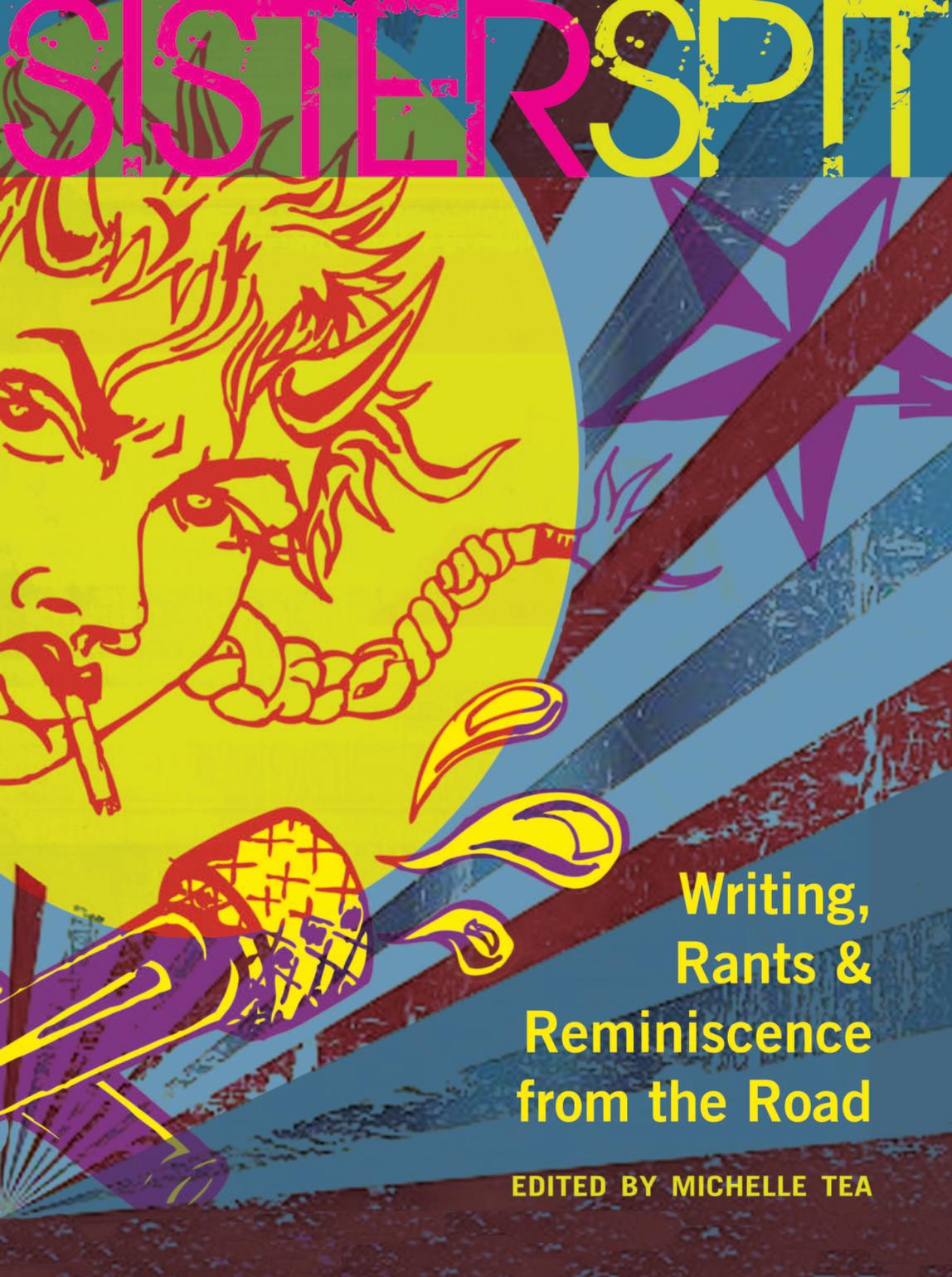


SISTERSPIT



Writing,
Rants &
Reminiscence
from the Road

EDITED BY MICHELLE TEA



SISTER SPIT



**City
Lights**

SISTER SPIT

Writing, Rants & Reminiscence from the Road

Edited by Michelle Tea

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Lights



CITY LIGHTS
SisterSpit
San Francisco

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Lights

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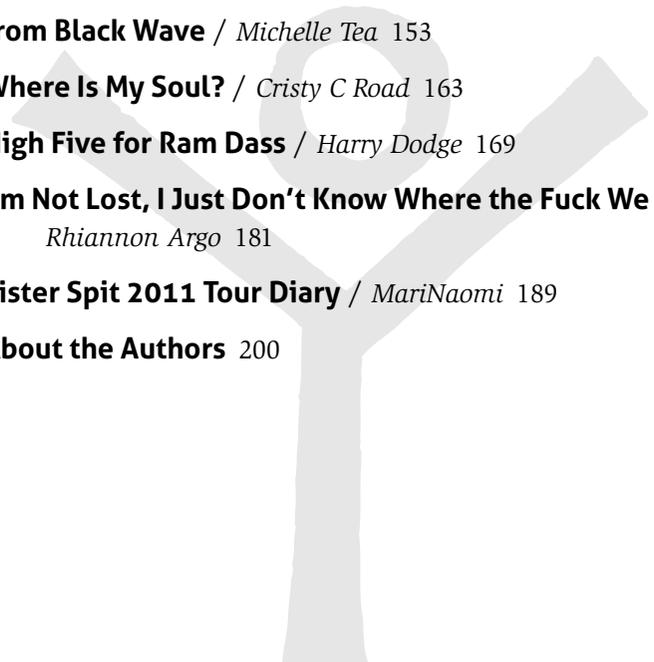
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City Lights



Introduction

I'm writing from inside of the 2012 Sister Spit Van, careening down the 5, on our way to a show tonight at UC Santa Cruz. The students have requested that we all talk about class. Sister Spit has never taken a request before, but this is easy — most Sister Spit shows are about class. About class and being female, or about class and not being female, about being trans, a faggot. There is feminism in everything, a punkness too. What's funny is that everyone is sort of perplexed about what they should do to fulfill this class requirement. One person reads every night about her broke family and the weird ways they got by in 1990s Long Island; another reads about waiting on Castro clones at an all-night diner in San Francisco. What about the performance artist who goads our audience — so far, California college students — to put money into the carved-out crotch of a baby doll? Or the slam poet who lists the extreme ways his immigrant family reused every bit of plastic packaging they brought into the house? It's funny that there would be any stress about selecting a piece that explores class, but when it is wound so intimately into the fabric of your person — and hence, your art — it can be as hard to recognize as your own speaking voice.

But we all hear each other, here in the van. *Yeah, do that piece! Yeah — talking about having sex with a homeless person is totally*

about class. Yeah, that song you sing about working at the farmer's market counts as a piece about class. And so we bring our show to a packed auditorium at UC Santa Cruz and without really trying become the embodiment of so much of the theory these kids are being taught. In the morning we convene with students and again discuss class. The things we share blow some of the students' minds, but our minds get blown, too. I have a major revelation, sitting there in this beautiful, wooden queer center, Redwood trees soaring outside the grand windows. If I'd gone to college, none of us would be here right now. Holy shit, it's true.

