

# Open Letters.

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What's going on out there



*July 2, 2000 (Vol. I, No. 2)*

This week,  
Open Letters features the collected letters of:  
Samantha Shapiro,  
X.,  
and Noah Cowan;  
as well as a conversation between Cheryl Wagner, Sam, and Zak.

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# Open up.



This issue was created in Los Angeles, California, with borrowed software, with a certain international flavor, with "Decade," "Magnolia," "All Hands on the Bad One," and "Here, My Dear" on the constantly skipping office CD player, with a willful disregard for the current economics of content provision on the Internet, but with, nonetheless, an abiding sense of hope.



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# Mystery, Man

A letter from the editor, on this week's issue.

Los Angeles, California • July 2, 2000

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the second issue of Open Letters, the weekly. Today: three letters, one conversation, and this note from me, the editor.

There's a globe-trotting vibe to this week's issue. First, Samantha Shapiro, a young American living in Jerusalem, writes about explosions, history, and a missing laptop. Samantha addressed her letter to Emily White, a contributing editor to Open Letters. Emily and Samantha worked together at *The Stranger*, a Seattle weekly that Emily used to edit. In an email Emily sent me this week, she had this to say about Samantha and her letter:

During the year and a half or so when I worked closely with her, Sam became more and more obsessed with her Jewish roots. I have known one other New York Jew who moved momentarily to Seattle, the writer Adam Heimlich, and both he and Sam described to me the way Seattle's white, west coast, vaguely gloomy rootlessness made them feel, as Adam said, "Like a TOTAL Jew." Eventually Sam joined a really serious hardcore synagogue and had to take three busses to get there for services. She didn't want any chickenshit religious services. She was hardcore.

Sometimes she and I talk about this spiritual feeling, this feeling of a lost world, and I tell her about how I don't know anything about my roots, I think there really are not any roots at all. She tells me about how she feels like she is part of a hidden story. Something going way way back. That is what her letter is about. Sometimes when she tells me about this way, way ancient story, I worry, like maybe she will disappear into it.

Our other non-North American letter comes from Noah Cowan, a programmer for the Toronto Film Festival, who wrote me a letter from Seoul about his attempt at a cross-cultural dialogue. It didn't work out exactly as he'd planned, but we, his readers, reap the benefits.

Regular readers of Open Letters will be familiar with X., a writer in Winnipeg, Manitoba. In last week's issue, she began a series of letters to Mike, the father of her thirteen-year-old son. In this week's issue, she contributes the second in what she promises will be a continuing series.

This week's conversation is an interview con-

ducted by Cheryl Wagner, a New Orleans journalist and novelist, with Sam and Zak, two young death-metal musicians from Florida. Sam and Zak talk to Cheryl about the many things they've smoked (liquid PCP, embalming fluid, human skin), and why.

Cheryl says her favorite line in the interview is this one, by Zak, "Me and my friend Joe have both broken our hands on each other's heads. It's just like burning yourself or whatever. It's just like doing something really nice for someone else." To her, it's a message that love sometimes expresses itself in unusual ways, but that love is love nonetheless. As Cheryl wrote me,

Why is getting punched in the head worse or more contemptible than going to church, taking prozac, going on a new age retreat, reading books, hiking, spending "quality time", or any other thing we've learned to venerate or at least accept?

For me, the big question of the week was about being explicit vs. being mysterious, which is an urgent issue in life, I find, as well as in Open Letters. Throughout the week, I corresponded with readers and editors about, e.g., whether the main page of the web site ([www.openletters.net](http://www.openletters.net)) needs a line of explanation, like "Open Letters is a new magazine of first-person writing in the form of correspondence," or not; about whether we should publish congratulatory letters from readers on the site, or whether that's just self-congratulation, and thus embarrassing; and whether I should include a letter from the editor (like this one) in the weekly. I remain conflicted. But I like thinking about it. So if you want to get in on the conversation, drop me a line at [editor@openletters.net](mailto:editor@openletters.net).

Next week's issue will be more North American: we have letters on deck from New York, Chicago, and Montreal, and an interview from Nebraska. Though all of that could change at any moment, of course, depending on the mail.

Thanks for reading.

Yours truly,

Paul Tough

# Lost and Found

A letter from Samantha Shapiro, on the Department of Lost Objects.

