

The Great San Francisco Poetry Wars, 12

by Jerry Ratch

Sunday afternoon on Telegraph Avenue. Pretty much like any Sunday afternoon at the O.K. Corral. Von Rotten had set up a podium at the side of the street. One of his minions was reading from an essay by some French philosopher on the corner in front of Cody's Books. He would read from this essay to anyone who would stop and listen, even if they really just stopped for the streetlight. He'd walk right up and begin reading this tome in their faces. Not one stayed beyond the time necessary for the light to change, then they would hurry across the intersection without looking back, couples clutching each other by the arm as if they were in fear of being asked for their purses, or spare change, or their souls.

As usual along came the Bubble Lady blowing bubbles and hawking her poetry books to anyone she could buttonhole. And people would buy these things too. She would just stand staring at them until they opened their wallets, and out would come the dollar bills like weakened moths. I had read one of them once. No comment. It was harmless enough, I guess. She even won a prize once! No comment there either.

Von Rotten set up a microphone. It had a portable amplifier attached so that you could actually broadcast above the din of the traffic and the street people begging for spare change and drug dealers hawking joints or tabs of acid, or stoned-out freaks looking for an angry fix.

He blew a small puff of air into the microphone. "Testing one two three four. It's not loud enough," he whined in his customary little nasal whine. One of his minions jumped to his side and adjusted a switch on the amplifier.

"Testing one two three four," it blurted out. "Better," he said. He raked his dark greasy hair away from his eyeglasses where it had previously all but obscured his vision. Above his lip rode the beginnings of a faint dark moustache that had been positioned there ever since puberty, no doubt. Boy, was this guy ever irritating! Everything he did was irritating, I don't know why or how, but trust me on this. It just was.

"All right, Janov, who goes first? Shall we flip for it?" He fished a dime out of his pocket before I could say fine.

"But not the dime," I said.

"It's your choice," he said. "Clearly, it makes a difference." He smirked that annoying canary-swallowing smirk of his, turning to glance at his minions, who wooed their approval at that cutting remark.

But when I took a penny out of my pocket and handed it to him, he simply could not take his eyes off it. I had one-upped him, clearly. His face turned beet red. He looked at Penny as if he had misplaced their marriage license.

"Here, I'll flip it," I said. I took the penny out of the palm of his delicate porcelain hand and flipped it in the air and caught it before he could say anything. "You have to call it in the air."

"Who says?" he disputed. "You're making up rules now?"

"Yes, I am."

"Why?"

"It's my penny, that's why."

"She is not your Penny yet."

"We'll see."

"Yes, we will. Flip it in the air so we can all see it clearly."

He absolutely loved using that word CLEARLY. I really wanted to just smack him one, right there on Telegraph Avenue.

That's when I noticed that John O'Toole showed up and was standing at the back of the small crowd that had gathered. Now I grew emboldened. I felt like my older stronger brother had shown up at a street fight and I could let loose with abandon. I didn't care

about the consequences of anything anymore, because I knew that O'Toole would take care of business when it came down to it.

I hauled out my Norton Anthology and threw caution to the wind.

"I'll go first," I said.

"Says who?"

O'Toole spoke up from behind Von Rotten's minions. "Let the man go first." He had this deep rough growling voice. People turned and stared at him. He had this long brown beard and looked like a lumberjack, and the crowd sort of parted for the bulk of him as he stepped forward. He was wolfing down a hamburger in one of his chubby hands, leering at Von Rotten. Here was as menacing a man as you could get, and he was my pal. I sort of swelled up. I breathed in and grew bigger. I felt Penny squeeze my hand.

"All right," said Von Rotten. "No problem. It doesn't really matter to me who goes first anyway, because you don't stand a chance anyway. Anyway, who gives a big rat's ass? Go ahead, Janov, read your trash. You read it real good. And get that key to Penny's room ready."

I opened up my yellow, dog-eared copy of the Norton Anthology and turned to Chaucer's verses.

"Wait a minute," said the one called Pincus. "You're supposed to read your own stuff. What the heck? Von?"

"No, no," waved Von Rotten. "This ought to be interesting. Real interesting. It's his risk. Let him read whatever he wants."

