guitar, go start a band." It was more like, "You're a teenager, go find a boyfriend who's in a band."

ICA: We never had 'guitar heroines' we could relate to. We had Jewel.

CHAS: But, I mean...does that mean that the things that came before don't have aesthetic value to you?

ICA: No, I mean, they do. But some people will try to tell you that because that's the way it's always been done, however exclusively, that it's the only way it can be done, can be judged.

CHAS: So, do you think women shouldn't play guitar solos, or paint nudes, or follow any of these forms that have always been dominated by men?

ICA: No. We just have to come to them on our own terms.

CHAS: Okay.

*Pause.*

Thanks.

ICA: Um, yeah.

*The lights dim.*

AND: Oh, here she comes.

*The crowd applauds as CECE and two other female musicians walk onto a makeshift stage that has on it a piano, a cello and an assorted percussion set. CECE sits behind the piano.*

ICA: Yeah, Ce!

ELLA: CeCe Ryder, pussy on fire!

CECE: *(into microphone)* Okay, guys. Thanks.

*There is a moment of silence before the performance begins. CECE delivers the text, but all three play intently. In addition to playing the piano, CECE also makes a lot of performative gestures, some of which might clarify some of the images. These images might also be represented in various degrees of abstraction in the shots, as well as the musical notation for what they play, which is dissonant and erratic.*

It was always you, always.

From the first eyes I recall staring into mine:  
my first penetration, my first possession.

It was always you pinching my flesh, appraising my shape.

You when I met Grandfather, demanded I return his kiss  
to his terrible, cold cheek. His kiss and not my own.

Sometimes Mother would hurt me, but I always knew  
that it was always you.

Or when Brother would beat me up,  
hold me down; or throw open the shower curtain,  
that was you too. It was always you.

→

It was always you in circles in schoolyards,  
shouting over me, changing the rules.

It was always you in classrooms,  
leering down the rows above my head  
and through my hand.

It was you blocking my view of the band, the reckless limbs  
flailing all through the crowd were you; and then the grip  
upon my wrist, directing me, protecting, was you too.

It was always you, in front of the counter, behind the desk,  
snarling, forcing the spread of my smile, eyes groping,  
hoping; finding, badge glaring like sight, lights  
shooting like arms, waiting for me to give you a show

of weakness so you could expose your

benevolence. I always did, and you did too.

→

It was always you in the drive of my father,  
bellowing out for me, so when I ran away from you I ran

to you. And the beast you rode that purred so  
dangerously, that was you too.

And inside of its breast, where belts and seatbelts  
clinked, unlinked, there you were, too.

It's always you! Hand on my wrist, hand on my thigh,  
hand into fist, fist into eye. Always your fists.

Whether your claws tore straight through my skin, or your  
fingers pressed quietly, softly, insistently in, rubbing me thin,  
the gentle force of a gentle man.

I've held my eyes open with terror as long as I can.  
They shut now, content just to know of the blow  
that hangs over my head.

They open again, only to see my reflection,

or to stare dead.

*CECE holds her final struck pose for a moment before relaxing, signifying the end of the piece. The crowd goes wild. Move to shots of AND and CHAS standing next to each other, both still staring at the stage. AND is emotionally stimulated and enchanted; CHAS is stunned and humbled.*

AND: Wow.

CHAS: Yeah.

AND: No, really, wow.

CHAS: That's your friend?

AND: Yeah, that's my, that's her, but...I had no idea.

CHAS: Yeah, well, wow—

AND: No, seriously, I just, we used to do stuff—I mean, I've heard her perform before, but that was a long time ago, and it was nothing...it was nothing like that.

CHAS: What do you mean, you used to do stuff?

AND: Oh, just the things she used to do, they were neat and all, but more shocking, and bitter, and...not like that, that was amazing.

CHAS: It was. It was...powerful. I don't know what to say.

AND: It was so strong, but it was so fragile too; it was angry, but it was still so calm; it was so vulnerable, but it was safe.

CHAS: Yeah. I was impressed.

AND: I have to go tell her how great she is.

*AND rushes off, leaving CHAS to contemplate his own response alone for a few moments more, before he looks up and sees JOHN a short distance away. They exchange slight but genuine smiles and approach each other.*

JOHN: Hi, Chas.

CHAS: Hi, John. How are you doing?

JOHN: I'm still alive.

CHAS: That bad, huh?

JOHN: Worse. It's good to see you, though.

*CHAS gestures to the stage.*

CHAS: So. How'd you like it?

JOHN: The performance? How did you?

CHAS: I asked you first.

JOHN: But I'm more interested in you.

CHAS: What, because I'm a guy?

JOHN: Not just a guy. You're And's guy.

CHAS: What difference does that make?

JOHN: Eh. Just the difference between you and some others, is all.

CHAS: Well...I mean, it was really good, right?

JOHN: You tell me.

CHAS: Yeah, it was. She can really play, CeCe. They all could.

JOHN: Uh huh?

CHAS: Sure, she could. A lot of that stuff she did was really weird, really interesting. I don't know how to play like that, all crazy.

JOHN: Yeah.

CHAS: Anyway, that's a big part of it.

JOHN: Part of?

CHAS: Oh, just the whole turmoil of humility mixed with intimidation that I'm sure you've sensed in me.

JOHN: I wasn't assuming anything about how you felt.

CHAS: Well, so you know. It's not just personal or political. It's artistic too.

JOHN: So you felt intimidated, watching that?

CHAS: Yeah, a bit. I know that's not really a good way to respond.

JOHN: It's not good or bad, Chas, it's how you feel.

CHAS: Well, it's not easy to control, you know. I don't want to get defensive, because I know that's the way a lot of dudes are. And then sometimes I feel guilty. But I know you don't want that either.

JOHN: I never said I wanted you to feel any particular way.

CHAS: No, not you, specifically, but women generally—oh.

JOHN: What? Oh.

CHAS: I'm sorry, I didn't know...

JOHN: No, no, it's fine...I guess I'm not *not* a woman...yet...

CHAS: Sorry.

JOHN: Don't be. This is how I work it out.

CHAS: So how is that? Working it out?

JOHN: It's working.

CHAS: Yeah?

JOHN: Well, I see you got the memo about the name.

CHAS: What's that like? Is it weird?

JOHN: It's unreal, Chas. You wouldn't believe how much different I get treated. I get served faster. Voices lose their music. No one speaks in complete sentences anymore.

CHAS: How does it feel to change your name?

JOHN: It's not a change, really. My mom has always called me Jeanette, all French-like. I was only Jean for a couple years. And no one blinks because they think I'm just saying John.

And that's all my gender is, apparently. I just have to pronounce my name correctly in the American Midwest and that's boy enough for them.

CHAS: Is it enough for you?

JOHN: It's enough for now.

What do you think?

CHAS: What does it matter what I think?

JOHN: Because you think something. And I want to know.

CHAS: Well, John...I can just talk to you. I can't just talk to most of And's friends. Maybe that's a part.

*They exchange another set of mild smiles before AND returns with CECE. JOHN steals away quietly.*

AND: Chas, I have someone for you to meet—

CHAS: Oh, hi...

CECE: Hello.

AND: Chas, CeCe, CeCe, Chas.

CHAS: Yeah, hi, I've heard so much about you.

CECE: The same. It's good to finally meet you.

CHAS: That was, uh...that was really something.

CECE: Oh, well, thank you. Thank you for coming.

CHAS: Where'd you learn to play like that?

CECE: Oh, the piano? You liked that?

CHAS: It was insane. I never knew what was going to happen next.

CECE: Thanks. But that's funny, a lot of people get really turned off by that stuff, you know.

CHAS: No, I thought it was...really striking. Even when all the music and the words were really emotional, it was this other subtle layer of meaning. I never learned to play like that.

CECE: Well, the composition department at the Institute teaches almost exclusively contemporary methods, a.k.a. exclusively weirdos.

CHAS: Oh, you went to Institute too. And never told me that.

AND: Oh, Chas, I must have—

CECE: Sure, that's where we met, our first year there.

CHAS: So did you graduate last year, then, or are you still there?

CECE: Oh, no, no. Haven't you told him anything, And? We dropped out at the same time, and Ella and Ica too.

CHAS: And is that how you all work—

AND: Yeah, that's why we all ended up volunteering at the clinic to begin with.

CECE: And, that's not *why* we dropped out, that's just what happened.

CHAS: So why did you?

CECE: Well, And had more reasons than the rest of us—

AND: Ce, J.C. was never one of the reasons I left school—

CHAS: (J.C.?)

CECE: —but the reason we all did it together was to focus on our band.

CHAS: You all were in a band?

AND: It wasn't a band, really...

CECE: Course we were. 'CeCe Ryder and the Feminine Wipes'.

CHAS: Haha! You were a Feminine Wipe, And?

AND: Jesus, talk about a haunting reputation, Chas.

CHAS: No, I think it's rock and roll.

CECE: What, you didn't think we picked up these dumb names just for our health? And Apostrophe? Ica Divine? I always thought mine was the stupidest. It's practically just my name.

CHAS: What did you all play?

AND: We didn't really 'play'...we didn't even have real songs...

CECE: I played keys and sang, and Ica played guitar. Ella Into Stella was on the skins, and where do you think your girlfriend acquired all that low end?

CHAS: Bass...

AND: I didn't even *play* bass...

CHAS: How come you didn't tell me you played?

AND: I didn't even own an instrument! It was Ica's brother's.

CECE: But you know, And, that band was as big a part of my musical training as any 'genius' piano instructor I ever had.

AND: Oh, quit.

CECE: I'm serious. Before then, I couldn't make it all come together. I knew I wanted to write, but I also wanted to perform, and I just had no idea how to give my words the power I wanted them to have.

AND: You figured that out on your own, though, Ce.

CECE: Eventually, but that group, that time we spent, it opened my eyes. That 'cowgirl hardcore' shit you were into was like nothing I had ever heard.

CHAS: Man. That sounds more like a genre of porn than it does music.

CECE: It practically was, dude.

*Gestures towards AND.*

I don't think you know how raw this little girl can be.

CHAS: Evidently not.

*The other musicians approach and catch CECE's eye.*

CECE: I have to help the girls pack up the stuff, guys, I'm sorry. Charles—it's been an honor.

*They shake.*

CHAS: Hey, right back at cha.

*CECE takes AND's hand.*

CECE: Working tomorrow, darling?

AND: Same bat time, Ce.

CECE: Then we'll meet again.

*Kisses AND on the cheek, hurries away.*

CHAS: Wow, And.

AND: Hmh.

CHAS: Hardcore music? Playing bass? I had no idea.

AND: Oh, forget it, Chas. None of that stuff's true anyway.

CHAS: What do you mean, none of it's true?

AND: She just tells me that to make me feel better. Because she knows I haven't done a single creative thing since we left the Institute. I'll bet she even feels responsible on some level.

CHAS: Oh, And, it's not like that.

AND: It *is* like that. I'm at the clinic all the time, I never even have time to...sketch, anymore...

CHAS: Well, but you're always talking about how important it is to you working there, how glad you are to be doing something meaningful. You said you never felt like going to school was meaningful.

AND: I am glad. It is meaningful. It is important to me.

I just never thought it would be the only thing that was.

*Cut shot of LEE and REA approaching apartment building. They look at the board of buzzers, a consecutive pair of which read, "J. Christian" and "C. Rider". They buzz the second.*

JOEL: (voice) Yes?

REA: Just us, Joel.

JOEL: Ah. We've been expecting you.

