

The Great San Francisco Poetry Wars, 15

by Jerry Ratch

Steve Bancroft's future wife showed up at his door that same night, slamming her hand loudly against the door and shouting for him. "Steve, Steve, wake up. Damn it, come on. You forgot to pick me up at the airport. Who are you in there with? I said wake the fuck up!" She had that same kind of high nasal whiney voice, sort of like Von Rotten's high whiney mosquito voice. For a long frightening moment, in the middle of the night like that, bolting up out of a deep sex-flushed sleep, I thought: *"Holy crap! It's him! The jig is up!"*

Teddy was barking like mad downstairs behind Marie's closed door. No use trying to get back to sleep anymore. When you're trying to climb up out of that deep hole of sleep, it takes a minute to come around to your senses, to normal existence. You hear freight trains whistling along on tracks down by the bay. You hear loud distant gunshots in the night, reverberating off buildings. You smell aromas next, smells like a cut-open persimmon, that may have poured out of my sweet ultra-liquid Penny onto the sheets. And then you feel a wave of serenity washing over your soul. And then you think of your enemy, Von Rotten, and what he may be plotting to do next.

I rolled over and kissed Penny's warm nipples. They never got cold. The blood was pulsing too near the surface in them to ever get cold. Even in a hurricane of wind-bitten nipples, I couldn't imagine hers tightening up with the cold and the rain.

Then Steve's door opened and we could hear them clearly.

"Where the fuck were you? You said you would pick me up? Where the fuck have you been. My god, look at you, you drunken lout! What kind of husband are you going to make? I flew out all the way out here to find this — *this mess?* Do you even have a job? What is this place, like a flophouse or something, some kind of

hippie joint? And where's that damned poet guru who's been leading you around by the fucking nose?"

"Hello, Hillary," said Steve. "Welcome home."

"Oh, no, this is not home. This is not home. We're not living here. I'll tell you where home is. You're coming back home with me to West Virginia."

"I'm not going back to the coal mines," Steve said flatly.

"You are so. If you ever want to marry me, you are. If you ever want anymore of this."

There was an enormous long silence. Crippled airplanes fell out of the sky during the next five centuries. I heard the breath of my love flowing in and out of Penny's lovely mouth. "Kiss me, Philip," she said, ever so softly. And I put my lips on hers. I would marry this one. For sure. I would work the coal mines of West Virginia for her, if asked. Though I knew she would never ask that, thank God. So I was safe there.

"Where the fuck is this Janov character? I've got a lot on my mind and I want to give him a piece of it. He's just a hippie fucking guru, is what he is. You're coming the fuck back home with me. Get your clothes on. My mother and father got a nice warm shotgun in their hands, waiting on your homecoming."

"Oh, crap," Steve said. "Hillary, I don't think I'm going back there. California is just such a load of fun."

"Fun, my ass! You put your clothes on. *Now!*" she shouted.

"I don't think so," Steve said to her. There was another real long silence. Then we could hear Hilary beginning to sob.

"I came all this way ... for you," she sobbed.

"Oh, crap, Hilary. Here. Come here. Come on, lie down."

We heard the door close, and then we could hear her sobbing right through the thin walls. I realized how thin they were, and how each of us could hear the real lives of everyone else in this world. It was all so transparent in America, or anywhere else probably, when you're living so close together, and have as much need as we had. We were all doomed to know the silence and imminent death inside these walls.

That was the weekend of the great softball game for the Red Baby Diaper Factory, which was organized by Greg. Our Greg. Man, he organized the shit out of it too. He gave Von Rotten's core group of Foul Language Movement Poets name-tags, FLIMP, some FLUMP, and even one FLAMP, but that one tore it off immediately when Von Rotten pointed at it, all red in the face. They all faced off against the rest of us ex-surrealists, or budding surrealists, even a few haiku enthusiast mavens we scavenged from a group we found trying to sell their stuff out on Telegraph Avenue, in direct imitation and competition with the infamous Bubble Lady of Telegraph Avenue. If she could do it, they figured, why couldn't they? Yeah, right! She was a professional, and an emotional bully!

The haiku enthusiasts were okay, but our real secret weapon was O'Toole. Well, he was no secret, but he sure as hell was a weapon. He became our pitcher, and that man could launch an underhanded softball like a canon. Nobody could hit it when it came barreling past the plate. But nobody. It was amusing, and even inspiring to see Von Rotten himself trying to hit that whizzing ball. He may as well have been trying to swallow a bumblebee. That was when I learned true laughter. And that also was when the real San Francisco Poetry Wars began in earnest, because it was later that day that Penny would announce in front of everyone assembled that we were going to have a baby. Von Rotten looked like he had just swallowed a dead mouse, whole, when she said that. I could see the trouble that was going to cause, even as Penny was saying it. Although this was a terrific way to stay the hell out of Vietnam, and everyone knew it, (including Hilary, which she would lord over Steve Bancroft like a war cry.)