Back in the 1990s, Sister Spit is what I did *instead* of going to college. Almost twenty years later, I'm still doing it, now bringing our lived example of outsider experience, of different ways of existing, living an artists' life, directly into universities nationwide. Every year I cull a different group of writers and performers from the wide pool of underground geniuses I'm deeply fortunate to know. For one month we live together in a van. We take to the stage every night and bare our souls, expose our experiences in ways so unusual and artful it looks easy. We sell chapbooks, zines, books, and CDs from a table at the back of the room. We sell glass bottles for wishes, we sell posters and tote bags. Then we pack it all back up in our rolley bags and move onto the next town.

Sister Spit was born in 1994, to fill a void. Spoken word cresting in popularity in cities and college towns across the United States, with Lollapalooza recruiting performance poets to open up for the Beastie Boys in stadium shows and Poetry Slam about to demonstrate that literature can have the energy of a sporting event. In San Francisco there was no lack of poetry open mics for aspiring writers to show their stuff at, but the majority of writers hitting those stages were men. And not just men — dudes. Bros. Guys who set

their beer cans at the altar of Charles Bukowski. Guys who ripped off their shirts and hollered their poems in homage to Henry Rollins. The events, be them in coffee shops or dive bars, had the vibes of a wild west saloon, and to get respect (or even get heard) you had to be bold enough to climb onto the stage and tell the ruffians sucking down suds to *Shut the fuck up*. They would startle quiet at your language, and then you had about twenty seconds to make them laugh or make them mad, to gross them out or piss them off. If you pulled this off you got a round of applause and/or some guy wanting to get in a shout fight with you at the end of the bar. Other poets would walk up to you and shake your hand, give you their chapbook; in another month you'd have one to give to them. The host would invite you to "feature" and you'd be paid in drink tickets. I loved this world, and the few females who figured out how to work the circuit were for sure the crazy bitches you wanted to be hanging out with — girls who'd gone to jail for stabbing their boyfriends, hookers, butch girls with cut-marks on their arms, junkie bike messengers, spastic fantastic jabber-mouths, brave, brave females and the best writers in the scene.