*They are buzzed in. Various guests wander around. These might be the same extras from the show. ANGIE, JESS and ANNETTE are setting up band equipment: ANGIE a drum kit, JESS a guitar and amp, ANNETTE a variety of instruments, some of them toys: mallet instruments, plastic horns, obscure lutes. CELIA rushes up to greet LEE and REA. REA and CELIA hug first.*

CELIA: Thank you so much for coming!

REA: Yeah, of course!

*CELIA grasps LEE by the arms in an intimate way and looks intently at him.*

CELIA: It's really good to see you.

LEE: Yeah. And you, too.

CELIA: Do you guys want drinks? We've got a bar.

REA: Gin and tonic would be killer right now.

CELIA: Sure thing. Lee?

LEE: Cheap beer?

CELIA: Of course. Be right back.

*She heads off.*

REA: There goes your girl – friend...

LEE: Oh, stop.

*JOEL walks up.*

JOEL: Hi, Andrea. Hello, Lee.

*REA hugs him.*

REA: Hi, Joel.

*LEE and JOEL shake hands.*

LEE: How are you, man?

JOEL: Doing well. We spent all day moving the last of Ce's stuff in from her old place.

REA: It looks like you got it all done, then?

JOEL: Pretty much. I don't know if it's all set up the way she wants it, but...I think we've earned this brief respite. Which reminds me—

*He produces a joint and lighter.*

I don't know if this is of any interest to either of you, but...

REA: Ick. Not my thing. Thanks though.

JOEL: Sure. Lee?

LEE: Rea?

REA: You don't need my permission.

LEE: Right, I forgot.

*He accepts.*

Thank you.

JOEL: Of course.

*CELIA returns with the drinks.*

CELIA: Joel! What have I told you about getting the guests stoned?

JOEL: I'm sorry, sweetheart. It won't happen a third time.

LEE: Don't worry, I'll still have that beer.

*Attention is suddenly drawn to the band. ANGIE is playing the drums with brushes, JESS is playing an acoustic guitar with a slide, and ANNETTE is playing a marimba and singing.*

ANNETTE:

Ladies and gentlemen,  
all kinds of gentle folk:  
at last the gentle clock  
has struck that gentle stroke.  
So make just like the clock  
and raise your gentle hands  
and welcome to your block  
gently The Gentle Band!

*People applaud. The music picks up. The band's bass drum head decorated with their name is shown.*

Well, this one's name's Annette  
that gently sings to you.  
And Angie stings the skins  
that gently ring so true.  
And Jess'll strum the strings  
so gently you could sigh.  
And gently hovering,  
the clock against the sky!

*ANNETTE begins to play a 'jazzy' solo on a kazoo. Cut back to shot of LEE and JOEL, still smoking the joint.*

JOEL: What do you think of this band, man?

LEE: This band?

JOEL: None other.

LEE: Um...they're gentle, right?

JOEL: They're nothing if not that, I'd say.

LEE: Do you like that about them?

JOEL: Eh. I like that kazoo. It reminds me of Louis Armstrong.

LEE: Yeah, but...

JOEL: What is it?

LEE: Well, they're your friends, right?

JOEL: Celia's, actually. It's okay, you can tell me.

LEE: They don't play that well, is all. So I'd hesitate to compare them to Louis.

JOEL: Yeah, I guess. The sound is there though, right?

LEE: Sure, they sound okay. But still.

JOEL: You think an artist should get their chops before they try anything else.

LEE: Yeah, sort of. The whole 'paying your dues' thing and all. Part of it is proving yourself to other artists, of course. But I think it's also proving something to your audience. That you had to struggle to give them your art. I think when an audience can hear that strain, it's meaningful to them.

JOEL: Huh. I don't think I ever thought of it that way. See, I like to hear people playing with complete ease. Whether it's Johnny Cash playing three chords, or Menuhin doing Mozart, I want to know that they're not thinking about their hands at all. That everything that comes out is pure expression and not mechanics.

LEE: So, you don't demand any skill level out of art, just as long as they stay within their means?

JOEL: More or less.

LEE: I think I'm just the opposite.

JOEL: But does your view demand a certain level either, necessarily? An artist at any level can reach for things beyond their grasp, can't they? They don't have to be good.

LEE: I suppose not. I guess at least I know they're trying.

JOEL: Hm. That's interesting. Though I think I'd still rather see the depth of an artist's talent, rather than their limits.

LEE: Yeah, I just have a hard time believing anything less.

*The shot cuts back to the band. ANNETTE is finishing the kazoo solo and starts singing again.*

ANNETTE:

The clock pulls at the sea,  
The sea pulls at the shore,  
Our song pulls gentle-ly

at what you're longing for.  
Your longing is transformed  
to gentleness so deep  
it pulls you gently to  
the gentlest of sleep.

*The song ends and the crowd applauds again.*

Thank you. We're The Gentle Band, specializing in sounds that soothe, such as sibilants, since September Seventy-Seven. We're going to take a quick break, then we'll be back with a second set. Think gentle thoughts, folks.

*Back to JOEL and LEE.*

JOEL: Hey, you feel like playing?

LEE: Uh...

JOEL: Come on.

*To JESS.*

Hey, Jess, would you mind if Lee played your guitar?

JESS: No, not at all. Be nice, though.

LEE: Of course. Thank you. Hi.

*He puts on the guitar, turns to JOEL.*

Um, I don't know what—

JOEL: Let me run and get my fiddle.

*He disappears, LEE warms up, adjusts settings. JOEL returns and starts tuning his viola.*

LEE: So...what are we playing?

JOEL: Anything. Just play.

LEE: Okay...

JOEL: Play anything.

*LEE starts to play, slowly, JOEL watching intently, then joining in. As the jam progresses, they both get more into it, and actually begin to move closer to one another. It's clearly becoming an intimate moment. Cut to shot of REA and CELIA sitting on a couch, drinking and watching their boyfriends.*

REA: Our boys.

CELIA: There they are.

REA: They're getting pretty into it.

CELIA: Yeah, they are.

That reminds me of something that occurred to me the other day.

REA: What's that?

CELIA: Most males in our society, from an adolescent age up, operate in a more or less constant state of competitiveness.

REA: Right...

CELIA: For such a long time, I've only been able to consider that mentality in light of how much harm it's done to the world. I can only think of it in an almost completely negative light.

REA: Okay.

CELIA: But the other day I was thinking, if you set aside for just one moment all the bullshit that that mentality's given rise to...all the pissing contests, all the warfare, the ravages of industrial progress...just for one moment...

There is still a sort of play about it. Even in the gruffest of men you can see it sometimes.

REA: Yeah, I could see that...but I don't think it's really all that innocent.

CELIA: Oh, no. I don't think it's very innocent at all. But what I realized, Rea, is that men do still play, in a way, even after they're grown. But women, I think somewhere along the line we learned not to. When was the last time you played with another person?

REA: I don't really know.

CELIA: I know it doesn't happen very often for me. And when it does, it's almost always with a man, not another woman. Which, I might add, can get rather frustrating, because a man will never let you win. They can't stand to.

REA: So what, are you saying that you need more for-women-by-women playtime in your life?

CELIA: Yeah, I don't know. Maybe. Pick up racquetball, or something.

*Looks over at LEE and JOEL.*

I do like having boys who play music, though.

REA: Yeah. That seems like mostly wholesome fun, right?

CELIA: Sure. It's more co-operative. They're making something together.

REA: Yeah, they're making *something*, all right. God, they look about ready to kiss each other.

CELIA: That—would be really hot.

REA: Uh-huh.

Wow, I haven't heard Joel play in so long. I forgot how much I love to hear him.

CELIA: You know, he's really fond of you, Rea.

REA: Yeah...well, we're old friends. It's easy to be sentimental about someone you haven't seen in a long time.

CELIA: Even before he ran into you last month, though, he was always talking about you. I think he missed you a lot.

REA. Mm. I missed him, too. But it was hard keeping in touch, especially after I started dating Lee...not that he would have minded, but...

CELIA: What was Joel like, back when you met him?

REA: Quiet, more than anything. He was one of those kids who was always so cool and solitary, you figured they had to be aloof. Most of the summer had gone by before I even talked to him. But after I did, he was the best friend anyone could ask for.

Ha...sometimes I wonder what he even got out of the friendship. It seemed like all we ever did was I'd be freaking out and he'd calm me down, or I'd be depressed and he'd get me to come out of it.

There was this thing he used to do...does he ever read tarot anymore?

CELIA: No, I didn't know he ever did.

REA: Well, I don't know if he ever *really* did, but sometimes, when I was so freaked out that I just wouldn't listen to anything, he'd take out this deck and say he was going to read my fortune. And then he'd just tell me the exact same thing, in fortune form.

Like, "oh, here's The Thief, which means you need to get a grip" or "this is The Fool, which means it's really silly to be worried about that". It sounds really stupid, but he'd be completely serious, and something about it would bring me back.

CELIA: That's so sweet.

REA: He's a sweet guy. I don't know where I'd be if I hadn't met him.

CELIA: Did you ever like him?

REA: Did I like him?

CELIA: Yeah.

Sorry, I didn't mean that to be weird or anything—

REA: Oh, no, it's fine. I just...I don't really know. I guess I probably felt something for him at some point. But the overwhelming thing I always felt was gratitude. The way he looked after me, he was more like an older brother than anything.

Why do you ask?

CELIA: Oh, it's just that, as much as Joel would always talk about you when I met him, it still seemed like he was holding something back. I figured it had to mean there was some romantic backstory he didn't want to get into.

I don't know if you guys were ever involved or not...

REA: Oh, no. There was never anything explicit. If he had feelings for me, he never came right out and told me.

CELIA: But you knew.

REA: Yeah. I suppose I did.

Okay, and the truth is, I really did like Joel quite a bit for a while. But since we always spent all our time fixing me and my problems, we almost never talked about him. His life, his situations. In a lot of ways I don't think I knew him very well at all.

So when I think back on how I used to feel about him, it's hard to pull apart what was real attraction and what was more the sense of security I got being around him. I guess more what I'm saying is, I don't know how much I would like him still.

I hope that's not weird for you to hear.

CELIA: No, not at all. Joel and I've still only known each other for a couple of months really, so I'm still trying to get to know him too. That's the reason I asked.

REA: I mean, I'm in a relationship and everything, anyway.

CELIA: Oh, yeah. You know, Rea, I think Lee is really a good guy.

REA: Oh, yeah?

CELIA: Yeah, I do. Of course, I've only spoken with him a little bit, apart from seeing his show that once, but he seems—

REA: Wait, so you actually did see him play?

CELIA: Yeah, why?

REA: Oh. Nothing.

CELIA: No, I think he's really talented. Reminds me of some of the stuff I studied at Institute, before I switched to writing. You don't hear many people who play like that.

REA: Honestly, it drives me a little bit crazy. To me it's like there's something that's really passionate that's trying to come out, but he covers it up because he thinks the music needs to sound weird at any cost.

CELIA: Huh. I love it. I don't know, I guess it is sort of a...curious sound. But it makes me think twice about what I'm listening to. I can't block it out.

REA: You should tell Lee that. I think he'd be thrilled to hear it from you.

CELIA: The music aside, though, I think he's really just a sweet person. From what I've seen.

REA: Well, Celia, there is a reason you've seen that.

CELIA: What is that?

REA: You must know the crush he has on you.

CELIA: What? No he doesn't...

REA: Come on, I wouldn't have said it if it wasn't obvious.

CELIA: No, Rea...

REA: You had to have known.

Come on, Ce, I was honest with you about Joel.

CELIA: Okay, maybe I thought it a little, but...

I hope that hasn't made anything awkward between you two.