That or shooting yourself in the foot, literally. I knew a few who took that route, and it worked too. The Army only liked it when the enemy shot you. Because, I guess the thinking went, what if you decided to turn the gun on one of your buddies, if you were goofy enough to turn it on yourself? Okay, that makes sense, I guess.

The morning of the big game arrived. It was up at a baseball diamond in Tilden Park, not that far from where Mary Jo

and I had first fucked. I felt a little twinge of guilt about it, for some reason. Not huge, just a little. I kept looking up toward that field of weeds where we had laid down and she hiked up her dress and pulled me into her bewildering world of hot slippery flesh and four kids and ex-husbands and pure Midwestern misery. All that dirty past that still had its claws attached to my soul, well, if not my soul, my pocketbook. What was I going to do about actually being married to that nut? What? Ah, me! I did not have a damn clue.

When O'Toole walked out onto the field directly to the pitcher's mound, I saw Von Rotten just looking at him like he was the Incredible Hulk, which he pretty much was. He was a brute, make no mistake. You didn't run up and question a man of his stature, directly to his face. Von Rotten ran up to me instead, and started yelling at me like I was his employee, which I was, in fact! But shit! This was uncalled for.

Greg intervened. "He can play."

"No. No, he cannot. He's not even an employee," Von Rotten whined in his nasty little mosquito voice.

O'Toole wandered off the mound toward home plate. He was dressed in an old-time baseball shirt that said New York on it. He approached Von Rotten, who had taken up the position of umpire, behind the batter's box. He had on a catcher's mask so as not to disturb that delicate white porcelain face of his, that chiseled jawbone, those fine delicate, almost feminine features. The Incredible Hulk stepped up real close and started breathing on him.

"Okay, he can play," Von Rotten said. Whined. "I can't see a reason why not."

You almost felt sorry for the wimp. Almost.

The day turned hot and sweaty. Penny pulled off her top, leaving only a camisole covering those wobbling tits. Her nipples were erect under that thing. I think "play ball" didn't begin for an extra ten minutes because of the movement going on inside her shirt. I witnessed the hurt on Von Rotten's face. Well, along one half of it, anyway. The other half turned and hid itself in the darkness of

a Picasso shadow. As hard as he managed to avoid reality, it sometimes rode home along the line of his aquiline jaw.

O'Toole wandered back out toward the mound. Greg began hooting from the outfield before any of their batters even came up. They were struggling to figure out who would be going first. Von Rotten pulled off his umpire mask and pointed for his team to line up along the first base line, then one by one he asked them a question none of us could hear. But I'm pretty sure I know what that question was. How about: *"Have any of you ever played baseball?"* Because one by one as Von Rotten went down the line of his minions, they wagged their heads ashamedly No, looking down at their feet. This included Kent, who was one of them. And Rotten Bobby, of course. Creamcheese was sitting on the one bleacher that was there beside the ball field. She eyed both of her men, and shook the scraggly blond curls surrounding her face. When she thrust her chest forward, naturally one of her nipples popped right out of that sunny yellow dress she still had on. She looked down at her chest and looked up again and shrugged, then smiled, throwing both arms up in a stretch and huge yawn.

Von Rotten looked around at the entire field of us. We were pounding our mitts. Greg was hooting the whole time. That's when Von Rotten tore off his catcher's mask and threw it to the ground. He picked up a bat and stepped into the batter's box.

"Play ball!" he shouted. Well, tried to shout, as loud as he could get his high-pitched weasely mosquito whining voice to go. It was a voice more attuned to opera than baseball.

O'Toole began firing in those bombers. Even underhanded that ball streaked past Von Rotten so fast it was a kind of blur. The poor bastard swung at it, but long after it had gone past, after you heard the pop in the catcher's mitt.

"Ball one!" he yelled.

"What?" Greg shouted from right field.

"That was a fucking strike if I've ever seen one!" yelled Steve from second base. "I can see the whole thing. A complete and total strike."

Hilary had come up behind the catcher. "Strike one!" she yelled. She couldn't have come up to more than Von Rotten's chest, she was so short and skinny.

Von Rotten's big carnival-sized head swung around on her.

"You're not the umpire anymore," she yelled at him.

