

The Great San Francisco Poetry Wars, 5

by Jerry Ratch

I put on my one suit to impress the landlord. I made up a story that I was a trust-funder and Allison was my newly-wed wife and we had just arrived in California to start a relaxed life of luxury and yachting. We didn't need to work because of this steady stream of income from my trust fund, left me after my parents had died in a car wreck, unfortunately. It worked, and we got the apartment, which was on a street that backed up on an alley situated, as it turned out, right across the alley from the very first Hari Krishna house, where they would wake up at four every morning and begin their maddening chanting: Hari Krishna, Hari Krishna, Hari Hari, Hari Rama. Over and over and over, every morning until dawn. That chanting drove itself right into your skull. Hari Krishna, Hari Krishna, Hari Hari, Hari Rama.

Still, I can't tell you how outraged the landlady was when she saw us pull up and unload our red, white, and blue Pepsi van. I wasn't a man in a suit anymore, but Levis and a cut-off sweatshirt. People would believe anything anyone said if they were dressed in a suit in those days. She came out of her door spitting, positively fuming, but there was little she could do, at least for the next two months, because I had paid in advance for the rest of the summer. She said she would be calling the police. "Go ahead," I bluffed. "I paid good funds. There's nothing they can do."

"But you're nothing but hippies," she announced. "In a van!" she added. "Oh!" she harrumphed and stomped away, singing, "Wait till I tell my husband about this!"

We would wander down to the beach every day. I remember sitting on the cliffs with Greg one morning, overlooking the spot where surfers waited for the waves, when these enormous

troop-carrying helicopters flew low overhead on their way to El Toro Marine base. We were still thick in the middle of the mess in Vietnam. Greg had really been on a drinking jag ever since we got to town and he wouldn't let up. He was a little worried about getting caught in the draft since dropping out of school.

"Greg," I said, "maybe you need to pull back a notch, you know, from all the boozing."

He'd taken a bad fall and was bleeding from the ear and forehead. Blood was matted in the scraggly long hair at his neck.

"Or else give up drinking completely."

We were watching surfers on long boards waiting to catch a wave.

"So, what do you think?" I asked.

He turned his head toward me and stared for the longest time.

"At first," he said, "I thought you were putting your foot in either my mouth or yours. Now I realize you're using both feet."

"Very funny," I said. "But I've heard that one before."

A huge helicopter flew low overhead, going back toward the Marine base at El Toro, chopping the air with its huge blades.

"Jesus Christ!" he said. "They're like crows on the open market."

One afternoon I bid goodbye to Allison, who was heading back to Missouri to see her parents. She said she would be back, but we were both uncertain about our future together and we knew it. I felt this huge long poem inside me struggling to get out, and something had to change. I decided I was going to drive back up the coast to Santa Cruz and hole up there and see if I couldn't get a good start on whatever it was that was coming. All I knew was there was a very big poem trapped somewhere inside, trying to give birth to itself. I barely suspected how big it was. It turned out it was going to be a long sixty-five page sequence of poems entitled Puppet X, an anthem to our own lost generation. This was some time before Generation X had ever been heard of.

Meanwhile up in Berkeley, Mitchell Parkman and his wife Mary Jo had rented a tiny house up in the hills of Berkeley with their four kids, all of them jammed into this little two plus bedroom house while Mitchell was on sabbatical for a year. It turned out they had indeed followed us out to California. As soon as they landed in Berkeley, Mary Jo announced that she wasn't going back to the middle of the Illinois cornfields and her personal torture chamber at Whitebread College. If Mitchell wanted to save their marriage, he could figure out how to stay in Berkeley. She was simply never going back and that was all there was to it.

I didn't find out they were up in Berkeley until I got to Santa Cruz and rented a tiny cottage on Front Street right by the Boardwalk and the sea. I had driven up the coast in my van, this time with Steve and Greg and a girl named Pamela, whom I'd known when I was a grad student at Irvine. Pamela was a rich girl from Boston, whose daddy more or less had a leash around her neck and kept yanking on it every time she got a little wild. This was her last attempt to break free from that yoke and do something wild with a poet. She'd made it a habit of sleeping with poets throughout her undergraduate and graduate school years. Pamela had a voracious sexual appetite and kept pouncing on top of me just about every night, while I was trying to lay out this long poem on my mattress with note cards. I'd get them arranged in the order I wanted to compose this long sequence and she would come into my little bedroom naked and go down on me and we'd end up on top of those note cards damned near every night. It got so I'd hurry the process along earlier and earlier every day before Pamela would burst in and flatten me underneath her considerable body. She had some weight on her and she was real proud of her tits and showed them off to whomever she could. "When I take off my top," she exclaimed, "I expect people to take notice."