REA: Don't be silly. Lee's always been like that. I think it's cute.

CELIA: He's always been like what?

REA: Oh, having crushes on new girls he meets. He never tells me up front, but it's always clear as day, the way he talks about them, or hangs on their every word.

CELIA: And that doesn't ever bother you?

REA: It's funny, there are a thousand little things that Lee does to bother me, most of them on purpose. But that's honestly never been one of them.

CELIA: Well. He's really nice.

*The shot turns back to LEE and JOEL on the last notes of their jam. After a moment of silence, JOEL laughs.*

JOEL: That was a lot of fun.

LEE: Yeah. You're really good, man.

JOEL: Hey, you're not nothing yourself.

*They put their instruments down and start moving towards CELIA and REA.*

LEE: No, but you know your instrument really well. The notes just pour out. I wish it was that simple for me.

JOEL: But I think I kind of understood what you were saying about struggle, in the way you played.

LEE: What does that mean?

JOEL: I didn't mean it as a joke. I just thought there was definitely a sense of opposing forces, pulling the music in different directions. It was effective.

LEE: Well, thanks. I just wish it didn't always feel like the opposing forces were my creativity and my actual ability.

JOEL: Lee, if I didn't know better I'd think you were saying the exact opposite of what you said just earlier tonight.

LEE: Yeah, fuck it. I don't know. Maybe I only meant what I said when applied to other people. Or maybe I don't actually like that quality at all, it just makes me feel better about my own failings. Ha.

JOEL: Well, I can't tell you what you like or don't, man. But don't hate what you have just because it's not everything you'd like to.

*They've reached their girlfriends.*

REA: Are you guys through making sweet musical love?

JOEL: Was it so obvious?

CELIA: That was really great, you guys. You should totally start a group.

LEE: Oh...I don't know.

JOEL: Yeah, Ce, I hardly play anymore.

REA: Oh, stop that, Joel. You still sound as amazing as you did four years ago.

CELIA: Seriously. I used to be a concert level player, and now I can barely plunk out a few chords. That's what it means to not play anymore.

LEE: Anyway, I think I've forgotten how to play with other musicians.

CELIA: It sounded like you were playing with another musician just now.

LEE: Well. We'll see.

JOEL: Another time, maybe?

LEE: Maybe.

*The Gentle Band has retaken the stage. ANNETTE now holds a saxophone and JESS an electric bass. ANNETTE addresses the crowd.*

ANNETTE: Alright, folks, we're back. No shocking acts of belligerence or general roughness in our absence, I hope? Our vigilance can only extend so far.

This is the housewarming party for our dear friend Cecelia Bedelia Rider, so be sure to congratulate her and thank her for buying you booze.

Celia is our co-worker from the Lindellwood Women's Clinic, where we offer comprehensive counseling, abortion and contraception information and services. We know you didn't have to pay to get in, but we're always accepting donations for the Clinic, if you want to help us out. Thanks.

Our next number is dedicated to the women. It's a slow one and it's ladies' choice, so girls, grab the cutest thing you can see and get out on the floor! And if a couple of you can find it in your heart to grab a boy instead, that'd be awful sweet too.

*To the band.*

One-two-three, two-two-three...

*They begin to play. The tune is "In the Flesh" by Blondie, arranged as an instrumental jazz ballad. This is represented on the page by notation in the style of a chart, with jazz fonts, composer credits, excessively jazzy re-harmonizations and syncopations, etc. Through the course of the tune, the lyrics on the page (not sung) may be shown to correlate in some clever way with the action.*

REA: What'll it be, party girl?

JOEL: You know I'm not much one for dancing, Ce.

CELIA: Who said anything about you, Mr. Christian? Maybe I was going to ask Rea if I could dance with her boyfriend.

REA: If you'll forgive me the same trespass, I think we can work something out.

JOEL: My objection stands.

REA: No it doesn't.

*CELIA and REA pull LEE and JOEL, respectively, to the floor. JOEL is reluctant but obliging; LEE is nervous.*

*A sequence of shots passes showing LEE and CELIA's dance become less rigid, more intimate. Their foreheads touch. Their eyes meet. Their lips brush.*

*LEE moves to a cheek-to-cheek position, and over CELIA's shoulder sees that REA and JOEL are in a similarly close moment; she is facing LEE, but her eyes are closed and her lips very close to JOEL's ear.*

*LEE and REA make eye contact. They're both expressionless for a moment, then she smiles faintly. They mouth the words to each other, perhaps indicated by brackets.*

REA: [I'm okay if you are.]

LEE: [I don't know.]

REA: [I think everything will be fine.]

LEE: [If you say so.]

REA: [I love you, Lee.]

LEE: [And I love you.]

*Both close their eyes. Then REA withdraws her face into JOEL's neck, and LEE sweeps his cheek across CELIA's.*

*Parallel shot of both pairs kissing.*

*Segue to all four of them in a bedroom, all in fairly close physical proximity. LEE and CELIA are now openly and ardently making out, as are JOEL and REA.*

*They break back into their original attachments for a moment. Maybe the shot shows in JOEL and CELIA checking in with each other in the background. In the foreground, LEE and REA trade grins and kisses.*

REA: How are you doing, baby?

LEE: Brilliant.

REA: Glad to hear it.

*The rest of the scene progresses without dialogue, but with the text of Lover's Press #6: Love is Made to Be Broken voiced-over.*

→ And that's when it all goes.

My dear readers: we are all great beacons of light, and everyone and everything is lost.

First you see stars, then you see them all. Once you realize that, you'll want to fit them in the cup of your hand.

You see? Once you learn what love can make between two, you'll want to make love to everything. You'll see the depth of all light in the strangest distant glimmers and want to chase it to its source.

A sky to hold such possibility would have to be impossibly vast, only simple and comprehensible when held at an infinite height.

I can't bear it. Once I was a sun and I knew that Nature relied on me; now it's 4:32 in the dark and the space between me and the heat and light of life is tangible and inexorable. I'm as little as a dot.

Happy Valentine's Day, readers. Will the sun never come? I need a place to hide.

*There are shots of LEE and CELIA and JOEL and REA again, with matters progressing and some garments being removed.*

*Then there are shots of CELIA and REA looking at each other playfully, then commencing to fool around.*

*At first, for lack of anyone else to make out with, LEE and JOEL look at each other a little uncomfortably. Then, after a moment's hesitation, they both take a leap and tentatively begin to kiss.*

*The shot cuts to CHAS waking up and looking at his clock. It's 4:32 in the morning. He looks over at the empty stretch of bed beside him. He rolls back over. He looks at the clock again at 5:14, and falls asleep again. He looks a third time at 5:46 and rubs his eyes.*

CHAS: Fuck it.

*He gets up and glances out the window at the street, then begins to get dressed. At some point, he hears the door to the apartment open, and a moment later AND stumbles in. She looks at the clock, which now reads 5:50.*

AND: Oh...you're already up.

CHAS: I kept waking up.

Late night at work?

AND: You could say that.

CHAS: You might've called.

AND: Yeah.

I, I brought your car back.

CHAS: Of course, why wouldn't you've...

Are you drunk?

AND: Not—no, I'm not.

CHAS: You are.

AND: No, Chas, I was before, but, I'm not now—

CHAS: I can't believe you; driving home drunk, with my car, after spending all night—

AND: Chas! It was fine, and I told you I'm not fucking drunk, anymore! I'm fucking tired is all!

I was just telling you, I brought it back, because I knew you needed to get to work...

CHAS: Okay, whatever. Thanks a million. I have to go.

AND: Chas, wait...

I made a mistake last night.

*Pause.*

CHAS: Oh, no.

Oh, no. I have to fucking go.

AND: Chas, don't...

CHAS: I can't hear this right now, And. I'll put my fist through the bathroom mirror if I do.

AND: Let me finish? Please?

CHAS: No, And, you can't! You can't fucking come in, right before I have to go to work all day, after you were out all night drinking—

AND: It's not what you think—

CHAS: —you can't fucking come in and make me forgive you for fucking whatever guy you fucked!

AND: Chas, it was CeCe.

I spent the night at CeCe's.

*Long pause. CHAS's expression freezes and he leans against the wall, not meeting her gaze.*

We, uh...well, we did work late. We had to enter a ton of new files, since all the patients from the county clinics have been coming to ours, since all the closings.

It was probably 1:00 already, when we got out of there. She asked me if I wanted to get just one drink at a bar. I figured you would be asleep already, so I went ahead.

Of course we got carried away, I know, and that was my fault. I should've known I needed to get back and I should've stopped. But, Chas, even after she told me to come back to her place to sleep it off, there wasn't any danger of anything happening. I swear there wasn't.

We were just sitting in her apartment, talking for awhile. We were talking about comic books, of all things, and Ce was going on about how women in comics are all these half-naked, super-skinny, hysterical vixens...

*The shot cuts to a flashback of CECE.*

CECE: And then they all have these weak-ass 'passive' powers, like invisibility, or being psychic, or making fucking flowers grow! Have you ever heard of a male hero who was mutated and gained supernatural powers of intuition? He'd get laughed out of his Justice League faster than a date rape out of court.

*AND speaking in the present.*

AND: She started telling me about some writing she'd been working on; she wanted to do a feminist comic book. All women heroes, with all different kinds of powers, fighting real villains: corporations, neo-con politicians, racist cops, all of them. She told me she had a lot figured out in the way of the story, and had started writing some dialogue, but she didn't have an artist.

*CECE in flashback.*

CECE: I don't know if you still illustrate much, And, but if you're interested, I'd like you to take a look at what I've got. I used to think your shit was really original and I really want to team up with a talented, radical artist on this. I think we could do great work together.

*AND in the present.*

AND: It's hard to say exactly what happened next, or how it happened. I was still sort of drunk, yes, but also...you know how I feel about CeCe. I look up to her so much, as a feminist, as an artist...fuck, just as a strong woman who does what the fuck she wants with her life, and does it well. I just got kind of overwhelmed, and emotional, and...

And I just started bawling. I'm sure she had no idea why, it came out of nowhere. But she was holding me, and trying to calm me down, and then at some point I realized we were kissing. And I knew it was wrong, I knew it, but it was so comforting right then, and I was afraid that if I stopped...I was sure I would start freaking out again.

So it kept going, the whole time feeling like there was this bubble inside me that could burst at any moment, and I couldn't think about anything else. It was only later, when it subsided, after I felt like I'd had some...release...

Only then did I realize what an awful thing I'd done.

Chas, I'm so sorry. I don't know what...I never even wanted, or expected—

CHAS: Please leave.

AND: What?

CHAS: Go. Please go now.

AND: Chas, don't do this—

CHAS: Go! Please leave! Please!

*He is finally making eye contact, his expression showing more intense hurt and disbelief than fury (though it is by no means completely absent). AND stares back, wanting to talk more but at a loss. For a moment she struggles to think of something to say, but before she can speak the clock strikes 6:00 and a loud alarm goes off. When she looks at it, CHAS cries again:*

CHAS: Leave! Go!

*Overwhelmed, AND rushes from the apartment, slamming the door behind her. She runs down the hall, starts down the stairs and stumbles a little. She doesn't take a spill, but it's enough to break her momentum. She sinks to her knees and greets uncontrollably.*

*Back in the room, CHAS is lying on the bed, wearing the same expression. The alarm is still going off. There are a few shot of him lying there, not doing anything. Finally, he remarks to himself:*

CHAS: Well, better go put my fist through the mirror.

*He gets up and heads to the bathroom, but the shot stays on his place in bed. A crash is heard from off-camera.*

*Cut to shot of LEE and REA leaving CELIA's apartment, with JOEL and CELIA walking them out.*

CELIA: Thanks, you guys, for coming to the party.

