

INTERVIEWER

When were you born?

LAURA ALBERT

November 2, 1965. I was born with a fever. My mother was in labor at The Brooklyn Hospital for three days and she almost died. It was election day, and because of me, my mother didn't get to vote. It was also the Day of the Dead.

INTERVIEWER

What did your parents do?

ALBERT

My mother was a musical playwright, and my father was an assistant principal. My parents were both children of Jewish immigrants. We didn't have money, we lived in public housing for the lower-middle class in Brooklyn Heights.

INTERVIEWER

Were your mother's plays produced?

ALBERT

She would stage them in our building, and I'd put on shows there too. She would sit with me at the piano, I would sing melodies to her, she would write them down, and then I would write the lyrics. If there wasn't an audience available, I'd go in the bathroom and do shows by myself in front of the mirrors. I'd arrange the mirrors so it was reflection after reflection. But I wanted an audience—I didn't want to be alone with it—and at school I would let loose the characters. I would do monologues. I would do different scenarios, different accents, mimicry, which is the same way you learn how to write. First you copy a writer, and then the material mutates and it becomes your own.

INTERVIEWER

How old were you when you started writing your own shows?

ALBERT

As far back as I can remember, I always had stories. They tended to be about boys who were in trouble. I would tell myself these stories every night when I went to bed. It was like watching a movie. I would rewind it a little bit, then

replay it and watch it again to help me fall asleep. Sometimes a story would keep me awake, though, and I'd start crying because I didn't know how it was going to end.

INTERVIEWER

Why do you think your protagonists were boys?

ALBERT

All the stories I was encountering were about boys. The characters that were allowed to have adventures and allowed to have redemption were boys, from Huck Finn to Tom Sawyer to *Oliver Twist* to Peter Pan. What were the girls? They were princesses. And I knew that was not my story. I was not a cute little kid.

INTERVIEWER

You say your mother helped you compose shows. What about your father?

ALBERT

My dad worked a lot and he wasn't home. But he would take me way out to Bushwick to this store that sold old comic books. I was *obsessed* with all these comic books from the forties. I loved Superman, but I had a mad crush on Aquaman. There was something about Aquaman that was really vulnerable and sort of gay that I just really dug. I remember sitting on the bus in fifth grade and all the other girls were talking about boys and I was just thinking, Aquaman.

INTERVIEWER

Did you have many friends at school—kids your own age?

ALBERT

I was friends with all the nerd guys. And the popular kids liked me because I made them laugh. I made up funny stories and I was the best at prank phone calls. In sixth and seventh grade girls started having serious crushes on boys, and we started calling them on the phone. There was this one guy that everyone really liked, but no one could speak to him on the phone because they'd giggle too much. So one day, with the other girls listening, I called him using a Swedish accent, and he fell for it. I kept calling him—and the other girls didn't know this. I made up a whole character, Katrin. I went to the library to research Sweden, and I studied Swedish to make sure my accent was right. Katrin was

living with Laura, with me, but her parents were very strict and she wasn't allowed to leave the house. So no one ever saw her. I found I had this skill over the phone—which I think a lot of women discover—this idea of, Wow, I have this personality, but I'm not allowed to expose it, because my physical appearance doesn't match it. The boy fell in love with Katrin. And I fell in love with him.

Our phone relationship went on for months. It got really elaborate. And then one day I met him, as Katrin's friend Laura, and we started to hang out together. I cut out a picture of a pretty girl from an old yearbook to show him. His friends found out about her, and they would talk to her on the phone too. And they would hang out with me also, but they didn't know that I was Katrin. It got to the point where the whole neighborhood had fallen in love with her. And I felt love for this guy, in the way that you do when you're twelve, where it's safe. It was very real, and it had taken me over. I didn't know how to stop it, but I realized it had to end. So I discovered this kind of cancer that could develop pretty fast, and I gave that to Katrin, and one day when the boy called the house, I told him that Katrin had died.

The next morning the boy's mother showed up at our door. The boy's family was upset, and they wanted to know what had happened. And my mother was like, What the fuck are you talking about? I remember hearing them talking in the other room, and feeling heartbroken. I hadn't meant for any of this to happen.

INTERVIEWER

Did you get in a lot of other trouble as a kid?

ALBERT

Not so much before my parents were divorced. That happened the next year, when I was thirteen, and my world tipped upside down. I had this diary from when I was eleven, and it was just these normal entries about middle-school gossip, how I'm not popular, and then one day it's, I think my parents might get divorced, it's really scary, they're fighting. Then the next entry is: Laura Albert died at birth and they put me in her body. I became really certain that I had died and they took Laura out of my body and they put an alien in. And I had all this evidence that showed that I was different, like my fingers are crooked and I have a point in my ear and all these things.