"Strike the fuck one! Dead center down the middle. Next pitch! C'mon!" It was kind of comical to see her yelling at the head of the Foul Language Movement. The FLEM.

"Excuse me, mam," one of the minions said from the sidelines. "Do you know who you're shouting at?"

"I'm yelling at the big-headed FLEM, yeah!" she yelled. "I know exactly who I'm yelling at! And he's not the umpire anymore! So, c'mon. Play ball! What is this, a bunch of old ladies? Play the fuck ball! Let's get this started!"

That's when Von Rotten stepped out of the batter's box and motioned for Rotten Bobby to come over. He spoke quietly into Rotten Bobby's ear, and for a moment there was no reaction, but then Rotten Bobby turned to look at O'Toole, then me. I was pounding my mitt at third base. The infielders were getting real impatient. We all knew Von Rotten could be theatric to the point of annoyance, but this was pushing it.

Rotten Bobby began to whine audibly.

"Just go do it!" Von Rotten said stiffly. His back arched noticeably. "Now!" he shouted. "Or you're fired!"

Rotten Bobby skulked off the ball field with his hands in his pockets and his head down.

"You better Run!" Von Rotten shouted after him. *"Keep going!"*

"I am human ordure," Rotten Bobby moaned as he went by me. He looked up for a second. "You won't believe what he wants me to do."

"What?" I whispered. "What?"

Bobby just shook his head and kept marching like a slack-jawed toy soldier.

I watched as he got into his old rattle-trap yellow ex-taxicab and rattled out of the pot-holed parking lot in a puff of blue smoke and began chugging up the hill. The engine backfired once against the surrounding woods.

Von Rotten gave an evil, eerie smirk, as only he could. Then he stepped back into the batter's box and said in the most annoying of nasally, mosquito-whining voices, "Play ball!" As if he were still the umpire. Man, you could really just kill the bastard.

O'Toole wound up and whizzed the next ball right past Von Rotten's big head. Von Rotten dropped right to the dirt, while a big "Whoa!" emerged from the sidelines.

Two of Von Rotten's disciples made a move to storm the pitcher's mound, then thought better of it. Von Rotten rose to his full stuck-up stature. When he looked down at the dirt on his pants, the two minions rushed to him and began dusting off his trousers, and he simply stood there and let them.

"Sorry," said O'Toole with a big smile. "Kinda hard to miss that big head. Quit crowding the plate. You never know where these things are gonna go. I'm kinda rusty."

"Rusty? You must be joking."

"I don't joke."

"Oh. Well, then."

Von Rotten stepped back to home plate and kicked at the dirt. "Let's try that again," he said. He was always trying to stay in control. It was damn near admirable. He would have made a good squadron commander if this had been a theater of war. Well, it was in fact a kind of theater of war. The Great San Francisco Poetry Wars. Though nobody was ever drafted into these wars that I know of. If only Uncle Sam would have acknowledged the veracity of these wars, then maybe Steve and Greg wouldn't have had to run from the long arm of Uncle Sam to Canada to avoid the draft sucking away our youth like a huge vacuum cleaner on the face of humanity into the unholy minefield of Vietnam.

It wasn't more than twenty-five minutes when we heard Rotten Bobby's car coming back down the bumpy road to the

parking lot. He shut off the ignition to his big yellow clunker, which sighed once and then let out with an enormous backfire that sounded like a gunshot. Rotten Bobby got out of the driver's side. Von Rotten was at bat again, and looked as if he were standing erect at attention, like an enormous skinny weasel standing up on its hind legs. Then I saw the most amazing site I think I have ever witnessed. The passenger door opened and out stepped Angelina, O'Toole's wife. Or ex-wife. Whatever she now was. You could see from a distance the look she threw O'Toole's way.

The reaction of O'Toole wasn't immediately apparent though. He was used to looking as though he was keeping his cool. He had to, being a bouncer and all.

Rotten Bobby escorted Angelina to the bench along the third base line where Creamcheese was basking in the sunshine with her nipple exposed. The two women eyed each other as Angelina sat down on the bench. She was dressed in a low-cut halter top and short-shorts. She had dyed her hair glowing blonde. Her hair used to be dark, like Penny's. Now she had somehow taken on the appearance of a hooker from San Pablo Avenue down in the seedier parts of Oakland. Angelina avoided looking directly at O'Toole. Instead for some reason she kept a steady eye on Von Rotten.

"Play ball!" Von Rotten shouted. "Hey, pitcher, pitcher! Hey, pitcher, pitcher! Let's see you throw some heat now, ya big lunk!"