It didn't make things easy, because I had managed to get pretty damned skinny during the summer down at Laguna Beach on account of the Arnold Ehret mucus-free diet system I'd been on, trying to clean up my system after drinking way too much red wine

every night with Greg. I was skin and bones, more or less. I'd gotten myself down to about 120 lbs. mostly because all I'd eat was one type of fruit a day, whatever was on sale. If watermelon was on sale that day, that's what I bought and that was all I ate. Then next day it might be cantaloupe. Or apples. It gets pretty tough and not a little boring eating apples all day long and on into the night, plus a jug of red wine. But I was on a mission, and the result was this tremendous loss of weight and the inability to get out from under the hefty booty of Pamela. After a few weeks of this, I began pushing her off me, saying I had more work to do. Well, Pamela did not understand this at all - how anybody could refuse her sex. Men had never ever turned her down before. It blew her mind. And that's when I got a letter from Mary Jo saying they were coming down to camp in the woods nearby and she wanted to see me when they did. That would be on Labor Day weekend.

It was like a scene right out of Richard Brautigan's Trout Fishing in America, camping in the woods with that non-Brady bunch. And along with them came Randy, a student from Whitebread College who was out visiting them for the weekend.

Randy was one of those short, ragged-around the edges, loud-mouthed Midwestern yahoos who bragged about how many jalapeno peppers he could jam into his mouth at one time. How fast his car could go. How many women he'd slept with. He actually kept a tally notched into his oversized belt. He'd even slept with Mary Jo one time back in Illinois when they'd both gotten roaring drunk on her living room couch, and he wouldn't let her forget it and kept traipsing along after her like a puppy-dog with his tongue hanging out looking for more. But she wouldn't have it.

"C'mon, Mary Jo, you know you want to. C'mon. C'mon!" he whined. It was worse than Steve Bancroft wanting to get out to California only to find out how homesick he was for his future wife. It was a bad Midwestern trait, this whining. No one else in the nation would conceive of whining this much. Well, practically no one.

Randy was one of Mitchell Parkman's more promising art students at college, a welder of big dumb iron sculptures with no imagination, just black pieces of junk welded together without meaning or intention, and Randy dogged Mitchell's every footstep, trying his damndest to both imitate and impress his teacher in everything he did, including sleeping with his wife. Whether he'd been egged on to do this by Mitchell Parkman himself was anybody's guess. It may have been a move to throw Mary Jo off scent because things with his secretary had gotten so hot and heavy, and his secretary kept pressing Mitchell to leave Mary Jo and marry her instead.

We all went out to the woods together. Mitchell and Randy set up a big campfire and erected their tents. All the kids were in one tent. Mitchell and Mary Jo had another tent. Randy had a little pup tent for himself. Pamela tagged along with me, and Greg and Steve, of course. Warren had just arrived that day from Laguna Beach. He'd rented a small room in the house where my little cottage was on Front Street. Pamela had her own room in the same house. It was a real crowd.

Everybody was getting drunk on red wine and beer and joints. The kids were getting overly excited from too many hot dogs and too much candy and flaming marshmallows. They kept falling into the fire and ending up with dirt streaked all over their faces and arms and legs, because Randy kept throwing them into the bushes. They were yelling at the top of their lungs, so much so that people at neighboring campsites kept looking over at us. It created the perfect diversion for Mary Jo. She pulled me behind an enormous redwood and started making out with me, spewing streams of red wine into my mouth and then swishing her tongue around in my mouth, trying to get some of the wine out of my mouth. She had a hold of both arms and clamped my hands on her ass and she leaned her warm damp body against me and she wouldn't let go.

"I want you to come up to Berkeley and see me, you hear? Write a letter telling me when and I'll come pick you up at the bus station. Don't worry about Mitchell. I've told him I'm not going back

to Illinois. I want to see you. You call me, or write. Hear?" I was going pretty nuts over that St. Louis accent. You didn't say no to a voice like that.

That's when Randy came around behind the big redwood to take a leak and ran right into us while we had our hands in each others' pants. We broke away from each other, but Mary Jo wouldn't let go of my hard-on.

"Just take your piss and leave us be," she said.

Randy was looking at her hand, which kept stroking me and stroking me. I didn't know what else to do but it felt pretty damn good so I did nothing. I let her keep up with what she was doing.

