

The Great San Francisco Poetry Wars, 1

by Jerry Ratch

I came out to San Francisco in a Pepsi van that was red, white and blue. We drove that van out of the great Midwest, our hungry souls looking for life at the edge of the continent. To escape the enormous and vacant soul that inhabited the White House in the form of King Richard Nixon and that also inhabited and ate away at the enormous bloated body of the Midwestern mentality that had voted this man into office. How could they have done that? We fled the Midwest to the edges of the continent, hoping to find solace and comfort among like souls who lived and breathed poetry from their every pore, day upon living day and night after night. We thought we would be saved from the savages in the Midwest who had nearly throttled us with their flat and even and straight-forward minds and hearts. The ultimate chicken pot-pie of everything that was there.

In those days everyone ate poetry for lunch. It was considered essential for your good up-bringing and mental health. We would skip a meal in order to satisfy our hunger for words. To hell with a meal. To hell with dirty politics and meaningless wars on other continents, it was enough to feed upon the poetic battles of the moment, and who wrote what and who read what at last night's reading at the bookstores and cafés, and who went home with whom after the inevitable late night parties that followed. It was the beginning of the end and we all lived as if we knew it was going to end any minute, which was why we found it so hard to keep it while we had it. It was that lust for life that was crucial to the Great San Francisco Poetry Wars. It has been said of us: For a small glassful of laughter we would kill. Yes, kill. And it was all true. Every word of it delicious and dirty and true.

And so, what follows is how I found them, my characters. And myself amongst them. All of us, equally lost in the Midwest.

"Write it, Bancroft!" Greg Penn was yelling from under the kitchen table. "Exactly as I said it. Go ahead and put it on the sucker's paper, will you? Chrissakes, just write it! *Write it!*"

Steve Bancroft was holding his head in his hands with his elbows on the table, where there were stacks of student papers scattered in disorderly piles. "Okay, what?" he asked. "What? Go ahead and repeat it, would you? '*At first... At first I thought...*'"

"Okay. You're ready now? Jesus, you pussy! '*At first I thought you were putting your foot in either my mouth or yours. Now I realize you were using both feet.*' Write it. It's perfect. Perfect!"

"You can't go putting that on somebody's precious little essay about their childhood," Steve complained.

"Just write it, you little turd."

We walked into the kitchen. From his outlook under the kitchen table, Greg Penn could probably only see so many feet. He was on all fours, all six and a half foot of him, bumping up against the underside of the table like a Shetland pony. These were my two best students at Whitebread College. They were grading papers for me while my assistant Allison Sheffield and I went out drinking at Jack's Bar on the town square, because tomorrow's big inquisition was coming fast and I didn't really care anymore what was going to happen to me. And both of them, Greg Penn and Steve Bancroft, were completely soused on two six-packs of beer I'd left for them as payment for grading my students' papers, which I simply could not bring myself to do anymore. My short-lived career around that town and that precious little college was all but over.

"Who is that? Janov, that you? Jesus, how many feet do you have now? We're out of beer, by the way. Who in hell's that with you? Sheffield? Sheffield, is that you?"

"What exactly are you doing under the table, Greg?" Allison asked.

Greg snorted, then let out with a massive, long otherworldly belch. "I'm up to my elbows in vomit and oblivion," he said, and belched once more. "Obviously."

Just before going back out to Berkeley, I was teaching at this small college in Illinois. It was late in the spring of 1971, near the end of the semester, and it was the perfect end to the idealistic Sixties deep in the cornfields of central Illinois at a liberal arts college known for the fact that its students ran the entire campus except, of course, for the teaching and the administration. That was left for dummies like us.

The town had an actual town square, around which a shell-shock case from World War II named John Fox still walked every day. Around and around the square he walked since returning home from the landing at Normandy Beach. And running the only bar on the square, Jack's Bar, was a man with an enormous nose who was the exact spitting image of Lyndon Baines Johnson, who'd been hounded out of office by our protests to the war in Vietnam. Everyone called him Jack. It was very spooky and very weird to have the ex-president of the United States asking what you wanted to drink. He had the extraordinary habit of staying focused on you, probably to establish that you were old enough to be ordering a drink. His nose was so red and enormous, he looked like he should be sitting on a stoop with his shoelaces untied in the Village in New York, chomping on a cigar butt and feeding pigeons out of a paper bag.

I was drinking myself into oblivion, as much as you can do that sort of thing, trying to forget exactly where I was while still trying to make a living of sorts, at the same time trying to keep from getting fired for neglecting to show up for my 8 a.m. class and holding the class at my house at 8 p.m. instead. Every one of my students showed up at the night class at the house. Everyone except one old lady from town. And that was where my troubles with the Dean and the President of that fine institution began.

