# The Great San Francisco Poetry Wars, 3

*by* Jerry Ratch

Before we go any further, a brief note of explanation about the notorious Poetry Wars of San Francisco.

I lived for a time on Red Square in Berkeley. You may have heard of it. It was run by Von Rotten (that's just plain Von), who was considered the Vladimir Lenin of the Foul Language Movement of Poetry (FLMP, pronounced “Flimp,” sometimes “Flump,” though never “Flamp!”) They even went so far as to have a statue of him erected on the waterfront in Berkeley, where he could be seen in thick fog and thin, lecturing to the poetic masses. But the truth is Von Rotten was really more of a Stalinist. Behind his back we used to refer to him as The Stalinista. More on that later. All you need to know for now is that I was in direct competition with Von Rotten for the heart of Penelope Martin, the Helen of our poetry world at that time. Penny, for short, who taught clairvoyant classes part-time, and modeled in the nude for art professors at the University of California the rest of the time. And that was where my problems began, though some wouldn't exactly consider them problems.

And how exactly, and why, should that concern you? Well, we wouldn't have half the poetry we have come to know and love today if it had not been for the outcome of the Great San Francisco Poetry Wars. Now, I invite you to consider just how different our world would be without all the Foul Language Poetry (sometimes referred to as FLIP) which, for instance, that young snot-nosed cousin of yours in Weehawken is known for in the East Coast branch of your family. No way could he or she have written half that stuff without the influence of said clan of poets running the world at poetic programs throughout the country today.

Available online at *«http://fictionaut.com/stories/jerry-ratch/the-great-san-francisco-poetry-wars-3--2»*
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And I defy you to find one iota of “meaning” in that stuff. That's because “meaning” was efficiently stomped out of all verse that was written at Red Square University (RSU, also known as old Rusty U.) It was essential to act and to speak like a Good Foul Language Comrade (GLC, pronounced “Glick”) at all times there. If one of them began to smell something even approaching meaning, or worse, EMOTION! — it was to be smashed to smithereens instantly and the bad poet taken out back and thrashed to within an inch of his or her poetic life. “Down with meaning!” was shouted in their whiny faces all through this procedure, and they were then squirted with a cold garden hose to drive home the non-point.

And Von Rotten cracked the whip over the Red Baby Diaper Factory there, as well, located on the infamous Red Square, which was how we survived in those days. There was simply no other work to be had, until the Rotten minions took over complete control of the academy throughout the country, with an eye toward spreading their influence even further and conquering the Known World of Poetry (KWP, pronounced “quip.”) The diapers at that factory were dyed with a mixture of beets and salamander juice. Salamander juice for reasons known only to Von Rotten personally. He would not relent on the reason why, even to Penny. He was quite anal in that way. I do know that salamanders were once plentiful in the Berkeley area and made a habit of overrunning every crawl space and basement in town. It used to rain a lot around there before the great drought of the 1970's. Our stain was irremovable, and quite striking, though to my eye just a touch on the side of purple as much as red. But “red” was a popular term in those days among the young mothers stamped out of the mold of the University of California at Berkeley.

I'm going to go ahead and warn you right now that I'm a little bit fond of the technical term “in those days.” You can just tune it out whenever you encounter it, if you are so inclined.

Von Rotten had the chiseled features of a finely-honed weasel. He stood perfectly erect with his ass muscles drawn in as if he'd been raised on a flagpole, or as the misdiagnosed second-born twin of a

drum majorette. They would have left him in the womb if his mother had not immediately started to complain of having a giant tummy ache after giving birth to his twin sister. It may have been luckier for us all if he'd simply been left in there to rot in the elder Mrs. Rotten, but unluckily he made his way to the door of the world and somehow kicked his Rotten self into existence.

Penny met Von Rotten when he decided to take a life-drawing class at the University when he was a student there, after one of his English Department professors told him he had to broaden his education and he had already run through every linguistics class at the University, as well as French. Now, Penny had a body, make no mistake. She was skinny with sharply pointed breasts and huge wine-dark nipples that could honestly make any man's mouth water just looking at them. They swayed deliciously when she moved. It would just drive you to distraction. Nobody could concentrate when she moved through a classroom, before disrobing in front of the class. It took a while for the men to gather their thoughts. She really did put you in mind of Helen of Troy. Men would willingly ride the seas and fight pitched battles over her. I know. I was one, I was one.

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We packed my king-sized mattress, given to me for free by an old teacher at Irvine, onto a sheet of plywood in the van. That was for Allison and me. Greg and Steve had pup tents, which they would roll out wherever we stopped and they would sleep under the stars. This worked fine until the first night it rained. That put a real crimp in our already crimped sex life. Actually I didn't mind as much as Allison minded. It made her real grumpy when she didn't get laid. I could never understand how she could bear so much pain, because she was so small that it was like being with a virgin every time we had sex. I guess it was the mixture of pleasure and pain that kept her going, or maybe she was practicing to have children.

