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TRENT REZNOR

NAILED

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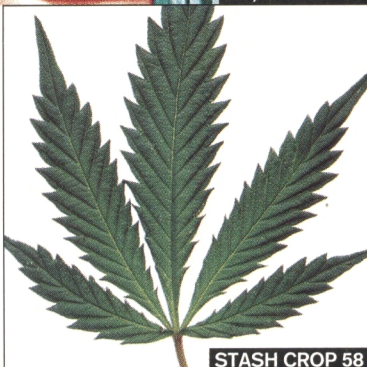
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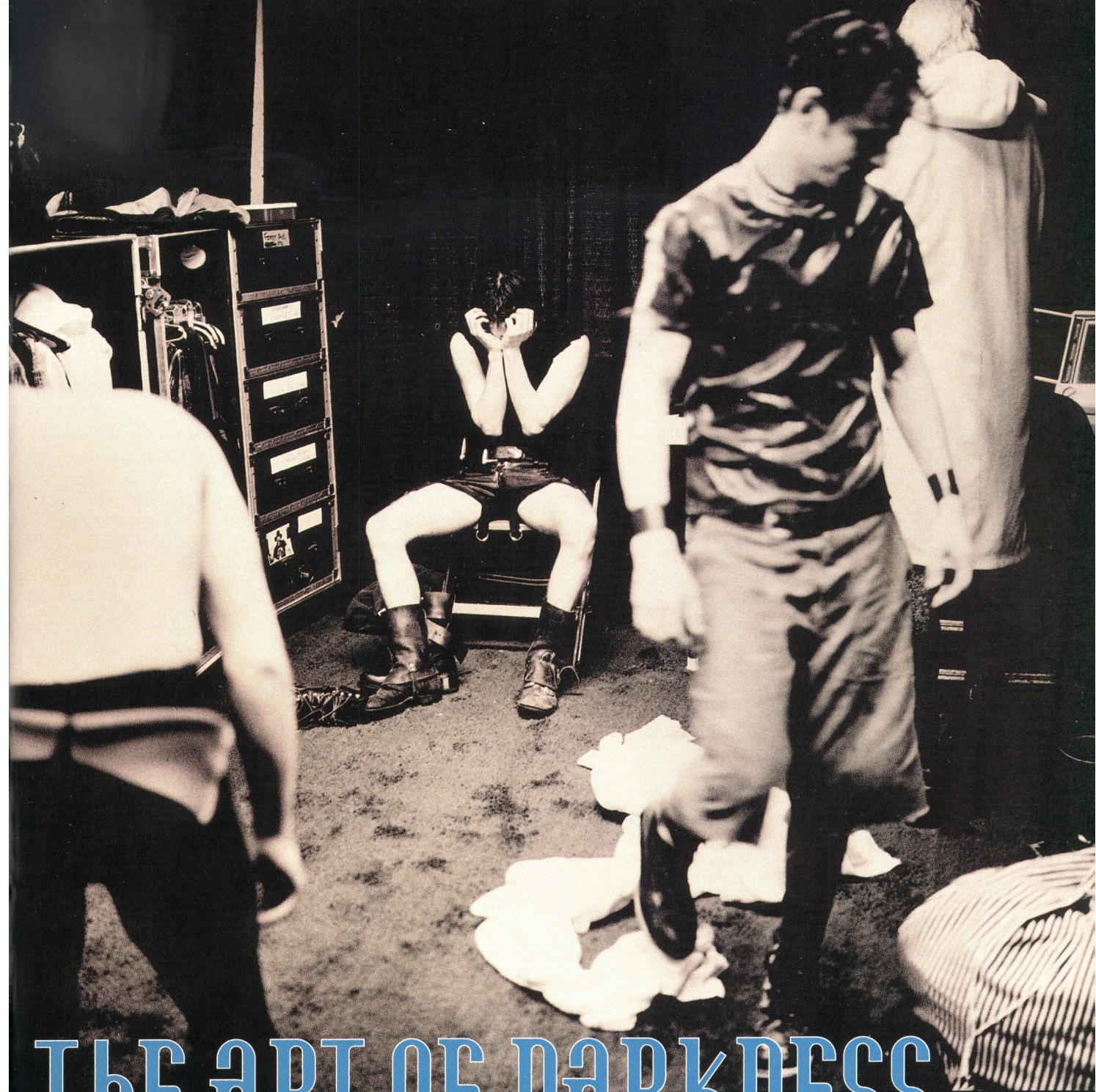
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Onstage, Trent Reznor is a demon possessed by his own sound and



THE ART OF DARKNESS

fury. Offstage he's a self-effacing guy who's still in love with his dearly departed dog. Chris Heath encounters the sharp point of Nine Inch Nails.