REA: Of course. It was, uh, a lot of fun.

JOEL: Call us again soon, we'll hang out again.

*REA gives each of them a short but intimate kiss on the lips.*

REA: Goodnight, you two.

*LEE gives CELIA an awkward kiss on the cheek and JOEL an awkward hug.*

LEE: Goodnight. Bye.

*The door shuts, and LEE and REA walk to their car nearby. They get in and LEE starts the engine. The clock reads 4:23. Before LEE can put the car into gear, REA puts her hand on his arm.*

REA: Hey. I love you, baby.

LEE: I love you too, Rea.

*They share a set of tired smiles. LEE's, however, though sincere, maybe has a hint of melancholy in it. He begins to drive.*

REA: How are you feeling?

LEE: Mm. Alright. Tired.

REA: Weird at all?

LEE: Well...I don't know. No. I don't think.

*Pause.*

I guess that wasn't exactly what I expected to happen, though.

REA: No, me either. I don't think any of us did.

LEE: But I mean...not just that it happened. But how it worked out too.

REA: You mean with you and Joel?

LEE: Yeah, it wasn't bad or anything, I just, I've never...even kissed a guy before, let alone...

REA: One giant leap for mankind, huh?

LEE: Sort of. But that doesn't mean it's weird, necessarily, it's just...

It was funny, actually. I felt like when we began, it was both of us really hesitant. I don't know if he's been with too many guys himself.

REA: I don't think he has at all.

LEE: After a little while, though, we started to get more into it.

*Flashback shot of LEE kissing JOEL hard, perhaps pushing him back a little.*

And then, even the longer it went on, it was...different. I felt like I was acting different.

*Shot of JOEL kissing LEE's neck, LEE's eyes closed, focusing on the sensation.*

REA: How's that?

LEE: Maybe, I felt a little more receptive...

*Shot of LEE kissing JOEL's neck tenderly.*

Or maybe it was more...gentle, or something. I'm not sure exactly. It was weird.

Mmh. I don't know if that's something I want to do again.

REA: That's okay, baby. I don't think you're expected to.

It wasn't like I thought it would be, either. I figured if anything I'd make out more with Joel than with his girlfriend.

LEE: One would've thought. So what went wrong?

REA: Well, other than the fact that Joel was otherwise occupied...

LEE: I think you and Celia started before that.

REA: It was like something she and I'd been talking about earlier. I guess it was kind of already in the air.

LEE: But you've never really been with a girl before, right?

REA: Well, I kissed a few of my friends back in high school, but...no, not like that.

LEE: Hmh.

REA: What's that noise?

LEE: I just...I thought it was going to turn out differently, is all. I thought you were going to be the one making out with Joel. I was okay with that.

REA: If I left you in an uncomfortable situation, baby, I'm really sorry.

LEE: It's not that, so much...

REA: But you wanted to be with Celia.

LEE: I mean...yeah. It wasn't a huge deal, but...you knew how I felt about her. You practically set us up.

REA: Yeah, I know, I'm sorry. I just thought we were trying something new.

LEE: We were, of course. But you knew I liked Celia, and I knew you and Joel used to have something, so I thought that—

REA: I never said Joel and I had anything.

LEE: But you did, that was clear enough.

REA: We did, but it's really not as simple as you think, Lee.

When I kissed him the first time, it was very tender, and very close. And familiar, even though I'd never kissed him before. It felt like we'd been intimates for as long as we'd known each other, and that was a wonderful, warm kind of feeling.

But then when I kissed Celia, even though I hadn't really thought of her that way before really even that moment...it was electric. I can't explain it. I really wanted her completely after that. I think we both felt it.

LEE: Okay, you don't have rub that in.

REA: What do you mean? Rub what in?

LEE: I mean it was already apparent enough what you both felt.

*Flashback of LEE and JOEL aborting a kiss to glance in the direction of moans coming from off-panel.*

REA: I'm sorry, I didn't know I was supposed to hide it.

LEE: You don't hide it and you don't fake it, huh?

REA: No. I don't. Lee, I wasn't trying to hurt you. All I'm trying to tell you is that I thought we were trying something new. Being with Joel after all that time was nice, but Celia felt new to me. That's why I did what I did.

LEE: Oh, but that's so unfair, Rea! I liked her first, you knew that!

REA: I know, I'm sorry. But I might like her too now. I'm not sure.

LEE: So what does that mean, that she's 'yours' now? It doesn't matter what I want?

REA: What you want, Lee, what about what Celia wants? No, she's not 'mine'. The last time I checked she was Joel's girlfriend.

And the last time I checked I was yours, too.

LEE: Right. Yeah.

Oh, god.

*He pulls the car over, and they embrace.*

I'm so sorry, Rea. I don't know what's going on.

REA: Okay. Okay.

LEE: What's going on with us?

REA: Don't worry about us. We'll be okay.

LEE: I thought you said everything was going to be fine.

REA: I thought it was. It is. It will be.

*Cut to cover of Lover's Press #7: Valentine's Eve*

→ This time last year, I was in an all night print shop producing the sixth issue of the *Press*.

I remember the whole of me greeting and quaking so violently that I could barely hold the manuscript steady on the copy glass.

If you've never quaked before, it's like trembling except different. Maybe even more different than the same. What you're feeling is the reverberation of all of love's inelegant weight as it crashes to ground in defeat.

But maybe that's all trembling is, too: just a dumb giggle rippling through an Olympic lifter's body as he hoists his burden and strikes the most moronic pose.

Still, hold that thought for two seconds, two unbearable, heavenly, instantaneous, infinite seconds, and that's victory enough for the sport, isn't it? Same for love.

This is the truth: love prevails all the time. Almost as often as it falls flat. Then four more years of training, two more rapturous seconds, and again and again. It's worth it, right? I think so. I love that shit.

→ I've been luckier than that, even, which I suppose is why I haven't written. It's not that there's no subject matter; there's simply no need.

I write when I'm miserable to bring other souls to the place I'm at, or at least to collect myself as much into that place as I can, so that it gets all over me.

It's not that I don't want to share my happier spots, too, but I just plain forget. And as far as gathering yourself more into the happy place: fuck it, you don't need to. Happiness is like that, you're there and that's it.

Tonight's different because I have a sort of melancholy, or rather a sort has me. Not that anything's changed, except for the persisting false newness of all these historic shards of feeling that I keep. But no, they haven't changed either. They're just still false.

→ Sylvia and I are supposed to celebrate the holiday, our third, when she finishes at the station for the night, which won't be until two. It's 1:30 now. I've spent the entire evening until this point being unfaithful to her.

Sylvia: my love, my home, my wife.

Why is it that an adulterer is never unfaithful to their mistress, only to the spouse?

Does that breach reveal the only faith true enough to be broken?

Or is there an understanding so deep within the illegitimate pair that they cannot betray each other?

Is Sylvia actually not my wife but my lover?

I wish it were so. She understands me well, but not that well; perfectly, but not that perfectly.

She understands my need, as I do hers. She's never wronged me, but even after I tell her everything I've done this night she still won't understand how deeply I've wronged her.

*Cut to shots of CHAS at work. He works in the back room of a large used retail store which is a fundraiser for a social services non-profit organization called Helping Hands. His work involves a lot of unloading shipments, moving skids with a handtruck, lifting, etc. Many of his co-workers are masculine men, and he works sullenly but steadily without interacting with them. The hours go by. A little before noon, ZEB shows up.*

ZEB: Morning, kid.

CHAS: Afternoon, Zeb.

ZEB: You got the early shift, I take it?

CHAS: First one here.

ZEB: Sorry to hear that. First is the worst, that's for damned sure.

Say, you gonna pick up your crap from the Lounge ever? I don't care, but Greta's getting upset.

CHAS: Shit, yeah, I'm sorry. I can get it tonight.

ZEB: That's fine. The boys told me you've been spending a lot of time with old Puss-In-Combat-Boots, so I wasn't going to bug you too much.

CHAS: Yeah, well...I don't think that'll be a problem anymore.

ZEB: No? I thought you were long gone to Hong Kong with that broad.

You think about what I said? Figure out what you need?

CHAS: Other way around.

She figured out what she needed. It wasn't me.

ZEB: Ah. I really am sorry to hear that, kid.

CHAS: Hey, it's fine. You know me, I don't give a fuck.

ZEB: That's what your songs tell me, anyway.

CHAS: I've gotten shat on before. I can take it.

I was a chump to let it happen again, that's all.

ZEB: Don't take it too hard, son. I had an old bandmate who used to say, love's a bitch. You gotta keep away from her. Trouble about that is, she's also a slut.

CHAS: Not right now, Zeb.

ZEB: What?

CHAS: I appreciate what you're trying to do, but...talking like that doesn't do me any good.

ZEB: Talking like what? Oh, come on, kid.

You're free at least, right? You don't have to let that whore control how you talk, and how you think. You don't have to buy into her PC bullshit anymore.

CHAS: Okay, one, it's not bullshit. It's important to me, and if you're my friend, you'll respect that.

Two, call her a whore again and I'll tear your fucking head off.

*They stare at each other for a moment; ZEB is more surprised than intimidated. Then they resume their work.*

ZEB: Okay, Chas. I know you just got fucked, and you're hurting, and I'm here for you. But the least you could do for yourself is man up and be the person you are, not the one she wanted you to be.

CHAS: Don't give me the 'real man' shit, Zeb. I'm not having it.

ZEB: Hear me out, kid.

CHAS: I work my ass off, you know, and I can lift and haul as well as any macho jerkoff here. Let them call me a fag for dating a girl like And and a cuckold for losing her. Maybe they're right. But I'm still every bit as much a man as any of them. And I'll drop the first one that says it to my face.

ZEB: Violent much today, Chas?

*CHAS holds up a bandaged hand.*

CHAS: That kind of morning.

ZEB: Listen, nobody's calling you anything, kid. Just let me ask you this. Whatever you really believe in, whoever you really are; didn't you try to be the way she liked you best?

CHAS: Well—yeah, sure.

ZEB: Try to make that the most important part of yourself? Didn't you?

CHAS: I guess so.

ZEB: You're not the first. And as much as you tried to give her that, muster as much of that part of yourself as you could, she still went and found it somewhere else.

CHAS: Thanks, Zeb.

ZEB: Kid, I've known a lot of fellas who went through what you're going through. Good guys, strong guys, great, bold men, nuts the size of cannonballs. Not a single one of them got mistreated like that without feeling like they got their bag chopped right off.

You tried hard, but she didn't respect what you were trying to do. She took everything you'd worked for and ran off with it. She ran off with your nuts.

CHAS: She what? She ran off with...?

ZEB: Your nuts. And now you've got to take them back.

*A HIPSTER appears in the doorway to the floor of the store.*

HIPSTER: Hey, is there somewhere I can leave some zines?

CHAS: Yeah, bookshelf by the front door. Ten copies max.

*The HIPSTER disappears. CHAS stares blankly after him for a few moments, then turns back to ZEB.*

CHAS: ...I've got to take my nuts back?

ZEB: Understand what I'm saying, kid. Everything you worked for with that girl, it's as much yours as it is hers. She doesn't take it away from you when she goes. So if it's something good, you haven't lost it. And if you don't like it, then you can let it go.

Knowing what to keep and what to leave, after the shitstorm passes: that's what being a man is.

CHAS: Is it now?

ZEB: It is. It ain't easy, kid, but it's your task and it's the only thing that'll let you move on.

CHAS: I guess that's a better definition than you'll get from some assholes.

