The Great San Francisco Poetry Wars, 4

by Jerry Ratch

We woke up at a rest stop on a knoll overlooking the Platte River, somewhere in Nebraska. Allison and I were under a blanket on our mattress when Greg and Steve peered in the door of our red, white, and blue Pepsi van.

"Psst! Janov, you awake yet? The sun's been up for like a whole hour, man. Get the hell up already, will you? These big damn trucks are keeping us awake out here with their diesel fumes. C'mon, man. Pull your dick out of Allison and let's get going."

"My dick's not in Allison."

"It's in my mouth," she said.

"Then how come you're still talking? No, wait, I get it," said Greg.

"What?" said Allison. "What?" Greg was smiling. He raised his eyebrows. "Oh, I get it," Allison said. "Well, it's way more than I can handle, I can tell you that much, you dirty old man!"

Steve Bancroft fell down in the dirt outside. "I already miss my future wife," he said. He lay flat on his back, looking up at the sky. "Let's get the hell outta here. There's a river out here. What's the name of it? Where the fug are we anyway? Are we there yet? C'mon, Janov, what say you get your ass out of bed? I need some breakfast or I'm going to throw a giant tantrum."

"Okay, Janov," said Greg. "Drive us to the nearest store so we can rustle up some breakfast."

I got into the driver's seat. At the next small town we stopped in front of a grocery and Greg went in with Steve again, who acted as suspicious as possible as a decoy. A man in a white apron came out hauling Steve along by the collar and yelled at him never to come back to his store. But right behind the man, out

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slipped Greg with his cargo pants bulging with goodies. Out of his pants Greg pulled a pound of bacon, a dozen eggs, another squashed loaf of Wonder bread, and two enormous Idaho potatoes. Then some green onions. Two more red apples. He looked at me, because he saw me watching him.

"Always have fruit with every meal, man," Greg said. "Uh, listen, can we stop at the next liquor store and get a jug of Gallo or Red Mountain or Gallo or something? I've about had it with all this driving crap. I think we need to pull over and spend some serious time drinking our asses off. I kinda thought we'd be there by this time. What do you say?"

I shook my head. Allison was nodding her head. I think she was about ready to jump on me. We needed some time alone.

"Okay," I said. "Just a little further. We need to keep pushing ahead a little more, if we're ever going to get there."

"Aw, man!" Steve whined. "Crap. We need a good drink. C'mon. *C'mon!"*

"Okay. Just a little further," I said.

We drove all the way through Nebraska that way, Steve whining, Greg holding his head, demanding a drink. "Look at my hand, will you? It's shaking. Look at it!"

Finally I pulled into a small shopping mall outside a town on the border of Wyoming. Ahead you could see the road starting to head uphill for quite a long stretch. Greg jumped out of the van and began doing handsprings in the parking lot. "Holy shit! Ah, I can't believe it. Earth. Real fucking ground! Okay, Janov, here's some money. We need two gallon jugs of some fine Red Mountain Pink Chablis. Oh, boy!"

I went into the liquor store and purchased two one-gallon jugs of Gallo Pink Chablis. They didn't have nor had they ever heard of Red Mountain for some reason. I got two six packs of Coors beer for myself and Allison. But when I came out, Greg looked at me and laughed.

"No, no," he said. "Look, just stay here. And start the motor, will you?"

He ran into the store with Steve. In less than five minutes they came running back out with their arms loaded with stuff. A pack of firewood, a box of stick matches, the biggest package of hot dogs I'd ever seen. It looked like enough to feed a campsite full of Boy Scouts. They had rolls of toilet paper, two newspapers. They had a whole sack of apples, they had marshmallows in one enormous bag. They leapt into the truck.

"Go, go, go!" Greg shouted. "Get the fuck out of here! The guy had a rifle, man! Floor this sucker! Go! Step on it!"

The door to the grocery began to open. I saw a rifle coming out first, and away we flew.

Somewhere between Cheyenne and Rock Springs, Wyoming, they ground me down, and I pulled over and stopped the truck. We were way the hell out in the middle of absolute nowhere. Trucks rarely went by on the highway. Almost nobody, it seemed, traveled this route. We crept up a small incline and parked in an open swing-about space where we could camp without being noticed, even if we built a big campfire, which was exactly what we did. There were logs and deadwood of all sorts scattered around the space. We dragged what we could toward the center and built this big pyramid of wood, and sat down to do some serious drinking on logs that acted as benches around the fire. We waited for darkness to come upon us before striking a match. Then it was the biggest bonfire I'd ever seen. It was like something you would see at a homecoming football match. We started jumping all around the flames as they rose higher and higher, because we noticed our own huge shadows leaping against a cliff right next to us. That was when we discovered we could make one shadow jump right through another and come out whole on the other side. Our shadows were indestructible. It was one of those moments of discovery maybe only gallons of pink Chablis could bring on. Or dope. Because Allison also broke out a couple of joints and we were getting pretty stoned.