I started running my finger down the stringy column of words to one side of Chaucer's Tales and began to read, editing as I went:

Once
practiced
guitar
&
dice
overindulgence

Tore
after
dancing girls
with
shapely neat
pimps

Didn't know
unnatural
lechery

In full
command
of
drunken
wickedness
&
damnation

I heard a murmur go up from the crowd, but I thought I noticed a fine smile crack along Von Rotten's finely chiseled lips. I flipped through a few pages until I spotted a string of words that looked promising. I extended a finger and began to read again:

Ducks kill
few

Bless me
company
trumpets

Surely
few
are seized
by the
wicked

curse
that
causes
self-control
chatters

Now a low roar among the small crowd. Von Rotten looked around at his minions with an open smile, nodding. I thought: What the hell is going on here? Can't they hear what I'm doing, or what? I was making monkey-squat out of their piddling bullshit theories! I thumbed through more pages until I spied a particularly juicy string of Chaucer's foul gutter language, needing translation from the Middle English by the kind editors of the Norton Anthology. This one would be sure to cause trouble. I was certain:

Cattle
are
wholly
afraid
since
the
plague

Dwelling in meadows
Secretly lending
stocks and property

Occupation:
stallion

Dapple/ named
Overcoat, blue
Bore
the shield of
Bawdswell

But really
a
fire-red
pimple
hot sparrow

scabby
&
afraid
of
blotches
lumps

Right mad

Well, that should blow the lid right off their theories! Or so I thought. But that was not what happened at all.

"We win!" Von Rotten announced. He smiled like a man embarrassed about showing his rotten little teeth, because they were stained dark, maybe from drinking too much tea, I don't know. It wasn't a winning smile. Or else he simply didn't possess the muscles to produce a smile. "Penny's mine," he said.

"How do you figure?"

"Because that was Foul Language Poetry you just read. We win. Give me her key." He held out his hand with its fine delicate fingers that had never experienced a callous, ever.

"That's not Foul Language Poetry. No way."

"I beg to differ. Clearly it is. WE WIN! And, oh, by the way, you lose."

He gestured with that porcelain hand as if weighing a fish, waiting for my copy of Penny's key.

"Also," he said, "I am inviting you to read with us at our next Foul Language Poetry event. It's huge. It's at the Berkeley Civic

Auditorium. So, Mr. Janov, how does it feel to be in with the in crowd?"

Von Rotten looked as though he had just swallowed the mother of all canaries.

"I'm not so sure," I said. "Where was that reading, did you say?"

I guess I was in somewhat of a hurry to get my international reputation going, since nothing seemed to be happening yet with the publication of Puppet X, which I really could not understand.

Von Rotten took Penny's elbow and started hauling her along down the Avenue. She kept looking back over her shoulder at me, waiting for me to say something, or do something. But I just stood there, unable to get myself to move. Finally I gave a small, weak wave of the paw, like Dostoyevsky's timid little mouse from behind his stove. And they vanished around the corner, while his minions put away the speaker and the podium. The one named Pincus walked up to me stiffly and held out a limp hand.

"Congratulations," he said. "You really made an impression on Von. I guess you're one of us. Well, see you at the big reading. Oh, and you are one lucky S.O.B. He doesn't let in just anybody."

"Really?"

"That's right."

The crowd of Foul Language people left me standing there with Greg, Warren, and O'Toole.

"What the fuck just happened?" Greg asked. "What was that crap you read?"

"That was, that was Chaucer Marginalia."

"Who whatinalia? What the fuck, Janov? What the fuck?"

Greg was shaking his head sadly. "I mean, WHAT THE FUCK! I came here expecting a battle, for Chrissake."

O'Toole had a cheeseburger in his other hand and kept wolfing it down. His shirt was hanging out of his pants. He was sort of smiling though.

"You better leave his ass alone," O'Toole said. "Leave him be."

"But he took off with Penny, for Chrissake!" Greg yelled. "You gonna just let that happen? C'mon, Janov. Janov? C'MON!"

O'Toole took a step toward Greg.

"Janov, you chicken-suited sonofabitch. You caved, for Chrissake! What exactly is at stake here? You love that girl. C'mon!"

That was when I reached in my pocket and felt her key.

"Holy crap!" I yelled.

Greg jumped. "What? What the hell! You scared the bJesus out of me. Holy crap!"

"I still have her key, right here." I held Penny's key up.

"Yeah? That's great. What are you going to do with it. Von Rotten just dragged her down the road like a cave man with a club."

"I'm going to go over there and throw him out."

"You and what army?"