Things got more and more painful—there was intense violence in my household—and I stopped going to school. I dropped out of eighth grade. My mom

had boyfriends who came to live with us and who were inappropriate with me. It was an ongoing cast of characters—an Indian called Strong Horse who had done time for murder, Stanley the manic depressive, Motorcycle Bob, and on and on. It was scary, but at the time I thought sex was an OK trade, because they were offering me things that I felt very hungry for: attention, validation, or a father figure.

INTERVIEWER

Had your father dropped out of the picture?

ALBERT

I would see him every now and then, but then I just stopped because it was too painful.

INTERVIEWER

What did you all day when you weren't going to school?

ALBERT

I stayed at home and called hotlines. I called any hotline that offered help for kids. I always called as a boy, telling stories. It's not like I had the desire to be transgendered, but I wouldn't pray at night for a normal, happy family, or even to be thin—I would pray, God, let me wake up as a boy. That was salvation for me. That was where the power lay, and that's what I became.

INTERVIEWER

You became a boy by calling emergency help hotlines?

ALBERT

I needed layers of distance. Being a girl was too close to me. I could never say, for instance, that my mom tried to set me on fire in my room, or that I had to barricade myself in my room because my mom was coming at my door with a hammer, or that I would come to school with third-degree burns from coffee being thrown at me.

INTERVIEWER

Did those things really happen?

June 28, 1981

Sun 11:57 AM

I feel lonely
IF I died tomorrow

Who do I
believe? Where do
I go? What
am I?

tear
tear
tear
tear
tear
tear
tear
tear
tear
tear

I
WANT
TO DO

So what?

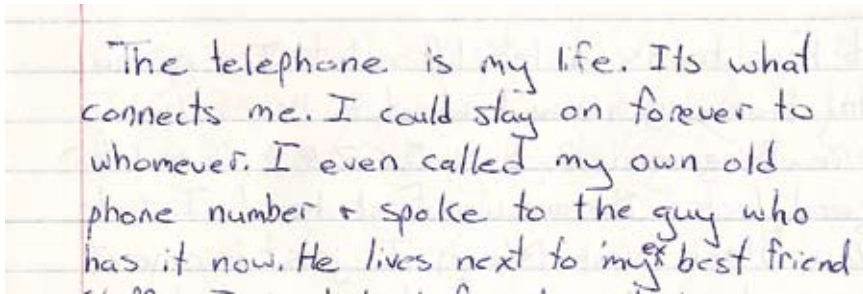
Who cares or knows what was inside
Me. I did nothing I AM nothing.

Look AT ME

ME
People
T.M.M.

I want to be special?
I want people to say I can do
this or that. Holy most people
can't do

A page from Laura Albert's diary when she was sixteen.



This page and opposite: Two passages from Laura Albert's 1981 diary.

ALBERT

Yeah. But my self-esteem was so low, I was afraid that if I told someone what was going on, they'd say, Well, you deserve it. Still, I had the fantasy of help. As long as I was different—if I were cute, if I were little, if I were boy, it would be OK.

INTERVIEWER

And you explained all this to the hotline operators?

ALBERT

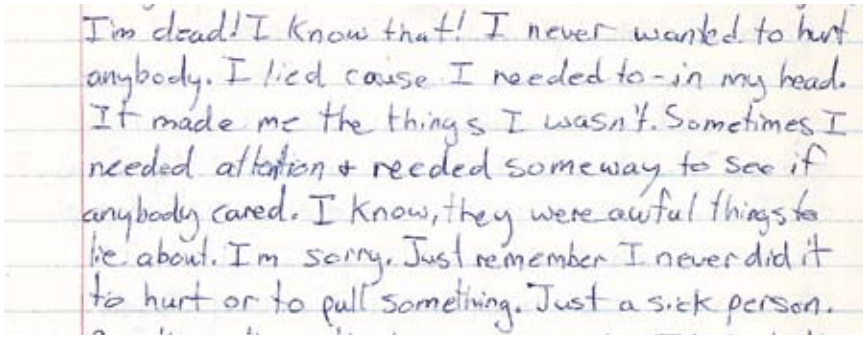
God no. On one call I might have a Southern accent and talk about something that happened in the South. Or I'd be an Irish-Catholic kid who discovers he's gay and is trying to deal with that. That story got more involved—I had books on Ireland I was studying—and it became that this gay guy's brother was in the IRA.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever feel bad about pretending these things to people who were offering help?