That night we took out a tall ladder and wrote one of my poems with a magic marker across the 12 foot ceilings of the college-owned faculty house where I was staying. Allison Sheffield

was short with luscious curls of reddish-brown hair, and a burst of baby fat and freckles in her cheeks. Freckles scattered themselves over her arms and chest, stopping just below her breasts. There was something childlike about her. She was definitely not a woman of the world yet. She came from a farm outside St. Louis where her father raised horses for riding and lambs for eating. She'd been riding horses more or less from the day she was born. She had lambs for pets.

Then suddenly from out in front of the house I heard voices that sounded real familiar. I put my beer down on the coffee table in the living room and went out to the front porch to see who it was, the screen door slamming shut behind me. A large moth kept flying around the porch light, hitting it over and over. It was still hot outside, though it was pitch black already. It must have been past 10 p.m. There at the curbside, beside a dinged-up Buick sedan that smelled of burning oil, stood Warren Jeffries, one of my previous students from my graduate teaching gig back at U.C. Irvine from the year before. He was standing beside this short, tightly-wound surfer buddy of his named Kent. It wasn't that long ago I'd left the state of California to begin what might have become my teaching career in the Great Midwest. Fat chance!

Warren and Kent were standing stiffly beside Kent's car like chauffeurs, Warren Jeffries a good foot taller. He eyed my assistant suspiciously. Allison's abundant chest stood out even in the darkness that surrounded us. The fat stars were dripping out of a bright Van Gogh night sky. It was so fresh and clear out there that you could more or less reach up and put your hand right in the Milky Way. The odor of earth drifted in from the cornfields surrounding the town on all sides. About the only sound was coming from the constant high-octane crickets in the bushes and lawns around the house.

"I have a gift for you," Warren said. "Come around to the trunk of the car. So, tell me, who's the wench with milk above her lip?"

“Oh, come here, Allison. Sorry. Allison, Kent. And this ... is Warren.”

Warren held out his hand, formally, and nodded. He pulled me toward the back of the Buick. “Boy,” he said. “She could almost be your daughter. And, well ... she's got *some cleavage!*”

“Some?”

“Cleavage scares me.”

“Why?”

“I don't know,” he giggled, “it just does. It makes you think before speaking, I think. I don't know. It just scares me, that's all. Makes me act dumb, and I hate that.”

He inserted the key, opened the trunk, and out popped Kirk Dayton like a jack-in-the-box, his dirty blonde shoulder-length hair looking every bit the spitting image of Curt Cobain, who was still probably in the 3rd grade or something at that time. Kirk made a rolling gesture with his hand, pointing in the trunk where he'd just been riding curled up in a fetal position. There sat a full case of Coors beer, my favorite, which they had purchased directly from the factory in Golden, Colorado, as they passed through the Rocky Mountains.

“Damn, Dayton!” I said, grinning, shaking Kirk's hand vigorously. These guys were the best of my class of students from my days back at Irvine, and they knew my fondness for Coors beer and that I probably couldn't get any there stuck in the Illinois cornfields.

Warren was eying me closely. I didn't notice, as it turned out, how closely. I thought he was enjoying the moment intensely. This really was the best joke possible.

“How do you like your gift?” Warren asked. “Your favorite, right?”

“You couldn't have made a more perfect night. Is it still cold?” I noticed Warren choking up. “You meant the beer, right?”

Warren must have blushed a deep red in the Illinois night.

“This is so awkward,” he said. He knew how much I preferred the pure energy and nerve, as well as the writing, of Kirk Dayton. I had said as much too many times really. As a teacher, I was

a sonofabitch. Too mean, I think. Or maybe just not politic enough to be effective. I was becoming more aware of that since I'd landed in the middle of the Illinois cornfields and began trying to lead some of those poor students out of the delusions of childhood.

"Oh, for Chrissakes!" Kirk grunted. "We just drove this stuff in from Golden, Colorado, pretty much non-stop, and he asks if it's still cold! Fucking-A! Here." He took out a bottle, positioned it against the edge of the car bumper and knocked off the cap. The beer shot out of the bottle. He sprayed my face with it. "We're here, man! We just drove all the way from Califuckinifornia. Fucking A, B and C! Now drink your beer."

We did. It was very warm, and we drank warm beer all night long.

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While we were drinking that warm beer from Golden, Colorado, a girlfriend of Allison's strode into the house, saying, "Okay, Janov, tomorrow's your trial. So, what are we going to do about it?" Everybody called this girl Creamcheese.

"Your trial?" asked Warren Jeffries. "Your *trial*?"

Kent immediately went and stood behind Creamcheese, who was even shorter than he was. He touched her bare shoulder. She had more flesh showing than clothing. Creamcheese wasn't her real name, but that's what everybody called her, because she wore either granny dresses or close to nothing at all and acted like a flower child. She was pretty much willing to sleep with anyone. She'd been with Jed upstairs until Peggy bumped her out of the way. Creamcheese was a groupie to us, even though we weren't exactly a group of anything in particular. She just liked hanging out, since student life around there was otherwise pretty boring.