But what about the rest of the girls? In San Francisco, a city known for both its literary and queer scenes, why weren't there more females at these readings? Well, duh. Not everyone wants to have to tango with a bunch of drunkards to read their work. And work that's being honest about female experience in America can be hard and vulnerable; quiet and fragile. These bars were no place for work like that. Not to mention all the offensive poetry you had to endure waiting for your shot at the mic, poems where guys talked about women in ways were astoundingly retro and disgusting. I got in fights with male poets all the time at these open mics; I was into it. But not everyone has such a hobby. And so with Chicago poet Sini Anderson, Sister Spit was born. A girls-only open mic that ran

every Sunday night, for free, for two solid years. By girls we meant past, present, and future females, and men were allowed to perform if they were part of a female's act. Once a year, on Easter Sunday, we'd have a marathon event called Sissy Spit, where all the guys we really liked would read.

The night of the very first Sister Spit, fifty females signed up to perform. We were unable to fit them all into the program. Our audience pushed back through the bar and spilled out onto Valencia Street. We had poets and writers and a puppeteer who crawled under the stage and performed a play with Nun finger-puppets. And off it went from there: a performance artist covered the stage in trash bags in anticipation of the mess she would make chain-sawing a pig's head, but then an animal rights activist *stole* the pig's head right off the stage and ran down the street with it. Girls danced naked with fire. A woman came every week and spoke to the Goddess through a telephone-shaped rock she'd found in the desert. Girls sang songs on acoustic guitars. Eileen Myles read with us, and Mary Gaitskill. Strippers took glitter baths in inflatable bathtubs, and drag kings masturbated dildos. A punk poet safety-pinned her lips shut, and we all dreamed of David Wojnarowicz. We had our canon — David, and Dorothy Allison, Jean Genet and Violette Le Duc, Mayakovsky and Cookie Mueller, Divine and Karen Finley, Diamanda Galas and Richard Hell, Emily Dickinson and Patti Smith, Kathy Acker and Sapphire, Kathleen Hannah and Aaron Cometbus, Ginsberg and yeah, Bukowski.

Oh excuse me — it is so hard to get any work done while *inside* the Sister Spit van! Dorothy Allison just stuffed her ear bud into my ear so I could listen to a bit of Joan Jett. How did we get from a weekly event that had us negotiating with venue owners about the

fire hazards and underage girls Sister Spit shows brought into their space, to today, 2012, hopping between universities with Dorothy Allison lounging in the van beside me?

After two years of hosting our weekly event, Sini and I were burned out. We called Sister Spit quits and took a break. I started playing drums in punk bands. I wasn't great and neither were my bandmates, but that didn't stop us from hitting the road on a month-long tour up and down the West Coast. Riot Girl and Homocore were still raging — we played the Supergirl Conspiracy conferences in Santa Barbara and Seattle; we were part of a festival in Portland that Sleater-Kinney headlined; we played at the famous Capitol Theater in Olympia, Washington, and members of Team Dresch were in the audience. We made enough money to gas the van, and that was it. We slept on the floors of strangers. We drank their beer and bummed their cigarettes. I remember selling the book I was reading to a used book store so I could get five dollars. I remember scraping nickels together and purchasing a granola bar from a Plaid Pantry, my breakfast, lunch and dinner that day.

When I got back to San Francisco I was exhilarated, and bummed. Bummed because I had to quit my band — we were a dysfunctional family, and I couldn't take it. Also, after all the easy camaraderie I found with other poets and writers, the snootiness of the music scene was an annoyance. I put down my drumsticks and returned to my notebook. I met up with Sini and some friends at a Mexican restaurant to regale them with tales of my travels over margaritas, and the idea for Sister Spit's Ramblin Roadshow hit us in a burst of drunken genius. By my sorry standards, the punk tour I'd just survived had been a success! I'd seen parts of the country I'd never known. I'd spied what the larger queer scene looked like, I

felt the thrill of performing for crowds of strangers. I woke up on the shag-carpeted rug of a punk house feeling worldly and wise, like a train hopper or a real beatnik. I felt freedom, and it felt *rad*.

