

SKETCH IN BLACK, WHITE, AND RED

I'll tell you how one aging rock reporter handled the punk/new wave thing--I quit. It just stopped being worth fifty bucks and two tickets to stand knee-deep in a bunch of puking little pogosticks listening to some bulimic twerp with a church key stuck through his nipple pretending he was too jived to realize the guitar he was thrashing was out of tune and missing strings. Then there was the letter from a teenaged fan in Tukwila who jumped all over my ass for ranking down the Bleeding Humps concert and telling me I was too old for rock. I sent him two tickets to Inflatable Date, a copy of my resignation letter to the paper, and a note that said, "You're right. Stay eighteen and you'll always be right."

But I guess I maintained a sort of morbid interest in the monotone, monochrome scene because I'd stop by the Gorilla Room or the Fun Hole at times. With a camera, which made me an official spectator, gave me an excuse, and got me in free. I've got frames of Jani dancing I took ten seconds after the first time I laid eyes on her.

The thing I saw, and never had reason to doubt, was that Jani was the real thing. Whatever the hell it was. Just like in the sixties you could tell the real hippies from the ones that might get grounded if their folks found their stash, you could tell Jani from the "punks" that were in it just to be part of the Rocky Halloween Show. I once asked her about what the guy who took over my rock reviewing job called "the nihilist

look". Are these suburban white breads really nihilists or is it just the depechest mode? She said, "Oh, they're really nihilists, all right. But that's because nihilism is the big thing right now." I also asked her if she knew what nihilism meant or where it came from. She said she hadn't the slightest idea and could really give a rat's ass.

I never made any bones about it, to her or anyone else--my attraction to her was limited to her appearance. She was the single most exotic creature I've ever seen. With that tight skin and prominent skeleton, she'd have looked good in anything or any hairdo, but she was born to be shaved. Not totally shaved--she left a Mohawk ridge that continued on down her neck and fell to her waist; a flat black mane, usually tiger-striped with glittery gold. She wore a few stretchy black tubes, torn and pierced with steel objects. I once admired a pattern of burns on the flank, brownish leopard rosettes of melted black synthetic surrounding dancing dots of skin. Later I saw the same pattern worked in deep burns on the flesh of her other hip. She'd had the "dress" on the other way when she tattooed herself with a cigarette tip. Or when somebody did.

Her body was chalk white, dramatically curved but not soft or muscular; stark rather than voluptuous, like a Jaguar fender. She would just pick something up on an impulse and stick it through the flesh of her nose, ear, or nipple. She ate with her hands and licked them clean like a cat. If she liked the music in a restaurant she was liable to jump up on the table and dance, twisting in her flimsy wrapper with her pig-shaved

pubic hair visible to everyone. She wasn't sexually excited all that often, but when she was she would stalk, scream, throw fist-pounding tantrums, pitch into a man (or woman, I understand) like a fistfight. She danced like a mad boneless bitch in a sacred seizure--but with what you'd have to call grace. I couldn't contain my admiration for her, but couldn't do much to express it, either. She lived in the alleys, sleeping behind dumpsters or wherever she passed out. She had no idea how many times she'd been raped, and found it a boring topic.

Since I was living in a transient hotel down by Pioneer Square at the time, it was easy to provide her a shelter. I almost gave her a key one night when I was more smitten than usual from watching her stomping naked around my room, waving her mane, pouncing on the bed to slap time on my chest like a conga, or to squat her loins down on me for a few shuddering strokes before the sensation would make her jump off and carom around the room. Fortunately, I had told the desk clerks at the Commodore to only let her go up to my room if she was alone, and could not take anything out. They went along; they were in awe of her themselves.

She followed me home a few times, but of course I couldn't keep her. I would have. The way you'd keep and care for a Balinese cat or Siamese fighting fish, just to serve the purity and beauty of it. I made it clear that I would feed her rather than see her hungry or eating garbage, that I would put her up without demands rather than see her ravaged by

random chance, that I would protect her from the weather and weirdness. She ignored me. She would only show up occasionally, when it was really nasty out, or she was really sick or hurt. It's incredible to me that there are people who will beat or cut someone like her. Listen to me--"Someone like her".

She was becoming sub-verbal, an ambulatory catatonic. She had gone from drifting to tumbling and the slopes were getting steeper. Even with her animal vitality, she couldn't fight off the drugs and the infections as well as she used to. I wanted to chain her up for a week to let her heal, see if she'd snap back into sanity. Okay, chain her to my bed. But there are worse places and she could always find them; staggering, half-conscious, and blasted blind. I considered taking her to a mental hospital, and still don't know whether I didn't because I couldn't stand to see her caged and drugged and humbled--or just because I knew they would only let her out in two weeks and she wouldn't trust me anymore. But she was getting a lot worse. They wouldn't even take her blood or plasma anymore. Any money I gave her, she'd fold into psychotic origami and toss out bus windows. She was driving me crazy, but for her it was just a coast.

I started noticing cuts on her wrists. Not deep, killing kinds of cuts, but nasty scars and more and more of them. I remember hoping she was Crying For Help. Right. I was doing everything but tying her down and force-feeding her Help and she wasn't having it. I paid for having her

stomach pumped, for having her asshole stitched up after a particularly brutal rape bent over a trashcan behind Greenstreets, for a lot of shots, for a psychiatric interview that lasted about five minutes before she jumped on the table, did a spraddle-legged hunch and pissed on the shrink. I have to admit, that part was worth every penny. But she was piling up scars and I decided to tail her.

I picked her up first try in Occidental Square, and drifted after her for hours, watching the scumbags eddy around her, almost blowing my cover to get between her and an Indian wino who grabbed her by the hair and got kicked in the nuts for it. Finally she drifted up First towards the Gorilla Room. I paid admission for the first time and walked into the ambience of celebratory industrial collapse to keep an eye on her. A new band was working out, trying hard to come up with new outrages in a place where the ultra-outrage has been old hat for years. I looked around for the haunting skull under the alien zebra mane and saw her dancing on the edge of the stage. They knew her and had thrown a spot on her. She was gyrating almost dreamily in the light, very autistic and so beautiful I felt like I'd been slapped across the eyes. You could see both nipples, most of her crotch. She looked glorious to me; a rotting monument, like the marbles of Athens being eaten away by acid rain. The kids knew the real thing too--she was a star at that stage. Lazily, with no thought to the howling crowd, she pulled out a razor blade and calmly slit both wrists. I started for her, pushing punkettes on the floor

as I waded through...then I stopped. And got soaked in the back of the head by some moshmonster but I didn't care about that. I was watching Jani dancing in the brave bright drizzle of her own blood, her arms writhing over her head, the red splashes looking fierce and Japanese as they hit her upturned white face in the white spotlight, her open mouth softly feeding on her own bleeding. And I'd been trying to water her with tears. Right. Sooner or later it's time to realize you're too old for the scene and that it's time to turn in your resignation.