

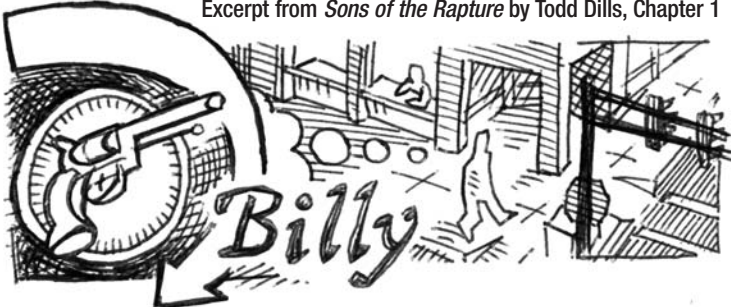
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NEW WRITING

# THE 2NDHAND



Excerpt from *Sons of the Rapture* by Todd Dills, Chapter 1

... Artichoke Heart was a South Carolina Jones, same as me: Jones, William Harmony. Eventually he left Chicago, got up his courage and boarded a plane headed south—he never flew on planes, normally, hadn’t been out of the city for ten years, he told me the day I met him. Same day I met Elsa, actually. A.H. played west-side food fests, “tastes” of this and that. He took the stage decked out in sequined cowboy vests, hair done up in a greasy pompadour, and played wanky, old-fashioned Mexican norteño with the crew of his four brothers, the Joneses. That fateful summer people were bouncing in the streets like not since seen. The boys revitalized the west-side block party scene. It wasn’t my bag, though I’d admit he was good, if asked. He put on an ecstatic show.

Taste of Kedzie, at the square down the block from my apartment, sticks in my mind as a half-assed gathering of lonely apartment hounds, where one was lucky to catch the GN’R tribute band that used to play around the neighborhood, unlucky if ending the day tired and bored with, at most, four other showgoers out on the street, hearing one of four different combos, all the same, very pandering in their instrumentation and obvious attempt at PC. Black singer, male. White longhair bassist rocking on his heels behind a big butch of a lady drummer, also white. There may be a black female or Latina keyboardist, but always the male Latino trumpeter up front, squeaking monotonously away: “La Bamba,” “Black Magic Woman,” “You Are the Sunshine of My Life,” “Black Dog,” they played it all, though the humdrum affairs always paled to that first one I witnessed—featuring none other than one Artichoke Heart, the new in block party entertainment.

I was only out for a quick coffee at a square cafe, though I carried my chrome flask as always, just in case. But stepping off my block I eyed a monstrous vinyl sign stretched across the facing buildings the other side of the square, satanic red lettering announcing today’s performer: ARTICHOKE HEART. The square jammed full of bodies, yellow food tents stewed, crawled with souls. I looked around for someone I knew—vaguely recognized, rather, for I’d been in Chicago just shy of two months—and found no one but anonymous Spanish speakers, an ugly white man or two with an uglier woman draped over his shoulder.

When I spotted her she was wading through this crowd: Elsa, a goddess with piano-key fingers wrapped tight around a stick on which was speared a rounded specimen of gyro meat. She was followed by her tall, functionally Amazonian equivalent: sister Katje, I would learn. The beautiful sight instilled a quality of bravery in my bones it’s likely I should not have felt. I shot through a couple and grabbed her by the wrist. She yelped in protest, whirled around and caught an old woman in the side of the head with a freewheeling elbow. I laughed, genuine hilarity bubbling up in my body. The girl muttered apologies to the old lady, then cocked a hip, staring down the plane of her nose in a squint. “Have a dime, dear woman?” I said, a shudder passing through the loose flesh of my premature Jones jowls. She didn’t say anything for a moment. “Jesus hell,” I muttered, and made like to turn away, but she stopped me, baring her crooked teeth in a sly grin, knowing too well my gambit. “I’m Elsa,” she said, extending her ghostly white arm, hand out, which I took. She chomped down on the tube of meat. “This is my sister Katje,” she went on, shredded bits popping half-chewed from her mouth. I proffered my flask only after a long pull for myself. Her dark eyes went wide. Katje squeezed up behind her, laid her chin on her sister’s shoulder and grimaced at the sun. “How do you do?” she said.

