

The Great San Francisco Poetry Wars, 13

by Jerry Ratch

There was a whole group of us Young Turk poets who hung out at the Savoy Tivoli in North Beach. Most of them drove cabs, (whereas I was now working in a damned gas station for Angel, my publisher's man, who got me a job there.) They would double-park their cabs out front of the café and run inside just long enough to slug down a glass of rot-gut house burgundy or a cold glass of tap beer, and shout out the lines of a poem they were working on. One of them was named Winio, (no need to wonder why.) He had total alopecia and was completely bald. His head shone with the light that fell on it. It was red most of the time as well, either from sunburn or booze or both. Or else it was from the enormous glare being thrown off Red Square across the Bay in Berkeley, who knows?

Then there was Rotten Bobby, who changed his name upon meeting Von Rotten, and would grovel at the master's feet whenever the great one deigned to come over to the City from Berkeley, which was on rare occasions. The master didn't like to move too far from the umbilical cord of the University, because he was so busy planning how to take over the Academy. But when he actually did set foot on the pavements of San Francisco, Rotten Bobby fawned over the master's every footfall so badly that he practically fanned the flames that inevitably leapt up from behind the Great One's heels. Smoke poured out of the burned holes where he tread.

Rotten Bobby also drove a cab, and in fact started a magazine called Diminished Taxicab. Later changing it to Pedicab, after the first oil shortage of the 1970's. This magazine had previously been chock full of imitative surrealist poems, until Von Rotten got a hold of him. Von Rotten twisted Rotten Bobby's head around as if he were a lanky puppet, and Rotten Bobby began seeing

only the good in any and every Foul Language poet Von Rotten deigned recommend. Poor Rotten Bobby. He didn't know which way was up and which way was down after that. He could barely drive a cab anymore, his vision of the world had gotten so skewed. He used to have a pretty good sense of humor before that too. He finally ended up dying of a brain aneurism, the poor bastard!

Everything would have probably gone humming along at that café, if Kent had not appeared one night with Creamcheese on his arm. That was the night all hell broke loose in the world of poetry, and the first cracks began to appear in the great façade of the Foul Language camp. Naturally, it was over a woman. It wasn't so very different from my own affair with Penny (Helen of Troy) Martin, if you want the truth. Good-looking women were a real scarce commodity around that particular poetry movement. I don't know why. It may have had something to do with the fact that it was a little difficult to make a living at slinging words around, especially when it came to poetry. Prose now, that was a whole other matter. Write a book about vampires, for example, and poof, they poured money down your silken throat like it was liquid gold and you were invading South America.

But that is a whole other subject, that I may one day get around to addressing.

The minute poor Rotten Bobby set eyes on Creamcheese, who was sitting at a long table at the café with the rest of us, I could see for myself the impact she had on him. She wasn't sitting exactly, it was more like sprawled out across one end of the table like that painting by Renoir, "The Luncheon of the Boating Party." She never just sat anywhere. She basically lounged around wherever she was, with at least half a nipple showing from her inevitably low-cut dress. First off, Rotten Bobby did the kind of double or triple take that permanently affects your neck if you aren't careful. He shook his head a number of times. Then I saw him purposely try and look away, but his head twisted back around to take another gander at the flesh on Creamcheese which, I have to say, was spilling out of this low-cut sleeveless yellow dress she had on. And her skin looked

just magnificent in that dress, because she had acquired quite a tan that summer. In fact, that seemed to be about all she ever did, was to go lay out in the sun at People's Park, while Kent did his best to fend off the hordes of muscle-bound basketball players and dope peddlers with their muscle-bound arms glistening in the sunlight. After awhile he took to carrying a short cut-off baseball bat around with him wherever they went.

But Creamcheese was no dummy. Well, she was in fact a complete and total dummy intellectually, but she was certainly no dummy when it came to money, because Kent himself was a trust-funder. He would never run out of money, and she knew it. And you couldn't pry her grasp from his arm under any circumstance. Except for this one time with Rotten Bobby. There's always an exception to any normally hard and fast rule.