"I want to fuck you like an animal." That's what they shout at Trent Reznor these days. Last year he released *The Downward Spiral*, an album about one man's descent into suicidal depression, about letting go of everything. One of the songs, "Closer," was about sex. Those words that they holler at him—out of imitation and, sometimes, invitation—weren't really ones of lust but of self-hatred. "It's supernegative and superhateful," he explains. "It's 'I am a piece ►"

PHOTOGRAPHED BY ANTON CORBIJN

of shit and I am declaring that and if you think you want me, here I am.'” And now it’s a modern nasty-as-nice catchphrase. “I didn’t think it would become a frat-party anthem or a titty-dancer anthem,” Trent Reznor snorts, and it’s hard to tell whether his *principal emotion is pride or embarrassment or despair*. Oh well. “I think my next album is going to be called *Music for Titty Bars*.”

If the growing celebrity of Trent Reznor and Nine Inch Nails is centered around “Closer,” *The Downward Spiral*, and the inspired collage soundtrack for *Natural Born Killers*, Woodstock ’94 clinched it. Nine Inch Nails scared David Letterman and came to represent the event. It was almost too perfect: a weekend fired by the soppy nostalgia of who our parents were, recaptured by the messy, self-obsessed reality of who we are. As with so many things, Trent is concerned that people shouldn’t think the band’s mud-covered appearance was a deliberate ploy. Backstage they were clowning about and pushing each other, and soon they realized they’d reached the point of no return, and so they plastered the mud all over themselves. Onstage it wasn’t so easy; the mud was exacting its revenge. Grit and sweat got in his eyes, and it became harder and harder to play the guitar. Afterward Trent took a shower, then went into the tour bus and started crying. Not elation and not sadness. Just a release of tension.

MICHAEL TRENT REZNOR’S PARENTS BOTH GREW UP IN THE same small Pennsylvania town, Mercer, where he would spend his childhood. They got married when they were still teenagers because they had to. His father was named Michael, so they always called their son Trent.

Michael Sr. was a commercial artist; his wife was a homemaker. But they were too young for all this. When Trent was five, after his sister Tera was born, his father had a talk with him.

“I’m leaving.”

“When are you coming back?”

“I’m not coming back.”

Trent just didn’t understand what that meant. All he could think about was their Saturday trips down to the drugstore, where they’d sit at the soda fountain. A cherry Coke for Trent, a chocolate Coke for Dad. What about that?

Afterward, though his parents were nearby, he lived with his grandparents. Several times he tells me how much he loves them: “I don’t want to give the impression it was a miserable childhood.”

Trent Reznor tells me this, sitting in his Cleveland hotel suite.

Just before Christmas he felt himself nudging toward self-destruct mode, then something pulled him headlong into it. He and his golden retriever Maise had been together for three years. She was visiting him on tour. When he came offstage in Columbus, something was wrong. “Come right now,” they said. “It’s Maise.”

Maise had been playing. She had jumped over a railing, expecting there to be the same ground on the landing side as the leaping side. It was fifty feet down. Trent hurried to the vet’s. Maise was struggling to get up, but she couldn’t. Her back was broken. There was nothing anybody could do, except the only thing we know how to do when we can’t mend something.

That was a bad day. Mr. Self-Destruct came to stay for a while after that. Over the last few years, Trent has stripped his life down. Everything that might have mattered apart from Nine Inch Nails he has either rejected or made it reject him. When he went on tour he didn’t even have a home to go back to. Maise was his last link with a life you might call normal. And now she was gone.

But the tequila was there. And the cocaine was there. (Cocaine isn’t the sort of drug Trent favors. His idea of a drug experience is to take psilocybin mushrooms and cycle through Louisiana parklands, sucking in the experience. But cocaine can make you numb, and sometimes numb is the easiest way to feel.) And the wheel turned on, down through the mad, dark days, and out again. He feels better now. A little tired, but better.

MONDAY IN CLEVELAND: I LOITER IN THE DRESSING ROOM. Ice Cube’s *AmeriKKKa’s Most Wanted* is playing. Trent is waiting for a cortisone shot from a doctor. (As a child he had bad allergies—cats and dust and ragweed and grass and corn—and his ears were all messed up. His doctor put tubes in Trent’s ears to equalize the pressure, and when Trent went swimming at the Mercer public pool he had to wear a tan bathing cap. “That was the source of much childhood trauma,” he recalls.) Today, Trent has a deep red rash running all the way up his right arm. It’s on his legs too. He thinks it might have been the hotel sheets in New York. A slightly dippy girl on the other side of the dressing room says, “Maybe you’re allergic to me.” Trent doesn’t look impressed.

Injection completed, Trent digs into a Gap bag for a new black T-shirt. He must be onstage soon. “My butt hurts,” he says.

After the show, we drive down to a club in the Cleveland Flats where there’s a party. On the way in, Trent signs a couple of autographs, but this doesn’t satisfy demand. “Trent!” shouts one girl.

The band head into the bathroom, where the white powder sits on the basin. It is cornstarch. They cover themselves from head to toe; Trent spares his hair.