I felt even surlier then, like a cowboy or something in my T-shirt and jeans in front of the two pristine women. I introduced myself with a twang as “SC Bill.” The ladies rolled their eyes, passed the flask between themselves. A wild gust of wind then kicked up, sending a ripple through the crowded square, a keen murmur rising as heads turned toward the stage. We gazed with the crowd up there, and lo, there was Artichoke Heart. “Wow,” the lady Elsa said in appraisal. I took the flask from her and pulled hard, exhaled at the terminus to the sight of the all-Jones crew of bass, drums, guitar, accordion, and just by the front microphone A.H.’s silvery trumpet resting quietly on a stand. Artichoke Heart bent at the waist to prize the instrument; the flames on his tiara aimed out at the crowd. A dust cloud rose and hung in the now windless sky above us. A hush fell over the assembled. Elsa worked at the belly of her T-shirt, raised up on her tiptoes. “Look at the guy!” she said. A man at my left raised his fist and bellowed happily in Spanish. And without a word A.H. and his band bounced through three polka numbers, covered MC Hammer’s “Can’t Touch This.” I clutched my own gyro tube by then and put out a hefty shout-out to my new friend. She pulled hard on both my flask and arm beside me, smiling into me, shouting “HOLY—JESUS—CHRIST—this guy is GOOD!” her face screwed up sweetly like she’d never been happier. I pretended I couldn’t hear her, leaned closer, and fireworks sprung from A.H.’s stage, the final song another exotic, accordion-based number. I set my gaze there, lit a cigarette, and pulled the final bit from the flask. I noted the man’s devilish tiara, cheeks distended as he blasted away, the quintet whee-wonk-wonking their way through some of the most beautifully crazed music I’d ever heard. Elsa blew smoke in my ear, saying something—it didn’t matter what—and my mind flew high over the stage and square to where I could look down on it all, the small traffic circle, south end full

of people, the bulbous yellow tops of the food tents and the smoke billowing out from their sides, the thick molasses stench of it all reaching way up here, opening up the sterile angles of the Chicago grid, the little blocks of neighborhoods, the right angles, the 45-degree angles of diagonal flow streets that connected them all, the fine curve of the expressway gray and desolate and jammed on its way downtown. It made some sense, for the moment. I could approach it.

We headed to Johnny’s Grill, a diner on the corner. A couple coffees into our sit Artichoke Heart strode into the space bedecked in street clothes, apparently. In full red jumpsuit, tiara, greasy Elvis hairdo, the man was followed by a cavalcade of admirers, brown-faced boys with baggy T-shirts half-tucked into jeans that sagged around their butts. Johnny’s Grill’s proprietor, Dean, came swinging feet-first over an empty space at the counter to fend the boys off. They sidled backward, waving their arms in parody of their future selves. A.H. smiled at them, taking the seat next to me, and Dean poured him a coffee like it was nothing, like he knew the man. And he did. “Wow!” Elsa whispered. She really liked saying that. I got a little nervous in the man’s presence myself. I trained my sight on Dean, who was back behind the counter by now tapping a syncopated beat with a metal spatula on the flattop cooker. “He’s so—” Elsa pausing, then whispering on. “So cool! Look at him!”

I turned to A.H., now determined in spite of my minor trepidation to show the girls something of myself. “Bill. Nice to meet you,” I said, thrusting my hand out like I might have been a vacuum-cleaner salesman, awkwardly holding it there not grasped in the space between myself and the red-vinyl-clad man.

A.H. only nodded, his deep voice then booming above the precious silence left in the terminus of Dean’s syncopated tapping. “Good to meet you, Bill,” he aped back, just barely letting his eyes catch mine before turning back to his coffee.

I asked him his name. He took a long, slow sip, put the cup down and exhaled dramatically. “Artichoke Heart,” he breathed, distending his cheeks after a long inhale.

“Oh, I meant your real one,” I said.

His eyes then went wide, caught mine for a long moment. He chuckled. Elsa and Katje gaped around my shoulder, their hot breath falling over my neck. The whites of the man’s eyes grew further at the women’s grinning faces before he pulled from a chest pocket in his jumpsuit his mirrored aviator shades, slipping them across his nose to dim the sight. “Jones,” he said, proffering his hand to me and prompting a series of guffaws from the women. “Artichoke Heart Jones.”