But you know I generally think that's all such a bunch of shit.

ZEB: I know. You're a little dick about those sorts of things.

CHAS: Particularly when it comes to women. Like, 'A real man only does what he promises x-percent of the time, or he's whipped. He only shows what he's really feeling this amount of the time, or he's weak. He only fucks women in one of these two ways, or he's a sissy bitch.'

But still, I always had my own ideas of how a man should be honorable with a woman. Like being absolutely loyal. And being honest, about your past and about your intentions. And sticking things out, even when situations changed or needs changed or people changed.

Those were things I thought a mature, responsible adult should be committed to in a relationship. Somehow I thought if you could get all that right, the rest would follow. I guess you can't necessarily expect anyone else to meet you halfway.

ZEB: Chas, you always talk about how you think everyone is full of shit and feeling is pointless and all that. I don't know that I ever believed you.

CHAS: You don't have to. It's just what I think.

ZEB: I mean, I don't think you actually believe that.

CHAS: Don't I.

ZEB: There are two kinds of cynics in this world, kid. Some folks who really think the world is shit, people are shit, everyone's an asshole, themselves included, and all you can really do to get some peace is to screw someone else and not think twice because they'd do the same to you. That's a real cynic, from the Latin *cynicus*, meaning 'actual genuine douchebag'.

CHAS: I didn't know they douched in ancient Rome.

ZEB: Shut up a minute. That's not you, Chas.

CHAS: What am I, then?

ZEB: There's another kind, and they say the world is shit too, but not because that's just the way it is. They actually think everything could be just swell if people could get their

heads out of their asses and act decent for two seconds. But when that doesn't happen, they get bitter.

CHAS: So then they become actual, genuine douchebags.

ZEB: I don't think so. Bottom line is, they're idealists. That goes down to the blood. No matter how bad they get it, they can't stop dreaming.

Matter fact, if they'd had better luck of it, they might not be all that different from a Romantic.

CHAS: I'm not a fucking Romantic, Zeb.

ZEB: I wasn't saying you were, kid. It's just something to think about.

I think there's worse things you could get called, though.

*Shot overlooking the bookshelf CHAS mentioned, with CHAS and ZEB visible in the back room. The zine that the HIPSTER left is Lover's Press #8: Dancing with Myself.*

→ It started with Summer.

I saw her in a club, not my old one, that's closed now, but a dance place called The Hip Joint.

I saw her right away, and she saw me.

I looked away quickly, pretended not to have noticed, and strode right past, easy and oblivious.

That's what I tried to do. I knew right away that I'd botched it. You dolt, I sneered inwardly. She fucking saw you looking. Once that happens, all you can do is go for the jugular, lock eyes and pull yourself into them.

Look away, and they know you haven't got an ounce more of command than you ever did. All your hang-ups are taken down and laid out in the most worthless and pitiable way. Well, I thought, now that I'd basically thrown the game right from the start, there was only one thing to do.

→ I danced. I dance the way all my lovers have collectively taught me to dance.

Don't warm up, begin abruptly and forcefully.

Look all around, but not at anyone.

Act as if your own movements amaze you as they come out of your body, hypnotize you, excite you as you expect them to excite anyone else.

When you abort, let all trace of interest fall from your face and form like a coat crumpling to the floor.

This, too, I knew would not work. Summer had taught me too much. Not looking at her once, I knew she was still there at her sniper's post by the door, not-looking at me back, her simple feigned lack of notice assuring her continued monopoly on coolness.

→ Oh, what is it about Summer, anyway? Why has that season always demanded a love affair so badly? Even as August is reached and the weeks slide away and desperation bubbles, those scarce remaining days still always seemed to hold such long, timeless promise.

Like the old cliché, there was so little to do and it was too hot to do it anyway, it was all you really *could* do to make love day in and day out. That's an awful lot of lovemaking and that's all summer was, an eternity of lazy, singular passion, but with an inescapable conclusion. Just like love, I guess: infinity with an endpoint.

But what does that mean when you're like me, carrying around fragments of one summer for years after? Are those pieces restorable, as alive as the season blooming anew each year? Or as decisive and dead as the stroke of autumn and each fallen leaf?

→ There is one little way I have about me that I didn't learn from any of my lovers, and that's the willingness (read weakness) to be rather explicit about some of my more shameful internal demands.

Summer (the girl) knew about this quality of mine, and though it would never change the outcome of any of the other contests she invariably trumped me in, I knew it horrified her. That was what allowed me to storm up to her and seethe as I did.

Look, you, I spoke tightly. Look at me again. I'm so much more than I was. I'm not the contemptible fool who imagined some significance into your tricks. I have no wish to put into you with any real part of me. But I'm no prude, either. I am none of those loathsome things anymore, and more of everything you desired then, and I knew your desire then. Won't you end this please?

I glared throughout the delivery of my speech, but as soon as it stopped all boldness drained from me. What a lousy super-power this truly is, I remarked to myself.

I quit her gaze and quit the place, knowing that there wasn't a soul alive that could end what she'd begun in me those seasons ago, not even Summer herself.

*Cut to LEE and BOB walking towards Helping Hands.*

LEE: Thanks for coming with, Bob. Rea and I were going to go earlier, but—

BOB: No problem, man. I know you said things were a little tense.

LEE: Yeah, a little—no, not tense. Yeah, tense. I don't know why though.

BOB: What, did something happen?

LEE: No, just...I think we're both starting to want different things. Both of us.

BOB: Like you want to live different places now, or what?

LEE: Or not even starting. Just realizing that there's more things that we want.

BOB: Oh. Not different, but more.

LEE: Yeah, but I don't think that means we can't still have what we've got, you know? I mean, we worked for a lot together, and that took time. But we don't lose that when we try different things. We didn't lose that. At least, I don't think we did.

BOB: Lee, I'm not going to understand a damn thing you're saying unless you tell me what the fuck you're talking about.

*They've entered the shop and now see Lover's Press #9: Best Friend's Girl on the shelf.*

LEE: Oh, I haven't seen this one yet.

BOB: This one of what?

*ZEB walks up to greet the two.*

ZEB: Hey, who let these bums in the door? Don't you have jobs, you degenerates?

LEE: This from a representative of an organization that provides job training and placement to people who experience barriers to employment.

BOB: Fuck that academic bullshit, Lee. I'll tell this asshole—Mister, we've got jobs. We're hardworking professional musicians.

*ZEB and BOB engage in a jovial masculine embrace.*

ZEB: Professional wankers and drug addicts? How the hell you been, you shitty son of a bitch?

BOB: Still shitty as ever, Zeb. Eight days a week.

ZEB: Alright, that's the good news. Still playing that devil's music?

BOB: I think even the devil might not want his kids listening to the sick shit we do.

ZEB: Okay, son, just tell me this: you still playing it loud?

BOB: The only way I know how.

ZEB: And fast?

BOB: Like my women.

ZEB: Thank fuck for that. This motherfucker, all he ever plays is slow, and quiet, and still weird as all fuck. Like he's trying to give an alien a hard-on.

LEE: I appreciate that, Zeb.

ZEB: Just taking the piss outta you, kid. I wouldn't keep getting you billed if you were *completely* useless.

LEE: Hey, whatever. Laugh if you like, but I'm making song for the revolution.

BOB: Come on, dude, don't start that.

LEE: Revolution has to take place in form *and* content. All your I – IV – Vs and your generic outrage and empty salvations, that's the fucking machine. Good luck transforming our society with that shit.

BOB: Okay, Lee, I might not've gone to private liberal arts school, but I can go toe-to-toe with you on pseudo-intellectual punk rock social change 'theory' any day and thrice on Sunday, so don't even try.

Also, let me know the day a song about a girl wiping her ass with your heart constitutes a revolutionary treatise.

ZEB: Love to stay and watch the catfight, ladies, but there's man's work that needs getting done. Load-in at 8:30, alright Lee?

LEE: Gotcha. Thanks, Zeb.

*ZEB leaves, LEE and BOB peruse the clothes.*

Low blow with the ass-wiping, Bob.

BOB: I'm sorry. You seemed like you needed an anchor though.

LEE: You're not telling me anything I don't know. What, you think I don't wish I could make art that had farther reaching meaning? Art that I could actually say served some purpose, and wasn't just completely self-indulgent?

BOB: No, man, I wasn't trying to diss what you do. I like your songs, at least parts of them. Maybe they're not about, you know, the class struggle, but they're you. You write what you know.

LEE: That's not enough, though. I don't know enough.

BOB: It has to be. It's all you can do.

And as far as self-indulgence goes, I'd say that's in your hands. It's a choice you make.

LEE: I don't make music that's completely off-the-wall just to make my audience feel stupid. I do it because I want it to mean something. To be different from all this copied, remanufactured shit that all leads back to the same inconsequential conclusions.

You should understand that as well as I do, Mister "I play shit that'll give you arrhythmia if you try to dance to it."

BOB: I do understand that. But at least when I see kids rocking out at our shows, I can tell they're feeling it. They're feeling something.

LEE: A bunch of drunk assholes kicking the shit out of each other to a brand new beat. Yeah, that's something.

*BOB thumps his heart with a fist.*

BOB: Listen, all I know is this: you've got to get them fucking *here* first. You don't have shit without it.

Of course you've got to challenge them, too, but this intellectual, elitist shit you're talking about, it goes beyond that. It's alienating, man.

LEE: Hmh.

*They silently go through the shirts some more. Then LEE holds one up, the front away from the camera.*

What do you think of this shirt?

*BOB shrugs.*

BOB: It's you.

*Cut to depiction of Lover's Press #9: Best Friend's Girl.*

→ It was still only 11:00 when I'd left, plenty time enough to dilute the rest of the night with lighter experiences before meeting with my love.

But, I was in a bit of a state: depressed, sure, embarrassed, superlatively, but strangely and quite unjustifiably hopeful.

So I called an old friend. I called on my old high school Sweetheart.

It's been ages now, I know, and that was just high school, but even diplomas and degrees and doctorates later I still sometimes peer at the calendar to realize it's the anniversary of the day she took everything from me.

If you charge that I exaggerate, I hold that to show someone something incredible, make them believe it against all sounder logic, and then make it disappear, is pretty much the ultimate in thievery.

But that doesn't make it a crime; if anyone fouled it was me.

It took me a long time to understand that, everything had seemed so right at the time. Not that it's a moral correctitude to try to get your best friend's girl to fall in love with you, but somehow the sheer improbability of that eventual outcome suggested a mock sense of righteousness and even sanctity to our scandal.

I couldn't believe it, or rather I couldn't believe that I believed it, but then I actually found that I could, and so I did. And what does a kid do the first time he finds he's able to accept incredulous things? Why, he loses himself in them.

I poured myself into my love and my love into her. In reality, though, it was not love, but idolatry; the object of worship not her, but myself.

Oh, I told her many things, about her beauty, and my passion, and the capacity of the one to inspire the other without so much as a word from her tongue, but it all amounted to a grand description of my emotional breadth.

There's a not inconsiderable number of other reasons that our relationship was slated for failure, but this was the one on my mind tonight.

→ We agreed to meet for a cup of joe at West Grand, where we played chess poorly and shot the shit.

She mused about her lack of plans for the following evening, then about two relationships of hers that had come and gone since the one we shared. Both of them had lasted much longer than our own, and used to make me wince.

Now I smile. We never reflect what we used to be, and what we are now bears almost no common thread of emotion and certainly none of rapport.

I say almost for the first, though, because for my part there are some legacies that cannot be lived down, and being the first girl to set my world ablaze like that and leave me with a smoldering memory as sharp and enormous as any hero's tale is one such case.