If my crappy punk band could go on tour, why couldn't a bunch of poets? The writers I'd come to know through Sister Spit were *way* more talented than my band. And unlike the band, which relied on an audience who enjoyed our particular brand of obscure, noisy, atonal, instrumental math-punk, the stories and poetry of the writers we knew had a more universal appeal. Sini and I went to work booking a one-month national tour.

It is worth mentioning that I made \$12,000 that year, and Sini no doubt made the same, if not less. We did not have cell phones (nobody did). We did not have credit cards. We did not have college educations that had empowered us to think we could take on such a crazy, ambitious project (and we also had no student loan debt shackling us to a straight life). We came from alcoholic families that had raised us to thrive in chaos and act without a lot of forethought. Thank god! If we had known we were setting out on what would be a \$10,000 adventure, we would have *never* taken it on. But we didn't know anything. Town by town we booked shows, mapping our way across the USA. We turned to punk bible, *Book Your Own Fucking Life*, a how-to guide for touring bands published by Maximum Roc N Roll. We cracked open the cheesy *Damron Traveler*, the gay travel guide that always had a tanned fag by a swimming pool on the cover. We used it to hunt down gay bars across America, keeping an eye out especially for places that had drag shows, figuring they'd have a stage and PA. We sought out Slam Teams in cities and towns and asked them to book us a show. We began a steady fundraising cycle — one benefit a month for the first six months, upping it to two benefits a month as the tour grew closer. One benefit would be a spoken word show; the next a rock show. We had a big

dance party that netted us a whopping \$1,000 (the cost of our van!) and a fancier performance where Annie Sprinkle let us auction off a pair of her pasties. In August, we hit the road with a lineup that included Eileen Myles, my favorite writer *ever*; Ali Liebegott, my other favorite writer and also best friend; Harry Dodge, the performance artist who ran the Bearded Lady Café, epicenter of all things queer, artsy, and punk in 1990s San Francisco, and many others, thirteen total including our heckler and roadie, Sash Sunday. Two vanloads of queer performers taking off into the place we'd fled, "America." Town after town greeted us with sold-out shows, friendly strangers who clamored to cook us spaghetti dinners and meaty brunches. We drank for free and sold our work to older lesbians in Charlottesville, North Carolina; to hot bar dykes at Meow Mix in NYC; to goth girls in Houston, TX and FBI Agents in Washington, DC. Drag Queens in New Orleans, preppies in Boston, salty dogs in Provincetown, punks in Atlanta and thesbians in Greeneville. Macho slam poets in Austin and frat boys in Las Vegas. Literary folk in Buffalo and activists in Philly. Everywhere we went we found our people, and they were and were not who we thought they would be. Our country welcomed us. Incredibly, we realized that we *belonged* here. Our worlds got bigger, and we returned to San Francisco changed. At the end of that month we were able to pay twelve writers and one roadie \$80 for their month of exhausting, twenty-four-hour-a-day work.

Those days feel far away from the tour I'm on today. I expect the engine in the van we're driving won't crack and die on the Alabama/Mississippi border at midnight on a Friday night, forcing us to sell it for parts and continue our trek illegally transporting eight passengers in a cargo van without seats. Probably the starter won't die, requiring me to crawl under the van and whack it with a hammer in order to turn on the van (we called that "Hammer

Time”). I am willing to bet cash money that our van won’t overheat so severely that we can’t actually turn it off, for fear that it will not turn back on again, circa 1998. No one will have to lead us in group van visualizations of cool snow falling on our overheated engine, or icicles dripping from the vents. If this van we are in right now were to burst into flames, the way some wires did on our 1999 tour, well, I’d be shocked. Our intrepid drivers are not having to keep their foot wrapped in a wet towel in order to withstand the heat of the gas pedal. Nope, we are in a *rental van*! A long, black passenger van we rent from a company that rents vans mainly to bands, and who name each of their vans after a female musician. We’re driving in Harriet, but we can’t figure out who Harriet is named after so we’ve been calling her Elvira.

When we pull into town tonight, we have a place to stay. Not like in the 1990s, when I would shout into the mic at the close of the show, Hey, can anyone put us up for the night? Someone always would. Once that someone was a girl who neglected to tell us her home was a very, very small apartment in some housing projects, which was already pretty crammed with ferret cages. Another time Sister Spit performers fell asleep on a stranger’s futon only to be woken up at six in the morning by a couple of skinheads who’d come to repossess their sleeping furniture. In Tucson, a performer slept in a claw-foot bathtub. It was the coolest spot in the house. We slept in bunks on women’s land in the south, no electricity, chiggers in the grass and dyke-biting-pike in the lake we swam in.