Randy's mouth was open and he couldn't look away. I noticed he was missing a fingertip on the middle finger of his right hand. "Jesus," he said. "Jesus Christ, Mary Jo, I thought we were, uh..."

"Uh what?"

"Uh, a number."

"You mean like a joint?" She laughed that mysterious throaty deep St. Louis laughter of hers. My dick grew about another inch in that grip of hers.

"Jesus Christ, Mary Jo. You're married."

"You didn't seem to mind about that yourself."

"Well, no, but Jesus, Jesus, Mary Jo, I mean..."

"Why don't you go back to the campfire, Randy? Can't you see I'm busy here?"

Abruptly he turned and left.

Her hand tightened its hold on me.

"You come up to Berkeley and see me, you hear?"

I nodded. She took my head and bent it down to her upturned face.

"I'll treat you real good."

She let go of my dick and walked out from behind the tree back toward the wild bunch around the campfire.

That night I took Warren Jeffries out on a walk with me to a railroad bridge overlooking some tracks that ran along the beach in Santa Cruz. I stopped on the bridge, looking down at the silver glint of light on the tracks, and that's where I confessed.

"I think I'm in love with Mary Jo," I said. I had to tell someone. I felt like I was bursting with this. It was a whole new world to me. My heart was racing. My head was spinning with the possibility of it all. Warren had just taken a mouthful of red wine when I told him.

"You're what!" he spewed. "Oh, no! I mean, she's married. She has four kids. You can't do that — can you? Oh, no!"

"I can. And I will."

"Oh, shit, man. Oh, no! That's outrageous, Janov. You've really outdone yourself this time."

Which pushed me right over the edge. Up till that point, I was bluffing, I think. I'm not sure. But that comment, I don't know, there's no turning back from that kind of a precipice. I was balanced on the edge of the highest cliff man could fall from. It was a real dare.

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I got on the Greyhound Bus at 11 a.m. and sat by myself staring out the window. I could see the reflection of my own dark beard in the window, a 27 year-old man with a huge poem bursting my heart, gasping to get out into the bright lit-up world out there, pulsing at my neck like a gigantic fish breathing through its gills as its life lay pounding on the deck, hearing the sirens singing in my ears like Homer or Janis Joplin singing her heart out through her dense haze of Southern Comfort. I had my whole life splayed out before me and I was heading up the highway toward a rendezvous with a married woman with four kids in Berkeley — Berkeley, California, of all places. And I was scared out of my wits about what might be coming. I had my own fate in my hands, and I didn't have my fate in my own hands at all. It was a startling complexity of the universe

that no man ever foresees until love blinds him and takes his balls in its mouth and begins chewing, chewing relentlessly and without mercy.

And the mother of all battles, the Great San Francisco Poetry Wars awaited me, and I knew nothing about it. When you are a young poet and starting out in the world for the first time like Homer first setting sail, you are so damned naïve, there is no way to know or express it. Rise sail, lord over and take me away! That's all I can say.

The mountains were a blur, the bus gliding around curves, and down into Los Gatos, where the rich and the idle would come to play. Then on into San Jose, the future heart of Silicon Valley, not yet invented. That would come soon enough. The geniuses were already gathered in their garages there inventing little laptop computers. Then up the highway we went until we pulled into the Greyhound Bus Terminal in one of the seedier parts of Oakland. Bottles lay broken on the ground and winos were slumped over on the bus benches waiting to go God knows where, Eureka maybe, stripped of everything but their souls and a sleeping bag or a rolled-up dirty blanket. They lay with their mouths open, teeth missing, sleeping because this was a safe place to sleep. They who'd already lost the world.

And when I walked outside into the sunlight, there was Mary Jo waiting for me in their long van.

"Janov," she said, waving. "Here I am." That voice of hers. Oh my God!

She pushed the passenger door open with her foot across the seat. She had on a long hippie-style dress, which was pulled way up her thigh. I couldn't tell if she was wearing anything underneath. She let her white leg lay there across the front seat.

"You want to drive?" she said. And she slid over in the seat. As she did her skirt hiked all the way up and there was nothing on underneath, nothing at all. My heart began pounding.

I ran around and jumped in behind the wheel. She took my head in her hands and kissed me hungrily. We were there about ten

minutes in a loading zone until a cop pulled up, honking. I started up the motor and put it in gear, my hard-on bursting out of my pants. Mary Jo wouldn't take her hand off the bulge and kept rubbing it. "Go faster," she said. "Turn here. Step on it. My dress is all wet between my legs. Here, feel this."

