

from: The Great San Francisco Poetry Wars

by Jerry Ratch

I got on the Greyhound Bus at 11 a.m. and sat by myself staring out the window. I could see the reflection of my own dark beard in the window, a 27 year-old man with a huge poem bursting my heart, gasping to get out into the bright lit-up world out there, pulsing at my neck like a gigantic fish breathing through its gills as its life lay pounding on the deck, hearing the sirens singing in my ears like Homer or Janis Joplin singing her heart out through her dense haze of Southern Comfort. I had my whole life splayed out before me and I was heading up the highway toward a rendezvous with a married woman with four kids in Berkeley — Berkeley, California, of all places. And I was scared out of my wits. I had my own fate in my hands, and I didn't have my fate in my own hands at all. It was a startling complexity of the universe that no man ever foresees until love blinds him and takes his balls in its mouth and begins chewing, chewing relentlessly and without mercy.

And the mother of all battles, the San Francisco Poetry Wars awaited me, and I knew nothing about it. When you are a young poet and starting out in the world for the first time like Homer first setting sail, you are so damned naïve, there is no way to know or express it. Rise sail, lord over and take me away! That's all I can say.

The mountains were a blur, the bus gliding around curves, and down into Los Gatos, where the rich and the idle played. Then on into San Jose, the future heart of the not yet invented Silicon Valley. The geniuses were already gathered in their garages there inventing. Up the highway we went until we pulled into the Greyhound Bus Terminal in one of the seedier parts of Oakland. Bottles lay broken on the ground and winos were slumped over on the bus benches waiting to go God knows where, Eureka maybe, stripped of everything but their souls and a sleeping bag or a rolled-

up dirty blanket. They lay with their mouths open, teeth missing, sleeping because this was a safe place to sleep. They who'd already lost the world.

And when I walked outside into the sunlight, there was Mary Jo waiting for me in their long van.

"Janov," she said, waving. "Here I am." That voice of hers. Oh my God!

She pushed the passenger door open with her foot across the seat. She had on a long hippie-style dress, which was pulled way up her thigh. I couldn't tell if she was wearing anything underneath. She let her white leg lay there across the front seat.

"You want to drive?" she said. And she slid over in the seat. As she did her skirt hiked all the way up and there was nothing on underneath, nothing at all. My heart began pounding.

I jumped in behind the wheel. She took my head in her hands and kissed me hungrily. We were there about ten minutes in a loading zone until a cop pulled up, honking. I started up the motor and put it in gear, my hard-on bursting out of my pants. Mary Jo wouldn't take her hand off the bulge and kept rubbing it. "Go faster," she said. "Turn here. Step on it. My dress is all wet between my legs. Here, feel this."

She took my hand and lifted her dress. I felt the buttery creaminess between her thighs. Jesus, I thought. Jesus.

We drove into the hills above Berkeley, along Grizzly Peak, and she had me drive up a path off the road and stop the truck. She pulled me out of the van. We walked through dense high weeds, heading down a slope toward a small lake, and all of a sudden she lay down on her back, pulling me down on top of her. She wiggled out of her dress in the bright sunlight. Her skin was as white as the innards of an oyster. Then she unbuckled my belt and yanked. We didn't even wait to get the pants off my right leg before she slipped me inside her, she was sopping wet, and we came about three times each. It just went on and on. I couldn't remember fucking so much in one burst ever, with anyone. This was fantastic. Bugs and flies kept landing on my bare ass while it was going up and down and I didn't

care and we lunged toward some new world record. That's how hungry we were for each other. Man alive! I thought. Was this what it was like to be in love? Really in love, like my first time? No, maybe even better!

When we finally rolled off each other, weeds and stickers were all over her dress, but she put it back on anyway. I kept trying to pick foptails off her dress, and the next thing I knew she had it raised up and we were flat on the ground. We were wholly unstable and entirely unstoppable. It was like we were in a barnyard. But there had to be an end. What about her kids? What about nightfall? What about Park Rangers and Boy Scouts who would use these trails and Campfire Girls and Brownies in their little chocolate outfits? We didn't care. I was mining my way out of childhood and deeper into adulthood than I had ever imagined it was possible to go without a roadmap, without a clue as to how to get out. Did one ever get out of adulthood? Yes, one way. One way only. I was on a one-way road now.