Hold on — Dorothy Allison, sprawled out barefoot next to me in the van, has started telling a story about the time Sapphire read her poem “Wilding” and the violence of the beautiful work drove out half the audience, including Angela Davis. I tried to re-focus, but then Cassie J Sneider twisted around in the front passenger seat and

asked me if there had ever been any drama on any Sister Spit tours, and I was off and running for a good hour, detailing (without ever mentioning a name) the time two alcoholic members fell diabolically in love, carved hearts on each other with razors as the sun came up, and got dragged to a morning AA meeting by the tour's two sober members. Or the time our new roadie tried to run away from the tour in the middle of the night because the poet she'd kissed in a bar bathroom then kissed someone else in a bar bathroom. The heterosexual performer who had an end-of-tour meltdown, screaming "I NEED MEN AND MEAT!" after too much time spent amongst vegetarian lesbians. The diner brawl prompted by one tour member whipping a dildo from his pants and daring a circus performer we'd befriended to fellate it. A rogue Catholic in the back of the room (this was in Boston) was violently offended and started menacing us all, so I jumped into action and hurled a jar of Grey Poupon at his head, sparking rather than quelling a raging fight.

Then Dorothy asked if there had been any *romantic* dramas on Sister Spit, and I detailed the hook-ups and break-ups the tour had inspired (ten break-ups have happened on the road, plus eight hook-ups, two resulting in marriages and then subsequent divorces). I finally shut up and tried to turn back to the task at hand, only to be distracted by Brontez Purnell talking about his father back in Alabama freaking out on him for not owning land: "How are you going to get beans? You're going to go on some white man's land and they're going to kill you!" And Brontez back in Oakland, going, "Huh? I get my beans at the grocery store."

I started Sister Spit because I wanted to go on a massive road-trip, and I don't drive. I started Sister Spit because I had a vision of a group slumber party with all the most interesting people I've met. I started Sister Spit because I was frustrated that all my friends were

wild geniuses and the rest of the world didn't seem to know this. And the bonding in the van, the thrill of a new city every night, and the true joy and wonder on our audience's faces as they behold their new favorite performers and their concept of what is possible in life gets cracked open a little wider — all these things make me keep doing Sister Spit every year.

Inside this book you will see the wild make-up of a Sister Spit tour, the way everyone is so singular yet strongly linked by — what? A shared political outlook? Maybe. Queerness? Usually, but not always. Feminism? Sure, but that doesn't always look like what you think it should. A dedication to their work? Certainly, but it is something else that brings these different people together and make them work as a whole, a certain Sister Spit *je ne sais quoi*. I know it when I hear it, it makes my pulse race a bit and I start yearning to hang out at a truck stop with the person. Many but not all of them are in here, people who joined Sister Spit on our maiden voyage in 1997 to people who are out in the hotel lobby right now, drinking coffee before we get in the van and head off to our next university workshop. Fifteen years of work are in this book — classics that people read on the road, and new stuff that shows you where they're at now. Tour diaries that hilariously detail what the culture we create on the road is like. I never went to college, but it seems the bonds we make in the van are sort of like that, the sort of friendships that come out of sharing a focused, exhilarating, grueling moment in time. I hope I am still doing this when I am a very old person. And I hope all of you will be there at our shows, cheering us on.