Cleveland was the city he moved to when he struck out on his own, but now it’s just another stop toward the end of a yearlong tour. Some mellow rap music plays in the background and some incense is burning in the bedroom next door. He is dressed all in black and is wearing no shoes. Computers and keyboards are set up around him: He is working on a cover version of an obscure old Gary Numan song called “Metal.” As we talk, he puts his feet on a switched-off keyboard in front of him and moves his socks up and down, playing chunky, atonal chords neither of us can hear.

This is called the Self-Destruct tour. On the road, Trent Reznor tells me, he goes through phases: “Self-destruct mode, repair mode, and then enjoy-life mode. Followed by self-destruct mode.”

Contributing editor Chris Heath profiled Michael Stipe in the February issue of *Details*.

“You suck!” Later, a man comes up brandishing a British Petroleum business card. “What the fuck do you want?” Trent asks. Trent puts the card in his mouth, chomps off a little, and hands the ripped card back. The man looks pleased but wants more. Trent takes it back and spits on it. The man is utterly delighted.

This is the last I see of Trent for two and a half days. The rash is worse. It has covered his whole body. He will see a regular doctor, and a homeopath, who will tell him to immerse himself in a bath of lavender and peppermint and chamomile and stuff, and to cover himself with green clay. All of this he will do.

As he lies in bed, this girl keeps phoning him. His calls are being blocked, so she must be staying somewhere in the hotel. She tells him he’ll know her when he sees her—she’s the one who sings “Hurt” really loud at every concert.

“Don’t do that,” he tells her. “Nobody wants to hear you.”

"My fate had long been spelled out," he sniggers.

In college he studied computer engineering and music. Before the first year was up, he knew he wanted to play music. At nineteen he auditioned for a band called the Innocent. "Foreigner crap . . . dinosaur AOR bullshit rock." He was accepted, and though he didn't play on their album—*Livin' on the Streets*, if you will—his photograph did appear. The mention of this record and photograph causes the most touchy and embarrassed reaction Trent will exhibit in my presence. "Stupid. Dumb. A ridiculous 1983 sissy. You got me. I'm an idiot. I've tried to hide it. It was the one thing I was waiting for someone to throw at me."

He left after three months. He was in endless other local bands, playing keyboards, biding his time. He worked in a keyboard store and then he worked in a local recording studio. His first, strange brush with fame came when the disastrous Michael J. Fox-Joan Jett film *Light of Day* was shot in Cleveland. He was

asked to be in a rinky-dink synth trio who are derided midway through the film: "They used to be called the Sins, but now they're the Problems," mocks one character, which seemed obliquely appropriate.



carefully avoided testing. Finally he started; he was really into the Clash at the time, and he tried to write these political lyrics and they just didn't work. It seemed fake. Then he turned to his private jottings. It was scary to sing about these feelings, and they weren't the sort of inner thoughts he was particularly keen to share with anyone, but somehow they made sense. The first song, "Down in It," was—appropriately—a suicide fantasy. A slow sinking. *I used to be so big and strong. I used to know my right from wrong. I used to have something inside. Now just this hole that's open wide. And what I used to think was me is just a fading memory.*

He called his 1989 debut *Pretty Hate Machine*. He got some people—including drummer Chris Vrenna, whom he'd been living with—to tour with him as Nine Inch Nails. This was new for Trent. A time of discovery. "It was the first time we'd ever acknowledged to another male that you actually masturbate. We all felt liberated, and then it finally got to the point where . . . we'd always room with two guys in a room, and there'd be the Masturbation Moment. You'd get the bathroom, and the deal was you wouldn't fuck with that person. It was 'Look, I'm jacking off. It could be fifteen minutes, could be an hour. Take messages.'"

Nine Inch Nails were invited on the first Lollapalooza and were suddenly being hailed as the world's primary industrial band. Along the way they sold half a million records. Things happened. Trent fell out with the boss of TVT, his first record company. (He still hates no one else more in the world.) A video camera used during the "Down in It" video, which was tied to a helium balloon that had broken away as it filmed Trent pretending to be

dead, was found by a farmer, who turned it in to the police. They watched it, and a murder investigation began.

A BUS RIDE FROM CLEVELAND TO KALAMAZOO.

Trent boards the coach carrying a plastic shopping bag. He has bought seven *Twilight Zone* videos. In the copious video library on board are all the *Planet of the Apes* films, except for the fourth, *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes*. They've been looking for it everywhere. The bus rolls on. Band members shout, "It's all good." That's the latest Nine Inch Nails catchphrase.

In Kalamazoo we go to eat in the hotel basement. On TV, O.J. Simpson's lawyers object to evidence that Simpson backhanded his wife in a limousine. "Imagine being in a relationship, guy or girl, where that happened," says bassist Danny Lohner.

"You don't know what you're missing out on," says Trent. I think he only says this for the cheap laugh, and because he knows it is expected of him. Then he adds, slightly more seriously, "An integral part of any relationship is knowing that you could be killed in your sleep at any time."