I think for her too, it was love at first glance. And there it is. It must have been that pretty yellow dress she was wearing that night, because the next thing we knew, Rotten Bobby had composed a damn-near brilliant poem to her skin, and to that dress. I say brilliant, because you could actually comprehend the thing. Somehow he had momentarily slipped out of his newly-acquired, Von-Rotten-approved Foul Language mode. In other words, let me be perfectly clear, you could actually understand the thing. That's because it was written from the heart and the penis, not his oversized brain.

But also let's not lose sight of the body and the skin of Creamcheese that came with that dress, in all its creamy lusciousness, even if the head above those creamy shoulders was normally filled with air. And of course, that half-round of rosy nipple that was exposed to the world of poetry.

Rotten Bobby leaned over her end of the table, extending his hand. "Hi, I'm Rotten Bobby."

"I know who you are," she said. Creamcheese had a kind of low husky voice that made men tear their clothes off without thinking. But you could pretty much get men to tear their clothes off

at the drop of a hat in those days. It didn't always take that much, if you want to know the absolute truth.

"You do?" Rotten Bobby asked. He seemed shocked that she would even speak to him. He blew out his breath and pulled around a chair, leaning way over that end of the table about as languorously as she leaned across the table. You could see Kent's back getting more arched minute by minute. He had that practiced stiffening that Von Rotten had, permanently up his ass and spine. I think people (poets, especially) practiced walking exactly like the Master as if they were going to modeling school.

"Course," she breathed. She sort of purred. It was more or less embarrassing, if you ask me.

"Oxygen! Oxygen!" Rotten Bobby shouted. He turned in his seat like a man about to call out "Garcon!" but this was a damned sawdust restaurant in North Beach, for God's sake. It wasn't France, and it wasn't fancy. I mean, these were cabbies and poets hanging out there. This wasn't Renoir territory. If the great painter had been hanging out with our crowd, the name of this painting would have to be changed to something more like "The Snack and Gulp at the Crab Shack Party."

And it was at that moment that Rotten Bobby reached across the table and simply held her hand. It seemed like he held her hand in his for about two and a half centuries, though I am sure it was just a few moments. But it was one of those moments in history you usually only hear about in retrospect. Like where they hit "freeze" in the movies.

Then Kent went to break it up. I know he noticed. Everyone did who was there. It couldn't be missed unless you were blind drunk, which was true of us most of the time in reality. I remember parties where they would take me home with my toes literally dragging on the ground.

And call me a fatalist, but here's what's wonderful about life. This was when Creamcheese became the true flesh goddess she was. She took both of their hands, Kent and Bobby both, stood up, and led them outside. They stood next to Bobby's yellow cab for a

long time. She was holding Bobby's hand and she was holding Kent's hand, and she was saying something, and they were both listening intently, nodding their heads. I've seen this sort of thing on playgrounds when a young mother is holding two unruly children by the hand and speaking to them in no uncertain terms, unwilling to let them go until they nodded their heads in agreement. A truce of some kind. A certain willingness to look at each other, before she would let them go back to their little ruffian universe.

Women have two breasts for a reason, I know that much. Maybe they have twin hearts underneath it all. And we all know about those rosy nipples. You'd have to go blind to miss them, most hours on any given night.

After that Rotten Bobby got into his cab, and Creamcheese crawled into the back with Kent, and they took off. But what surprised us all that night was when they pulled up not half an hour later, and stopped the cab in front of the Savoy. Kent was driving the damned cab, for Chrissake! And Creamcheese and Rotten Bobby crawled out of the back seat, looking disheveled as all get out. Creamcheese straightened out that spectacular yellow dress, tucking a fully exposed nipple back in under the material. She pulled down the hem of the dress, then strolled right into the Savoy like a wooden duck being pulled on a string, and headed straight back to the ladies room.