All of a sudden there was a howl from somewhere out in the bushes around us. The next thing I knew Greg took to howling as well. Then Steve began howling. Then to my amazement so did

Allison, then me as well. We all began howling with whatever it was that was out there, and I turned and noticed the moon which seemed to have swerved over the horizon, which began all the way back in Illinois. I grew certain I could see all the way back to the beginning from our plateau in Wyoming.

“I saw the moon swerve over the horizon,” I said.

“Let's haul out the poetry, man” Greg said. He ran to the truck and brought out a hardbound edition of the Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke.

“Give me that,” I said. I turned to “The Meditations of an Old Woman” and began to read. I read two pages and put the book down on the ground. I thought I was getting up to go take a leak, but I leapt over the flames of the fire instead. I don't know why I did that.

Well, all hell broke loose.

Greg jumped to his feet and grabbed the book of poetry and began shouting out lines rapid-fire, then he too leapt through the flames.

Steve was next. Even Allison took a turn at reading, but she was a little too short and plump to make it over the flames. The pit was pretty damned wide. She got to the edge and looked in and turned back and sat down, taking another toke off the joint.

“C'mon, Sheffield, don't chicken out,” yelled Steve.

“Ah, leave her alone,” said Greg.

“You're no fun,” Steve complained.

“Go fuck yourself,” Greg retorted. He took an enormous swig off the jug of wine. Then he leapt back through the flames again. He came back to where the book was and handed it to me. “Read some more, man. You're a great reader. Here.”

I opened the book and began reading. I saw Steve and Greg sit down on the ground and sink back against the logs. They let their heads tilt back and their faces lifted up to the stars. I could feel the heat emanating from Allison's skin. It was still quite warm out, but a wind began picking up, making the flames more raggedy. I turned up my collar and kept reading. When my throat went dry, I

took a long pull from my bottle of Coors. No one said a word while I drank. Then I began flowing back into the “Meditations of an Old Woman.” The poet's words held us. They held us all. We went this way and that with the memories and the mind of age as it bent and swayed between its idle and sharp thoughts. Roethke had really managed to get inside that old woman. We felt a twig snap in the universe.

No, wait, that was a real twig in the real world. What was out there? Ah, but what did it matter? Not one of us moved, and I dug in further and let that old mind carry us. The cares of the other world that was out there drifted further away. The wars. The politicians with their warped thoughts, speaking about dollars in the night. We were carried away by the internal river of words.

We were clueless as to how it all worked, and we did not care how it all worked.

We were poets. We were in love with the world again.

Allison took her clothes off. She was full-bodied with abundant breasts and the firelight shone on her large nipples. She took me by the hand as Steve and Greg stared open-mouthed. Steve began to masturbate, while Greg kept drinking wine. Allison and I went into the truck and balled our brains out. Allison screamed out with the pain and the joy. Day 2.

Finally at one point in the middle of the night I heard Greg saying, “Will you put your dick away, ass-wipe? Jesus! You're not going to bring your girlfriend out here with all your whiplash masturbation.”

After three days of complete and utter debauchery in our little encampment on that plateau in Wyoming, we started heading west again. Altogether, after numerous runs to a liquor/grocery store, we had consumed a grand total of twelve gallons of Gallo pink Chablis, four cases of Coors beer, and two bags of weed. We began passing through one town after another. They all became a blur. We kept driving and driving. We descended upon Salt Lake City, then turned north up through Idaho, always seeking the flattest route possible, following after Lewis and Clarke. Through Twin Falls,

Gooding, Mountain Home, Boise, then on into Oregon. When we hit the Columbia River Gorge, a light lit up in my red eyes. Like a heat-seeking missile I headed down that river toward the sea, and we drove all the way down along the river until we came into Portland.