Later, at the venue, Trent makes up one of his herbal pick-me-ups, carefully dripping a cocktail of brown potions into water: echinacea, American ginseng, and something else. His acupuncturist in L.A. recommended it to him. I'm ill too, so he offers me a cup.

Tonight I get to watch his preshow preparations. He dances a

Rumors that have circulated about Trent: That he is dead ("I a paternity suit against him ["I heard that, but it's not true"])

He had always told himself that when the time came, he would be able to write songs, but this was a theory he had

little, sometimes watching himself in the mirror. Then he sits down and puts on some black eyeshadow, and applies the Desire tone lipstick he sometimes wears when he goes out. One by one the band head into the bathroom, where the white powder sits on the basin. It is cornstarch. They cover themselves from head to toe; Trent spares his hair. Any brand will do. But not flour. "We tried it once, but under the stage lights it turned into batter."

The show is far more intense tonight. During one song he stops singing and says, "Can someone do me a favor and beat the shit out of the asshole with the red light before I kill the asshole?" Someone has been tracing a red laser beam over his body. Scary. "I'm just waiting to have my arm blown off," he'll explain later. "It's that feeling when it's zipping across your face and you're wondering when the JFK moment is going to come."

Afterward Trent mixes us up some more herbs. I thank him. "You'll be injecting it soon," he says.

On the bus, Trent opens a Federal Express package. It is a hefty self-published book of poetry and prose. The letter, from Brett, twenty-three, is heartbreaking. He published the book because no one else would, and has given up trying to sell it. "I am giving the remainder of the books to people I suspect and who I believe will appreciate what I have written. . . . You understand true art."

There is no doubt that a certain type of outsider is drawn to Nine Inch Nails. The tattoo and body-piercing brigades have adopted them enthusiastically. Trent has no tattoos. His ears are pierced, but that is it. He had his septum pierced for a year, but it was a nightmare when he had a cold. As a rule, he doesn't even like to wear jewelry: "I don't like shit on me." It strikes me that the real message of all this is less an unwillingness to embrace modern masochistic rituals than a more primary impulse: Don't Pin Me Down. Don't Tell Me Who I Am. There is something else close to this, but even more fundamental. It is something Trent says when he's explaining the elegant, mortifying song "Piggy":

"I'm saying 'If I don't care, you can't affect me.'"

Danny calls the bus to attention. He wants to perform. He takes a lighter, lifts his legs, and tries to light a fart. There is a rather feeble conflagration. "Don't write that," he says to me, mortified—meaning not the stunt itself but his failure to deliver. The band reminisce about the night in Atlanta when, after a ribald evening in a surreal titty bar, Jon Stewart impressed them with his own fart fireballs. "Sometimes," says Trent, "it's fun just to be retarded."

THE SECOND NINE INCH NAILS RECORD, THE *BROKEN* MINI-album, was a nasty mixed-up splurge of unfocused hate and despair. Trent wanted his next record to be something more. He had discovered that the more he wrote about his depressions, the more it fed and encouraged them. "And," he tells me, "I'm wondering if all this negative energy is leading to a dead end. What is the ultimate solution to this? It's kill myself, I guess. Right?"

Maybe. But instead of doing it, he decided to chronicle the descent. It was to be a concept album called *The Downward Spiral*. If there was a template in his head, it was the album which touched him most when he was younger: Pink Floyd's *The Wall*. "*The Downward Spiral*," he says, "is about somebody discarding parts of themselves"—religion, love, caring about the opinion of others—"ultimately for self-realization." The bleakness builds to a crescendo with the title track. He simply set to music a sui-

always hear that"), that he is misogynistic ("It makes me mad"), that there was that he dated Kennedy ("She's just a friend").

cide description which he wrote down when he was "really fucking utterly superdepressed" and then forgot about. *He couldn't believe how easy it was. He put the gun into his face. Bang! So much blood for such a tiny little hole. Problems have solutions. A lifetime of fucking things up fixed in one determined flash.*

"I'm not saying this from a covering-my-ass point of view," he insists, "but I'd thought it several times, and saying it almost demystifies it." He was not without secondhand experience. A friend had watched his girlfriend shoot herself. And then drummer Jeff Ward—who had taken over for the Lollapalooza era, when Trent fell out with Chris—carbon-monoxidized himself in a car because he couldn't quit heroin.

When Trent completed the record, he was convinced it was destructively uncommercial. But he either ignored, or refuses to acknowledge, the mentality of the American Pop Fan '94: Nothing is more commercial than uncommercial. And anyway, in a far more specific way he had managed to capture one of the dark ironies of our era. Kurt Cobain is the one who sings "I don't have a gun" and then blows his brains out. Trent Reznor sings "a lifetime of fucking things up fixed in one determined flash," but he is, I think, not the sort to kill himself. That makes things difficult. Kurt Cobain will stand now as the big, dumb, contemporary example by which the sincerity of anyone's suffering is measured, and by that idiotic standard Trent Reznor must always fall short. We talk about this, and after a while I get paranoid about the conversation's direction. I'm trying to stir a discussion, but more and more it feels as though I'm throwing up a challenge. I'm not suggesting you should kill yourself to validate your record, I tell him.