We said we would meet my old Irvine students back in Laguna Beach when we got out to California. Our plan was to take the northern route out through Wyoming, then straight across to Portland before turning south and heading all the way down Highway 101 and Highway 1 to drive the whole coast. A 3000 mile trip in all. Unfortunately, none of us had ever driven a delivery van that was meant for deliveries on the plains, not the mountains. It didn't have the requisite dual rear wheels you needed for stability going around mountain curves. Neither did it have four gears, only three on the column. You need more than three gears when you're going down a steep incline. We discovered as we were heading down our first steep incline in Wyoming that our gearshift wouldn't stay in second gear without holding it up in second gear with one hand. It kept popping out of gear. That meant we had no way of gearing down and slowing the descent of the truck except for our brakes, which began smoking and grinding and groaning as soon as we hit that first incline. The vehicle was simply not made for the mountains. One of my students, either Greg or Steve, occasionally Allison, would sit or kneel on the floor of the van right next to me, holding that gear shift in second gear as we shimmied along down mountain roads.

But first let me back up a little. After piling all of my belongings into the truck, stowing as much as possible underneath the sheet of plywood that acted as the base for our bed, we pulled up in front of Dean Brown's house, which was situated at the edge of town. He lived in a sprawling rancher with a half wagon wheel planted in the neatly mowed front yard. The wagon wheel was painted white.

Greg insisted on trying to learn how to drive a stick shift and told me to go sit on the mattress with Allison. He and Steve hung out the stand-up doors and began singing at the top of their lungs: *“We love you, Mr. Gordon! We love you, Mr. Brown!”*

Then Greg jumped into the driver's seat, floored the engine and popped the clutch, and the van lurched forward, letting out a peal of rubber as he swung around the corner on two wheels,

nearly turning over. Steve Bancroft kept hollering out the right side door as we tore up the street, holding up his middle finger as we went. When he turned around, he was so red in the face I thought he was going to pass out. He collapsed on the mattress, laughing and coughing in a spasm.

But at the next stop sign Greg put the truck in neutral and crawled out from behind the wheel. He looked at me. “It's all yours, captain. I need a drink.” He pulled a cold beer out of a brown paper bag.

“Hey, put that stuff away,” I said. “I can't go driving down the road with open booze.” Greg sucked down half the bottle and Steve practically inhaled the rest. They tossed the bottle right out the open door into the street where it shattered, and off we went.

I turned the truck onto Mary Jo's street and crawled past the house where she lived with Mitchell Parkman and her four kids. The kids were running all over the front yard when Mary Jo spotted our truck. She came to the curbside as I pulled up in front of the house. She motioned for me to come out of the truck. We walked to the corner of her street. She was a good deal shorter than me. Her hair was long and flowing and had turned prematurely white. She looked over her glasses at me. She was still quite lovely. She had once been a debutante in St. Louis.

“This is where I come when I need to talk to the frogs.”

She pointed at the gutter by a storm drain.

‘They're the only ones I can talk to around here. There was nobody else, until you came to town.”

“We're leaving for the coast.”

“Please don't leave me here, Janov. Can't you see what it's done to me? I'm going crazy here.”

I looked all around at the tall lovely elm trees and the big sleepy houses. I saw something move behind a curtain in one of the houses.

“They're watching us,” she said. “They're always watching. The frogs are all I have to talk to. You know?”

I nodded. Sadly, I knew. I touched her on the forearm. The bare skin along her forearms was quite firm and muscular. She was a painter, like her husband. There were small spots of white paint along her arms. I stepped back and hesitated, then turned and went back to the red, white and blue Pepsi van.

“I'll follow you out to the coast, Janov!” she yelled after me.

We drove one last time around the town square and saw John Fox, still walking. We drove past Jack's bar. Greg hopped to the door and saluted Lyndon Baines Johnson. Then we drove out to Route 66 and started out toward the Coast. That was the last I saw of Illinois.

As we were passing an Army surplus store in downtown St. Louis, Greg started shaking me by the arm. “Stop the truck! Stop the truck!”

“What? What?” I rammed on the brakes, thinking it was some emergency, or I was about to hit something I couldn't see.

“I need to get me some pants,” he said. “It won't take long. You can wait right here, and keep the motor running. Ass-wipe, you come inside with me.” He dragged Steve by the arm. They went running into the store. Allison and I started making out the instant they went inside the store. But they both came running back out of the store before I could get a good hard-on.