Jerusalem • June 26, 2000

Dear Emily,

We all lose things in transit, almost involuntarily, as if Kleenex, keys and library cards were feathers to be molted. I've shed diaries and disks, contact lenses, entire bicycles; my mind holds the image of each and every lunch box left behind.

I knew I would rack up significant losses when I went to Israel, and I did – especially considering how little I had with me. I lost my laptop computer, the only thing I owned worth more than fifty dollars. And I lost my story, which I didn't know you could lose.

My story had never been told to me in a systematic fashion, but from an early age I gathered it went something like this: I was a white American, solidly middle-class; the important remnants of my grandparents' foreignness – language, gait, custom – had been purged, and the rest could be gotten out of. I was Jewish, but not in the way that Jewish people had been. I wasn't hated, chased, taunted, had never been and would never be. I wasn't fastidious about food, cleanness, kitchens, books. I moved easily through the world with tremendous freedom, without fear, without a passport announcing I was Jewish, and returned to an apartment building that wasn't in a ghetto, that didn't smell from cooking but from brand new carpets.

This is the same story that the grandchildren of the taxi driver with the turban or the Mexican housekeeper will have. It is the one correct story in America, and although the beginnings are wildly diverse, the story is not about the beginning. It is about how we became free of the beginning; how the squalor, song, bloodshed, and blood ties of the other land dissolve. They don't dissolve into the enormous ocean dividing America from everywhere else, they don't dissolve from pure contact with the untouched continent, they don't dissolve just from a failure of memory; as I understood the story they dissolve because they aren't real, or at least because they aren't as real as America's own particular violence, beauty and rhythm. They were lost to prove they hadn't meant that much in the first place. They were lost to make way for a better, more universal beginning.

I'm not sure which went first, the computer or the story, but I can tell you exactly where I lost the computer. I left it on a bus, an unimpressive move anywhere, but especially bad in Israel, where any package that appears to be unattended is a "hefetz hashuv," a suspicious object, and assumed to be a bomb. If it can't be claimed – and quick – police take it away and detonate it.

The noise is terrifyingly loud for a procedure that is a standard part of civic life, and for months every time I heard it I would become inconsolable, find myself sobbing behind a tree on a busy street, blowing snot into my T-shirt. The first time it happened I had just arrived and was in a big hurry to get back to my hostel before it locked for the night at midnight. The hostel was a religious place for the great unwashed American Jewish population and you could stay for free as long as you attended their religious classes once in a while and made it back by midnight (no sexy disco dancing).

When I got to the entrance of the old city at five minutes before midnight, it was surrounded by police cars and army officers. Whatever – I was late! I barreled through them single-mindedly and was stopped by several furious police officers. One shoved me back behind the army vans where assorted police officers, army officers, people standing on the street and taxi drivers waiting to get into the old city began screaming at me in highly agitated Hebrew. When one of the officers realized I spoke no Hebrew, he softened and explained that someone had just found a kerosene container left by one of the Arab guys who sells corn. This army officer, who was probably younger than me, said gently and earnestly, "It could be a bomb and it could go off and you can't just run into it. This is serious."

Everyone shifted around by the gate, pacing, waiting for an explosion. The old city, the walled container of Jerusalem's boundaries circa 1100, is a deep hot blister in the valley between the Mount of Olives, Mount Zion and Mount Scopus. The rock where Mohammed ascended to heaven, the patch of ground where Jesus was resurrected, and the remaining stone wall of the first Jewish

temple where God dwelt stand within meters of each other, indifferent to each other and to the thundering throngs whose sweaty hands, chaste, needy kisses, and tears coat them in a briny grime. Everyone wants a little piece of the old city – within the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, ten different Christian groups battle for turf, none willing to relinquish any space for an emergency exit. At night the old city is dead, dark, dangerous, and the energy that during the day often transforms tourists into believers or patients in the local mental hospital lays still over everything like a hot blanket.

When the explosion came from behind the darkened walls, it jarred me completely. It was so much louder than anything I had ever heard; it rocked through the concrete, through the soles of my feet, and I could feel it reverberating in my jaw and chest. Everyone dispersed immediately – it had been just a canister of kerosene after all – cars were restarted, radios blasting, and people moved through the reopened entrance. I just stood there at the gate, as though at attention after some ceremonial shot had been fired.