"No," he says. "It doesn't mean enough to me to prove myself to you to do that."

Later he tells me that when he was making *The Downward Spiral*, he never finished recording the most disturbing song of all. It had just two lines: *Just do it. Nobody cares at all.*

TRENT REZNOR'S FIRST KISS WAS WHEN HE WAS TEN. HE TALKS about uncontrolled, aimless early desire: discovering you couldn't go up to the blackboard during math "because calculus has given you a hard-on." Trent lost his virginity when he was fifteen. He pulled out to discover the condom ring at the base of his penis, and nothing else. It had broken. He didn't tell her. He just prayed she wasn't pregnant. After that, he ended up going out with a devout, religious girl.

ME: Tell me five words you associate with sex.

TRENT: (*very long pause*) The first things that pop into my head would be "taste," "sweat," "lick," "come," "bite."

ME: In your songs, sex always seems very carnal and violent. And watching your videos, one might guess that you have a personal interest in masochism.

TRENT: I do, to a degree. I'm not a hard-core practitioner.

ME: So do you like pain during sex?

TRENT: Sometimes. Just the psychology behind it. I'm somewhat uncomfortable talking about this too much . . .

ME: Have you ever kissed a man?

TRENT: Yes, I've kissed a man.

ME: In the fullest sense?

TRENT: Almost. A veil of drunkenness. It was kind of a mutual thing. It was weird. It was half joking around. It was bristly. And later—in the old Nine

Inch Nails—if we wanted to get rid of people, the guitar player and I would start making out. It was a trick. I mean, I really love women. I don't dislike men, and there's many times I've thought about it. You get into certain scenes, and I realize I should experiment down that path, and I just haven't done it yet. I've been in situations where there's men involved, but not directly interacting.

ME: So are there a lot of orgies around the Reznor household?

TRENT: No, no, it's not a common situation. When I'm in a relationship that overpowers the desire to . . . these usually arise from casual situations, usually intoxicated situations. You wake up and think, "Okay, we just stepped through another portal . . ." (*pause*) I think about giving head, though. I don't know why I'm saying this, but I think about that. I'd be good at giving head, because I know what . . . (*laughs*) . . . I mean, no one knows how to jack yourself off better than yourself, you know?

ME: Which kiss will you remember forever?

TRENT: (*extremely long pause*) I don't know.

ME: Are no kisses coming to mind, or various kisses?

TRENT: A variety of ones that are pretty high up there. It's the combination of the right environment and the right set of lips.

ME: So it's a ranking problem rather than a memory problem?

TRENT: Yeah. (*a lengthy pause*) From my dog, Maise, licking me in the mouth, after I had passed out drinking. I was sleeping with my mouth open and Maise never does that normally. (*he nearly always speaks of her in the present tense*)

ME: Did you kiss back?

TRENT: A little kiss back. I prefer to kiss her on the side of the mouth rather than getting right in. It's kind of incestuous, you understand, because she's part of the family.

ME: What should a woman never do on a date with you?

TRENT: It's all good. (*pause*) But usually fart lighting is not one of my favorites.

The next day, Trent offers a postmortem: "I woke up in a cold

sweat this morning, fearing I've revealed too much. I started getting that uneasy feeling." I am not sure what he means, and he doesn't elaborate. About half an hour later he sighs, under his breath, "The big headline: I COULD SUCK A MAN'S COCK . . ."

SOME FACTS: HE WAS BORN MAY 17, 1965. HE WAS BROUGHT up Protestant and went to Sunday school. His favorite candy is Reese's peanut butter cups: "It's the perfect balance of shitty peanut material and chocolate." I ask him what the last book he read was and he says he's got a book of pathological crime stories somewhere, but he's not really reading right now. He dyes his dark brown hair jet black every six weeks. He shaved his head a couple of years ago, "and I thought, 'Christ, I'm ugly—what kind of hats are out now?'" When I ask what the last thing he does at night is, he says, "I try to have time to write a little bit in my journal. And I have a vigorous masturbation routine." The first time Trent smoked pot was with his father when he was fourteen. He's never liked it. His grandmother cried when she read his interview in *USA Today*, because it mentioned that Trent has taken drugs. She was upset for him. Trent went home for Christmas. That was the last time he cried: Grandma was ill, he was staying in a Howard Johnson, and one day nothing made more sense than sitting down for a couple of hours of unfocused weeping. The only record he could find at the local Kmart that seemed remotely interesting to play in the rental car was Sting's greatest hits. "I appreciate the fact that when it kicks into the chorus it's a good song," he explains. "I don't like what he's saying, I don't like how he's saying it, but the pure craft of writing songs . . ." He sighs. "I realize I'm destroying my entire reputation by saying this."