ALBERT

Well, I needed help. It wasn't like I was ever thinking, Ha, ha, I'm tricking these people. No, it was like, I'm staying alive. And it was like a trade with the hotline counselors—a lot of it involved sex. You know how a lot of alcoholics work in bars? A lot of pedophiles work around kids. I went into service mode. I knew how to do that by then, from the older guys that I'd been around, and from being molested, and I felt like I had control of the situation as long as I



I'm dead! I know that! I never wanted to hurt anybody. I lied cause I needed to—in my head. It made me the things I wasn't. Sometimes I needed attention & needed some way to see if anybody cared. I know, they were awful things to lie about. I'm sorry. Just remember I never did it to hurt or to pull something. Just a sick person.

was a boy. There was one guy I had been talking to, who billed himself as a child therapist—he had an ad in *The Village Voice*—and when he found out that I was a sixteen-year-old girl instead of a fourteen-year-old boy, he said, Don't you ever call me again. He responded angrily instead of asking himself, Why did this kid invent this story? What would make a child do such a thing?

INTERVIEWER

Were you ever in any kind of formal, face-to-face therapy as a kid?

ALBERT

We were seeing a family therapist. I had an eating disorder. I really believed that if I were thin everything would be OK. That was my focus. And this therapist recommended that I be hospitalized at St. Vincent's. The arrangement with my mother was that we'd go check out the hospital, and if it wasn't appropriate, we'd leave. As soon as we got there, it was clear that it was inappropriate: big water bugs on the wall, peeling paint, old people sitting around and waiting to die. So I said to my mom, We should leave. She looked at me and said, I'm going, you're staying. And she left. I ran to the door and it was locked, and the windows were all barred, and then the nurses came over with Thorazine pills. My mother later told me it was like when we had to leave my dog at the pound. And I was like, OK, but I'm not a dog.

INTERVIEWER

How long were you in the hospital?

ALBERT

I got out after about four days by putting on the biggest song and dance ever.

I suppressed all emotion. I told them, I can't wait to get back to school. But my mom made it very clear to me. She said, Any more shit, you go right back.

INTERVIEWER

Did you manage to stay out of the hospital after that?

ALBERT

Oh no. But first I returned to school, four schools actually—I dropped out of them all one after another. I just couldn't take it anymore. Then I discovered punk rock and all of a sudden my life had purpose. That music expressed the rage I was feeling. It was my language. I got into the early-eighties New York punk scene. There was a club on Avenue A called A7 that everyone went to. Bad Brains would play, Agnostic Front, Minor Threat, and the Beastie Boys, when they were still a hardcore band. I started dating a skinhead, and I started interviewing my heroes in this world. Some of the guys in the bands were just really hostile to girls but when I'd call them up as a boy, all of a sudden they would open up.

INTERVIEWER

Did you continue living at home after you'd dropped out of school?

ALBERT

Until I went back into the hospital for five months—yes. This time, before I got out of the hospital, the social workers strongly suggested that I not return home, and I was sent to a group home run by the Jewish Child Care Association on the Upper West Side. I was in a psychiatric day program. I had private therapy with a social worker, group therapy, and I still saw a psychiatrist from the hospital, but it wasn't doing anything for me. So I would sneak out to a pay phone and call hotlines all over the United States making up new stories—always as a boy—to relieve my torment.

After being in the home for about four years, I realized I needed to get out of New York. Some skinhead friends of mine had moved to San Francisco, and it seemed like a good alternative. I moved here in 1989, the year of the quake. I entered a twelve-step program for eating disorders, and I worked hard at it, and I also started to play music. I started a band with Geoff, who later became my boyfriend and the father of my son. Our band was called Daddy Don't Go. Major labels were interested, but I learned really quickly that atten-

tion was dangerous for me. I can't get enough attention to heal me. So I just couldn't keep it together and the band broke up.

INTERVIEWER

Did you have a job to fall back on?

ALBERT

Around that time a local writer who liked my band, James Cury, called me up. He was a senior editor at *The Web Magazine*, one of the first magazines to cover the Internet—this was 1996. He liked my band and my personality and he thought I could do reviews of sex websites for them. So I did. I had the password for every online sex site, and I would write really funny reviews. So I was writing and I was doing phone sex as well. I had started doing phone sex in New York when I was a kid. It allowed me to leave my body and portray any kind of sexual being. I could do every accent under the sun. I would be Asian, Russian, German, Southern, Swedish, all the clichés.

INTERVIEWER

Was that fun for you, or just a paycheck?

ALBERT

I liked some of the guys. I liked talking to them about their lives. I'm still friends with some of them.

INTERVIEWER

These were really your first steady jobs, then.

