

# from: The Great San Francisco Poetry Wars

*by* Jerry Ratch

Somewhere between Cheyenne and Rock Springs, Wyoming, they ground me down, and I pulled over. We were way the hell out in the middle of absolute nowhere. Trucks rarely went by on the highway. Almost nobody, it seemed, traveled this route. We crept up a small incline and parked in an open swing-about space where we could camp without being noticed, even if we built a big campfire, which was exactly what we did. There were logs and deadwood of all sorts scattered around the space. We dragged what we could toward the center and built this big five-foot pyramid of wood, and sat down to do some serious drinking on logs that acted as benches around our fire. We waited for darkness before striking a match. It was the biggest bonfire I'd ever seen. It was like something you would see at a homecoming football match. We started jumping all around the flames as they rose higher and higher, because we noticed our own huge shadows leaping against a cliff right next to us. That was when we discovered we could make one shadow jump right through another and come out whole on the other side. Our shadows were indestructible. It was one of those moments of discovery maybe only gallons of pink Chablis could bring on. Or dope. Because Allison also broke out a couple of joints and we were getting pretty stoned.

All of a sudden a howl came out of the bushes. The next thing I knew Greg took to howling as well. Then Steve began howling. Then to my amazement so did Allison, then me as well. We all howled with whatever it was that was out there, and I turned and noticed the moon which swerved over the horizon, which began way back in Illinois where we had started. I grew certain I could see all the way back to the beginning of time from our plateau in Wyoming.

"I saw the moon swerve," I said.

“Let's haul out the poetry, man” Greg said. He ran to the truck and brought out a hardbound edition of the Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke.

“Give me that,” I said. I turned to “The Meditations of an Old Woman” and began to read. I read two pages and put the book down on the ground. I thought I was getting up to go take a leak, but I leapt over the flames of the fire instead. I don't know why.

All hell broke loose.

Greg jumped to his feet and grabbed the book of poetry and began shouting out lines rapid-fire, then he too leapt through the flames.

Steve was next. Even Allison took a turn at reading, but she was a little too short and plump to make it over. The pit was pretty damned wide. She got to the edge and looked in and turned back and sat down, taking another toke off the joint.

“C'mon, Sheffield, don't chicken out,” yelled Steve.

“Ah, leave her alone,” said Greg.

“You're no fun,” Steve complained.

“Go fuck yourself,” Greg retorted. He took an enormous swig off the jug of wine. Then he leapt back through the flames again. He came back to where the book was and handed it to me. “Read some more, man. You're a great reader. Here.”

I opened the book and began reading. “I have gone into the waste lonely places / Behind the eye; the lost acres at the edge of smoky cities...” I saw Steve and Greg sit down on the ground and sink back against the logs. They let their heads tilt back and their faces lifted up to the stars. I could feel the heat from Allison's skin. It was still warm out, but a wind began picking up, making the flames raggedy. I turned up my collar and kept reading. When my throat went dry, I took a long pull from my bottle of Coors. No one said a word while I drank. Then I began flowing back into the “Meditations of an Old Woman.”

"How can I rest in the days of my slowness?

I've become a strange piece of flesh....

I need an old crone's knowing....

Often I think of myself as riding—  
Alone, on a bus through western country.  
I sit above the back wheels, where the jolts are hardest....  
All journeys, I think, are the same...”

The poet's words held us. They held us all. We went this way and that with the memories and the mind of age as it bent and swayed between its idle and sharp thoughts. Roethke had really managed to get inside that old woman. We felt a twig snap in the universe.

No, wait, that was a real twig in the real world. What was out there? Ah, but what did it matter? Not one of us moved, and I dug in further and let that old mind carry us. The cares of the other world that was out there drifted further away. The wars. The politicians with their warped thoughts, speaking about dollars in the night. The passing of the Sixties. None of it mattered. An internal river of words carried us away.

We were clueless as to how it all worked, and we did not care how it all worked.

We were poets. We were in love with the world again.

Allison took her clothes off. She was full-bodied with abundant breasts and the firelight shone on her large nipples. She took me by the hand as Steve and Greg stared open-mouthed. Steve began to masturbate, while Greg kept drinking wine. Allison and I went into the truck. Allison screamed out with the pain and the joy.