My great-grandparents moved through Russia, Lithuania and Poland before they came to America. They were running from pogroms. They got out before the holocaust and the town they were from became the second largest ghetto in Poland after they left. In my family no one mentions or mourns this. It is over. It ended in Europe before it ever happened to us. It is buried there safely with all the other Jewish graves and memorials.

But the story in which being Jewish is deadly serious and of daily importance isn't over in Israel. Here people's passports still say they are Jewish, and with their Jewish passports there are lots of places they can't go. Everyone serves in the army. People in their early twenties, like me, lose their whole social group. They lose fingers. I went on a date with a man who had spent the last year as an assassin. Who knows what he lost. In Israel being Jewish (or for that matter being Christian, Muslim, Palestinian or Arab) still matters in a way that we are told in America it shouldn't matter; it still binds in a way America refuses – often admirably – to let it bind. The elderly Jewish people here, who move their stocky barrel frames and speak in ways that are so much like my grandparents, who stop me in the street and tell me to tie my shoelaces, have hand-written numbers sloppily tattooed on their forearms. How to tell them or their children that nationalism is not trendy, that identity is fluid, that ethnicity is

mutable and irrelevant in a postmodern era? Or looking at them, still hoarding food in their hotel rooms on vacation, how to tell oneself? How to explain the deep visceral sense of home I found navigating through cities and texts I had never seen before? How to explain the nearly electric connection to waterfalls, to ancient chants, plots of land, strangers? What if the prayerbook's claim that something was "sealed in my flesh" – the claim that America undermines relentlessly, nobly – rings true?

Anyway, as soon as I realized I was missing my computer I knew it was a prime target for exploding, and I ran back to the bus station.

The bus was of course not where I left it, but I thought I could find it – I remembered that the driver had a giant yellow flag that said "Moshiach" (Messiah) by his seat. I ran up and down the aisles of buses peering in and asking in a panicked Hebrew, "Where is the bus with Moshiach?" They are used to this kind of tourist here; in fact he is usually wearing a purple robe and playing a harp. No one paid much attention to me – they were in a hurry to close for Shabbat – and I got sent home until Sunday.

There were many theories at the bus station about where my particular bus had gone after it stopped in Jerusalem, and I spent a lot of time calling various remote bus stations to see if the computer had turned up. I also paid repeated visits to the mystical "Department of Lost Objects" at the bus station, an improbably tranquil oasis in a country where the checkout counter at the supermarket is a bit like roller derby. I think I was the only person who visited the Department, and I usually found an old bearded man named Zion entertaining his friends with backgammon or stories when I arrived. Due to our language barrier he would show me all the empty computer bags he had, his dewy eyes beaming warmly at me. I eventually gave up hope and bought a new computer.

That was back in November. Then two weeks ago a man from a Christian television network in Michigan called my mom in New York City. Seemed he had been in a different lost and found and an Israeli police officer had told him to call my home phone number when he got back to the States. So yesterday I went to this other lost and found. Although it was in the center of the "shouk," a chaotic market whose narrow cobblestone walkways are slick with mashed fruit and trash, it had the same surreal peaceful feeling as the Department of Lost Objects. Three old reli-

gious guys sat in an empty airy room. In desperately bad Hebrew I tried to engage them in my story. Unmoved by the surprise ending with the Christian TV producer, they replied repeatedly "everything here is property of medinat yisrael (the nation of Israel)." I thought this was brilliant – a lost and found which exists to tell people that they can't have their lost things back, that the lost things have moved on! We went back and forth until I said "Texas Instruments," the brand of my computer. Like magic, a middle-aged woman with an enormous blond coiffure and a fetchingly tight police uniform emerged and took me to a back room, where she removed my computer bag from a locker. She was incredibly proud of herself, although her entire effort to return the computer had been to tell a stranger to call me when he got to the United States nine months after she had first received it.

"Here," she said proudly. "This is your disk, no? And this is your pens, no?" We went back and forth until she opened the computer bag. I screamed. Beneath the screen there were little holes with wires poking out from them. The computer didn't sit straight, the keys were hanging off the plastic things that are apparently underneath keys. "Ohhh," the officer said, "It must have been exploded." Not to worry, she told me, the government of Israel reimburses people whose items get detonated. She filled out a form for me to take to a bureau in the Prime Minister's office, where I was assigned to an English-speaking insurance agent.