ALBERT

The sex writing was easy and I was having a lot of success. *Rolling Stone* asked me to do an online radio show for them. Then I wrote for *Adult Video News* magazine. But I realized, This ain't literature. I wanted to leave something that made an impact. Around this time I had also started hanging out with a lot of the kids on Polk Street, past California Street. Everyone was doing heroin and most of them would trick. These kids were so left behind. The outreach services would treat them like they were a drain on the city's resources, taking attention away from people who could really benefit from it. But if you're aware of their suffering, how can you just sit there? I felt very drawn to these

hardcore street kids, and they recognized that I knew the world. I asked, How can I be of service? I got involved with the needle exchange program—giving kids clean needles so they're not getting infected with HIV—and I also felt that I had to absorb their stories.

INTERVIEWER

Had you stopped calling therapy hotlines yourself by this point?

ALBERT

No, I was still calling them all the time. But then I started speaking with a psychiatrist named Terrence Owens. We had a half-hour phone conversation every day, and I built my life around that. It was the only time I felt alive.

INTERVIEWER

Were you speaking to him as yourself—as Laura Albert?

ALBERT

No, I called him as a boy named Jeremiah. He was thirteen at the time, and he was from West Virginia. At first I didn't really know much about him. As with my other characters, I wouldn't know who was talking until the person spoke through me. He would reveal himself to me, I would let it unfold, and I would go to that other world, which was much better to me than my own world, which I hated. I never thought, My God, this isn't true. It felt more alive and more true to me than any of the things in my world.

INTERVIEWER

What was the story that emerged about Jeremiah?

ALBERT

Jeremiah's family was educated and wealthy. His grandfather owned radio stations and telephone towers, and he was a very religious man. His mother was a woman named Sarah, who gave birth to him when she was thirteen. His father was a theologian who came into their home to study with the grandfather and got seduced by Sarah, who was a rebel, trying out her fledgling sexuality. But she was still an innocent—a child—so it was also like a rape. Then her father forbade her from having an abortion, and shortly after she gave birth to Jeremiah, he was taken away and raised in a foster family. Sarah

started to work as a waitress and hustled, just trying to survive. She started drinking. When she was eighteen, the state contacted her about giving up her legal rights to the foster family. She refused and her father helped her win her kid back because he didn't like government interference—he was very conservative and antigovernment. So she got the kid back, but Jeremiah, who was four, didn't understand why his foster family had given him up. Sarah told him it was because he's evil. She scared him into staying with her. How could the kid make sense of this kind of betrayal? How do any of us make sense of betrayal at an early age? Every day, on the phone with Dr. Owens, something new from Jeremiah's story would be revealed to me.

INTERVIEWER

Did he ever question its veracity?

ALBERT

No. He helped me with the feelings beneath it, because it was all very true to me. I just told a story that fit that pain I was in. So Sarah and Jeremiah traveled around a lot—Portland, Seattle, Los Angeles. They lived in poverty, and both of them would hustle—which was true for me at the time. Jeremiah would try to emulate her. It's like how I, as a girl, acted seductively toward the men that my mother brought into the house, not really understanding what I was doing. I'd get raped, but I didn't think of it as rape. I didn't know those terms. I went along with it, and at times, without understanding the consequences, I initiated it. That's what many people don't understand about abuse. People want to think that the kid is always innocent and angelic, but, I'm sorry, abused children develop survival strategies that aren't attractive. They can be capable of provoking violence, because getting hit feels like an articulation of love. That isn't convenient or pretty, but it's true. That doesn't mean that the kid is guilty—the kid does not understand. That's how it was with Jeremiah. He wanted attention and love without really knowing how to get it.

On the street, Jeremiah would call himself Terminator. The name was kind of a joke, because it was the opposite of his actual personality, which was shy and introverted. Jeremiah liked it because it gave him a sense of power. So sometimes he was Jeremiah, sometimes he was Jeremy, sometimes he was Terminator, and later he was JT. His last name was LeRoy, which is the name of a good friend of mine. Finally, Sarah abandoned him in a motel in San Francisco, and Jeremy wanted to commit suicide. He didn't want to go back

to hustling or living in the street anymore. He wanted to find a therapist to tell him that he could commit suicide, that he wouldn't go to hell if he did, because he just couldn't take the pain anymore. That was very true for me. I wanted someone to say, OK, you can give up now. I would feel suicidal and I was unable to express that as me, so Jeremy would take over. Jeremy reached out to lots of different people, until one day he found Dr. Owens.

INTERVIEWER

You invented Jeremy, but you say he took you over—as if he existed independently of you.

ALBERT

It really felt like he was another human being. I'm talking about him in the past tense because I feel that his energy is not the primary force inside me, as it was then.