"Hey!" Greg yelled. "You can't go doing that! The term is *Hey, batter, batter. Hey, batter, batter!* This guy doesn't know anything!"

"Yeah!" Steve chimed in. "You don't know jack shit!"

But Von Rotten, with one enormous mother of a smirk, ignored them completely. "*Hey, pitcher, pitcher!*" he whined. "*Hey, pitcher, pitcher!*" He waved his little light-weight bat over the plate.

Almost immediately the ball popped right out of O'Toole's big hands, as if it had been greased. He stooped over to pick up the ball and you could see half the crack in his ass because his pants

were riding so low from his enormous belly. He reached back to hitch up his pants, then bent over to scoop up the ball from the grass.

“Say, that's a pretty picture!” Von Rotten quipped. “Anyone got a camera? Get a load of the ass on this fellow, will you?”

O'Toole started breathing real hard. Sweat appeared suddenly under both armpits in huge looping stains on his ancient baseball shirt. He dropped the ball again, and Von Rotten had the nerve to laugh out loud. A real nasty guffaw.

Finally O'Toole took a short wind-up and lobbed in the next pitch. It was a looping bomber of a pitch, with no heat whatsoever. Von Rotten took a big swing and connected and the ball flew right over this makeshift two-and-a-half foot chunk of chicken wire that acted as a fence. Von Rotten's minions exploded, jumping to their feet and hopping in embarrassing little circles, as Von Rotten trotted around the bases waving both hands in the air like a little girl. When he got to home base, he jumped on it with both feet, then laughed right in O'Toole's direction. “That's one to nothing!” he informed O'Toole.

“Lucky hit!” Steve yelled from second base.

I heard a groan from behind me and swung around and looked at Penny, who was feeling her belly and looking a little sick out in left field. All of a sudden she leaned forward and threw up in the grass.

“Oh, shit,” she moaned.

I immediately ran out to left field and held her head. “Are you okay, Pussy?”

“I'm okay. Shit. Where did that come from?” she said. She had a bewildered look. I could see Von Rotten watching us intently. There was that little red smirk glowing on his weasel face.

“Okay, troops!” he yelled. “We're going to win this hands down!”

His minions gave a big boy-scout yell.

Greg shouted at O'Toole. “It's okay, big boy. Now just fire up that old cannon again, wouldya?”

"Hey! You okay?" Warren asked from center field.

O'Toole glanced over at the bench where his wife sat fidgeting with her ring finger. He kind of whimpered. It's always pathetic to see a big grown man like him doing that. It was dispiriting, because if he couldn't keep it together, who among us could?

That was when a row of some kind erupted between Creamcheese and Angelina.

"No, you move over!" Angelina yelled. Suddenly the two girls were at each other, pulling hair and yanking at clothing, arms flailing wildly in the air, though nobody seemed to be able to connect. They were both in the dirt before Kent could rush over to pull Angelina, who was much larger, off his skinny little Creamcheese in what used to be her bright yellow summer dress. Now both nipples were showing. She had close to no cleavage at all, but her nipples were erect, like two rosy-colored buttons.

"Jesus Christ, what is wrong with you, woman?" she said. Kent was restraining Creamcheese from launching into Angelina again.

"It's him!" Angelina yelled, pointing at O'Toole. "He ... he blinded my great poet! He blinded him in one eye, my sweet old Eugene Forcer, and now all Eugene does is go around moaning and writing Homeric odes! That's what! You bastard! You stole his strength! You took away his manhood!"

O'Toole just stood on the pitcher's mound, staring at his wife, and shaking his huge head.

"Hey, are we playing ball, or what?" yelled Von Rotten.

"Why did you have to come up here?" Greg shouted at Angelina. "Can't you see what you're doing to him? You're like fucking Kryptonite! Bobby, why did you have to go and bring her up here?"

"I am human ordure," Rotten Bobby muttered, looking down.

In left field Penny barfed again.

"Was it something you ate?" I asked.

"I'm fucking pregnant, you idiot!" she yelled.

"What?" Von Rotten said from home plate. "You're what?" He could hear it from there. Everyone, I think, pretty much heard it. "You're ... you're pregnant?" Von Rotten asked. "This is great news!" he shouted, and threw down his bat and began jumping up and down and all around, like a fairy. "I made our little Helen pregnant!"

"What?" I yelled.

"You're so full of shit, Von!" yelled Penny. "You couldn't make a weasel pregnant. First, you've got to have sex to get someone pregnant!"

Von Rotten trotted from home plate into left field where we were. "That baby is mine," Von Rotten said in a muted voice. He looked around at his minions who were following him out to left field. "*Penny*," he warned.