I looked around. "Me and O'Toole, that's what army."

O'Toole quit wolfing his third cheeseburger.

"I'm your man," he said with his mouth full of cheese and meat. "I'll mess that twerp up. I'll mess him up real good."

"Count me in," said Greg. "I can't wait to get a whack in on this. I can't fucking wait."

We went to Penny's place and opened the front door. Marie's dog Teddy began barking fiercely at us and ran right up to O'Toole and put the bite on his pant leg.

"Get off me, you little mongrel!" he growled. He spun around in the vestibule with Teddy hanging off his cuff like a mean rag doll. O'Toole gave a giant kick and Teddy flew through the air into the front yard. The little dog bounced with a squeak, but came charging back up the front stairs. O'Toole slammed the door in Teddy's face. Teddy must have had some Lhasa Apso mixed in his genes, because he was quite the temple guardian. I mean, to him O'Toole must have looked the size of your standard ape, though he smelled of hamburger, which would be unusual where Teddy may have come from.

We heard a commotion from upstairs in Penny's room, and I put out my hand with my finger to my lips to be quiet. We began creeping up the stairs, which groaned under our combined weight. Teddy kept yapping outside and pitching his full meager weight against the front door over and over without relenting.

"Who's there?" Marie yelled from behind the closed door of her apartment on the first floor. You could hear the tremor in her old voice. "Teddy? Teddy? I'm going to call the police, if you don't answer."

I went back down the stairs and spoke as quietly as I could through Marie's door.

"It's me, Marie. Philip Janov."

"Philip? Why is Teddy outside?"

"He needed to take a pee, Marie."

"Oh, thank you, Philip. Could you make sure he does his business too?"

"I will, Marie. Don't worry. I'll take care of it."

"Thank you, Philip. Are you here to see Penny again?"

"Yes, I am, Marie. Don't worry about a thing."

"She's in love with you, Philip. She's crazy about you. She told me all about it."

"Thank you, Marie. I know. I know. I love her too."

"You two make such a cute couple. And to think it all started right here in my house. Oh!"

"Get some rest, Marie," I said, and then I abruptly turned around and walked out the front door. Teddy flew right at O'Toole's pant leg again and he shook the dog off, tossing him back inside and shut the door on the little monster.

"Janov, wait," cried Greg. "What the hell are you doing? Wait up."

I kept on walking up the sidewalk, turned the corner and walked to Telegraph Avenue with both of them panting right behind me.

"Well, I'll be butt-fucked in a hurry," Greg said when I stopped.

But O'Toole was smiling. "Let him be," he said. "Can't you see he's a man in love."

"Well, now, that's just plain good-for-nothing bullshit."

"Just leave him be."

I said nothing. I was looking up Telegraph toward Cody's and the campus. What had I done? I had let Greg down. I had let the whole underground world of surreal and streetwise and plain-speaking non-academic poetry down. I had let myself down, had abandoned my ideals. I had abandoned the girl I was truly in love with, and for what? To gain a modicum of local respect from a gang of blood-thirsty Foul Language Poets who were bound and determined to become the next academy, and I knew it. But what if they actually did get somewhere in the world of poetry? First of all, would they? I knew it in my bones that they would. They were so damned organized, so anal and determined. They were going for teaching jobs across America, and the prizes, and the grants. They were starting their own magazines and publishing only each other. They absolutely knew what they were up to, because they were the only ones who did anything in an organized, corporate sort of way. They were like the damned Grand Mafia of poetry, for Chrissake! The GM, the General Motors, of Poetry. They were like Joseph Stalin and they would kill anyone that got in their way. And I would be a pretty big fool indeed not to join them, especially since I had just received an engraved invitation.

And anyway, my first book, *Puppet X*, was going absolutely nowhere that I could see, because my publisher was just way too underground. At that level of the underground, the massive piles of dirt pretty much obscured the view.

But Von Rotten was up in Penny's room right this minute, either banging her or haranguing her, or worse, both. I envisioned him with her, and my guts began twisting and turning, and my insides fell into my shoes. What had I done? She was being held captive in her own room, for Chrissake, probably with her arm twisted behind her back, and I also knew she was partially afraid of him and his henchmen, because they were not above using violence

to achieve their goals. They were not the sanest crowd in the world, but then, who was? Indeed, my own crowd was just a gang of thieves. In fact, I myself, it could be argued. I myself.