I am uncomfortably aware that this is an undesired distinction and threatens even our current friendship with its implications of non-recognition, so I decide not to mention it.

Instead I relate as casually as I can the debacle at The Hip Joint, and explain another time why and how Sylvia and I permit each other to take lovers.

→ For all of my Sweetheart's apparent bewilderment at my circumstance, I have to believe that she understood something of it.

I noticed immediately when her foot came to rest upon mine under the table. Well, that's fine, I thought.

It stayed there for maybe a minute, substantial, conscious, radiant.

Then it pulled back, and I thought that's fine too, retracting my own as an invisible symbolic gesture.

This wasn't the first time something like this had happened, and though they weren't frequent occurrences I felt they were growing to be more so.

You might think that such an instance would provoke mixed feelings in me, but this was not the case. My feelings were clear, uncontroversial, and uncharacteristically patient.

Oh, Sweetheart, my mind started. I wouldn't refuse you. We're not the ones we were, and this has nothing to do with that. Only that I owe you something. I'm not angry, Sweetheart; anger is for Summer, not for you. Whatever I might have accused you of taking away from me, you gave me so much more. You showed me how to love and how to lose, and I will never learn those things for the first time again. I promised you so much, Sweetheart, but I didn't do right. I didn't know how to then, but I know now. I owe you so much. I won't try to pay it back unless you tell me that's what you want, but if you give me that chance, Sweetheart, oh, I would not refuse...

→ And so on.

Once this line of internal rambling has been activated in me, it can't really be turned off, so it continued at a hushed volume underneath the rest of our conversation, though slowly breaking down into non-linguistic articulations and non-linear patterns.

At one the coffee shop closed, and we parted.

I headed back to the apartment I share with Sylvia, a journey which always feels like a pilgrimage on nights that I've been a flirt. I knew I was ready to write again.

Now I have and it's time that my love came home, and come she does.

*Cut to shots of CHAS sitting in the break room of Helping Hands, reading Lover's Press #10: Post-Script with a furrowed brow. After a few moments, ZEB enters.*

ZEB: Boss says you're clear. Go on and clock out.

CHAS: You still want me to come after the show tonight?

ZEB: Yeah, should be done by 11, 11:30. Stop on by.

CHAS: Thanks, Zeb. Peace.

*CHAS punches out and walks out of the break room, out of the store, and towards his car. A figure gets out of a parked car and moves to intercept him. It's CECE.*

CECE: Chas.

*CHAS turns to see her, is startled at first, then settles into his expressionless anger.*

CHAS: Why are you here?

CECE: I wanted to talk. And told me this was where I could find you.

CHAS: Now you have. But there's nothing to talk about.

CECE: I wanted to tell you first of all that I'm sorry.

CHAS: Thanks.

CECE: I mean that. I really am.

CHAS: I said thank you.

CECE: Second of all, you've got to take And back.

CHAS: The dick I do.

CECE: Chas, she spent the whole day at my apartment crying her eyes out.

CHAS: Yeah, I know what happens then.

CECE: I understand that you're upset right now, and you have every right to be. And fucked up, she knows that. But it was one mistake, and she's sorry. It's nothing that would ever happen again.

CHAS: Don't worry, it's not going to. Not to me, anyway.

CECE: If you hate me, Chas, I accept that. I did you a serious injury.

The whole mess is my fault, I know. I was completely selfish, I took advantage of a vulnerable moment, and that makes me a shitty friend as well. So if you hate me, I understand.

But you can't let that anger hurt what you have with And. I'm telling you that girl is committed to you, and you've got too many good things going for you in this relationship to throw it all away. She loves yo—

CHAS: Don't...use that word, CeCe.

CECE: What, love? That's what it is, Chas. Love. She loves you.

CHAS: Don't fucking use that word! You don't what the fuck that word means!

CECE: You asshole.

CHAS: Asshole, huh. Yeah, you're so sorry.

CECE: No, fuck you, alright? It's so fucking simple in your mind, isn't it? When a girl is yours, she's got to really be yours, right? She belongs to you like anything else. Somebody else touches her, that's trespassing on private property, isn't it?

CHAS: Don't you dare make this political, CeCe! You don't fucking know our relationship! I put my faith and my trust in her, and she broke them both. That's it.

CECE: So she slips up once in an extremely emotional state, and now she's damaged goods. Totally irredeemable. Yeah, I get it. You know, just the fact that you're so willing to give up shows how much less you're actually committed to the relationship.

Go ahead and hold onto your stubbornness and your wounded pride like they actually mean something, like there's something noble about it. And you dare to tell me I don't know about love? I know more about what it means to love than most people ever—

*She stops herself, thinks a moment, then resolves. She looks directly at CHAS.*

I've been in love with And since the day I met her.

That was almost four years ago. I've seen her through all kinds of clowns she's dated, and I've hardly gotten into anything else that could be considered a relationship. I've loved her for the better part of the time that I've known I'm gay. So I think I know a little bit about what it means to stand by someone through some changes.

CHAS: I kind of liked her in high school.

CECE: Don't bullshit me, Chas. And told me you hardly remembered her when you came into the clinic that day.

*Flashback to five months earlier in the Lindellwood Women's Clinic.*

CHAS: Hi, uh, I need to buy, um, one of those 'morning after' pills...

AND: Charlie Johnston?

CHAS: What? Yeah?

*Present.*

CECE: Do you have any idea what that's like? To want someone that badly, to know so clearly what amazing things the two of you could share, and to not even register on their radar of possibilities worth consideration?

CHAS: And can't help that she doesn't like girls, CeCe.

CECE: I don't believe that. Not anymore. She might not admit it, especially not now, but I know there was something there before.

*Showing flashback pictures of them chatting comfortably.*

We used to talk for hours about what we were curious about.

*Shot of AND and CECE with arms around each other's waists.*

And I know a friend's touch from the other kind as well as any straight person.

Of course, we'd go on like that for months, inching closer and closer, until some loser with a Y-chromosome would pop up in her life, and then she'd be as distant as China. Not a single one of them was ready to stay the course with her the way I was. J.C. proved that, and now you're all set and ready to prove it too.

CHAS: Do you think we could break from the reaming for a second so you could tell me who the fuck this J.C. guy was?

CECE: You really don't know And at all, do you?

CHAS: So I'm told.

CECE: She started dating J.C. pretty early on freshman year. Apparently they'd known each other back in high school, but never got together because he lived in some podunk town in the middle of the state.

I actually met And through J.C., when I think about it, because he was a double major in music performance and studio art, and he'd bring her to all the concerts. After she and I became friends, I saw a lot of him.

I don't know what to say about the guy though. And won't hear anything bad about him, she says he got her through some hard times back when. Me, I think when your old best friend knocks you up and then hauls ass to California, you need to do some re-evaluating.

CHAS: And that's why she dropped out, after all.

CECE: Of course, she was frustrated with school, all of us were, but she was the most reluctant to just get out. This unexpected turn of events was definitely a catalyst.

CHAS: But And didn't have any kid...right?

CECE: Do you know where we work, Chas?

CHAS: So, that's how you all got started there.

CECE: Yeah. Not that it mattered to J.C.; he ghosted just the same.

CHAS: Maybe he had other reasons.

CECE: That was just the first, Chas. I can't count how many more times this shit happened. Not the unwanted pregnancy part each time, but...

It was watching And that I learned, really learned, that it didn't matter how gentle, or non-assertive, or politically aware a guy was, or pretended to be, because in the end they still would all still treat a girl the same way: like something to be expended and discarded. The only difference was how long it took to use her up. Maybe it was naïve of me to think you might be different.

Every time, she'd get hurt, and she'd cry on me; and I'd hold her, the way a friend's supposed to, until she was okay. Then she and I would be back at square one. And I was tired of that. I was tired of her running from what she wanted, and I was tired of letting her. So I did what I did, and though I'm sorry I don't imagine most people would've done any different.

CHAS: So what's the problem? Why don't you just take her then? You got what you wanted, and what you probably deserved all this time. So take her.

CECE: I can't take her.

CHAS: Why not?

CECE: Because she's not mine. She's yours. At least, she wants to be. I was wrong last night. Not wrong to do what I did—well, maybe—but wrong about what And wanted. If there was a right time to kiss that girl for everything I had, it'd passed before you came around. The whole night was a sham, and now I've hurt her, I've hurt my love, I've hurt myself. Convincing you to have her back might be all I can do for forgiveness, and even that might not suffice. That girl fucking loves you, Chas, and if you won't fucking take her back after everything I've just said—

*She's so worked up she is paralyzed for a moment.*

—then you're a fuck.

*She glares at him for a moment, then wheels around, gets back in her car, and promptly drives away. CHAS remains mostly without expression for a long time, but now he's trying to calmly weigh his conflicting emotions rather than just shut them out in favor of an impenetrable façade.*

*Cut to cover of Lover's Press #10: Post-Script.*

→ The next day I scrawl an addendum before heading to the copy shop. It was just like I said it would be.

We ate a big meal we had jointly prepared that afternoon, and she asked me about my evening.

She grimaced sympathetically when I told her about Summer, and grinned when I talked about my Sweetheart. Just like I predicted, she didn't understand why it was wrong.

Maybe you don't either. This isn't about honesty or trust or commitment or any other simple contract. It's about what's been given, and what it means, and what's owed for it.

I know the truth I speak when I boast the strength I've gained, because I didn't muster it on my own. It's the strength Sylvia gave to me, or at least helped me build.

But now that I have it, what I need more than anything is to show it to those who only know my weakness, even as I know that my need *is* my weakness and by following it I undermine my strength, I break its power, but even after it's broken I keep pretending it's not because the simple fact is that I want them to desire me, the way they did before they turned away in disdain, I want them to see that what repelled them so has been purged

from me, though of course it hasn't at all because by this point all I'm doing is faking with a broken, borrowed strength, a parody of Sylvia's gift and our creation, and I'm as spineless as ever I've been.

That is my betrayal, and for it I truly am ashamed.

But Sylvia always takes my shame for pain; she lavishes me with understanding, and it is only at these moments that I still feel that she understands me not at all.

→ Yet, I am still one year wiser than last you read me, and I've learned not to balk at disillusionment so. After awhile I gave up trying to explain to Sylvia exactly what I thought was awry in my nature.

We made love for the rest of the night instead, and thank goodness for that, because it always seems like the more love I have the more I give it away, and then the more we have to make the next time, and I just don't know how likely it is that I'll ever be able to stop. You may find that funny but I find it terrifying.

My one comfort comes in the recurrence of paradox, like limits on the infinite, truth of the fantastic, so that perhaps I might find strength in terrific things.

*Cut to the outside of the Radio Lounge, the TONIGHT'S BILL sign reading 'LIE JOHNSTON. In the next shot, LEE is sitting backstage, reading Lover's Press #1: Genesis. He's wearing the shirt he found at Helping Hands. The front is covered with various slang terms for female sex organs, some of them derogatory, with the bold heading TAKE IT BACK. He finishes the last page of the issue, then looks over to a table which is covered with the other issues of the zine, #10 somewhere near the top. LEE addresses the latter issue.*

LEE: So, one more time: how'd you get there...

*Looks back to the issue in his hand.*

...from here?

*REA has entered silently and now speaks up.*

REA: They can't hear you, Lee. They don't know they're dead.

LEE: Jesus, you surprised me. How, why are you here? Don't you have work?

REA: I figured if they were going to put me on graveyard again this week, they could stand for me to be a little late. Thought I'd try to catch the start of your set.