His tiny office was lined with binders full of damage reports and a bottle of kosher wine. In the space between the bookshelves and the wall, he had crammed a series of prints of famous art works featuring serene women: Gauguin, Rembrandt, etc. My chair was back-to-back with his secretary's. He apologized for keeping me waiting; he was busy because during the Israeli pullout from Lebanon, Hezbollah had lobbed a bunch of Ketuysha rockets over the border into Kiryat Shemona, a sort of battered desert Detroit that gets bombed every time the Middle East's political Jenga shifts a bit. "See what happened to your computer?" the agent asked gently. "In Kiryat Shemona that happened to people's houses and stores."

He told me to estimate the damage, I told him I couldn't, he asked me to bring him an estimate for the damage from anyone – even a friend who knew about computers – and said he would do the appropriate paperwork. He showed almost no interest in seeing the computer, although he

repeatedly expressed great sympathy for my hardship. I asked him about Kiryat Shemona. He said after the recent bombs, the government sent thirty insurance agents down for a blitz weekend. They divided the town up and each surveyed a few blocks for damages.

"Was it hard?" I asked.

"To be honest," he said, "it is not quite right. Often the people say more damage was done and we look and see it wasn't done, but they say it's bad and then on our reports we say it's worse than it is. We go to the house and they already have three TV sets from the last set of ketuyshas."

"You mean you say the damage is worse than it is so people can get new stuff?" He nodded. This seemed like a fairly inappropriate statement for an insurance agent to make to a client.

"Is that the right thing to do?" I asked.

He said, "The one night I stayed there I didn't sleep at all. I couldn't wait to leave. Rockets were going off over my head. They live with that." He shrugged.

I took my computer to a repairman to get an estimate. When I told him it had been a hafetz hashuv, he cradled it sympathetically in his enormous hands. He sat with it, gently prodding the small plastic pieces into place with a tiny pocketknife. He put it back together again and when he was done there were just two keys that didn't fit. Everything worked. He didn't charge me but said for \$400 he could send it somewhere to get the last two keys fixed. I said that wouldn't be necessary, but he still wrote me an estimate for \$400 and told me to give it to the insurance agent if I wanted to.

Israel isn't really at war and hasn't been since 1973. The Ketuyshas Lebanon sends over, the bombs that go off on busses, don't cause death counts that are anything like that of war. So why is there a bureau of the government to reimburse people for damages incurred at war? And what is it doing trying to pay me \$400 for two broken keys?

The violence here – a thousand Israeli lives and tens of thousands of Arab lives during the eighteen-year occupation in Lebanon – is not exactly war, but unlike the violence in the United States, there is no distance from it, literal or imagined. In a tiny country where the enemies' settlements are scattered throughout the land and on all sides, it

is hard to feel safe. The enemies look a lot like the citizens and are close enough for their scars – missing eyes from rubber bullets, furious tempers – to remain in full view. Israel cannot, for all its military strength, provide the illusion of distance. There is no ocean, there is no West, no vast emptiness to choke memory and history with. The air is flush with memory and history; sometimes like the ecstatic honeysuckle fragrance of a spring balls-out blooming, sometimes like the inescapable stink of a paper mill that announces its presence in a town long before you see its hulking frame.

In America, the beginning of the story has a moment on the ground, like a dead leaf, a nostalgic moment touched with color, but then it is gone. In Israel, it just lies there in plain view. Nothing seeps into the ground, nothing disappears. Looking around it is obvious that the process of life, of creating new things, cannot happen without loss. To understand this too fully is crippling. We need the fiction that life and death are separate, that loss is accidental, in order to keep going on with it. When the fiction fails, when the threat of death comes too close to reminding everyone how they came to be in this particular place at this particular time; that the beginning of the story is, still, a part of the story –

when the threat of death jostles everyone badly and in ways that cannot be fixed, what can be done? Someone can come around and suggest an imperfect remedy, announce in a report that all that was shaken was a window pane or a television set. That it may have been shaken in ways that are not visible, not apprehensible to insurance agents is a given.

In the Bible, the Hebrew word for redemption is the same as "to buy back," to regain possession of something you once owned; it is often used in the Bible to describe the act of repurchasing land that had previously been in one's family. These days, Webster's says, to redeem is also to compensate, to pay the penalty for something; to make amends for it, to atone. It may be that whatever is lost or damaged in transit, whatever disappears into that violent airless vacuum at the moment of birthing, will be given back to us. Our precious wallets, sweaters, wristwatches will be rediscovered, nearly intact, like ghosts, changed only a bit by their silent adventures. And the pulse of stories thought to have dissolved into the earth will flicker and lurch again through the veins.