Michelle Tea

2012



SISTER SPIT

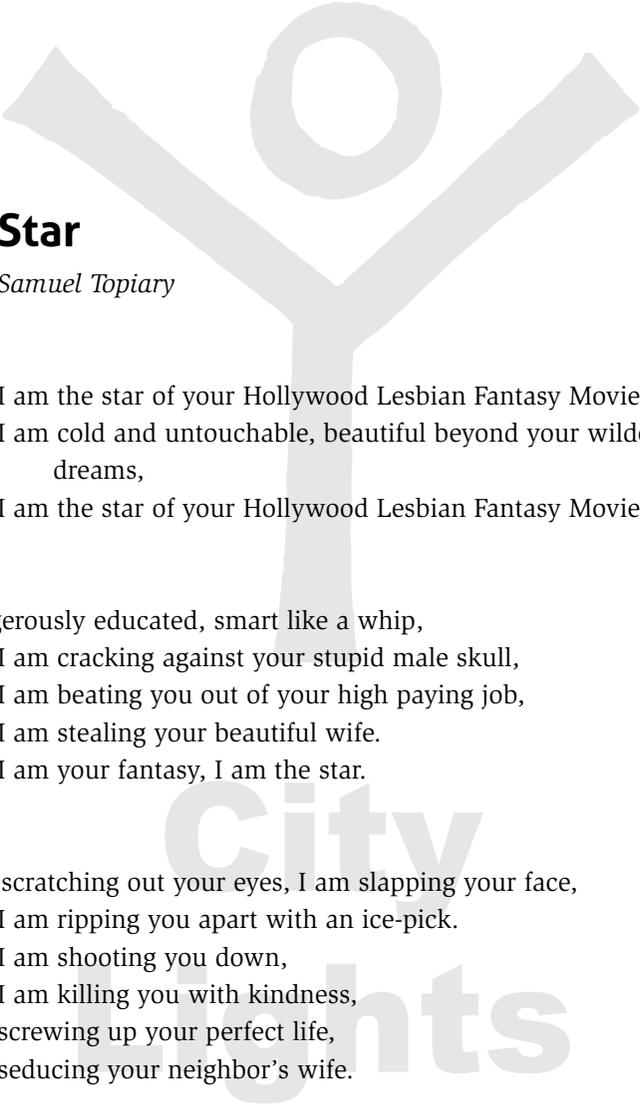


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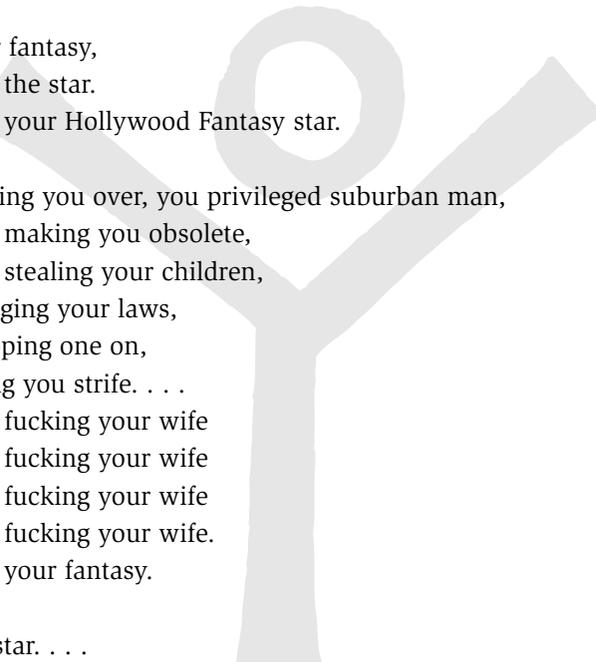
Star

Samuel Topiary

I am the star of your Hollywood Lesbian Fantasy Movie.
I am cold and untouchable, beautiful beyond your wildest
dreams,
I am the star of your Hollywood Lesbian Fantasy Movie.

Dangerously educated, smart like a whip,
I am cracking against your stupid male skull,
I am beating you out of your high paying job,
I am stealing your beautiful wife.
I am your fantasy, I am the star.

I am scratching out your eyes, I am slapping your face,
I am ripping you apart with an ice-pick.
I am shooting you down,
I am killing you with kindness,
screwing up your perfect life,
seducing your neighbor's wife.