Rumors that have circulated about him: that he is dead ("I always hear that"), that he is misogynistic ("It makes me mad"), that there was a paternity suit against him ("I heard that, but it's not true"), that he knew Jeffrey Dahmer ("No affiliation whatsoever"), that he dated Kennedy ("She's just a friend"—they met at the Whisky in L.A. after Kennedy humiliated him by singing "Head Like a Hole" loudly to his face to win a twenty-dollar bet with a buddy).

Then there is the legendary, impertinent small-penis aspersion. "That's an irritant," he says. A journalist first taunted him with

One night she said a few impudent things about Nine Inch Nails onstage. "What I didn't know then was her fierce competitiveness when she's opening for somebody—she's carrying the weight of alternative credibility on her back, and we're a New Wave faggot band that's easily dismissed. Even though my crowd doesn't give a shit about that." In Detroit they bumped into each other backstage and Courtney said her voice was messed up. Trent offered to mix her up some herbs and they talked. "I thought she was really smart, which you couldn't tell from her behavior. But she was obsessed with media and how she's perceived. What I didn't realize was that 95 percent of it was her directly calling editors. She's got a full media network going on."

He says that contrary to the impression Love has given, they didn't have a sexual relationship. "I think if there was an attraction on her part toward me, it was maybe because I showed compassion. The bottom line was, I thought I was around someone who was a victim and somebody who could use a friend, and what I was around was a very good manipulator and a careerist, someone not to be underestimated."

Soon it began to get nasty. The first story to spread was that Courtney was pregnant with his child. "It would be the second Immaculate Conception," snaps Trent. She said the things she knew would hurt him. She suggested he didn't want to be seen with her because it was bad for his rock-star image. And she pointedly announced to the world, as though to shame him, that he has a silver Porsche.

That last fact, as it happens, is true. He refers to it once as "a \$100,000 car." He says, "I had the money and I wanted a nice car to drive because it was fun, driving at five hundred miles per hour wondering if it's going to flip over and kill me and I'll die a glamorous death. It isn't to take models to movie premieres in." You disappoint me, I say. "I disappoint myself," he replies.

(Trent calls me a couple of weeks after I leave the tour. He's on the bus, heading for Sioux Falls. This morning he was wakened by the telephone. "Hello, Trent. It's Courtney." Her mission was one of peace. "She seemed somewhat genuinely to want to make up. And I don't want a war between us. I said, 'If you want it to be stopped, stop it.'" But it reminded him of our conversations: "I'd been hearing from all these people all these things she'd been

"Every day I'm saying the most personal thing I could ever say. But one of the prices is that there's a raw nerve I'm letting everybody look at."

this notion a while back. It annoyed him. "If I have to prove myself, I'll do that," he says. "I've got references, goddamn it."

THIS SLUR NOW HAS A NEW PROPONENT. COURTNEY LOVE HAS taken to talking ill of Trent Reznor. Saying things like: *Nine Inch Nails, huh—more like Three Inch Nails*. It's a long story, and it is one to which, with some reluctance, Trent gives his side. He had never met Love before this autumn, but he heard she wanted to open for Nine Inch Nails and he liked Hole's last album, so he agreed. Six shows. "I thought, 'What's the worst that can happen?' Famous last words . . ."