Love,

Samantha



## Changing of the Guard

A letter from Noah Cowan, on the international film business.

Seoul, South Korea • June 28, 2000

Dear Paul:

So an idea came to me yesterday morning in my ridiculously swank hotel room in Seoul, where I have come to have these ludicrous meetings with all the famous film directors of Korea to discuss...what? They want their films in my festival; if they make a really big movie, I have a better chance of getting them to my festival if I get to know them a bit. So we scrape together enough conversation to feel like we have become friends,

smile a lot and fight over the check. It's all strangely imperialistic; I know how the Dutch felt in the Spice Islands, except I am not killing everyone.

But these were not my thoughts yesterday morning. I was showering with my computer – *qua de facto* CD player – and Ms. Marcia Griffiths was cranking out her transcendent cover of "Don't

"Bring Me Down," a cute Beatles song that she made so so much better. It is the sweet, succulent, soulful reggae of the early 1970s, the kind that has become desperately out of fashion in these rub-a-dub-dub times. (Ms. MG, FYI, was the only truly great member of the I-Threes, frat-boy pothead superstar Bob Marley's backup singers. She had a pre- and post-Bob career, though, as opposed to his talentless usurper of a wife. Have you heard "One Draw" lately? There is so much production sweetener in that rip-off fraud; she makes Christina Aguilera look like a punk rocker.)

I asked myself why this unusually beautiful form of popular music was trashed in favor of macho homophobes and their "raps." (What's his name? I always forget everything about him except that white suit and those terrified-looking women in the videos.) Then, in a horrifying flash of self-hatred, I realized we are, generationally speaking, responsible for this changing of the guard. It was on our watch that Yellowman and his quirky barks were first heard in clubs, and we were way too indulgent of Rankin' Roger's "toasts" on those English Beat albums.

I tried to explain this cultural loss to Im Kwon Taek, the ancient and venerable master of Korean cinema who has made his name as an archivist of the great arts of Korea. His films are fantastic and totally closed to Western folk, giving them an oddly hallucinatory quality. My favorite is "Run Far Fly High Kae-Byok!", a two-and-a-half hour narrative film about a schism in Korean Buddhism in the 16th Century. The film is all spoken in meaningful sutras, badly subtitled. Riveting.

So yesterday afternoon he got me loopy on a beer called "Hi Lite" (which is quite a bricolage of a name if you stop to think about it). His newest film, "Chun-Hyang," tells an epic love story using the "Pansori" singing technique – imagine a cross between Pavarotti and Plant. Apparently Koreans don't really give a shit about Pansori anymore, because the film was a huge bomb in Korea. He had never heard of Marcia Griffiths, but pretended to understand the connection I was making. On and on I went

about changing fashions between generations actually acting as unwittingly destructive forces. I thought I had created a wonderful international bridge of cross-cultural criticism until Im smiled at me with his brown teeth and politely asked if I was a musician.

Later that night, I went out with some other, younger Korean directors and took up the topic again while they drank my sorry ass under the table with a terrifying concoction known as Soju. A kind of Korean sake, it undercuts any argument one might make about clear liquors somehow being safer. I suppose my illness also had something to do with consuming the most confrontational food I have ever eaten. Waitresses in traditional Korean restaurants don't pad around in slippers and kimono like Japanese waitresses, deferentially waiting for a break in conversation to enter the room, apologize and serve food. These girls sport gaudy eye makeup, sweaters with sequined portraits of endangered species and hearty laughs. One slapped me on the shoulder to make me pay attention. She had just brought a bowl of itty-bitty live baby squids to the table. She extracted one, picked up a stiff garlic shoot, and then, with a filthy little smile, proceeded to drive the shoot into the sea creature's brain and wrap the tentacles around the top of the shoot. After a dip into some fiery sauce, she handed me the seafood popsicle, which proved surprisingly good. I had four.

These young people knew about reggae, though not Ms. Griffiths specifically. They thought Mr. Im's problem in "Chun-Hyang" was that he had not re-invented the story sufficiently for a modern audience, and so they perceived it as a didactic exercise. They told me that in the Buddhist tradition, there is a firmly determined cycle of life-death-rebirth that all cultural forms need to follow. They reminded me of a little concept known as the comeback.

Hope all is well in California, where there are no comebacks, because nothing ever goes away.