And we hung around all afternoon, told stories, and ended the day at a bar down the road. The pure chance of our time did matter, for the fun was had, and a beautiful trap was set for each of us. Thereafter we traveled in a pack. A.H. took the point, Elsa and I groping each other just behind him with Katje at our backs to ward off opportunistic assholes, those who would attempt to upset the delicate balance we made. We convoyed to parties, drank in corners, joked, and got along quite fabulously. A few months into it, I got fired from my job at a downtown bakery, and Johnny’s Grill was where me and A.H. met in the aftermath. I told him I’d been stealing from the register, it was true, and probably deserved what I got. “No problem,” A.H. said, “though that will be on your ‘record.’ We want to say you don’t even have one.” So he set me up with a guy he knew in the Illinois Division of Waste Management, Frank Christ—“Tell him I sent you,” A.H. said—who apparently owed A.H. a favor. I didn’t ask him for particulars, and when I finally got a haircut and met with the man, when I told

Mr. Christ who sent me, the old man’s brow lost its wrinkled consternation and I got the job.

A time of bliss ensued with Elsa on my twin bed. The apartment took on the smell of her perfume and sex, and she talked my ears off while atop my stomach. I loved her there, above me, chatting with abandon about my dark eyes, goofball humor. She began to give me the run-down of her previous men, an African named Aime, Hugo the Portuguese, Yves back home. She toppled down the uncertain hills of her memory and I dogged behind her like Katje—Dutch, I learned, adopted. My heart fluttered anxiously, elated, occasionally bored though I was, at the spoken history of the lady. At bottom Elsa’s voice is a salve for your wounds, sexy like cold water. But her past began to loom in my mind like charging Confederates flanked by outrageous artillery. I could take Elsa’s monologues no longer and told her about it, laid it out hard that I did not under any circumstances want to hear about her men past.

“Jealous, jealous man!” she cried, laughing wildly from her perch on my stomach and digging her fingers into my ribs. “Jealous of the past!”

I did not laugh. I spent the night grinding my teeth while I slept.

I ran to A.H., who told me how full of shit I was, how Elsa would see that just fine, too. Johnny’s Grill was enveloped in ice that brutal Chicago winter. The wagging lips of the old men scattered around the counter like to have frozen even poised above their coffee mugs. A.H. perched on his haunches atop the counter and gave a sermon about my plight to the men. Now what will this Billy boy do?

One of the old fools remarked that the only way to control a woman was to beat the evil out of her.

The next day, A.H. played banjo and guitar for me in his little den. We went on to Johnny’s, and he listened to the whole again in front of Dean, the proprietor, who laughed and said I sounded like a bitch in heat without a mind or even a dong to act on it. The men around the counter joined him in his cold laughing.

I smoked more and more laid up on my bed, evenings. Elsa assumed her customary spot on top of me, talking. I blew smoke in her eyes if she leaned too close, even burned the tips of her bangs once or twice—half-hearted accidents. The rotten, acrid smell of burning hair filled the apartment.

One morning, after an unpleasant dream that involved Elsa and out-of-work porn actors, I woke sweating and crying. I did not want to hear the same shit from A.H. again, so I hooked up with Dean at Johnny’s on my own. He took me to his Serbian uncle’s place outside Milwaukee. I shot and killed a raccoon with a little .22, a fine shot, Dean said. He skinned the beast, cleaned it, giving me the mangled bullet to commemorate the day. Then he cooked it in his patented (or so I was told) raccoon stew. We ate it. The meat tasted like the smell of burning hair, if that makes sense. “Raccoons are crazy little fuckers, rodents,” Dean said, his fork pulling at the gristle in his plastic bowl.

“You cook a mean one,” I forced out, washing yet another acrid mouthful down with a pull from my beer. A strong urge to spit didn’t subside for weeks.

After two days absence, I returned home to find Elsa in my apartment, smiling in front of some TV rerun like I’d never been gone. I told her I’d been called home by my father, my brother had died in prison and the funeral was just yesterday. She brushed the lie off, mostly, beckoned me to the bed and made love to me as I smoked cigarette after cigarette to keep from spitting, crying into the stench of her burned hair, the memory of the taste of the wayward rodent crowding my senses so that I gagged at



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every pull of the cigarette, Elsa giggling, screaming at the pleasure of it.