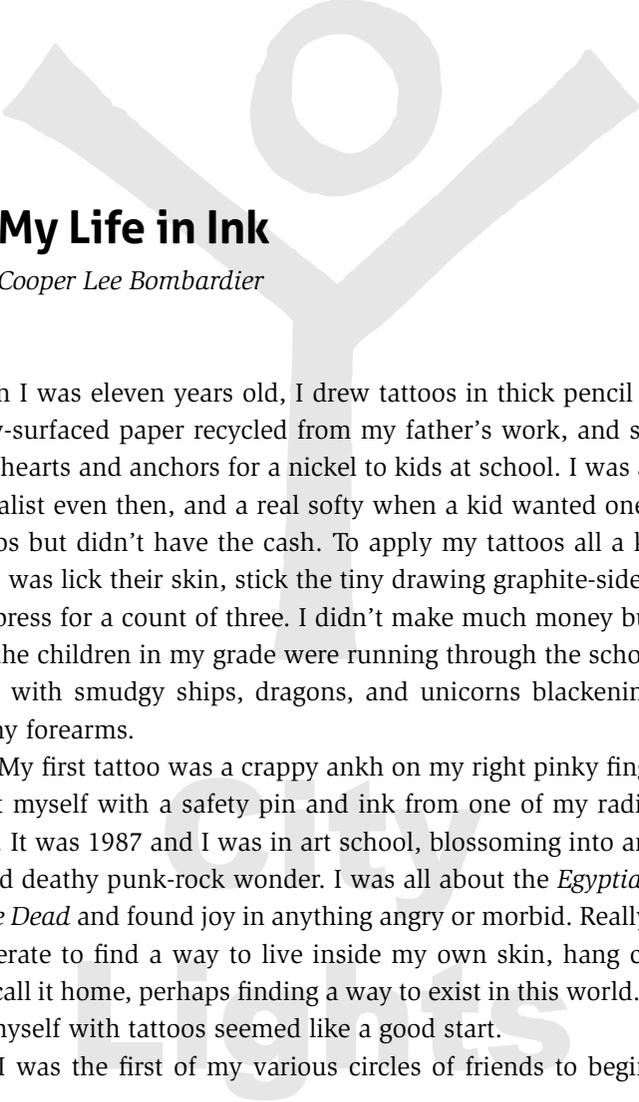


I am your fantasy,
I am the star.
I am your Hollywood Fantasy star.

I am fucking you over, you privileged suburban man,
I am making you obsolete,
I am stealing your children,
changing your laws,
strapping one on,
giving you strife. . . .
I am fucking your wife
I am fucking your wife
I am fucking your wife
I am fucking your wife.
I am your fantasy.

I am the star. . . .
I am your Hollywood fantasy star,
I am your Hollywood Lesbian Fantasy Movie star.

City Lights



My Life in Ink

Cooper Lee Bombardier

When I was eleven years old, I drew tattoos in thick pencil on this shiny-surfaced paper recycled from my father's work, and sold the little hearts and anchors for a nickel to kids at school. I was a shitty capitalist even then, and a real softy when a kid wanted one of my tattoos but didn't have the cash. To apply my tattoos all a kid had to do was lick their skin, stick the tiny drawing graphite-side down, and press for a count of three. I didn't make much money but soon half the children in my grade were running through the school hallways with smudgy ships, dragons, and unicorns blackening their skinny forearms.

My first tattoo was a crappy ankh on my right pinky finger — I did it myself with a safety pin and ink from one of my radiograph pens. It was 1987 and I was in art school, blossoming into an aquanetted deathly punk-rock wonder. I was all about the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* and found joy in anything angry or morbid. Really, I was desperate to find a way to live inside my own skin, hang curtains and call it home, perhaps finding a way to exist in this world. Covering myself with tattoos seemed like a good start.

I was the first of my various circles of friends to begin to be

tattooed. During my first year at MassArt, an older and spectacular goth girl named Patti Day told me she was getting tattooed. Tattooing was illegal in Massachusetts in 1987, an enforcement that lasted from the late 1960s until the turn of the century. *Where, with who?* I desperately wanted to know, *Because I want tattoos!* Patti invited me to her apartment in Allston, and soon after my arrival a dapper, biker-looking guy knocked on the door. He carried two small suitcases, and made some shy small talk in a calm, quiet voice. His name was Mark. He unpacked his equipment with nimble swiftness and was soon stepping on his pedal, revving his tattoo gun like a racecar at a stoplight, examining the needle-bar as it flicked in and out of the tip of the filler tube like a hummingbird's tongue. He had drugstore reading glasses far down on his nose like a grandmother, which managed to only make him look even more cool and tough rather than frumpy. He sat up and glanced from me to Patti, *OK. Who's first.* No turning back now.

Mark gave me two tattoos in Patti's flat that evening. I also got Mark's business card, and shortly after started scheduling him for tattoo parties at my Mission Hill flat. My friends would come up to Boston from the South Shore on the Red Line T train. Mark would arrive looking handsome and biker tough with his little cases, and tattoo six or eight of us in an evening. I got to know my underground tattoo artist well enough to have actual conversation with him, hear him laugh. We were kids, getting silly things etched onto us forever as if there would never be a tomorrow, a tomorrow where you might want to cover up that Eye of Horus. If he thought we were goofy, he was gracious enough to never let on. He carried a solemn manner of decorum and he would only accept a cold beer from us after the last person was bandaged up, very professional. Years later I discovered photos of Mark in Nan Goldin's book, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, from 1978 — a decade before I started getting

tattoos from him. In the Nan Goldin pictures he looks skinny, shining with sweat and drugs, big eyed and young. A bloody-banded tattoo on his thin hip. I remember wishing I still had a way to contact him. I had so many questions.