INTERVIEWER

How did you decide to introduce JT to a broader world, beyond the confines of your therapy?

ALBERT

Dr. Owens asked me to write my stories down. He was teaching a class at the University of San Francisco for people who wanted to be social workers, and he knew how much I hated social workers, so he said, You can teach them the real deal. I liked that, because I felt I could be of service. And, I realize now, it was a way to trick myself into writing. When I wrote the first piece I felt the voice click. It was a story called "Balloons," about using heroin. I would write the stories by hand because I didn't know how to type. Then I'd fax them to him, and sometimes I would ride my bike over to the school and deliver a story directly. I was very driven and hungry for feedback.

INTERVIEWER

You'd show up in person, as Laura?

ALBERT

No, I'd show up as Jeremy's friend Speedie. That's who I was in public—a woman, later known as Emily, whose street name was Speedie. She spoke with

this annoying, singsongy Cockney accent, so you wanted to slap her, but she was from all over, because her father was in the military. She came from a hard life, and she left home early and settled in San Francisco. I also said that she was in the sex world, because there were people who might have recognized me. I met Terry—Dr. Owens—as Speedie a couple of times.

INTERVIEWER

When you were writing, did you feel JT take over in the same way as when you were talking? Did you feel that JT was writing?

ALBERT

No, when I wrote I felt more like it was me trying to craft a story. He'd tell the story and I was the secretary who would take it down and say, OK, thank you, now I'm going to try to turn it into craft. But while I wouldn't sit there and think of myself as JT, as long as I was writing I didn't have to be Laura either.

INTERVIEWER

What did Dr. Owens, or his students, make of the stories?

ALBERT

They talked about the pieces on a therapeutic basis. But I really wanted to know what they thought about the writing. So Dr. Owens put me in touch with a neighbor of his, an editor named Eric Wilinski, who gave me feedback. A phone-sex client had turned me on to the poetry of Sharon Olds, and I really admired her. When I mentioned this to Eric, he said that he had studied with her and suggested that I write her directly. I said, Nah, you don't do that. He said, Yeah, I spoke to her, she wants you to write to her. And she wrote me back. She read "Balloons" and her response was just really gracious.

At the same time I reached out to a gay fiction writer whom I was just in awe of. There were a lot of disturbing things in his books, transgressive sexual stuff, and the way he captured a teen's loneliness and need really resonated with me. I called him using the name Terminator, and I spoke as Jeremy. He was someone I revered, but when I read my work to him on the phone, I understood that, as much as he liked my writing, he was also turned on sexually by the perversity and the abuse in the stories. So he started to turn our relationship into a sexual relationship. It was like with my mother's boyfriends—I wanted to keep them around, so I would go into service mode. He thought

he was talking to a thirteen-year-old boy, and he was always inviting me to his house. I thought, Sexual attention is better than no attention. I had learned on the street from outreach workers that if you get into a dangerous sexual situation, you just tell the man you have AIDS—that was the last-resort survival strategy. So I finally put the brakes on and said I had AIDS and sores all over my body. It didn't faze him at all. There are people who like to play along the edge. I was scared, but I was also relieved. If he could have compassion for someone who isn't beautiful, who is in fact disfigured, that means he could have compassion for me—Laura.

INTERVIEWER

But he didn't know Laura existed. Did he actually help you as JT in any way?

ALBERT

He sent me a novel by another gay writer, who I got in contact with. This guy would also invite me to come stay with him, but he passed my work to a writer at *The Village Voice* named Laurie Stone, who ended up putting one of my stories, "Baby Doll," into an anthology called *Close to the Bone*. That book got a lot of reviews, and many of the reviews singled out my story, saying how raw and intense it was. The next thing I knew, I had an agent, Henry Dunow, and Random House wanted to publish a collection of my stories. But they wanted to publish them as a nonfiction memoir, and I refused. This was the time of the memoir craze. Kathryn Harrison's *The Kiss* was out, and Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club*, and there were also these exploitative child-abuse books popping up left and right. But I didn't want to publish the stories if they couldn't stand on their own as fiction. I'd begun corresponding with the writer Mary Gaitskill, and she gave me immense positive feedback, but she was also the first person to be critical about my writing. She was directing me to all this great literature—Vladimir Nabokov and Flannery O'Connor—and I realized how much I had to learn.

INTERVIEWER

Did she ever ask to meet JT?