We were exhausted, and when we walked into a record store where they had enormous speakers that were blaring out Janis Joplin singing “Piece of My Heart,” it was like hearing the gospel on the mountain directly from the lips of Ms. Moses. We couldn't get ourselves to leave that record store, and instead sat around on these enormous comfortable old sofas absorbing the music like bees sotted on honey. We'd been on the road so long, this seemed like the ultimate return to civilization to us. It didn't seem possible one woman could contain so much soul. And I had seen Janis Joplin with Big Brother and the Holding Company once in concert down at U.C. Irvine, but this was something else again. We'd been in the wilderness of America just too damned long. When you are out there on the road, America seems like pretty much the same old same old, no matter where you are. Things never seem to change until you hit the big city. Even a place like Portland was big to us. And the size of that music store! It was two stories high inside and absolutely cavernous. And those speakers must have been five feet across, they were so big, and they hung them from the ceiling and it was just wonderful to hear those angelic tones coming out of Janis, our Janis.

I didn't want to go on. “Portland seems like it might be a nice place to live,” I said. “Let's stop here.”

Janis Joplin was charming their ears too, like a siren. It took them a minute. Then Steve began to whine. “No, man, we're going to California. I want to see California. Gre…e…g!” he whined. “Get him off his ass. I want to go to California.”

“Bancroft, will you just shut up and listen to Joplin? Fuck sake!”

“I wanna go to California. I wanna go. C'mon. Jeez! ”

“Nasturtium! Shut the fuck up, will you?”

“Greg, c'mon! C'mon!”

Greg looked over at me. “He's never going to stop, you know.”

I nodded. I did know that. With the greatest effort I rose from the sofa and looked back at it. “Sofas were once noble flower-eating animals, you know.”

“Yeah, yeah, Zbignew Herbert the Polish poet, I know,” Steve said. “But California, man. California! I can almost taste it.”

“You're getting out at the state line.”

“No, I'm not. Anyway, doesn't Janis Joplin live there?”

“Not anymore.”

We took Route 5 south out of Portland, then turned west to the coast, after stealing enough to eat from a grocery to last us two days on the road. I wanted to stop at Brookings by the seacoast, almost down to the California border, to visit a poet friend of mine from Irvine, who was living on his brother's ranch in the mountains next to a river with his girlfriend. This was Bart Leary, who'd gotten a little too far into acid at school and dropped out. He was a terrific young poet but had stopped believing in words and was making amateur films with an 8 mm camera he'd bought. His movies were about the movements of a weed in the wind, things of that sort. “Words are out,” he used to say down at Irvine. “No one reads anymore. Movies are everything now.” All of which turned out to be pretty prescient.

When we drove up this long bumpy road to the ranch, which was along a ridge, his brother, Dick, came out of the house with his wife and two little kids trailing behind. I asked where Bart was, and his brother pointed down the hill at the river. “Bathing with his girlfriend,” Dick said. “They're down at the river. We ran out of water up here, so…” he trailed off. He turned and went back into the house with his wife and two bare-assed kids traipsing after him like little ducklings.

We went down to the river. From high up on the embankment we could plainly see Bart with this skinny, almost breastless woman, a girl really, sunning themselves on a sandbar. They were both stark naked. Their skin was so white in the bright

sunlight that at first they looked like two chunks of human ice in the middle of the stream.

"Jesus, will you look at that," said Steve. He couldn't stop looking. "Will you look at that?"

We didn't know what to do with ourselves. We weren't nudists exactly, so we couldn't just go barging in on them while they were out in the open, naked that way. It seemed so private somehow, and sacrosanct. So we went back up to the house on the ridge and hung out. About half an hour passed before Bart and his woman went past on a trail behind the house and disappeared into a tiny cabin we hadn't even noticed. It wasn't much bigger than an outhouse. About ten minutes later Bart emerged from the cabin with the woman right behind him, her long dark hair still wet from bathing. When he spied us, he acted surprised, even shy.

Bart was living in this cabin without running water or electricity. They were surviving that summer by picking ferns along the ridge for bouquets at flower stands down in Berkeley and San Francisco, places like that. They came out of the shack fully dressed this time, Bart's skinny little legs hanging out of his shorts. He seemed different. He seemed so domesticated somehow. I guess it made me look at myself, how I was already set in my ways. I was settling into a rigidity, I realized, and I was way too young for that to happen. I needed to open something up about myself. I needed to look at the world in some kind of different, bigger way.

"I read the poems you sent me," said Bart. "Damn. They were good, real good. I wish I'd written those. When did you become such a damn grown-up?"