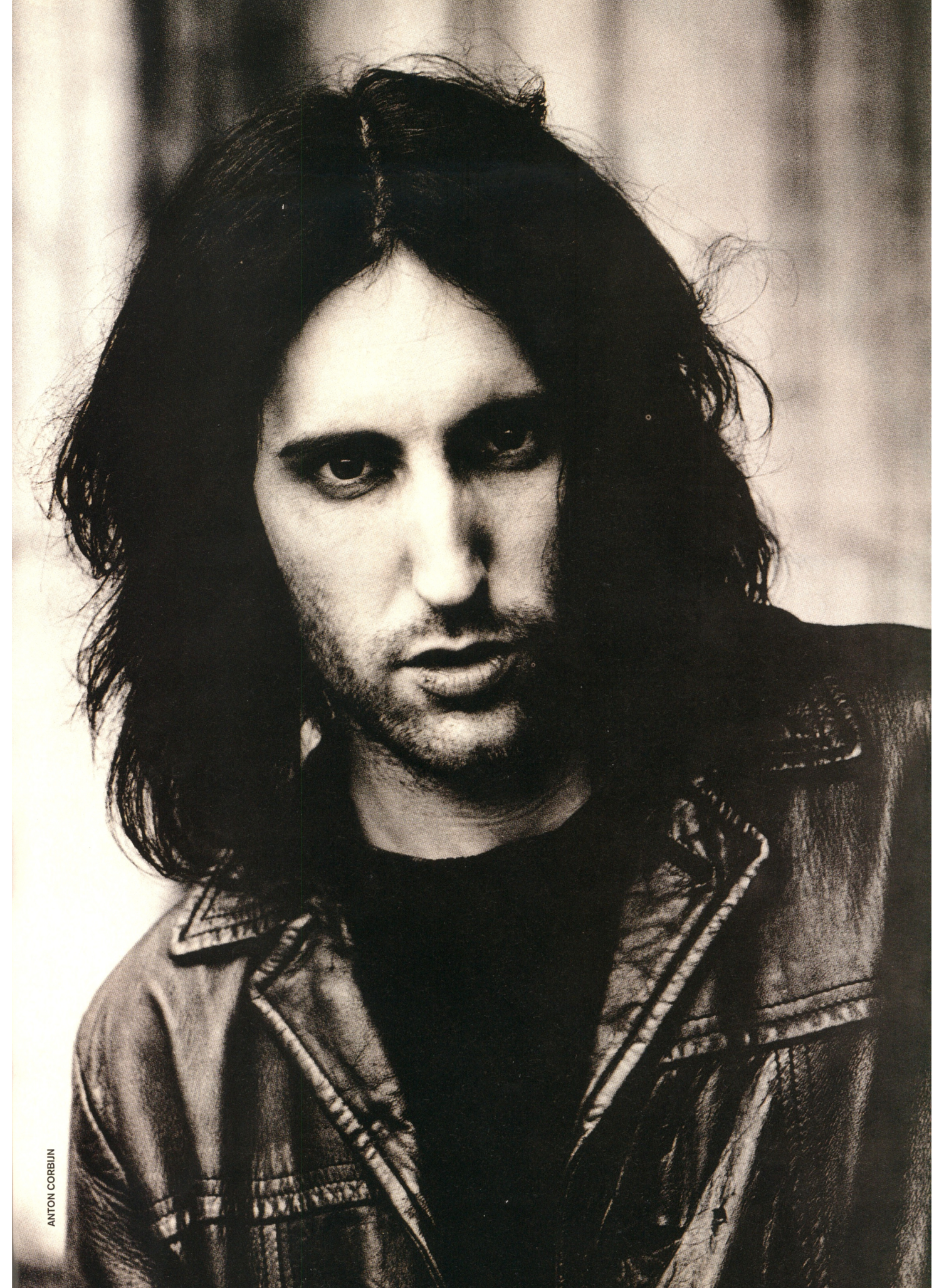
The first three shows, he didn't talk to her. "In Cleveland she was completely intoxicated, a fucking mess." He says that at one after-show party she was passed out on a pool table with her dress hiked up, and people were taking photographs, as though it were all quite normal. "I thought, that was shitty. I'd be upset if people I thought cared about me allowed me to be in that position."

saying about me, and I'd been bottling up all my feelings about it, and you asked me, so I told you." He said what he was thinking, but now he wishes to calm the waters. "There's a nice side to her," he says, "and that's what I saw today." He laughs. "She's certainly a fucking character.")

AT THE TOLEDO SPORTS ARENA THERE IS ANOTHER FEDERAL Express package for him. (This, it seems, is the new upscale way to make sure your unsolicited offering reaches the modern pop star of your choice.) I read the contents, and the awful truth finally dawns on me. Trent Reznor's role in '90s culture is not so much the Prince of Despondency or the Lord of Negativity. It is far, far worse than that. He is the Man You Send Bad Poetry To.

The letter, as before, is a corker. "I went through a somewhat rocky emotional journey this past year. . . . Somehow, somewhere our minds have met before." The poems are the usual bleak cries

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ANTON CORBIJN

The Art of Darkness

(Continued from page 145)

for help. A few titles: *Crumbling Away*, *Alone*, *Escape*, *The Need*. Let me quote one. "I am full of nothing. Of darkness, emptiness, a void." It ends "And would there be a hole in the world where I'd been? I don't think so."

Trent studies it only briefly. He tells me he wants to show me some cartoons he was sent, and leads me over to a luggage drawer, where he keeps mementos. There are cards and letters. There is a copy of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. He takes out a small pamphlet: *Pocket Porn Special 46*, which is full of explicit copulation photographs of most imaginable varieties. "Last book read," he says.

He finishes his makeup. "Trent Reznor, starring in *The Crow*," he mutters sarcastically. Word comes from out front that the Toledo crowd is almost out of control. Women are sitting on people's shoulders and showing the crowd their breasts, and the backstage medical crews have had their hands full even during the support acts, Pop Will Eat Itself and the Jim Rose Circus. "It's nice to be back with aggressive crowds," Trent says. "I miss when we played clubs and it was destruction and death." They have to wait to go on because—they are told—there is a body in the pit. That's more like it. "You expect that from Toledo," Trent laughs, then adds, "Where is Toledo?"

Tonight's concert is the finest I see. I watch from the side of the stage, and the way they are possessed is terrifying. When guitarist Robin Finck rolls offstage at the end of "Happiness in Slavery," he just lies there glassy-eyed with exhaustion, and is given oxygen. Trent is even more manic. His is the anguished rampage of someone trying to reach something that always feels just beyond his fingertips. He bashes the keyboards with his guitar and his microphone and his body. He throws his guitar into the stage set; he tosses his microphone stand into the drums. (Accidents do happen. The other day when Trent was onstage, he landed on a keyboard and something went in his mouth, that metallic taste almost like blood, and it gave him a flashback to when he was a kid in his grandfather's dusty old garage, licking his grandfather's work tools because he wondered what they tasted like.)