ALBERT

Yes. No one had ever met him in person, and there were starting to be rumors that he was not real, so I knew I needed to supply a body. I made a

date to meet Mary, and I decided to hire someone to play JT. But I didn't know anybody who matched my physical description of JT. So Geoff and I got in the car and started driving up and down Polk Street, and I saw a boy I'd never seen before. He was nineteen and he was slight, blond, blue-eyed—perfect. I said to him, You want to make fifty bucks, no sex? He said, Sure. I just told him not to talk, just say hello to a woman named Mary, get freaked out, and leave. I took him to the café. Mary Gaitskill was sitting there. The kid walked up to her, said, Hi, I'm Terminator, and he handed her some vinegar and chocolate—things I brought to give her as gifts. She said, Hi, glad to meet you, and when the kid ran off, I sat down. I was there as Speedie, and we talked.

INTERVIEWER

What did Geoff think of what you were doing?

ALBERT

For the longest time, he didn't know what was going on. JT was a dirty thing for me, something I did on the side, to stay alive. He stayed out of it because he just really didn't want to know.

INTERVIEWER

How did you finally tell him?

ALBERT

I didn't really tell him. He slowly became aware of it. We never had a conversation about why it was what it was.

INTERVIEWER

Sarah was published in 2001. Was the story that JT was still living on the street at that point?

ALBERT

No, Jeremy was living with me by then. On the phone he would say, I'm living with my friend Speedie and her boyfriend Astor. That was my name for Geoff—Astor. And when I got pregnant, JT would also say, Speedie's having a baby, she's settling down. And JT would rebel and say, Speedie's such a bitch. As JT, I could talk such shit about myself.

INTERVIEWER

Did having a child affect the way you wrote as JT in any way?

ALBERT

JT kept going at his own speed. I started writing a novel, *Sarah*, right after I gave birth to my son.

INTERVIEWER

There was an author photo of JT on that book. Who was that?

ALBERT

My publisher paid to use a photograph of a teenage boy who looked a lot like JT and got permission to run it as the author photo. When *Sarah* was published and it got fabulous reviews, magazines wanted to run articles about JT with their own photos. They didn't want to use the author photo. So again I realized I had to produce a body.

INTERVIEWER

A body that looked exactly like that photo?

ALBERT

Or close enough. I love Andy Warhol, and I had read that he sent out impersonators of himself. So when his magazine, *Interview*, wanted a picture of JT, I asked this girl I saw on Valencia Street, this cute dyke probably in her twenties, if I could take a picture of her for fifteen bucks. I put sunglasses on her and photographed her as JT, and they ran that. But more magazines were getting interested. I needed more photographs. Geoff's younger half sister, Savannah, knew about JT, and it had occurred to me that I could always use her as a model if I couldn't find someone else. She had this amazing spark, a star quality, and she agreed to let me take some pictures of her. When I saw them I said, Oh my God, you look just like JT's author photo.

INTERVIEWER

Why were you having girls play JT?

ALBERT

Well, first I tried to find a guy. I would even have JT say to people, I need



Savannah Knoop as JT LeRoy, left, with Laura Albert as Speedie, spring 2005.

to find a stunt double, like Andy Warhol. But ultimately I realized that gender didn't matter—it was more about finding a specific look and an emotional resonance. Savannah just happened to be female.

But even after she started appearing as JT, I was always looking for someone else, because I knew it was not easy for Savannah to dress up as him. It required a whole physical transformation, beyond the blond wig and black hat and big sunglasses.

INTERVIEWER

Did you let her speak to reporters or just pose for pictures?

ALBERT

Originally, I told her not to talk. She's got a great ear, though, and listening to me speak as JT on the phone, she was able to pick up the southern accent, the slowness of speech, and some basic phrases JT would say, like, Hi there, I'm JT. As she began to do more interviews, she would speak more. But it took Savannah a long time to commit to being JT, and early on, she'd occasionally fuck up. Once she said she was from North Virginia—and people were like, Oh, JT just likes to mess with people. Another time, we went to a screening and there was a sound guy who had worked with Savannah's father. She pulled me into the bathroom and told me, and my heart stopped. I thought, Well, we had a good run.

Luckily, he didn't recognize her. That kept happening. When Savannah signed autographs, she would see people she knew and they didn't recognize her.

INTERVIEWER

How were you able to travel with Savannah when she was passing as JT? Did you make fake IDs?

ALBERT

Yes, but she had her own passport. Only the customs people would see it, though, and we were careful. When the books were sold abroad, we were brought to Japan, Brazil, and all over Europe, and we had a ritual. When we landed, we'd rip all the nametags off the bags.

INTERVIEWER

So you lived in some fear of being exposed?

ALBERT

We'd talk about it sometimes, but we knew our intent was not malicious, so we didn't feel ashamed. We asked ourselves, Are we making anyone do something they don't want to do? Are we being of service? Are we making people feel good and spreading love? We felt that we were. People responded with great love and great happiness to JT, and to his writing. It wasn't like we were spreading some dark thing. And there were people who entered our circle who became very close to us. Sex was had with people.