"Jesus," I said. "I'm not sure whether that's a compliment or not."

"It is." Bart had this way of looking at you out of the side of his eye, shyly, with his face down. It wasn't always this way. When we'd first met down at school at Irvine, he was as cocky as a male poet could get. Absolutely self-assured. He'd had some terrific early successes in his publishing career and it set him a notch above the rest of us, who were totally unpublished and knew close to nothing

about anything. But the acid took the cockiness out of Bart. It gave him some humility, although it also seemed to eat away at his ability with words. And he had ability, believe me. The women on campus used to flock to him like a group of pigeons being fed out of a paper bag. Every night a different one would take him home, until he settled in with a locally famous woman artist. She seemed to tone him down a notch. Or else it may have simply been the acid eating away at his brains.

Myself I had little or no ego. At first I'd come to the writing program at Irvine with some. Then it got kicked right out of me during our criticism classes. Then I gained a little when I'd written a few semi-decent poems. Then it got knocked right out of me when I received my first batch of rejections from magazines. So I'd been up and down the ladder of non-success more than a few times.

Bart took us inside his cabin and proudly showed us this new batch of green beer they had made and bottled by themselves. That night we drank up the entire batch. When we left they had nothing to eat and nothing to drink. They were trying to subsist off the land. I looked at Bart and imagined I saw him getting skinnier and skinnier on into the future. I have no idea to this day whatever happened to him.

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Next we drove down the road to Eureka, California, after first stopping right at the border to let Steve out so he could kiss the ground of California and everything California stood for. In Eureka we dropped in on another poet friend from my writing program named Bo, who was teaching at a junior college called College of the Redwoods. Going down the mountains outside Eureka was where I got the scare of my life when we kept trying to hold the gear shift up in second to gear the truck down, because these huge logging trucks kept swooping down on us from behind. In the mirror I would watch them getting closer and closer to our rear bumper. I was sweating

bullets or brains or at least huge drops right out of my forehead. I asked Allison to keep mopping off my brow as we went down that mountain, and one by one the logging trucks would swing out around us whenever they got half the chance, to blow past this bunch of screaming hippies in our red, white and blue Pepsi van, going down the mountain on their turf. The nerve! It was like I could hear them yelling out the curses as they flew past us. If they'd only known the ultimate curse: Nasturtiums! they would yell. Nasturtiums! NASTURTIUMS!

Then our brakes gave out, though fortunately at the bottom of our long descent into Eureka. We all got out and looked at the blue smoking wheels of the Pepsi van. It smelled just awful, like asbestos. None of us knew what to do. I called Bo and got directions to his house, which was out in the sticks at the edge of town. We put the van in first gear and limped slowly all the way there.

Bo lived with his wife Dana in a house with her children from another marriage. The house had a duck pond with actual ducks floating on the surface. Her kids entertained themselves throwing food at the ducks, which would dive to retrieve what didn't hit them directly. The ducks were pretty adept at catching food in mid-air, hamburger buns, pieces of baloney, sliced pickles, which they would spit out, looking at the kids impudently. Not even a duck, apparently, liked pickles, though I did. I loved pickles, as a matter of fact. I could eat them until I developed a good case of hives.

Bo knew everything there was about mechanical stuff like brake shoes. He got that van up on jacks and started right in taking off the wheels. But then we couldn't find the right parts at a local auto store, so we had to spend the next week waiting for them to be shipped in from somewhere else. In the meantime, we got a chance to slow down and relax. And Bo took us out at night to some pretty great music at the house of some locals. There was a woman there who played this electric violin, country blues music that was drenched with soul. I didn't even know you could hook up a violin electrically. It was astounding music. I wanted to weep, it was so

beautiful. Of course, I was getting pretty soused too, once I got the chance to quit thinking about the next day's drive.

Trouble was, it rained damn near every day in Eureka. The sun would finally break out about midday for about an hour, then it would get swallowed up in this fog. It got really wearing to be in that grayness all the time. People would sort of wait around for the sun to appear, then we'd all run outdoors yelling like Comanches until it went away. The next thing you'd think about was drinking. And people got on your nerves when you were cooped up together inside all the time. Bo and his wife really started sniping at each other. We started to feel like we needed to get the wheels back on our van and get the hell out of there before things erupted into full-blown mayhem. As soon as the parts arrived I sat down beside Bo and learned what needed to be done so we could speed things up and get back out on the road.