I left the apartment after, cruised the alleyways with the .22 I'd stolen from Dean's uncle. I liked the feel of it tucked at the small of my back, though I worried that it would misfire and blow my ass off. The alleyway behind my place led me to the trash cans behind the square's restaurants, where I found an open bin crawling with rats. I stopped ten yards off, pulled the gun, kicked at the asphalt under my feet prompting a further swarm of vermin in every direction, behind and under the bins lining the alley or into the mindless safety of crevices under concrete steps. Some, certainly, only burrowed further into the filth. One mighty son of a bitch had the gall to sit stock still atop the mounds of garbage there; the thing stared straight into me, an opportunity too great to resist. My arms went numb as I took aim, fired, and the fucker flew over backward in the bin.

Next day, I woke up and called A.H. I told him Dean had taken me out to his uncle's and fed me the best damned food I'd ever had.

"Dean cook you a raccoon?" A.H. asked.

"How'd you know?"

Artichoke Heart didn't speak, but I could picture him on his end of the line, casually laid back in his big orange chair, wide cryptic grin spread across his face, the grin that told you he'd heard it all.



Elsa never figured the lie I told her, harmless as it was considering her seemingly devil-may-care attitude toward our coupling. I did not tell her either of my nightly excursions through Chicago alleyways in search of the next kill. Three weeks in I'd laid off three more rats. The killing offset the pain, somehow. And I drank and drank to cover the guilt of the lies, the rage, everything, and it all seemed to be working. Then I left the gun at home, and our crew rolled over to a friend's party. Bunch of art school kids. Hundreds packed into the little kitchen and den areas of a third-floor two-bedroom. Drunk, everyone. The atmosphere was steamy with heat inside the place; frigid Chicago winter death ruled the outer climes. Me and Elsa parked on a couch by the front windows, and in a bright moment she thrust her hand down behind the belt of my leather pants, her fingers wrapped right around my privates. She pressed her body against mine, the passel of others in the room all huddled tight together on the improvised dance floor in front of us. I did what I felt in that close heat and drunk and got my hand in between our bodies and unzipped my jeans for more room. The noodlings of a saxophone rose like an atom bomb in the dark. My eyes snapped tightly closed.

And then above it all I hear this "God-damn!"—Elsa's "Goddamn!" It's hysterically funny—high-pitched, breathy, French as all hell.

But when my shaft popped free, I felt a slap come hard across my face. Elsa gave a stiff pull at my nose with the same hand, zipped me up with the other. Then she jumped back and stood glaring like a redneck queen would at her cheating husband, one hip cocked and with a hand stuck hard just above its curve, eyes slit down to the black of the pupils. The other hand pointed and looped around as she told me off. Ten or so of the other partygoers formed tight flanks at her side like as backup. What was I gonna do to her? "Jesus hell," I muttered. I clamped and unclamped my lids a few times trying to really focus on the mutant circus: Elsa and Katje made up the point, the flanks decked out in shiny or goofy-striped shirts, more than a few pairs of tight pants with

outrageous fur fringe at the cuffs, sunglasses there even in the dark. None of them liked me much: I'd pissed off too many during drunken blackouts when I finally spoke my mind to the trust-funded crew. Thing is, I could control this crowd, if I really thought on it: I pulled my aviators from my shirt pocket and slid them slow across my nose, nodding a little as the whole place erupted in laughter.

We left soon after. As if in spite of my little victory the eruption had thrown a gigantic roadblock between various possible one-night stands groping along; the place felt dead as a bar mitzvah or something. I wore my aviators behind A.H. on a cold and dark walk to the Two-Way, a place with two entrances, an old oak bar, and a pervasive air of sexual ambivalence. We crowded into a booth by the bar as the old Chicago drunks sat above us flinging bad jokes and groans around the counter. Elsa fumed a little about the party incident. "I can't believe you fucking took your cock out!" though she was laughing, too. Katje and A.H. just rolled their eyes from across the table as finally I took off my aviators and stared at Elsa's mouth. I was drunk.

A few more drinks and we were all stuck listening to A.H. talk about his experiments with dudes, appropriately enough, considering the environs. In full regalia, tiara and all like it'd been stuck to his skin, he clung to the glory of his minor fame; consequently he was a favorite at bars such as this one, where the old Chicago drunks and hipsters formed a cohort. "Bill," he said. "You've never stuck your cock up a fella's ass?" And he grinned that sweaty, sarcastic thing. Elsa and her sister broke into laughter so high-pitched and loud that I quickly wiped the disgusted look from my face with the back of a hand.

"Well," I said, simply.

"You haven't." A.H. nodded as if to confirm the truth of his statement.