INTERVIEWER

Wasn't there a point when you had to explain to them what was going on?

ALBERT

When I got close with someone, I would always tell them. I would say, I'm JT LeRoy. I write the books. People laughed: Yeah right. That was usually the response I got. Then people would call JT on the phone the next day and say, You know, you've got to watch out for this Speedie. She's maniacal, and she's trying to take all the credit for your work.

INTERVIEWER

How would you respond?

ALBERT

I'd say, OK, I will. Or, Speedie means well.

INTERVIEWER

Didn't anybody notice the difference between Savannah in person and you on the phone?

ALBERT

No, because when she started becoming JT, I matched her voice. I matched the rhythm. In my punk days, I would speak with a British accent because it was cooler to be British. I was going out with my skinhead boyfriend for four months before I told him that I wasn't British. What I noticed is that after a while, people start listening to what you say and not the voice itself. So you can relax the accent and people tend not to notice. But if I sensed I was talking to someone who was skeptical, I'd keep on top of it, and as Speedie's role became more important, I'd have to talk as her and JT on the phone, sometimes both during the same phone call. I'd go back and forth: Hold on, let me get JT, and then JT would start speaking.

INTERVIEWER

Did anyone believe you when you told them you were JT?

ALBERT

Yes, sure. In general I think a lot more people—people involved with the publication of the book, people who got close to me and Savannah—knew that I was JT than are willing to admit it. It's easier to claim ignorance and blame me than to admit knowing. On the other hand, there were some people I actually felt I had to tell who had no problem with it. One of them was Billy Corgan of Smashing Pumpkins. When I met him three years ago, it was a big deal, because his music meant so much to me. He read my work, and said that knowing me was meaningful to him, too. He had a phone relationship with JT, but when I met him in person, I told him that JT was me—Laura. He understood this on an intuitive level and was very supportive.

INTERVIEWER

Are you saying that you would talk to him as JT when you were actually together with him in a room?

ALBERT

Yeah. It was like, JT is still here, and he likes his relationship with you, and he still has things to discuss with you. And JT would say things to Billy that I, as Laura, wouldn't dare say to Billy.

INTERVIEWER

Were your relations with music and film celebrities generally different from those with writers?

ALBERT

Yes, but for the most part, those star types were approaching me. Or they would mention my work in a magazine article, and then I would write to thank them. I found out that Sheryl Crow had talked about my book on her website, and I was floored. Someone told me that Winona Ryder was into my work, and Drew Barrymore was too, and I was put in touch with them. Lou Reed read the books and he was really supportive. Shirley Manson read about JT in *The Face* magazine early on, and we saw her play in L.A., and we all had a big pajama party. Shirley was as welcoming to Speedie as she was to JT, which was rare. She wrote a song called "Cherry Lips" based on the character of Cherry Vanilla, from *Sarah*. We did a huge photo shoot for the icon issue of *Pop* magazine. I remember Courtney Love told me, You're an iconoclast, JT.

INTERVIEWER

You mean she said that to Savannah?

ALBERT

No, she said it to me on the phone. And I was like, Wow. I'd pick up the newspaper and things would be referred to as in the "JT Leroy mode." It was surreal. Musicians started to ask me to write stories about them to go with press releases for their new albums. I wrote one for Billy Corgan, one for Bryan Adams, Nancy Sinatra, Bright Eyes. JT was the person to go to if you wanted to be cool or reach the young people. Shirley Manson passed my writing on to Bono, and in an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Bono talked about how *The Heart Is Deceitful* was blowing his mind. We met him, and he was wonderful to all of us. The director Allison Anders read *Sarah* and passed it on to Madonna, and she told me that Madonna was reading it.

I was in Florida, swimming in the pool at my grandma's house, and I was thinking, My God, Madonna's in my world. It was an incredible feeling. I knew that if I met her, I would not register on her screen at all. So to know that she was in my world—it shouldn't have given me this feeling of elation, but it did. I just remember I was swimming back and forth in the pool. It was like running over a joyful spot that gave me energy. She's in my world, she's in my world, she's in my world.

But Madonna and I never had much to say to each other—it was more a vanity thing. She once sent me a bunch of kabbalah books. I kept one and I sold the others. I needed the money more than I needed the kabbalah.

INTERVIEWER

How would you feel when you watched Savannah out in the public as JT?