Much love,

Noah

# Riding the Rotor

A second letter from X., on her son and his father.

Winnipeg, Manitoba • June 29, 2000

Dear Mike,

So, so you think you can tell, a green field from a cold steel rail, a smile from a veil? Wish you were here. That's only the name of the album. Remember the orange Datsun B210 and the blow torch? I thought that while I write this stuff about the kid, I'd listen to my ancient records. He's not here right now. He's over at my mom's watching *The Usual Suspects* and recovering from the Cobra, which is a killer ride at this carnival we found today, downtown next to the river. He can't handle those rides very well, but he agreed to go on the Cobra with his sister, twice, which I thought was sweet. Afterwards he lurched back to the van, clutching his bottle of coke and making fake barfing sounds, and saying stuff like anything for the kid and I just remember how no one would go with me on the Cobra when I was a (barfing noise) kid and (more barfing) I just couldn't do that to her (falling on the grass, motionless). Really sweet, because G. giggled and said that when he was being nice to her, he was the best brother in the world.

The other day he bought himself a hat that said Porn Star on it and I was kind of upset about it and I asked him not to wear it. Then my sister and my mom also asked him not to wear it, and he said maaaaan, would you all just relax. But O., I said, do you know what a porn star is? No, mom, he said, what's a porn star? And I said, weelll, okay, it's when a person becomes very good at— and he said Yes mother, I know what a porn star is, I was kidding, god. And then he told me it was a brand, just a brand, or maybe he said a band, I can't remember. And I said, well, okay, I'm gonna get a Porn Star hat for me too, and one for Auntie M. and one for Grandma, and we'll all wear them, if it's just a brand. Fill your boots, he said, and stalked off. So, it was kind of a dilemma. Take his hat away or just let it go or buy him a different one. I suggested that, a different one, and he said yeah, please get me one with Paddington the Bear on it. So, finally, my sister called and said she'd give him twenty bucks not to wear the Porn Star hat and he said he'd think about it. The next thing I know my sister's beaming and he's twenty bucks richer. How pathetic is that? What do you think you'd have done? Have you even heard of that brand in Uganda or

Greenland or wherever you are? Now when we see a kid with a Porn Star T-shirt or hat or bumper sticker, O. says to me, go get 'em mom. An older kid he shoots hoops with across the street gave him a Swank magazine the other day and I caught him trying to smuggle that shit into the house. Guess dope's the next thing. No money offered for the mag if that's what he was thinking.

Today is my birthday and I'm drinking orange juice and champagne right now. He stayed up til two in the morning last night making me a mixed tape of songs he knew I liked, stuff like Randy Newman and Paul Westerberg and Tom Waits and the new Neil Young and even the Clash, and it's so sweet because he actually had to listen to all these old guys while he made it, which was a form of torture for him, so it means a lot. I'm listening to Christmas Card right now, Tom Waits. Really nice, you know Charlie I'm pregnant, living on Ninth Street, above a dirty bookstore...you remember. You do. Strange thing is I can't remember your birthday. We were together long enough to put together this funny, intense, shy kid who stays up late making compilation tapes for his old lady, but not long enough for me to remember the day you were born. Weird life. Was it April something?

So today I'm thirty-six and you get to stay twenty-three forever, in black faded Levi's and an SNFU T-shirt and Converse sneakers, smoking an Export A and cooking penny wieners in some shitty apartment kitchen with the Cramps playing and no furniture. Soon I'll be old enough to be your mother! Sometimes I do think I see you on the street, and if I'm with O. I sometimes look over at him and wonder if he thinks he sees you too, if he remembers much from when he was, what, four or five and you went mini-golfing with him and then left forever and I want to ask him but at the same time I don't want to ask him. You take up a lot of room for a guy who's not here. Maybe you're living under some kind of witness protection program and you'll never return as your original self, ever. Well, you did hang out with quite a few thuggish guys there for a while. You might have turned them in, maybe.

I remember once, when I was about thirteen, I was riding the Rotor at the Ex with a boy named Jacques and he was about fifteen and there we were spinning around and around and then, you know the Rotor?, the floor drops out and you're stuck to the wall. I just stayed in one position but Jacques crawled around on the wall and while he was doing that he crawled over to me and said where have you been all my life. At first I thought he had to be joking but he seemed kind of serious so I said uh, I don't know, nowhere. And then, because I was a polite kid, I asked him where he had been all

my life, and he said right here, baby, riding the rotor.