Bobby slouched into one of the chairs at the table. Kent took another chair. Both of them were flushed in the face. The hair on both men was tousled like they'd been in a scuffle of some sort. But neither could get themselves to say anything more than order a round of beers. We all looked from one face to the other.

"What the fuck happened?" Winio finally blurted out.

In unison, they both shrugged and lowered their heads into their beer mugs.

Creamcheese came back to the table, and Kent popped up and offered her his chair. Immediately she began languorously lounging across their end of the table. She just took up her old

position, like in that painting by Renoir, but with the smile of the Mona Lisa spread across her lips.

"The name of my magazine just got changed," Rotten Bobby said.

"To what?" asked Winio.

"Pedicab."

He took a long draught from his beer. Then he said, "I am human ordure."

Helen #2 of the modern poetry world had just mated with two competing gods at once. And I saw at a glance a crack open up in the façade of the Foul Language Movement of Poetry. And that was when I realized how to destroy that world. With a little help from my friends.

Winio stood up from the table. He pulled Rotten Bobby up by the collar like a giant bald high school gym teacher. "C'mon, you need some dim sum."

"No, I don't, leave me alone, would you? I'm human ordure."

"You're coming with me. We're going over to the Dim Sum Palace over on Washington. We're going to drink sweet plum wine and get fucked up."

Rotten Bobby went limp and let himself be led away by Winio. I saw them go wobbling off down the street, but then I leapt up from the table and ran after them.

The light in the Dim Sum Palace was like out of an Edward Hopper painting. We sat on one side of a huge round family-size Formica-covered table right in the middle of the place. The restaurant was huge, and there was nobody else in it at that hour. The front of the Palace was covered in gaudy tiles that were orange and green and mustard yellow and red. Across the street was Sam Wo's with the famous shouting waiter who told you where to sit and what to eat. He scared me. Everybody who went in there was cowed by him, but they couldn't resist going back for the verbal abuse. One sometimes needed that kind of punishment, or amusement, or

whatever you want to call it. It was never a dull experience, I can tell you that.

Winio ordered a decanter of sweet plum wine and poured some for everybody.

Rotten Bobby hung his head. "I am human ordure," he whimpered.

"Drink your fucking wine," said Winio.

Rotten Bobby took a small mouthful and spit it back into his glass.

"How can you drink that stuff?" he groaned.

"What's wrong with it?"

"It's too sweet."

"Yeah? So?"

"I like things sour."

"Well, maybe that's what's wrong with you. Drink it. Drink the whole damn thing down. You drink it real good, or I'm hauling your ass over to Sam Wo's and I'll let them give you the full treatment."

Rotten Bobby craned his neck and looked out the badly-lit restaurant window into the sad dusk. He looked genuinely frightened, though of what I wasn't completely sure. Then he lowered his head and began slugging down the spit-filled wine. After he finished his glass, he licked his lips and a certain brightness entered his eyes for the first time that evening.

"Holy crap!" he said. "My cab! My Cab!"

"Forget your cab and drink," Winio said. "I'm driving your fucking cab."

I kept buying decanters and plying Rotten Bobby with the sweet plum wine.

"I think I can help you get into Creamcheese's pants," I said at one point.

Rotten Bobby brightened up. I actually saw the beginning of a smile passing across his lips. "Yeah?" His features had definitely gotten somewhat thicker during the evening.

"I feel exactly the way you do, about someone," I said.

“Who's that?”

I pushed another full glass of the pale purple wine toward him. He grabbed it and tossed back his head. I watched his Adam's apple bobbing up and down.

“You know that girl Penny who works at the Red Diaper Factory?”

“Penny? Yeah.” Suddenly he spit a mouthful of wine back into his glass. “You mean Von Rotten's bitch? No way. No way!”

“You know how you're feeling right now about Creamcheese?” I grabbed my own throat in a gesture, then stood up and grabbed my crotch.