ALBERT

I wasn't watching Savannah, I was watching JT. It was a great relief because JT would leave me and enter her. I felt amazement, elation, pride. People would line up all day to see him—he'd get the rock-star treatment. They had to get us security guards because all these people just wanted to touch him. I remember once we went to Sweden to do a reading, and people were bowing down and kneeling before JT. It happened spontaneously, and it was beautiful. And I was there standing on the side, asking people what brought them. They would always talk about the books. I could get what I wanted—connecting with others—without having to be the focus of attention.

INTERVIEWER

Did you worry about how all this was affecting Savannah?

ALBERT

Yes, a lot. In the fall of 2003 production began on the film of *The Heart Is Deceitful*, which Asia Argento directed. There was an alarming amount of drug use on the set, and many people wanted to get close to JT, so they'd offer Savannah drugs and alcohol. I would get furious. Here they know that JT has substance abuse issues and they're giving him drugs! And of course, I also had this fear that she might say or do something that would give the whole thing away. It's no secret that she and Asia became lovers.

INTERVIEWER

So Asia knew JT was a girl?

ALBERT

Yeah, of course.

INTERVIEWER

And other people must have noticed too. How did you explain JT's feminine appearance?

ALBERT

Savannah was really beginning to embrace JT by this point. Even her body had changed. It became very masculine, her period stopped, her breasts got smaller. At the same time, JT was transforming himself into a woman—it was his truth. He started talking about getting hormonal treatments and having a sex-change operation.

INTERVIEWER

As your son grew up, was he aware of the JT phenomenon?

ALBERT

When he was about six, I explained it to him, and he got it right away. He would look at Savannah and know when she was male and know when she wasn't. He was born into this world, so it was more natural to him. I didn't have to coach him. Pronouns were used very loosely. And when he went out with us, we wouldn't call him by his real name—he went by Thor.

INTERVIEWER

What did you foresee happening to JT? Did you expect him to grow up and continue writing?

ALBERT

I always felt like JT was a mutation, a shared lung, and for me to become normal I'd have to breathe on my own. Originally I felt that he might die of AIDS, but that's not in any of the books. I didn't deny the rumors, but I never made any statement intended to further JT's popularity by claiming he had AIDS. I remember one day ten years ago I thought, he will die this weekend.

I went into deep mourning. I was physically sick. But JT didn't want to die, and I couldn't let him die. I felt that if he died, I would die.

INTERVIEWER

When the *New York Times* told you they were going to expose you as the author of the JT Leroy books, did you deny it?

ALBERT

I said, I don't know what you're talking about. I wasn't ready to admit anything. I published everything as fiction. JT was protection. He was a veil upon a veil—a filter. I never saw it as a hoax. It was bizarre, when the articles came out, to read these interpretations of what we were doing. I was holding on for dear life. One public-relations guy yelled at me over the phone, You're a fake! You're a phony, fuck you! The therapist in my son's school said to me the other day, You know, from what I can see, they're accusing you of being a great writer. But you wouldn't know it. You'd think it was drugs, or a sex ring.

INTERVIEWER

Did you—or do you—feel any shame about misleading people who believed in JT?

ALBERT

I bleed, but it's a different kind of shame. I'm sad I was so injured. Many people were inspired that someone so young could write what I was writing. JT is fifteen years younger than me. All I can say is I am sorry if people are disappointed or offended. If knowing that I'm fifteen years older than Jeremy devalues the work, then I'm sorry they feel that way.

Everything you need to know about me is in my books, in ways that I don't even understand. I think some people take it for granted to be acknowledged and not overlooked. My experience was to be completely ignored and disregarded and disdained. That's what I write about. One thing people often comment to me about the characters in JT LeRoy's books is that they strive for goodness, even in a world where all their experience contradicts this. I feel that desire is essential to my story as well. When I would reach a point where I wanted to commit suicide, something gave me hope. This hope is in the books too—and of course the ultimate hope is that I can reveal myself and you won't go away.

INTERVIEWER

You now do some writing work for the HBO series *Deadwood* as Laura Albert. How does it feel not to be JT anymore?

ALBERT

It's amazing to me for the first time in my life to be out in the world as Laura Albert, the successful writer. And I am moving toward writing fiction under my own name. You're told to pray for your enemies. Ultimately, what they gave me was a gift, and I owe them gratitude.

INTERVIEWER

Are you still in therapy with Dr. Owens?

ALBERT

Yes. It's a sacred relationship. When the whole story broke, he said that I was ready to go to the next step, which was being me. It's like how welders will get metal splinters embedded in their body, but they don't know they're there until they have an MRI and the magnet starts pulling them out. That's how it is with me. I feel that, in my work with Terry, I'm just beginning to lift out the splinters.

INTERVIEWER

So who are you when you talk to Dr. Owens now? Are you still JT?

ALBERT

No. I'm Laura.