Then we drove down the coast all the way into San Francisco, swinging around curves overhanging the ocean that looked death-defying. And we were cold nearly all the time. I remember once hearing Mark Twain's description: “The coldest winter I ever spent was a summer in San Francisco.” Amen to that!

Then on across the Bay Bridge into Berkeley, where the head of the Foul Language School of poets resided, our nemesis, Von Rotten, no relation to Johnny Rotten. And the beginning of the Great San Francisco Poetry Wars.

But we didn't settle in there yet. Instead we continued down the coast until we came to Santa Cruz where parking was free. This seemed like a good town somehow, situated right on the sea, with a boardwalk and an amusement park with a roller coaster. It seemed untouched by time for some reason, and I thought this would be a good place to hole up someday and write a long poem, something I had already started to envision back in those Illinois cornfields. There was broken glass on the sidewalks every morning from fights between winos. What more could a young poet want? Just ask Charles Bukowski. I drew in the sea air. Yes, this would be perfect, I thought. Perfect.

We kept on driving down along the coast, passing through Big Sur, made famous by Jack Keruoac, who stayed there once in a cabin owned by Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Then along perilous cliffs, down past the Hearst Castle, and finally through smog-filled L.A. until we got to Laguna Beach. 3000 miles in all. As we pulled into a parking lot to get some jug wine before entering Laguna Beach, I was so out of it with the fatigue of driving that we hit something with a loud crunch. It was a damned lamp post, right in the middle of the parking lot across the campus from Irvine, but fortunately we'd only been going a few miles per hour. Who the hell puts a light post right smack dab in the middle of a damned parking lot in Irvine, California? I thought. What an outrage! I looked at everybody. They were all staring at me dumbfounded. They'd gotten pretty used to trusting in me with all the driving, like I was their father. I think it sort of woke us all up.

“Not to worry,” I said, “that's my good parking karma kicking in.”

They looked worried.

When we got down to Laguna Beach, we stopped at the apartment house where Kirk Dayton was staying with his artist girlfriend, Maggie. It was late at night. Kirk and I went out to a playground for kids and hung out on the swing set, drinking wine and beers. I began shaking my head. Kirk kept eying me.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” he asked.

I just shook my head, looking down into the sand. “I don't know.”

“Fuck, man. Want a joint?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you all right?”

“I'm okay.”

“Fuck, man. Fuck.”

“Yeah,” I said. “3000 miles. I drove the whole way. They're just kids,” I said.

“They're the same age I am,” Kirk said.

“Yeah. Shit.”

“Well, guess what,” he said.

“What?”

“Maggie's sleeping with this big honcho artist at Irvine, Philip Guston.”

“You're kidding. Philip Guston, for real?”

Kirk nodded.

“Man, he's huge.”

“She's his favorite and they're like doing it and I confronted her about it and she wouldn't say yes but she wouldn't say no either and now she goes around talking to herself all the time. It's like blowing her mind.”

“Wow. *The* Philip Guston? He's huge, Kirk.”

“I know. And she's got hot pants for him and he's easily old enough to be her father, maybe grandfather, who the fuck knows?”

I was shaking my head again. I took a huge mouthful of wine and held my head back and gargled it. Then I swallowed, of course.

We began swinging on the swing set really high, charging into it to get the swings going as high as we could. We could feel the legs of the swing set pulling up out of the ground, because we were swinging in exact formation. Then we started yelling like kids, though it was close to midnight, but we didn't give a shit about anything and we just kept swinging, swinging wild and free. One could do worse, you know.

Then we tried to figure out how to keep swinging while we drank, but we couldn't. So we stopped and went over to climb on the monkey bars and sat on them and did some serious drinking and finally I fell off into the sand and just lay there, crying softly. You could hear the waves pounding on the beach below that night. Something big must have been out there, stirring something up way out on the Pacific Ocean.

I had to go find an apartment the next day, but that night I didn't care about how the normal world worked. I had just escaped from Illinois with three students in a red, white and blue Pepsi van, for Chrissake. I had made it all the way back to Laguna Beach with

our history of wild student parties and the wreck of the Sixties splayed out behind us.

I was free at last, free at last, or so I thought.

That night we slept on the floor of Kirk and Maggie's apartment and listened to them arguing all night about art and life and love. Ah, me, I sighed, the sad soul of America! I thought of Walt Whitman. I thought of Allen Ginsberg. I thought about both of them squeezing melons in the supermarkets of California, and the ghosts of our own lost generation, and of what was to come for someone in this room called Life.