"Oh no..." wide-eyed, me. I motioned to the bartender for more drinks. Three burly drunks at the counter were visibly tuned into our conversation. A.H. went on about how he'd once taken on three faggot ex-cons at once. The three, he said, were friends of his brother Charlie. Visions of pedophiles in riot gear flooded my senses—Charlie was at least ten years A.H.'s junior. A.H. laughed long and loud, nodding to my disgusted expression. "The guy," he said, looking to Elsa. "He wouldn't know beauty if it walked up and said hello."

I was now very drunk. The bartender laid our beers on the edge of the bar. I reached up quick, grabbing mine and sucking hard on it.

"He knows me," said Elsa, and they all laughed. I sucked down my perturbation, the lot of them staring like they expected me to vomit. I might. What kind of conversation was this? What a thing to push on a man so obviously tanked, uncomfortable, sitting here with his goddamned ladyfriend. But I wasn't so drunk I couldn't think, for I then pulled a kernel out of that sentiment, as my friends continued to talk, figuring I'd play the game a bit. "Now the question!" I hollered. "It's what does the lady Betty think of all this?" I was positively beaming here, understand, as A.H. began to sneer. Artichoke Heart's sometime girlfriend Betty was a homey south-sider with an old maid's hairdo and, a little like A.H. himself, a dictionary's worth of words to say—no, to yell—about everything.

"Does she know, for instance, about the three pedophiles in their riot gear?" I leaned way back in the booth, smiling, letting it all sink in. But A.H. remained calm.

"Who said anything about riot gear?" Elsa said, but I kept my gaze fixed on the man in front of me, who smiled like he'd read my mind. And maybe he had. "Not quite sure," he said. "You know, I don't think Betty knows."

And he laughed yet again, a big belly-laugh, his head falling back from our booth; it was forced, I knew. The boys at the bar bought it, though, guffawing and reaching around each other to slap the black man A.H. on the back like he was an old pal. They all bought it. Elsa and Katje chuckled their ways through a sip each, and A.H. adjusted his tiara to cap it, pushing the thing farther up atop his head. He winked at me as the crowd laughed on.

"Well you should fucking tell her," I said.

"It was a long time ago," he said. "Fun while it lasted, but the ladies are much more the thing that gets me going." A.H. looked toward Elsa and Katje and winked some more.

"But what if you told her, see?" I said. "I think you know damned well what would happen."

Then Elsa grabbed my shoulder and turned my drunken body to her. "Women are not so," she said, pausing, "so prudish about it? That right?" Her voice cut up in pitch and volume like that of a stepped-on cat.

"Shit," I said.

A.H. cocked his head and drove home the point. "The opposite's opposite," he said. "It's impossible to compete with a girl. In the case of a dude. Or vice-versa."

"Right," Elsa said. But I was fucking lost. I set my sights on the dudes at the bar, who now were giving drooling, gape-mouthed sorts of looks at A.H.

Elsa's wild howl brought me back after a time to the picture of Katje smiling sarcastically at me. "Fucking what?" I said.

A.H. chuckled. "The man's got a point."

"Who's got a point?" I said.

"You do."

"I didn't say shit."

Then Elsa sat up, rolled her beautifully bulbous eyes down to me. "What would you say, for instance, if you knew I'd had a girlfriend?" I didn't say a word for a long moment, was aware only vaguely of a slight sinking feeling in my gut. I managed to stammer "And had you?" which she answered with a nod, a shrug of her shoulders and "There was a girl at the party wearing a beret. That's her."

"What?" I stammered, but she was smiling at me, that smile to die for: lips parted just a little like an opening flower, a sexy lilt to one side of her mouth. And with that smile the knowledge of her pronouncement sank in. "Fucking outrageous," I said, turning back to the bar, the old men just laughing away with themselves. I pointed. "What the fuck are you laughing at?" I said.

Artichoke Heart tried to deflate the uneasiness in the air between us by ordering a round of shots, then another, and another, which more or less worked. I donned my aviators after the fourth round and had forgotten about most everything. I rose, swaying, to go to the bathroom and was collared by one of the old guys as I passed the bar. He swung my drunken body onto a stool too close to him for my comfort. "What's the word, my man?" he said.

"The word is my fucking head hurts, friend," I said, and I stuck my pointer finger then an inch from his nose, curled it in, and "BOOM!" I said, with thoughts of rats braver and uglier than even he, whose eyes shot wide before he laughed. "Ever shot a rat?" I hollered.

He got up from his chair.