Anyway, it's kind of hard, at thirteen, to know what to say to that, don't you think? Remember Land of Dreams by Randy Newman? I just want you to hurt like I do, honest I do, honest I do, honest I do? Well, I don't actually, cause I'm thinking you already do.

Later, mystery man.

X.



## We Just Have a Plethora of Drugs to Try

A conversation between Cheryl, Sam, and Zak, about what can be smoked, what should be smoked, and why.

Florida • June 30, 2000

Cheryl Wagner is a writer in New Orleans. Sam and Zak (see photo, page 11) are members of Mysophilia, a death-metal band based in Florida.

Cheryl: How old were you when you first started smoking things?

Zak: I think I smoked reefer before I ever smoked cigarettes. I was probably like ten or eleven years old.

Sam: I think I smoked reefer when I was fourteen.

Cheryl: What was the first thing not meant to be smoked that you smoked?

Zak: I don't know. I remember when I was younger, around the same age that I smoked reefer, we rolled up pine needles and smoked them.

Sam: I've smoked those little things that fall off pine trees that look like little dicks and you can

crush them up into an orange powder. Do you know what I'm talking about? I rolled that and smoked that a long, long time ago.

Zak: It's like inhaling a forest fire.

Cheryl: Do you usually plan to smoke something in advance or is it kind of a spur-of-the-moment, "it's here why not smoke it?" kind of thing?

Zak: The first time I would say I usually smoke it trying to get high from it and then, like, use that as my judgment of whether smoking works better than the other ways you can do it. Like some drugs, from just hearsay we already knew we couldn't get high from smoking, but we smoked them anyway.

Cheryl: Like what?



Zak: Like Percocets and prescription drugs that you wouldn't normally even guess to smoke, we would try to smoke.

Cheryl: How come?

Sam: We just have a plethora of drugs to try and maybe it'll get you more fucked up, like the way you want to be.

Cheryl: How many more items do you think you have smoked than the average person?

Zak: I would put anyone besides like a good drug-dealing one of my friends to the test. I could have outsmoked them by ten. I'd be really surprised if somebody's outsmoked me.

Sam: I think we have probably smoked more shit than most of the people we know.

Zak: Any drug I've taken, I've smoked also.

Cheryl: Why?

Sam: Just curiosity. Most drugs that you can eat or inject we'll try to see what effect it has, because we want to see if it gets you more fucked up. But a lot of shit we'll just smoke because we're curious what it tastes like and what it does to you, you know?

Cheryl: Where did you get embalming fluid?

Zak: A girl we know was studying to be a mortician and she stole it for us.

Cheryl: Had you heard that it was a good thing to smoke or did you just think you'd try it?

Zak: It's an ingredient in PCP.

Cheryl: So what was it like?

Sam: I didn't like it. It made my lips feel really numb and tingly and made my lungs hurt really bad, and I think when you start smoking a shit-load then it just makes you psycho. I just smoked a bowl and I was like, I can tell this sucks, so I stopped smoking it. But I think it must really warp you out, kind of maybe similar to PCP, if you smoke a lot, because my friends kept smoking it and they were like...I think it warped them out.

Cheryl: What's smoking PCP like?

Zak: It's like the whole world is rushing through a straw and you've poked a hole in the side and there's a tiny bubble coming out but it's actually like cycling liquid the whole time, you know, but it's not dripping down, and you're in that little bubble.

Cheryl: Is that positive or negative?

Zak: I don't know. It depends on your personality.

Sam: I really don't like smoking dust because it makes my lungs hurt really bad. It makes you feel like your lungs will totally collapse. It's like a suffocating feeling almost for about a week or so afterwards.

Cheryl: What common household items are best smoked?

Zak: I've smoked laxatives. There's always some

degree of laxatives in most of the cocaine you get because baby laxative is a really good cut.

Sam: It makes you want to shit a lot.

Zak: Yeah.

Sam: You do it and you're like, damn, I have to take a shit really bad.

Cheryl: How about Tylenol and stuff? Have you tried to smoke any medicine-cabinet things?

Zak: I tried to smoke some, I forget what this stuff's called, it's like menthol-smelling cold-sore gel.

Cheryl: Vicks Vapo-Rub?

Zak: Yeah, it's kind of like that but it's a liquid. I cooked that into a crystal on the stove and I smoked the crystals from that.

