

*Jay Dougherty*

TWO POETS

Jan came into the room, sat down in the rusted  
lawn chair, opened a bottle of cola and pushed her  
feet up onto the table. It was the kitchen  
table, and the living room  
table, and the television  
table.

Jan and Harry had, in short, just one other  
piece of furniture:  
the mattress.

"Shit," Jan said, taking a gulp  
of coke.

"What's wrong, Jan," Harry said —  
"just the usual?"

"Uh uh," she said. "This time it's worse.  
This time I've had it, and I may never go back."

"Jan," Harry said, "some day we're both going to die,  
and if we die the usual way, like everybody else, we'll  
most likely be apart when it happens, maybe one of us  
at work while the other one kicks off. Anyway, we haven't  
worked it out the usual way so far; why shouldn't we die  
together? What I'm saying is, quit the damn job; let's starve  
together or take enough drugs together so that we both  
kick off."

I don't know if I want to kick off, though," Jan said.  
"Why can't *you* get a job for awhile and let *me* stay home  
and write the poems?"

"I'm afraid it's too late for that," said Harry.  
"I've been writing the poems so long now that all I can

think of is death, and you know it never works to talk about death during a job interview." But you don't *have* to talk about death during the interview," she said.

"Jan," Harry said, lowing his voice, "be serious. All the employers will know that I'm faking it if I don't talk about death. They've all read my poetry by now."

"You have *flipped out*," Jan said. "You think *anybody* reads those dumb little xeroxed rags that publish your shit...?"

"Jan, don't call my poetry shit," Harry said flatly. "Before you started working full-time you had more respect for my works."

"Well, I was either naive then or your works have deteriorated in quality quite a bit," Jan said. "I mean, your poems are nothing but prose cut up into lines now."

"Jan," Harry said, "I think this discussion is getting us nowhere."

"Oh, just great," she said. "What then? *I'll* tell you what. Jan keeps working and you keep on writing your *shit* and sending it off to those dumb fucking little magazines. Jan pays the bills and you continue paying for a cup of coffee for yourself once every week with those fifty-cent checks you get in the mail. Is that it?"

"Jan, I asked you not to call my poems *shit*."

"Oh, my god, you conceited bastard — you don't even respond anymore to my complaints. All you can talk about is your dumb, stupid SHIT — and DEATH — you and your stupid SHIT about DEATH! I can't take it anymore!"

"Okay, look," said Harry. "You've had a rough day. Why don't we both eat some dinner and talk about this when we're both in a better mood?"

"SHIT and DEATH," she went on. "That's all you are: SHIT and DEATH. I HATE your SHIT and I HATE your DEATH! If you don't want to change things, then you can just EAT your SHIT and DIE!"

Harry got up from the kitchen table, walked into the bathroom, and shut the door. He stayed in there, no noise, five, ten, fifteen minutes.

Jan listened, telling herself she didn't care.

A half an hour passed, no sound from within.

Finally Jan got up, walked to the bathroom door. "Harry, look, you okay in there?"

"I'm okay," said Harry.

Jan could tell he had been crying.

"Just leave me alone a little while longer. I've been trying to write a poem. I don't think I can anymore."

"Look," Jan said, "why don't you take a laxative. Something's bound to come out in a couple of hours."  
"Good idea," Harry said. "Does this mean you aren't mad anymore?"

"Well," Jan said, "we'll have to talk about this awhile."  
"I understand," said Harry.

Jan heard Harry unlock the door, and then it opened. Harry stood there, face red from crying, pants bunched up around his ankles, penis shriveled and pitiful looking.

Jan kissed him on the forehead.

"You shit," she said, a little tear forming at the edge of her eye, "someday you'll be the death of me."

"Now you're talking," Harry said.

Harry pulled up his pants with one hand, and they walked over to the mattress, turned on the small black-and-white television with a coat hanger for an antenna, lay in each other's arms, and fell asleep.