"It's an amazing thing," I said. "You look into the fucker's eyes before it dies and you know what you see? It knows. In this city, these rats know what a gun pointed at their heads means. So what's the answer, friend?" He shuffled back and away. I stood and stepped toward him slowly, backing him up against the pool table. "You done it yourself? You look like you might, I'll say." The man's jeans were smeared with grease, his coat a dastardly, stinking thing. He nearly collapsed backward onto the table. I took one more step forward before being spun around by the hard hand of Artichoke Heart, who stood there in his sunglasses, near identical to my own. "Let's go," he said. I stared at my reflection in his shades for a full minute, it seemed, the crowd gathered around us staring, gawking, unsure even of its own existence at this moment. We'd given them a show. A.H. could keep this up indefinitely. A bright bulb hung just over our heads on the end of a wire. I closed my eyes. When I opened them he was still there. As was I, there in his sunglasses,



I thought, and it broke me. I turned away, remembered the man and pool table behind me. "Wait a second," I said, shaking out a blooming pain in my head. I turned around and, of course, met only the enraged gazes of not only the current billiards players but every shithead who waited his turn. "Shit hell," I said, and we left, wading through the gawking circle of hipsters, the old men on the other side of them, a few of the latter vowing that we'd never see the interior of the Two-Way again. But we exited through the north door, and the entryway through the south would be forever open to us, as it later turned out.

Elsa and Katje stood in the cold outdoors, looked at me like I might kill them before I said, "Come on ladies." Only you will save us.

I lurched home with Elsa, stopping once to piss in an alleyway, and reached the door to my place to choke at the smell of burned hair that crept through the gaps, then hitting the hot interior and bursting into a fit of coughing so violent I thought I might vomit. I stewed. Elsa made straight for the bathroom. I prized the .22 from its spot in my underwear drawer. She came back out and sat down. She asked about her girlfriend. I didn't speak. She told me that when she'd made her confession, I looked like someone had punched me in the nose. "What would you do if I told you some shit like that?" I asked, unable to smile or frown or even summon the muscles I would need to put on an expression appropriate for a man asking a question. I stood by the doorway and swayed. She hadn't an answer for me and started to cry a little. "I've got to walk," I said, and left the place. There was a police car by the restaurant garbage bins, a cop sitting idly in wait for a man with a gun. I ambled on by, rats hopping at my feet.

Four blocks down I made the mistake of spending the last bullet on a beast as it trundled in the open air down the alley in flight from me. I was stumbling along and missed every shot, had to duck a police siren I could only hear, at some remove behind me, wailing through the whine of the city. I ran the alleys and emerged onto a street nearly a mile east of my apartment, gasping. I could see the freeway from this spot, the lights of cars falling around a turn toward unknown fates. I watched them for a time, the siren wailing in diminuendo behind me before it fell off completely. I thought nothing, felt for the gun at my back. It was there. I sat and must have for hours, or I sat there for days, maybe, as the next weeks were only a stasis of teeth-grinding and clenched fists.

Elsa and Katje had in truth been planning a departure for a long time, so it shouldn't have been much of a surprise that they left a few weeks on. They'd said they'd be coming back, before all this, but I knew it was over. I was so broken I took to carrying the gun at all times, empty though it was, and I did not use it. I floated along. ...

*Continued in Sons of the Rapture, Featherproof Books (featherproof.com), Chicago, 2006.*

*Todd Dills hails originally from Rock Hill, SC. He lives and writes in Chicago, where he serves as editor of THE2NDHAND (this issue guest-edited by Jonathan Messinger and Zach Dodson). Sons of the Rapture is his first novel.*



**FROM *THE BOY DETECTIVE FAILS* BY JOE MENO, PUNK PLANET/AKASHIC BOOKS 2006:** At one time, in nearby New York City, a beautiful silver cathedral was built. Before long, a masked villain blew it up with an explosive device and many people were killed. We hate to even discuss it because your pretty cousin Amy, sadly, was inside. Immediately, like everyone else, she was turned into a brilliant explosion of stained glass. Tiny bits of it fell everywhere. The colorful pieces were carried into the river and disappeared downstream, turning everything they touched gray. Little children, fish, deer—anything near the explosion—became slouched and old. Miles and miles away from the lights of that great city, everyone in our town, including you, became ill, either from the colored glass in their blood or the sadness of seeing the spot on the horizon where the cathedral used to be.