“Oh, shit. I am human ordure,” Bobby groaned.

“I think I can help you out in that department,” I said. “If you help me get a job there. That's all you've got to do.”

“Oh, man. Von Rotten will have me killed.” Bobby looked at me, almost soberly I thought. “I'm so screwed,” he said. And he went in for another glass of that sickly sweet plum wine. “I'm so screwed.”

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I got the job at the Red Baby Diaper Factory in West Berkeley. It was down on 4th Street, north of Gilman, not far from the railroad tracks. It was real dusty down there during the summer. A paint factory was situated right across the street, and these noxious fumes came drifting out of there every afternoon, the smells of toluene, the same stuff that's in glue. We'd get high just going outside on our coffee breaks and taking a good long whiff.

I got Greg a job there as well. They were pretty desperate to find someone who would do most anything, ie: the dirty work the rest of the lily-fingered Foul Language poets had no stomach for. Greg didn't really give a shit, as long as he got paid. Give him a turd to sniff and he would sniff that thing eight hours a day, if they paid him. Also, they kept him in a constant supply of Red Mountain Pink

Chablis, so he was happy most of the time. But he didn't think much of Von Rotten, because the man came off so superior all the time, and above actual work himself.

Whenever Von Rotten came within earshot, Greg would start shouting gibberish. You could see the reaction on Von Rotten. It was visible. His back arched even more than normal. And his pace quickened. You'd see him buttonholing anyone he could get a hold of. They'd crane their necks. Von Rotten always had a worried look, but they would end up just shaking their heads. There was nothing they could do about Greg's sudden outbursts, they told him, because nobody else was willing to swab out the toilets, so Greg was necessary to the whole operation. It was a perfect picture of how the asshole can sway the entire body of a poetry movement. Though I'm not at all sure which end of things was the real asshole here.

That was the era I began going out to cafes to work on my poems. I couldn't write anymore with all those kids crawling around the house like a swarm of monkeys. Also, I'd begun to grow frustrated with my love-life at home. It had grown too predictable. We made love once a week, if that. And it was always the same position. Mary Jo had to be fucked from behind, in a kind of reclining doggy-style. She wasn't built right to be fucked in the straight-up position, with me on top. She could never reach a climax that way. So while I was out writing my poems at cafes, I kept searching the bodies of women who would pass by for how they would most likely have to be fucked. And in that way, I fell in love all over again with my Penny, and knew I had to calculate a way to see her again. Repeatedly in my imagination I saw her magnificent wobbling breasts and skinny little ass, and it began crowding out any thoughts I might have of a literary nature.

Then I actually saw Penny one day at the Red Diaper Factory. Von Rotten kept her sitting behind a glass enclosure so I couldn't get near her, though I could see her when I passed by. One day I pressed my nose against the glass. She pretended not to see me. And I thought I noticed something a little weird. There were distinct marks on both wrists. I thought they might be like tattoos,

though I knew Penny would never do something like get tattoos. Her body was as pure as a temple. But these marks were the kind you might get if you'd been wearing handcuffs a little too tight. Maybe both of her wrists were bruised. Once again I pressed my face against the glass, but she wouldn't look my way. In fact, I noticed her distinctly turn just a little in her seat, to face slightly away from me. As she turned I could see those dark nipples of hers wobble just a little beneath the loose sleeveless white top she had on. Then, then, to top things off, the next time I passed by she had an actual handcuff slapped on one of her wrists! The other hand being free so she could keep on answering the red telephone that sat on her desk. I shook my head, violently. I could barely believe it. I grew incensed, outraged.

When I called out her name, there was no reaction at all. I couldn't be absolutely sure, to tell you the truth, that she could hear me. It was thick bullet-proof glass they had her caged behind, like you would see in a bank.

When I ran into Rotten Bobby on the production line, I asked him, "What the hell is going on here with Penny? What's Von Rotten got her, in damned handcuffs now?"

