

The Great San Francisco Poetry Wars, 19

by Jerry Ratch

His wings were down when he got into the truck. It was a used UPS truck we'd bought from someone in Berkeley, and we painted out the letter "S," so that it just read "UP."

We'd seen him standing by the side of Highway 1, but tried to ignore him. It was a common sight in those days to see hippies and bedraggled creatures dressed in costumes of all sorts, and everybody would hitch-hike everywhere. It was almost normal then. We didn't give it a second thought as we rolled past him. But that was when the motor coughed and sputtered, and simply went dead. I pulled over onto the shoulder of the road, and that was when he stepped up into the van. He didn't have to say a thing. Greg practically leapt out of the seat on the passenger side and got into the back with Steve and Penny and Steve's future bride, Hilary. Our gang, except for Warren. The angel looked over Penny's belly and smiled. He had a nice warm smile. He sort of beamed, you could say. Well, I could say it anyway.

"Just head straight up Highway 1," he said. He adjusted himself in the seat so his wings fit behind him better. "I'm heading north to Canada."

Suddenly the motor was running again. I didn't even touch the key.

"S ... so are we," I sputtered.

"I know. Drive," he said, "and this time, for Christ's sake, look out where you're going."

Steve blew the beer he was chugging right out of his mouth, soaking the shirt of his future wife. Greg and Steve started socking one another in the arm. Steve looked over at the angel sitting in the front seat.

"Are you ... are you Robert Creeley, or something?"

"Robert's still alive," the angel said.

"Yeah, well," said Steve, "so what are you doing quoting poetry of living people then?"

"The best stuff reaches right up into heaven," the creature said. He kept staring straight before him, watching as the road rolled up before us. "Sometimes it's better than music. Even Janis Joplin."

Steve and Greg started in socking each other again.

"See?" said Greg.

"See what?"

"I told you so."

"You did not."

"Did so."

"Did so, did so!" Steve mocked.

Greg really let him have it in the arm.

"Ow!" Steve yelled. "Cut it out, will you?"

"Greg!" yelled Hilary. "Quit it!"

"Hey, wait a minute. The fucking truck is running again!"

Steve bellowed. "What just happened?"

Angel 1508 turned and looked back at him.

"You mean you don't know? Say, can I bum one of those cigarettes?"

Greg shook one out of his pack and held it out to the stranger.

The angel touched a finger to the end of it and all of a sudden it was lit. We all just shook our heads, more or less in unison.

"Can you show me how you did that?" Steve asked.

"Sure. Would you mind giving me another?" Greg shook the pack again and out slid another cigarette. "Watch," the thing said, and the creature touched one end of the cigarette. It began to glow as though someone were puffing on it.

Steve took the offered cigarette from the angel. As if in a dream he touched his finger to the lit end.

"Ow!" he yelled, jerking his hand away. "Ow, ow, fuck!"

"Bancroft, you are an idiot!" Greg said.

The angel looked at Greg for about half a century. Greg looked away. Then he stuck his hand in a brown sack at his side and twisted the cap off a bottle of tokay and took a long swig. His face went sour.

"Shee...it!" he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "Ass wipe! *Nasturtium!*"

But they both broke out laughing, and the angel laughed with them. And I thought: *How strange! How strange it all is!*

And we kept on driving, driving into the broad day with an angel inside our little world inside that UP(s) van, heading up the road toward the vast empire of Canada, and freedom from worries over the draft, and the war, and the nasty small-minded politics of the far twisted right who were out to get us all. All of us, and put us in chains so we could keep working until the psychic pyramids were built into the sky, or down into the ground, the inverted upended mind-fuck reverse pyramids of the soul.

And we drove and we drove and we drove. All that night and into the next day. And as we were passing by Portland, all of a sudden over the radio we heard it: the end of an era. What we never thought would come to pass. The very real end.

As if in a dream we heard the voice of King Richard Nixon. And we had to pull the van to the shoulder of the road and stop.

We just sat looking at each other. Even Angel 1508, who actually seemed slightly amused, almost as if he knew beforehand what would be said.

"And so, effective tomorrow," said the great Puppet, King Richard Nixon himself, as if his strings were still being pulled by the very, very rich, the very powerful of our kingdom, "I shall resign the Presidency of the United States."

Certainly, I recall, we hesitated upon hearing those words. They poured over our ragged lost souls like a balm from heaven. We were bound to be released from an infinite servitude with those words. We were sure of it. And we turned our truck around and drove into Portland to listen to the raggedy voice of Janis Joplin on the biggest speakers ever invented, in a record store next to heaven.