“Go, go, go!” shouted Greg. Steve was laughing and running. The store door opened and a store dick came running out, looking both ways up and down the sidewalk.

“Put this thing in gear,” Greg yelled, “for Chrissakes, floor this sucker. Two-wheel it around the corner, will you?”

He had a cigarette in his mouth and lit a stick match with his thumbnail. He puffed on the thing like Groucho Marx, tapping the ash delicately with his ring finger.

“Yowsir! Got me some pants. Now we're in business.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You'll see. Drive,” he said. “For Chrissakes, look out where you're going.”

Both Steve and Greg lay on their backs on my mattress in the rear and howled with laughter. They were kicking their legs in the air like babes in new diapers.

“Shit, shit!” Steve howled. “You should have seen the look on that store clerk's face when Greg vaulted over the check out stand.”

We drove in front of the St. Louis Arch on our way out west. It was like one enormous goal post in the shape of an arch, or one of the hoops to a gigantic croquet set. We set our eyes west from there, rolling out into the vast sea of cornfields extending from the Mississippi River until you reached the base of the Wyoming highlands. Wyoming is like a huge raised plateau before you got to the Rocky Mountains. We kept driving and driving and driving. My students were pretty much no use at all, so I had to do most of it myself.

Forty miles outside St. Louis, Allison said to pull down this side road. We drove past her farm and stopped beside a pasture with horses in it. She got out of the truck, taking me by the arm. We walked to the fence and she made a noise and one of the horses came right over toward the fence. She put her hand on the horse's muzzle and petted it, whispering its name. She pulled a small red apple out of her jeans. Her horse began wolfing down the apple without biting her hand. Pretty adept.

“Do you want to meet my parents, Mr. Janov?” she asked, looking at me. “I know they would like to meet you.”

“I'll bet.”

“No, they would love you, just like I do.”

“I don't think so. Love to kill me maybe.”

“No, they would love you too. I'm pretty sure, Mr. Janov. Who wouldn't love a poet? My horse too. Her name is Ginger, because she's red.”

She looked her horse in the eye. “I'm going out to California with Mr. Janov,” she said softly. “He's my lover.”

Her horse looked right at me. The smell of horse shit was staggering, pretty much. I guess you'd get used to it after a time.

But I was a city boy, raised in Chicago, where horses were kept under the hood of fast cars and power boats or at the movies.

Allison kissed her horse's nose, and I saw tears sliding down beside her rosy baby-fat cheeks. When we got back into our Pepsi van, Greg had put on his Army cargo pants, which were loose and baggy.

I couldn't understand why in hell he insisted on wearing these things until the first time we ran out of cigarettes. We were somewhere, God-knows-where, on the outskirts of some godforsaken little town. That was when he disappeared into a food store and emerged with his pants bulging with goods. He was laughing wildly. He pulled a whole carton of Pall Malls out of his pants. Then a package of Oscar Meyer baloney, a red apple, a small jar of mayonnaise, a squashed loaf of Wonder bread. I began wondering what he didn't have jammed into those pants.

I said, “What happens if they catch you with all this stuff?”

“What if they do?” he said. “What's the worst that could happen? I go to jail, right? Then I don't have to worry about going to Vietnam anymore. So, good.”

“Good?” echoed Steve. “Fucking-A! It's great!”

We'd been driving through head-high cornstalks for what seemed like close to 100 years of complete and utter solitude. All you could hear when you pulled over for a piss stop was the insect roar out in those fields, or when they swooped past your ear. Flattened snakes glistened on the surface of the road, road kill covered by dense swarms of flies.

“Who lives out here?” I asked.

“Pretty near everyone else in America,” said Allison. “Parents with their kids, white picket fences. You know, that kind of thing. People discovering dope and sex for the first time.”

“Sex, drugs and rock-and-roll,” said Steve. “Yeah!”

“Ass-wipe, will you just shut your pie-hole for one minute so someone can think?” Greg remarked, almost to himself. “Jeez. Just look at the landscape, will you? Fucking-A, man. You always gotta have the last word, don't you?”

“Yeah,” said Steve.

“I mean, Vietnam, man. Think about it.”

“Yeah,” said Steve. “I'd rather get married.”

“Nasturtium!” Greg yelled, and he dove at Steve on the mattress, pinning him down. “Nasturtium!” he yelled right in Steve's ear.

“Watch your fucking language, man!” Steve yelled back from his position in a headlock. “There's a lady present.”

After crossing the border into Kansas, a minor tornado appeared out of the dark lowering clouds, and the truck really began to rock. We turned north to avoid a head-on collision with it, and stumbled on the Oregon National Historic Trail, also known as the Lewis and Clark Trail. It was the flattest route out to the coast. Day 1.