I try to figure out Trent's compelling, desperate frenzy. On his face is the thrilling, insatiable abandon of someone trying to prove to himself that what he does is for real. It is its very futility—you can never give yourself over completely if you're still aware that you care about doing it—that makes it so exciting. It is the fury that results when you try to disprove

the equation that self-awareness is the enemy of sincerity. It's hard for him onstage. "Every day I'm saying the most personal thing I could ever say. And I don't know if I want people in my head that much, but I've chosen to give that out because I realized that's what made the strongest statement, that was the most honest art I could make. But one of the prices is that there's an open raw nerve that I'm letting everybody look at. There's a hole in the back of my pants with a bare asshole showing, and you can see right in there. And sometimes I wish I hadn't."

Trent hates the idea that some people have: that just because the presentation is mildly theatrical, his intent is somehow cushioned or shallow. He claims, furious at the memory, that he was recently quoted as saying "I'm much closer to Alice Cooper than Eddie Vedder." He remembers how betrayed he felt as a teenager when Alice Cooper said that his character onstage wasn't real ("He said, 'I'm Vincent Fuckface and he's just a character I create' and I thought, 'Fuck you!'"). And another thing: "I don't look at Eddie Vedder as any person I'd ever call reference to, and I don't look at him as a pinnacle of being sincere at all."

In front of an audience, Trent Reznor would do anything to make them realize this matters. Nearly. He doesn't stage-dive anymore. He will show me scars running from his armpits to his shoulders. "Why do I not jump in the crowd? Because my shirt gets ripped off and someone sticks their finger in my butt."

IT IS TIME TO TELL THE LEGENDARY TALE OF Charles Manson, Tori Amos, and a curiously uncoked chicken. Trent and Tori had become friends (he sang on her last album) and she would visit him at the Los Angeles house where *The Downward Spiral* was recorded. The house where Manson followers killed Sharon Tate. On one visit, Tori told a depressed Trent that she would whip him up a hearty home-cooked meal. The cursed chicken. After six hours in the Tate house oven, it was still bloody and raw. Tori's preferred excuse: "The spirits of the house wouldn't let it." Eventually Trent left for another studio, where he ordered in.

And the chicken?

He shrugs. "I didn't ask. The ghost ate it."

THE PARTY TONIGHT IS AT A CLUB CALLED, with cruel inaccuracy, Asylum. Any hope that the guests of honor might be in for a quiet, discreet night of fun are ruined by the subtle sign outside: FRIDAY—NIN PARTY. There is a cordoned-off area, but from all sides crowds mill and stare. Even I feel horribly claustrophobic, and they are not looking at me. Trent lasts five

minutes. "If I want that," he fumes, "I'll go to the zoo." We sit on the bus, waiting for the rest of his entourage to come to the same conclusion. Trent plays Mother Tongue and PJ Harvey. Danny puts on Prong. We eat pizza. It's better here.

Trent talks about the future. After the tour he will move to New Orleans, where he has bought a house. Earlier he had talked about taking some time to repair his life. "I still don't know who the fuck I am. I know what I don't believe in. I know what I've rejected. But I don't know what I do believe in." He sighs. "I don't trust people very much. I don't like that many people."

This afternoon, when all the questions had been asked, he had fetched some photos. He handed me a few snapshots of his new house. It has lovely Southern balconies. He said it will be nice to do things he has never had the chance to, like "picking out kitchen sink units." He sifted through his other snapshots, fanning them closely in front of his face like a careful card player. He showed me maybe one in ten, mostly of Maise and him, lying together on beds. One is just Maise alone, staring into the camera. "Her last photo," he said. He told me he'd maybe like to act, and when I asked what he'd think about if he needed to cry on cue, he said: "Whatever's on top of the sad pile. Probably Maise dying."

There is one statement which Trent Reznor had made to me, in different ways, over and over again: "I think the underlying basic thing is this: I've been really superlonely." (He likes his "super"s as much as he likes his "fucking"s.) Pretty much all I hear from him is loneliness and numbness, so it was surprising when he let slip, this afternoon, that he is seeing somebody. "The level or degree is yet to be determined. It provides me something to project onto."

Does it make you happier?

"Yeah," he said, though he sounded unsure. "Yeah." Then a third time, "Yeah."

Well, that's good.

He put on a pitiful, craven voice. "Somebody loves me." He paused. "And those people last night! They liked me! Remember?"

FANS WAIT BY THE BUS. TRENT OBLIGES. "I passed out before the show," says one, triumphantly. "I only saw the last five minutes." The second has a package which she hands over with the utmost solemnity. Her special gift, from her to him. Because he will understand. By now you should know what lies inside. Her poems are neatly typed, and the first four titles I spot are *Raven*, *Damned*, *World of Shadows*, and *Death Wish*. •