LEE: Oh...well, thanks—

REA: What's this shirt you're wearing?

LEE: Do you like it? I got it at Helping Hands this afternoon.

REA: I thought we were going to go together.

LEE: But then you said you had a bunch of other stuff, so I asked Bob to go.

REA: So why'd you get that? What is it to you?

LEE: I dunno. Trying to fight the good fight.

REA: Great. You're my fucking hero.

LEE: I'm sorry, I don't understand—

REA: I don't know. Just...forget it.

I feel like there was still something unresolved this morning, even though we said it was fine. I was thinking about what we said—

LEE: Yeah, I've been thinking about it a lot, too.

REA: —and I think that maybe we ought to wait a little while. To see what we feel like after this stuff sinks in a bit.

LEE: I was actually—I think this is pretty important now.

REA: What?

LEE: I mean, don't you think—doesn't it seem like these things that are coming up now have been there for awhile, beneath the surface?

REA: I don't know. No. Is that how you feel?

LEE: You know how I am, how I've always been. An emotional butterfly.

REA: I don't know what you're trying to say.

LEE: I don't mean that I'm not still committed to you. I am. It's just...this whole time we've been together, you know I've always felt so many things, and never acted on them...

REA: If you want to leave, Lee, be plain about it.

LEE: I don't want that. I think we can both get what we want, and still keep what we've got.

REA: I don't really know if it works like that.

LEE: It's a scary idea, I know, but listen to what I'm trying to say—

REA: I know what you're trying to say, Lee, but I don't think that's something I can deal with. I just don't.

LEE: You were the one who said you were becoming more interested in girls. I thought you would want this. I thought if anything this would be easier for you than it is for me.

REA: It's something I'm interested in. I never told you that all of a sudden it was something I needed. And even if it was, I wouldn't want you to say it was okay when it wasn't, just so you could get something else you wanted.

LEE: That's not what I'm doing. It's not. I just...let's just think about this for a bit.

REA: That's what I said. We should think about it.

*They stand tensely for a moment. It's clear that neither of them is feeling great about the situation or mood. Then, from the stage comes Zeb's voice.*

ZEB: Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention please!

LEE: Um...that's gonna be me, in a second.

REA: Don't let me hold you up.

ZEB: Welcome to the Radio Lounge, in conjunction with 88.1 KDHY, broadcasting live music over South City every Friday since 1995.

LEE: Can I come by the diner after the show?

REA: I told you, my boss is an asshole about that.

ZEB: You might recall tonight's fez-adorned primate from a local teen-pop sensation a few years back, The Velveteens.

LEE: After your shift then, maybe?

REA: At six in the morning?

ZEB: He spent the last four learning about dead Germans, and tonight if we're lucky we might get to see him in the judge wig.

*LEE gestures to the stage entrance.*

LEE: I have to do this.

REA: Me too.

ZEB: Ladies and jerks, please welcome to the stage: Lee Johnston!

*REA saves LEE the trouble of having to uncomfortably abandon her by turning away briskly and walking out of the venue. LEE watches her for a moment, then heads for the stage.*

*LEE comes onstage to courteous applause. It's a good turnout: substantially more than the last time (twenty), and the smallish venue is reasonably well-filled. LEE is a bit surprised, smiles and nods/bows, and surveys the crowd momentarily. Faces of persons LEE wishes were in attendance are shown: REA, then BOB, then CELIA, then JOEL. None of them are present. LEE sits down, picks up his guitar, and begins.*

*Shots of LEE's set follow. He pours his current emotional hardships into his performance, and shots of the audience seem to reveal that it's somewhat effective. The final shot shows the lyrics to one of his songs.*

Give me this just once, sweet heart, I'll never want again.  
And all these flames consuming me, you'd put them to an end.  
Just douse me something wonderful, make hallowed all this shame.  
Or else just smolder hotter still, I'm swallowed all the same.

Give me just this once, dear heart, I'll never ask again.  
So long I've tried to choke it back, but now I can't pretend.  
There's none other more dear to me. I never turned away.  
But whether far or near you be, I'll always burn this way.

Give me this at last, my heart; let me be satisfied.  
It isn't fair that eyes so full should be the saddest eyes.  
Odds that you could pay me out are scarcely one in ten.  
So strike me one to lay me out to never want again.

*Shot of LEE setting down guitar to moderately riotous applause. He heads backstage, a little stunned at the audience and himself, but generally feeling pretty good. ZEB claps him on the shoulder.*

ZEB: Alright then, kid. You did it.

LEE: Yeah...I tried.

ZEB: Hey, I know that sound when I hear it. So be proud.

That last one, that a new song?

LEE: Actually, that was the Velveteens. Only old song on the set.

ZEB: Huh. Sounded new.

*Cut to LEE selling his recordings at a merch table. ZEB is packing up the sound equipment.*

LEE: So, five for the EP and three for the tape, that's eight dollars. Thanks for supporting local artists.

*As he puts the money in a cashbox, a GIRL approaches.*

GIRL: Hi.

LEE: Hello. How are you doing tonight?

GIRL: I'm doing well. I just wanted to tell you I really loved your set.

LEE: Thank you very much. Did you want to purchase an album?

GIRL: No, I don't have any cash on me. But it was really amazing. I like your shirt, too.

LEE: Oh, this...thanks.

GIRL: What makes you wear something like that, in front of all these people?

LEE: Well, it was either this or "This is what a feminist looks like", and this one matched my tie...

GIRL: Haha. So you're a feminist, huh?

LEE: I think so. Or trying to be.

GIRL: That's pretty...ballsy, in a way.

LEE: I'm just trying to challenge the norm, I guess. Be accountable for the way things are, and do what I can to make it better.

GIRL: That's really great of you. Hey, I have to go meet some friends at Muse, but I don't know if you feel like having drinks—

*ZEB calls to LEE from the stage.*

ZEB: Little help with the strike, diva?

LEE: Um...I better not. But, uh, here.

*He hands her one of his CDs.*

Most of the stuff I played tonight was from this one.

GIRL: Oh, I couldn't—

LEE: Come to the next show, we'll call it even.

GIRL: That sounds nice. It was great to meet you...Lie?

LEE: Lee, actually. Spelled Lie, pronounced Lee. From Charlie.

GIRL: Good to meet you, Charlie. I'll see you soon.

*LEE and ZEB both watch her leave.*

ZEB: Miss Apostoloff not letting it go?

LEE: What? No. I mean, no, she's not *not* letting—you know what I mean.

ZEB: You're beautiful when you falter, sweetie pie, but how about the truth?

LEE: It has nothing to do with sex.

ZEB: Better. I almost believed you.

LEE: Fuck, Zeb. It has *almost* nothing to do with sex, alright?

ZEB: Then why you lettin' your eyes wander, son?

LEE: I'm not.

ZEB: A straying man and a staying man are as different as an ass and a titmouse, Lee. And I can tell the difference.

LEE: She was just a nice girl.

ZEB: You don't know a thing about her. You didn't even get her name.

LEE: ...

ZEB: No, you didn't. I heard. And I heard your little exchange before the set, and it didn't sound like marriage vows either.

LEE: Okay, Zeb, you caught me. My previously perfect relationship is getting all fucked up for no apparent reason, and I'm standing here tugging my limp dick, letting it happen.

ZEB: Forgive me for dropping the eaves, Lee, but you didn't sound half that clueless about the source of the problem earlier. Sounded like you knew exactly what you wanted, in fact.

LEE: So what do you do about that? Suddenly you want something so bad you're almost ready to throw away the best, surest thing in your life. But you're not fucking crazy, or at least you hope not. What do you do, except try to work with what you've got?

ZEB: That's absolutely all you can do. Nothing truer in this world. But, one word of caution, kid:

Just make sure you're not trying to clean a turd.

LEE: I've heard this a hundred times from you, Zeb. I think three and a half years is enough time for me to deduce whether my romance is glorified excrement or not.

ZEB: That's your problem, Lee, is you don't listen: I'm not talking about polishing a turd. I'm talking about cleaning one.

LEE: I insist that you edify me as to the distinction, right now.

ZEB: Well, assume with me for a moment, if you will, that a turd is not an inherently bad or evil thing. Maybe it can be used in moral or immoral ways, but as itself, it is what it is.

LEE: Sure, I owned a Green Day album or two growing up. Fine.

ZEB: That said, it's still got some objective characteristics about it, things that define it, make it what it is. Am I right?

LEE: It's not cotton candy. Never will be.

ZEB: You don't got to act so smart, kid. I want you to take a second, right now, to ponder what would happen if you tried to clean this thing. This turd.

LEE: Well, I imagine it would—

ZEB: Ah, ah, ah! Take a second. Think about it.

*LEE begrudgingly complies, and they stand in silence for a few foments.*

What do you got?

LEE: ...I guess it would be pretty difficult.

ZEB: No. It would be *impossible*. A turd is a fundamentally unclean thing, Lee. I don't mean that as a derogatory statement against turds, that's just one of its properties.

Now, you can polish a turd just fine. There's no theory in physics that says a turd can't shine. Might not be worth your while, but you can do it. But if you tried to clean one, not only would it never work, but you know what else would happen?

LEE: ...No.

ZEB: You'd probably destroy it in the process.

*They stand silently for a little while. LEE is processing ZEB's advice in terms of his relationship in spite of its crude vehicle. Then, finally:*

LEE: Zeb...

I think, in spite of your obsession with relating everything in life back to the human sexual anatomy and function,

I think that is the grossest thing I have ever heard you say.

*ZEB grins.*

ZEB: Think about it, kid. I just remembered something I have to take care of.

*ZEB heads for the bathroom.*

LEE: Don't forget to wash that filthy, filthy fucking mouth! Sicko.

*LEE reflects on his disgust a few moments longer, then resumes thinking about his situation. After an interval, he starts calling to ZEB.*

Okay, so how do you know if that's what you've got?

Of course, if it is, then it's clear. You've just got to recognize it for that, and...you know...“shit or get off the pot,” I guess, for lack of a non-fecal adage.

But how can you tell? Sure, some things can never change, but others just need time, and care, and how can you know whether that's possible, or fair, or worthwhile...

*He looks over at the table with the collected issues of the zine.*

...or how to even go about it in the first place?

*LEE pauses, then realizes that ZEB has not responded in awhile. He laughs.*

How you doing in there, old man?

*No response. He grows a little anxious.*

Are you okay?

*Simultaneously feels a little ridiculous.*

Do you...need...help?

*LEE finally resolves to enter the bathroom. It is small and without stalls, and is inexplicably and unquestionably empty. LEE is understandably shocked. Then, an unidentified voice from off-panel calls out:*

VOICE: Zeb?

*Cut to text of Lover's Press #1. This is the only issue that is interrupted by dialogue from the characters.*

Listen to this. Her name is Sylvia.

No, it's not actually, but that's not important either. What's important is that there be a document of all this. A history, starting now.

This isn't the beginning, but it's close enough. You'll forgive me for not recognizing the germ right when it alighted, but give me a little credit too, for telling how blessed a beast this will become, tender though the affair still is.

*Cut to recent flashback of CHAS driving. The clock reads 11:27. He parks in front of the Radio Lounge (the TONIGHT'S BILL sign should not be visible in this shot). CHAS enters and calls out.*

CHAS: Zeb?

Zeb, you here?

*LEE bursts out of the bathroom to stare dumbfounded at CHAS. CHAS reciprocates. If photographs are ultimately used, this scene will obviously require some degree of planning and editing finesse to have the same actor appear twice in some shots.*

*After a few moments, CHAS and LEE seem to both arrive at some kind of wary (mis)understanding of each other. They speak very cautiously.*

LEE: You're here.