"In a pig's eye," Penny shouted back, then she threw up again and fell to her knees in the grass. I mopped the sweat off the back of her neck. That lovely neck. Ah, me! Her tits were hanging down and dangling inside her camisole. Was I the only one who could get turned on by all the vomiting and wobbling of her wine-dark nipples inside her shirt, for God's sake?

"I can take a damned blood test," Penny said.

"Penny, I forbid you to talk about this baby of ours to anyone but our own magazine."

"You forbid me?"

"Don't forget who you are working for. And your current *'friend'* here."

"You forbid me? You're so full of shit, Von."

"Penny!" he warned, while somehow still managing to whine like a mosquito.

Then Von Rotten shouted across the ball field for everybody to hear: "Okay, all of you, everyone here, will be working for me starting Monday. You can all move down to the Red Baby Diaper Factory. We have room for everyone to live there. Starting Monday, I have a new project. We're going to paint a giant red square around the warehouse and we're going to have a big naming

ceremony. The press will be there. We're going to make a big splash. Let me be clear, as of this moment, you are all working for me."

A commotion went through the entire minions and they seemed to either sway or swoon or both. I thought I noticed a large flock of birds turning away from the ballpark in one giant motion. Shadows were criss-crossing the diamond everywhere. I heard the swooping of wings, and then they were gone, and we were left with the remains of the extraordinary afternoon.

We were so screwed! We weren't even aware how screwed we were. That's how screwed we were!

And that was when Von Rotten made his great exception.

"Except for O'Toole," he announced. "Now line up."

Everyone began walking off the ball field single file, like a line of ants. There wasn't a sound out of anyone. They headed for their cars as if hypnotized. I looked at Penny, and she looked at me with a pained look on her face, then her forehead wrinkled, and I witnessed doubt, real doubt, for perhaps the first time ever, in the face of mankind. A great doubt. And then we fell in line like true drones, leaving O'Toole abandoned on the mound. He was watching us go. I glanced back over my shoulder and saw him looking at my back. I could feel that stare boring into the place where my wings used to be when I was little with a blond mop of hair.

A very spooky event happened, that sort of numbed me, then shook me to the core. I think an imaginary or some kind of being landed in a small puff of dust and stood not that far from the pitcher's mound, and whatever it was started saying things. I saw O'Toole staring in its direction. I overheard, or thought I overheard (you know how poets are) some of what it was saying.

Apparently that was when I began receiving monologues of this thing called Angel 1508. And they have not quit ever since. I heard them, like voices of a voiceover in a movie. *"Things found in the wreckage of Angel 1508,"* it said.

A canister of unused laughter taken from the mouth of a baby not yet born.

A splinter of wood from a cross, perfectly preserved in dark tea taken from the belly of a dead Irishman.

A milky vial of smog taken from the air of Los Angeles circa 1965.

A lock of hair from the head of a prophet preserved in amber like a mosquito from the swamp of the La Brea tar pits.

One of Vincent van Gogh's paint brushes with the remains of cerulean blue still wet on its tip.

I heard these things clearly in my head. I looked at Penny to see whether she had heard them too, but at that moment she leaned to one side and threw up. But these sayings just kept coming out of nowhere. I turned to stare at O'Toole who was standing on the pitcher's mound. He had turned stark white, like a pillar of salt. I grew convinced he heard them too.

Unanswered questions from interviews with God.

An array of unborn weeds from the red spot of Jupiter.

The twinkle of an eye taken from a soldier fallen on Normandy Beach.

Things that have yet to occur in a land far, far away.

The fingers of someone who couldn't let go of the rubber bands wrapped around the newspapers of the future.

We got into our cars. No one spoke a word. It was ghostly silent, as if everyone were listening along with me. I heard:

"Still undiscovered:"

Why these things were found in the wreckage of an angel.

Why this particular angel had fallen.

Why that cerulean blue paint has never dried and instead remains open as though someone expects to go on painting to this day.

We drove over the crest of the hill. Bobby Rotten's yellow ex-taxi backfiring at nearly every red octagonal stop sign. Then down the hill into the heart of West Berkeley to the Red Baby Diaper Factory, located down on 4th Street, near the waters of the San Francisco Bay.

Thus to Red Square we went, to live in a tent.

Who knew what it meant?

*Was it God's plans that were found in tatters all around
the wreckage?*

*Was this angel ever trusted to bear the unnatural weight
of evidence?*

*Were these the twisted scales of justice itself lying to one
side as if thrown aside?*

And if so, who threw this one out of the heavens?

*And exactly how high did he climb before streaking across
the dark side of eternity?*