"You're on trial, Janov?" Kirk Dayton asked. "For what?"

"Yeah," said Bancroft. "The dean and the president are trying to get him fired."

"And what are we going to do about it?" asked Creamcheese.

"What *are we* going to do about it?" Steve Bancroft sneered. "Why don't you shut it, Creamcheese? You aren't going to do anything and you know it. He's going to get his ass fired tomorrow, and we're going to burn down the campus, and you'll run home to Chicago to your lawyer Daddy and you know it, so just shut it, little fucking daddy's girl Susie Creamcheese-Creamcheese."

Kent moved out from behind Creamcheese and stood in front of her, facing Steve Bancroft.

"Now, just you wait a minute," he said.

"Ah, sit down and relax your little biceps," said Bancroft. "Here, have a beer, why don't you." He held out his hand. "I didn't mean anything. It's just Creamcheese, man. Relax. I'm Steve, by the way."

"Kent. I'm a Foul Language Poet," he announced.

"You're a, you're a, what the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"I'm a student of the infamous Von Rotten, of Red Square fame, in Berkeley."

"Well, who gives a big rat's ass?" said Steve.

"Oh, you certainly will, some day." Kent was one smug sonofabitch.

"Great. Okay, let's haul the twelve foot ladder in here," said Greg Penn. "We're going to write one of Janov's poems all the way across this here ceiling. Who's up for the second or third line? I'm good for one, maybe two."

We all looked up. The ceiling was twelve or fourteen foot high. We were real drunk. There was one of those Victorian era ornamental plaster moldings around the light fixture right in the middle of the ceiling. A large dusty moth was consistently hitting its head against one of the six or eight light bulbs, throwing flickering shadows against the walls.

Greg began climbing the ladder. "Hold on to the damned ladder, will you, ass-wipe?"

"I'm next," Warren Jeffries chimed in.

I made a motion, but Steve Bancroft stopped me. "Look, why don't you two go into the bedroom and leave the driving to us?" he said, motioning toward Allison. "Go ahead and get some while you can, because we're all going on such a long trip. We'll take care of business here. You're going out and buying that Pepsi van we talked about tomorrow. It's already been decided, and we ain't taking no for an answer, so get some rest."

"A Pepsi van?" asked Warren.

"Yeah. The electric cool-aid Pepsi van," said Steve. "It's real cool. It's red, white and blue, and costs only five hundred bucks. We're all going out to California in it after he gets his ass shit-canned tomorrow and we burn down the campus."

"Well," said Warren, turning to me, "it sounds like these guys have your life all planned out for you, don't they?"

"Pretty much," Steve said, nodding. "Yeah." He took a long pull on his warm Coors beer, then held it off at a distance, looking at the label. "Not bad. Not bad. Beats the crap out of Carling Black Label, doesn't it, Greg? That's all we ever drank in high school in West Virginia. Damned coal miners, man. Yeah. That Carling Black Label. Tasted like salt and piss-water. Or else they mixed their sweat right in your beer. Either way."

"Put a cork in it, will you, ass-wipe?" said Greg.

"Whatever."

The next day some of my students were reading papers they had prepared in lieu of a final exam. My classroom was up on the second floor of a large old building in the middle of campus. The second story had tall windows with a view out into these huge old trees. It was warm out already and the smell of mowed lawns drifted in through the open windows and Greg's was the last paper of the class. He read from his paper in a florid pontificating voice about the French novelist Celine and the effect surrealism had on him. As he was finishing, he said, "In summation, Celine decided the ultimate insult you could hurl at someone was the word, *'Nasturtium!'* I think

you can best summarize Celine's attitude toward the meaning of life by the following gesture."

Greg threw his cigarette on the floor with a look of disdain. One student began to clap, when suddenly Greg sprinted toward the window, waving as he went, and dove right through the open window, disappearing downward out of sight. Everyone in the room gasped, realizing that we were a whole tall floor up among the trees, and that this guy was diving headlong to his death. En masse we all rushed to the window. There lay Greg on his back on a pile of mattresses assembled by Warren, Steve and Allison, Kirk, Creamcheese and Kent. Greg was laughing his ass off down below, and my classroom went nuts. People were hitting each other. They were ecstatic. Needless to say, I gave Greg an A. In fact, I scrawled across the top of his paper: *Fucking A+*. A fact which, unfortunately, did not sit well around that campus. It was the crowning touch to my travails with Mr. Gordon and Mr. Brown, President and Dean of that fine institution of higher learning in the Midwest. As the students around there used to sing: "*We love you, Mr. Gordon. We love you, Mr. Brown.*"

We were beaten mercilessly there.