CHAS: Where's Zeb?

LEE: Why are you here?

CHAS: I'd ask you the same thing.

LEE: I don't know where Zeb is.

CHAS: What is this?

LEE: I don't know.

You're Charles Franklin Johnston.

CHAS: I go by Chas. And you're...

LEE: Lee.

CHAS: From Charlie.

LEE: Right.

Do you want to get some coffee, or something?

CHAS: Coffee Den?

LEE: The same.

*Cut back to text from Lover's Press.*

When did it hit me? Last night we saw a film about a man stuck in one place and time. It was because he'd forgotten how to be happy, how to be inspired, and he was bound to remain in this single purgative moment until it came back to him.

Then we laid down, a familiar descent by this time, but I was still caught with her face and her forms and patterns I'd only just begun to recognize, let alone understand.

*Cut to shot of LEE and CHAS through the window of West Grand Coffee Den. Throughout the scene, there must be no other people shown, such as waitresses or pedestrians. How they got served freshly brewed coffee will, like other phenomena, remain a mystery.*

*Though they are still very serious, the two seem to have gotten a little more comfortable talking to each other, at least as much as two people who are kind-of-but-not-really the same person should.*

LEE: Still, you did what I never could. Struck out west, never looked back.

CHAS: Well, we're back now, me and Robby and...I guess you never knew Kirk. I know what you mean though. Usually I don't regret it.

Just sometimes, I wished I'd known what I was doing before I had to do it.

LEE: Going to music school doesn't really change that. So you know.

CHAS: I wasn't planning on going back.

LEE: You planning on going back to Rea?

CHAS: You mean And?

LEE: Sorry. And. That's kind of weird, by the way.

CHAS: You don't have to tell me.

LEE: I can't believe you've only been together for four months.

CHAS: That doesn't mean this is easy.

LEE: I didn't mean that. It's just that Rea and I have spent so much time together; that seems like so long ago. It's hard to change when someone's been in your life for so long.

CHAS: If you want to leave her, man, leave her already. Don't waste her time.

LEE: Goddamnit, I don't want that. I really don't. I don't know what I want, but it's not that. You know what you want, though.

CHAS: I'm not sure.

LEE: No, you know. Not only that, you know it's perfectly possible. All you have to do is let yourself have it.

CHAS: It's really not that simple.

LEE: CeCe made it sound pretty simple.

CHAS: Lee, cosmic alternate universe twin or not, I will knock you out if you put me through that again today.

*Text.*

This is my moment, I realized. Though never having forgotten anything, I could recover it all here. All the drama and demonstration of yesterlove could go to hell. This is where I keep myself, this gaze, this embrace, train my heart to know life as a single, simple gesture of love; one meaning, deepening not by elaboration, but by dimension. Of course sometimes I'll have to emerge to interpret the shadows, but this is my home, ageless yet ever richer.

*CHAS and LEE.*

LEE: I don't think that's what she was saying—

CHAS: I know what she was saying. I don't hold it against her. And yeah, she's probably right. But my pain is still real, and my disillusionment is too. I can't just ignore them. And anyone who tells me I should is my enemy, and that can include you if it has to.

LEE: I'm not your enemy. I wouldn't do that to you.

CHAS: Yes, you would. You do it to Rea all the time.

LEE: You don't know what you're talking about.

CHAS: Yes, I do. And you know too. You just don't notice right away because you're too busy tooting your own morality horn. Either that, or you're trying to get something you want.

LEE: You don't know what the fuck you're talking about! You don't know what we're going through right now.

CHAS: This is deeper than that, Lee. Be honest with yourself at least.

*LEE is silent. Cut back to text.*

No, it wasn't just then that I knew this was needed. Last night full of clear, brilliant seconds, snapshot memories you could paint a picture from. Maybe it was this afternoon, after the past eve had set in a bit, meaning seeping into feeling, lending wonderful moods to a heavenly, momentless day.

*CHAS and LEE.*

LEE: Yeah, I know.

It's the same with music. I always wanted my stuff to have feeling, of course; but I also wanted it to be bigger, somehow. Bigger than me and my experience; and I guess bigger than my audience and theirs, too.

When people would tell me it didn't move them, or suggest that it was pretentious, I'd write them off. *They* were the ones who were numb, who were too self-important to listen with a larger mind.

But apparently, I've been sabotaging my art as well as my relationship this whole time.

CHAS: I don't think it's like that all the time. Like tonight, you were good. People were listening. I think it was because your heart was there.

LEE: My heart's always there. I don't know how else I can show that.

CHAS: Not when you let guilt control you. Not when all you think about is whether or not you're being 'effective'. Not when you're not yourself.

LEE: I'm always myself. Maybe I'm just not you.

CHAS: I guess not. I'd never wear that shirt.

LEE: What's that supposed to mean?

CHAS: Never mind.

LEE: Please, I'd like to know.

CHAS: Ask your girlfriend.

LEE: Don't hide behind her. That's not what you meant.

You'd never wear this shirt because you can deal with other people calling you a pussy. But you'd hang before you ever did it to yourself.

You know as well as I do, though, it takes more nu—more guts to do that than it does to swagger around crossing swords with any dickhead that tests you.

CHAS: Like Rea said. You're a hero.

LEE: And you're full of shit, Chas! You pretend to be humble and supportive and open to change, but really you buy into masculinity wholesale. You can't let go of it.

CHAS: Well, at least when I'm full of shit, I know it.

LEE: You say that like it's better that way.

CHAS: It can't be worse.

*Text.*

After waking late, we were fixing lunch. I think Sylvia's a poet in the kitchen, though she gets annoyed with me when I tell her so. "It's just noodles with butter and basil," she'll say. To me it's glory.

Acute stimulation and smart shapes are all well and good, but the warm and full and not-solid-not-liquid is where my soul will stay. The nondescript is for me the undescrivable.

Maybe it's that I always think there's something more subtle, something immensely sensitive, beneath such an indiscriminate and gregarious surface.

Or maybe it's much less clever than that. Probably it has more to do simply with the smooth flow from one thing to the next; nothing is static, ever, but change is more easily accepted if one understands that time and transition are not to be distinguished.

*Back to the two. LEE is still pissed off, but CHAS is now curiously amused.*

CHAS: Okay, so we're both pricks. Now what?

Computer, end program.

Lee, it's not like I betrayed you.

LEE: Not personally, no. Just my every principle.

CHAS: Christ, we're not even that different, dude.

Maybe you just can't stand how much of yourself you see in me.

LEE: Only inasmuch as we shared a youthhood. Which you make me embarrassed of.

CHAS: Nobody makes you embarrassed, Lee, except you.

But what are you so ashamed of, anyway? Is it Robby? Is he such a jock now that you can't even look at him, like me?

LEE: You know he's not. Bob's my man.

CHAS: What about everything you two shared growing up? What about getting decked out together for shitty punk shows, prowling for grunge girls?

Hell, what about middle school, wishing to each other you could even talk to girls? What about comparing notes about the first time either of you jerked off?

LEE: Jesus, is there anything you don't know?

CHAS: It's as much mine as it is yours, brother. And I don't think there's anything shameful about it.

LEE: No, I didn't say that. That's just how we grew up.

CHAS: Then don't you miss it, ever, having friends like that? You'll never have that with anyone else. No matter how many close girl friends you have, none of them will ever really understand what that felt like. You'll never be at ease.

LEE: I'm not at ease with guys. I haven't been for years.

CHAS: I know you haven't. But you can't go on like that, Lee.

LEE: And why's that?

CHAS: Because it's no solution. In fact, it's everything you hate. Scorning every male you meet, trying to ingratiate yourself to every girl, whatever your justifications are...

...keep it up long enough, and it's just another cock fight.

*Text.*

All of this was all over every aspect of the afternoon. It was in the tactile drag of the heated air through the winter kitchen, in the grey-blond tones of the walls; and of course it was in the music.

While Sylvia cooked, I did dishes, and we listened to Led Zeppelin II. In a more impressionable time as a young romantic, I used to dismiss the record out of hand, taking all its crassness, musical or otherwise, as completely literal.

Sylvia got my head checked. She taught me to understand more than just the raucousness that I would grow to find endearing; Page and Plant, that is. Mistake me not, I adore the gentlemen, but for me everything comes into focus around John Paul's Fender P and Bonzo with his Ludwig set.

The mellow blend of the bass lines, all mumbling and chuckling and faintly glowing in their sleep; the affectionate thump and the light, smirking race of a kick drum belly and a hi-hat heart.

*CHAS and LEE.*

CHAS: Of course, dudes do stupid shit to piss me off, but I was never willing to do the whole mutual exile thing. Whether that's weak or strong, I can't say. But I knew I'd never escape having to prove and defend myself in those terms.

So it seemed best to just decide what they meant myself. Take these ideals, this 'strength' and 'courage' and 'responsibility', and make myself the person *I* thought I should be. And maybe I could even get a few to follow along.

LEE: But that's bullshit. You know it's bullshit. Whatever worth you try to read into it, it's still this ideology that's hurt so many people. You can't hold up values with such a dishonorable legacy. You're still an atheist, right?

CHAS: Since first grade. You know that.

LEE: It's like people who know how much harm religion has done, but still want all their good works in life to bring glory to something they call 'god'. It's just a word, Chas. We can find a cleaner one.

CHAS: Know what else it's like?

LEE: What?

CHAS: 'Love'.

LEE: I thought you were done with that one.

CHAS: You thought you were done with masculinity, too.

*Text.*

I'm dancing by the time the food's done. The air is alive with smell. For some reason, I can never recall the scent of basil until I'm actually whiffing it. People tell me my sense of taste can't be too fine, with my olfactory so shot. I tell them all to shut it. I know when good things come my way.

They can't always come smoothly, though. I know that too. Sometimes, the good stuff needs to be thrust through our calm and comfort for us to recognize the arrival. Others, it hits like a floor, that by soft degrees a divinity has insinuated itself into one's presence, and there's praising to be done.

*CHAS and LEE are ready to depart.*

LEE: So, is that it? Are we finished?

CHAS: Seems like. What are you going to do?

LEE: Maybe go by the diner.

CHAS: I thought Rea told you not to do that.

LEE: I better anyway. Are you going to see And?

CHAS: First I've got to go back to the Lounge, get my stuff.

LEE: And then?

CHAS: Then, we'll see.

LEE: Okay. I don't know what happened to Zeb, though. He disappeared.

CHAS: What do you mean, he disapp—wait a minute.

LEE: You call him Zeb too.

CHAS: Yeah.

I have no idea what that means though.

LEE: Me either.

*They stand in silence a moment.*

You know, Chas, I don't want to offend you...

...but I haven't really been able to completely buy that you're actually my parallel reality self, and not just a hallucinated projection of my repressions.

CHAS: Why are you worried about offending a figment?

LEE: I was afraid you might jack me.

CHAS: Haha. I might've, if I hadn't been thinking the same thing.

LEE: Well...thanks, anyway. For telling me things I needed to hear.

CHAS: Sure thing.

LEE: I hope I helped you, somehow, to see something new.

CHAS: Nothing new. But you reminded me.

LEE: I don't regret that I didn't turn out like you, though.

CHAS: I don't regret that I did.

*Both smile faintly and begrudgingly, then turn and walk in opposite direction. When each looks over their shoulder, the other is gone. Back to text.*

So I'm mindful as we eat the pasta, which is stellar in its simplicity: an instant prolonging, an understanding swelling, a chime pure and sustained. Still, I know it's changing, always. My heart is open and my pen's poised. I am bright and ready.

**End.**