Cheryl: Did it do anything?

Zak: No. It tasted bad. But if I knew there was a consistent household source of getting high I would do it.

Sam: But there's not. I think they really think about that.

Zak: Yeah, they're smart, the people who run the country. They're smarter than to let people have an easily accessible thing to get high off of.

Sam: They don't want people having shit in their house that they can always get.

Zak: They don't want people to get high. Whether it hurts you or whether it doesn't, they just don't want you to get high.

Sam: Or if it makes you even better than you were before.

Zak: Right. Like if there was something that made you super-smart and super-creative, they probably wouldn't want you to take it.

Cheryl: When did you smoke your skin and why?

Sam: We smoked skin several times.

Zak: Yeah, we smoked skin a bunch of times. And

then one time this girl held a lighter to my hand and I had a huge blister, like that big, because I let her do it for like a minute. Then I popped that and we put the pus onto reefer we were smoking and smoked my pus. And then any good cuts we've had, we've tried to smoke our blood.

Cheryl: Would you smoke each other's skin?

Zak: Yeah.

Sam: Sure. I'm sure we'd all smoke each other's skin.

Zak: And I think we'd all drink each other's pus or blood, too, in like a close-knit group of friends. Not just anyone's pus.

Sam: Yeah, not just anybody. Piss is different though.

Zak: Yeah, urine's different.

Cheryl: Why is urine different?

Zak: I won't drink guy's urine, but I will drink girl's piss.

Sam: Yeah, definitely.

Cheryl: Would you smoke a female's urine?

Sam: Yeah.

Zak: Yeah, I'd smoke guy's urine too.

Sam: I'd rather smoke urine than drink it.

Cheryl: If I wanted to smoke, say, my shoe, what might be a good method?

Zak: I would say to smoke the top parts of it first and probably the bottom last. Or I would maybe even scrape off the stuff on the bottom and smoke that first.

Sam: Yeah.

Zak: You're more likely to get high off that than the rest of your shoe. You're more likely to step in something that's somehow poisonous to you to get you high than what they make shoes out of, or people'd be smoking their shoes.

Sam: What was that one shit called that Craig and

all them were smoking and it made them crazy?

Zak: Some plant from Africa.

Sam: What's that called?

Zak: I don't know. It tasted like peanut butter when you ate it. It was this African plant and our friend took it and he never recovered.

Sam: He's crazy.

Zak: He's like, not sociable any more. You can't talk to him.

Sam: They just smoked so much it warped them.

Cheryl: Have you noticed any negative side effects from your years of smoking?

Zak: I went on a trip last year to Philadelphia and I smoked with my friend. We bought a bunch of liquid PCP and smoked it, and I know that when I came back I wasn't the same person I was when I left. But I think I've pretty much recovered by now.

Cheryl: How long did it last?

Zak: Probably about six months.

Cheryl: You were different in what way?

Zak: Just everything.

Sam: All his thought tracks were changed. I thought he was totally psycho and crazy and would never be the same again. I was like, bullshit, he's crazy as hell and he doesn't know what he's talking about.

Cheryl: Do you think you've suffered any brain damage from your years of smoking?

Zak: Of course.

Sam: I'm sure. But I think I've suffered even more

from drinking too much alcohol since I was twelve than I have from all the drugs I've smoked.

Zak: I think in the last year I've suffered more brain damage from hits to my head than from any drug that I've done in my life.

Cheryl: Do you get a lot of hits to your head?

Zak: Yeah.

Cheryl: How?

Zak: All sorts of ways. Been in car accidents and fallen out of trees and been punched in the head and slammed my head through doors and walls and stuff.

Sam: Had punching competitions. Like who can punch each other as hard as they can in the head and still like it.

Cheryl: What is the effect of that?

Zak: It's almost like a hit of nitrous, but it's all natural. Me and my friend Joe have both broken our hands on each other's heads. It's just like burning yourself or whatever. It's just like doing something really nice for someone else and you get a feeling of goodness to yourself.

Cheryl: Is there a place on your head where you prefer to be hit?

Sam: It's usually in the forehead.

Zak: Anywhere from like my temples forward and mid-eyebrows up, but sometimes I like getting punched in the cheekbones really hard.

Cheryl: Is there anything you've smoked that you wish you hadn't? If you could go back and "unsmoke" something, would you?

Sam: No.