In 1990 I got a girlfriend who was a tattoo artist — and not a good one. Maybe just an okay one. She tried to teach me how to tattoo but she didn't have the patience. Also, I don't think she knew enough herself to impart instruction to anyone else. She once tore the gun out of my hands while I was working on her leg. Impatient and hot-headed, she finished it herself, grumbling like I was an idiot.

When I moved to San Francisco in 1993, there was an abundance of great artists from whom to get tattooed. I promptly got a sacred heart in memory of my brother from the legendary Freddie Corbin. I began to frequent Ed Hardy's shop in North Beach — long before his name started blowing up on soap bottles and lighters at Walgreens.

In those early days of my SF tenure, I lived at the renowned 122 Webster Street House in the Lower Haight, home of the Webster Street Witches. One day I answered a knock at my door — I figured it was one of the local crack aficionados wanting to borrow matches, but to my surprise there were two ethereal girls swaying on my stoop and holding hands. *We heard you did tattoos will you give us tattoos?* They asked with nary a comma, like Children of the Corn or something. I eyeballed them hard. One was short and dark haired with a croaking amphibian voice and a huge septum piercing glimmering above a wispy mustache and slight beard. All of her clothes were the same color brown as her eyes, hair, and beard. The other girl was tall and ghostly in bleached hair and a cream colored Victorian gown that was street-sooty and tattered at the hem. They wore a vegan pallor that made the two of them seem to be a sepia-tone tintype photograph come to life. They swayed back and forth

slightly as if to a breeze or unheard music, but my guess was really heroin. *I am not a tattoo artist you guys. Sorry.* They just stared at me harder in their close, narcotic way. *Will you give us tattoos anyway?* They implored. *No, guys, I'm sorry.* Which felt difficult to say during a time of my life where I seemed to be saying YES to everything else.

But not long after, 1994 or something, there I was in that same house, drinking cold beers with Shanna Banana, giving each other jailhouse tattoos — sewing needles grouped in a tight bundle with cotton thread, and Waterman India ink blobbed into an upturned bottle cap. We watched *The Decline of Western Civilization* on VHS and gave each other tattoos that read “Sister” to the sounds of the Germs and X.

Just a couple of years later I landed an actual tattoo apprenticeship at Black and Blue, next door to Red Dora’s Bearded Lady. This was an amazing and generous opportunity that I completely squandered; not out of laziness, but from immaturity maybe, and definitely from doing too much. I swirled in some kind of energetic fugue state of grief, terrified of ever spending two minutes alone with myself. When I took the apprenticeship I was also in a band, Dirt Bike Gang; I created a series of huge paintings, and laborious hand-drawn band posters; I landed several art shows, wrote furiously and performed often — I was at a creative zenith. And I worked three jobs, took up smoking, slept with just about *everyone*, attempted to drown my grief in booze, and was housing my dear friend Atom in my bedroom for several months. In the spirit of saying YES to everything, I took on a tattoo apprenticeship — a serious endeavor that requires commitment, responsibility, and focus, things that I couldn’t seem to access in my life. So for a few months I soldered lots of tattoo needles onto holder bars, made signs for the shop, and flirted with the hot girls who came in to a dyke-owned

tattoo shop to be inked up. Then I left in the summer to go on tour with Sister Spit — the first tour, in 1997.

I can't even say how it started, who wanted me to do it first. I tattooed about half our crew with jailhouse-style (the trendy parlance these days is "stick 'n' poke") commemorative tour tattoos — scraggly stars with uneven arms like baby starfish, or a star with the initials O and K on either side to salute our beloved OK Van (R.I.P.). One had a little trail of stardust like a shooting star — it may have been to camouflage a mistake, and a couple of them came out not half bad! I gave them in bars and on a picnic table at a Texas anarchist compound. I gave them in living rooms in Buffalo. I wanted mine on my hand, but I couldn't bear to do a lumpy star on my own hand so triple Virgo and future Sister Spit tour member Stanya gave me a lovely little star on the web of my right hand in Williamsburg. I could not and would not vouch for the quality of my work. I would agree to do it if the person promised that they were okay with being possibly quite bummed about the result. It was a bit of a surprise that others wanted their tour tattoos after seeing the first or second. They were shaky and uneven but weirdly full of heart. Actually, I don't know anyone, myself included, who gets homemade tattoos with sewing needles and India ink because they want an excellent tattoo. It is about an immediacy, an intimacy, an indelible souvenir of a time and of a place that you will never return to as you sail forth in your life's own ocean. It is about a connection, a reminder, a friendship, an adventure. You can look at your scraggly little star and remember: *I was there.*

Lights