I was incensed, you know? I mean, this was America, not the Soviet Union here.

I grabbed him by the arm. "You've got to help me get to her." Rotten Bobby went slack and began whining like a little kid who'd lost his baseball mitt and didn't want to admit it to his alcoholic father. I was looking right in his ear, which had a tremendous brown slug of wax. "Hey, can you even hear me? Do you ever clean out your ears?"

Greg came around the corner just then.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"This twerp has got to help me get near the love of my life. Don't ya?"

Rotten Bobby whined, and Greg laughed at him, right in his face, kind of too close, like a drunkard in a barroom with a pool stick in his hand.

"Ah, he's a fucking wimp!" Greg said. "Listen, wanna go shoot some pool after work. This joint is making me thirsty. You too, wimp. You're coming with us, aren't you. Hey, wimp!" Greg yelled right in his ear.

Rotten Bobby whined and nodded, whined some more, then nodded.

"I kinda like pool," he said. "What are we playing for?"

"What do you mean?" Greg asked. "You a pool hustler? You know, you could get hurt doing that around here."

"Shaw! I've shot a little."

"He's a fucking hustler, Janov! Look at that. He's blushing! We got us a little fucking pool hustler here. Don't we? Huh?"

Greg grabbed Rotten Bobby around the neck, holding him tight in the crook of his arm, and began rubbing the top of his head with his fist. Hard.

"Ow! Ow!" Rotten Bobby yelled. "Cut it out! Look, there are plenty of other women I could set you up with. Why's it got to be her? Sides, aren't you already married or something?"

"More like or something," Greg said. He laughed. "His marriage was a set-up. A damned sham."

"How about someone else then? Anyone else," Rotten Bobby whined. "Just not Penny."

He looked at me. My mouth was attempting to move, but nothing was coming out. It had gone dry. "I... I..."

"C'mon, be reasonable. It's just too dangerous with her. Von Rotten lords it over her like a hawk. Why does it have to be Penny? Huh? Tell me."

I mumbled something at my own feet.

"What?"

"I can't sleep."

He actually had the nerve to laugh.

"Wh ... what?"

"I can't sleep."

"I can't believe it," Rotten Bobby said.

"Why not, man?" asked Greg. "Look, can't you see the guy's in love? Haven't you ever been in love?"

"Nope," Rotten Bobby said. He seemed sort of proud of the fact.

Greg just said, "You poor miserable fuck."

And that was when Von Rotten himself came through the assembly room. He stopped in front of our little group, looking from face to face.

"What exactly is going on, Bobby?"

"We have a request to make," Greg said.

I felt my insides dropping suddenly into my shoes. I looked toward the bathroom door. A red fire extinguisher was posted there on the wall.

"What?"

"We'd like to propose a company picnic, for everybody. The entire staff. Everybody, even you."

"A picnic."

"Yes, sir, a picnic. Like with sandwiches and beer and stuff. And a softball game, like up in Tilden Park. I'll do all the arranging, sir. I've got some friends."

"You do." Von Rotten's head bobbed once or twice.

"Some people I met, sir. I've got friends in the right places."

"And just where did you meet your friends in the right places?"

"On Telegraph Avenue, sir. During the riots. They work for the county now."

Von Rotten looked Greg up and down, twice.

"Okay!" he snapped, with a little click of his heels, like a damn Nazi Lieutenant. "Arrange it for the first of next month. But make it for a Saturday. We're not taking a paid day for a picnic."

The Stalinista spun on his heel and fled through a swinging door. We saw him appear behind Penny. He fished a key out of his change pocket and unlocked her handcuff. Hand in hand they left the office, and we saw them strolling out the front door to the

outside world. But before the door shut, I saw Penny glance furtively back in my direction, and I felt my chest jump like a bolt of electric shot through me.

My face immediately grew hot. Rotten Bobby was looking at me, shaking his head.

“Pathetic,” was all he said. “Pah...fucking...thetic!”

