



## Ann Rower: A State of Mind

### If You're A Girl

by Ann Rower

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### Beth Henson

All these embarrassing female-type stories seemed to be popping into my mind, and then into my writing since V. was away: stories about sex, abuse, rape, abortion, marriage, divorce, infection, kids. I want to make a collection of them and call it, *If You're A Girl*. What a great title, say all the girls: Louise, Andrea, Rose, Eileen, Vicky, etc. Is it about pre-pubescence? said Paul Cherry snidely. No, I said, immediately on the defensive, it's, you know, a state of mind.

— Ann Rower, *If You're a Girl*

Ann Rower calls her work transfiction, a combination of fiction and experience. She frequently writes about her friends, then writes about their reactions to her writing. For example, she has a friend who's working as a receptionist in a brothel. Instead of writing the stories he feeds her about the whores and their johns, she writes about a night in an uptown bar with her friend and the brothel owner (who has ugly bulging eyes), a college boy, and a few others: a desultory, finally drunken evening, which ends when her friend goes to work and a whore bursts out of her room crying. Rower's friend reads the story and becomes enraged; he berates her for everything she has and hasn't written, and then he accuses her of having made up stupid names for the characters. She says no, that was an exercise in class, I drew those names out of a hat, and at that he backs off. "You mean it was just an exercise and not a story you were really writing?"

Ann Rower's stories are close to home, if home is in downtown New York — the voyeurism that results from uncovered windows, facing each other across an airshaft; yeast infections; benefits for St. Mark's Place; ESL classes; and Saturday afternoon poetry readings at greasy spoons. She also writes about the west coast: "Thanks for the Memory" is about her uncle, Leo Robin, hit songwriter whose warmth was the hearth around which her mother's family gathered until his death at ninety, in Hollywood, where the piano player plays Leo's songs and the women's diamonds gently twinkle.



Rower's stories remind me of the work Eleanor Antin did in the early seventies, creating and documenting certain psychological tableaux with the people around her. For example, Antin committed herself beforehand to engaging in provocative actions during meetings of a feminist artists' collective or, while on a visit to her mother, graphed the emotional tension that results from certain topics of conversation, which she has decided on previously.

Ann was a weekly participant in Timothy Leary's legal experiments with psychedelics under the auspices of Harvard University in the early sixties, when she was doing her Masters in English Lit. She and her husband were initially invited to babysit Leary's two young children. Apparently, they never did, but instead showed up every weekend at Leary's borrowed suburban house where he stocked a candy dish with LSD and psilocybin. What a party it must have been: academics and poets and artists, getting high as a spiritual quest, then gathering in the kitchen to talk about "Hindu symbolism, the Euclidean mysteries, Tantric cults, and the ancient secrets of Tibet." Very inward parties, where most people retreated to one of the many bedrooms. Leary himself (King Leary, she calls him) did not partake, but claimed to be clinically monitoring. His kids looked sad.

In 1984 Ann was interviewed by The Wooster Group, a New York theater company, and made into a character (the babysitter) in their play, *LSD...Just the Highlights*. In this volume Rower includes both a portion of the transcript of the play as performed and the entire transcription of the original interview. Ann describes her first arrival at that house in late winter when she sat in Leary's study with the strong late afternoon sun backlighting her hair. Leary ordered a camera turned on her; his assistant fumbled and the camera fell and broke, but what a shot it would have been: the young

woman with her shiny aureole of hair, present at the very dawn of the Age of Aquarius.

I would have loved to have her for a sister, to show me the ropes. She's hip, thoughtful, funny and was friends with people like Ginsberg and Orlovsky. I love the way she faces down abusive friends ("You've gained weight"), rude waitstaff, abusive editors ("Love your perfume") with aplomb. If you're a girl, aplomb is one thing you really need: you can use it to make that rapist, that editor, back down. Aplomb: confidence and poise. She does not explain, analyze, plead, confess or fuss. She narrates; her transfiction is like O'Hara's poetry: I did this and I did that. This is what gives it its poise. She is so nonchalant, so reticent in the narration of her own life, that I think she may be some kind of saint.

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