

So You Want to Be a Poet

by Kathryn Kulpa

It's open mic night at the Pensive Pelican and you're the feature. You wear your best black jeans, the ones that are only three years old, and a beaded top you found at Savers. The host introduces you as her favourite rock star poet. Everyone cheers. Two people buy a chapbook. You live off that night for weeks.

Not literally, because the chapbooks cost ten dollars. But at work, in your "other" job at the convenience store (which this summer is your only job), you amuse yourself during inventory by turning shelf talkers into triolets, box labels into haiku. Before you leave for home you spend five minutes in the walk-in freezer, hoping the chill will last, because you've promised yourself not to turn the A.C. on unless the temperature in the house is absolutely over 80.

You're the girl that would sneak out to poetry readings instead of parties, watching fierce semi-bearded men reading their poems from hand-stapled zines. Think of teenage you, with buckle boots and fishnet tights, waiting in the February cold outside Boston Public Library to see Ginsberg and Burroughs, and the egg-eyed old man who thought you were in line for a concert and handed you a comic book tract about the evils of punk rock, how a once-Christian band signed up with wily concert promoter "Lew Siffer" and met well-deserved fates: the drummer OD'd, the bassist died of AIDS, and the lead singer was "into vampirism." You and your friends loved it; you cut up the comic for erasure poems, stayed up until light scraped the windows of your attic bedroom, reading them out loud and laughing. You wanted to cut the whole world up into poems that night. You wanted to never go to sleep.

You wish you had that tract now. It might be worth something. Once, as a joke, an ex-boyfriend gave you an old porn magazine with Allen Ginsberg as the interview. There was Ginsberg, talking about Buddhism and desire amidst the brazen 1970s muffs. You offer it up on eBay as a collector's item. Someone buys it for \$11.88.

In your mind, you translate that: three gallons of gas. If you use your employee discount, you can also get a large coffee.

Calculate this: when you finish paying off your MFA loans, you will be eligible for Social Security.

You tell yourself you're not really poor, just bohemian-poor. Tell yourself there's something artisanal and slow-food movement about soaking and boiling dried garbanzo beans, instead of admitting they're the last available protein source in the house, not counting the flop-eared bunny who you're sure has been looking at you suspiciously of late. Haunt the bargain produce box at the farm stand and take home brown-spotted tomatoes and oddly shaped zucchini and tell yourself they are the misfit toys of veggie-land and you are rescuing them.

Sometimes you dream a rescue will come for you. A genius grant. A two-year residency in Prague. A tenured teaching job, even if it's in Arkansas or South Dakota. Your poetry workshop was cancelled for the summer but you're sure it will run this fall. Every day, obsessively, starting in August, you check your class's enrollment on the university web site. Five. Twelve. When it hits 15 you feel safe, temporarily, but you know it could still drop. You hope some people won't decide they don't really want to be poets.