She took my hand and lifted her dress. I felt the creaminess between her thighs that was like butter. Jesus, I thought. Jesus.

We drove up into the hills above Berkeley, along Grizzly Peak, and she had me drive up a path off the road and stop the truck. She pulled me out of the van. We walked along a path through dense high weeds, heading down a slope toward a small lake, and all of a sudden she lay down on her back, pulling me down on top of her. She wiggled out of her dress in the bright sunlight. Her skin was as white as the innards of an oyster. Then she unbuckled my belt and yanked down my pants. We didn't even wait to get the pants off my right leg before she slipped me inside her, she was sopping wet, and we came about three times each. It just went on and on. I couldn't remember fucking so much in one burst ever, with anyone. This was fantastic. Bugs and flies kept landing on my bare ass while it was going up and down and I didn't care and we lunged toward some new world record. That's how hungry we were for each other. Man alive! I thought. Was this what it was like to be in love? Really in love, like my first time? No, maybe even better!

When we finally rolled off each other, weeds and stickers were all over her dress, but she just put it back on anyway, ignoring them. I kept trying to pick foxtails off her dress, and the next thing I knew she had it raised up and we were flat on the ground balling again. We were wholly unstable and entirely unstoppable. It was like we were in a barnyard. But there had to be an end. What about her kids? What about nightfall? What about Park Rangers and Boy Scouts who would use these trails and Campfire Girls and Brownies in their little chocolate outfits? We didn't care. I was mining my way out of childhood and deeper into adulthood than I had ever imagined it was possible to go without a roadmap, without a clue as to how to

get out. Did one ever get out of adulthood? Yes, one way. One way only. I was on a one-way road now.

Then she drove me over the hill into Orinda and dropped me off at my brother's house. He lived there with his wife Beryl and their daughter. Beryl was a pink Chablis drunkard stay-at-home mom who ran around the house in a moo-moo and bunny slippers, smoking Parliaments and sipping from a plastic wine glass all day.

Mary Jo came in the house with me. It appeared no one was at home, so we went into the TV room and stripped off our clothes and tried to go at it one more time but it was no use. I was too pooped and it would not stay up anymore. I had worn myself out. All I wanted to do was go to sleep, so Mary Jo left.

How were we going to communicate? I thought, before passing out on the couch. I did not have a clue what one did in this sort of affair. I'd never been in an affair with a married woman before. No wait. That simply was not true. I'd forgotten completely about Carla, the woman with three children who'd come out to the writing program with me at Irvine. She had left her husband to run off to California. Ah, yes, I was at it again. My old friends back in Chicago would have been impressed. Anyone else, I'm not so sure.

The next day Beryl drove me to the Greyhound Bus terminal and I went back to Santa Cruz. The loneliest time of my life began. I did not hear a word from Mary Jo. What was happening to her? Had Mitchell found us out? Did he get violent as only a Texan can? That was where he'd been born and raised. They settled things with guns and knives there. I well knew how that line of thinking went. Women were possessions. You did not steal people's turtles, you did not take a woman from a man. You drank cold beers all afternoon in front of an iced-over air conditioner without saying a thing, and you drove along the highway shooting holes in every road sign you could. Still, in Texas the law was everything, except when it came to the politicians. They simply did not give a hoot about the law. They were above it. Our own Lyndon Baines Johnson came from Texas, after all, and his idea of law and order was, "Don't spit in the soup, we all got to eat."

I crept back to my little hovel by the sea and waited for word from Berkeley. I made a vow to stop drinking even, if I heard any kind of good news from up there. That's right, you heard me — I would stop drinking. Greg laughed in my face when he heard me say that. We went out to the pier one night while the fog rolled in around us. He offered me a swig from his jug of Red Mountain. I waved it away, and he stood up and guffawed. "C'mon!" he shouted at me. I hung my head. I was despondent. I just waved.

"C'mon, for Chrissakes. C'mon!"

A harbor seal began yelping loudly on the piers below, then another, then a whole chorus of them, talking to each other about courtship and pain and the state of the sea. Yelping, yelping and yelping. Then they quieted down.

I made a gesture and I could see Greg grin, nodding his head. He handed me the jug of wine and I took a long pull and it began warming up my soul just a little. I saw the reason behind living again. The world opened up to me. I saw a certain vastness that would become my poem, Puppet X. I saw the beginning plainly: *"I know you,/ ladies and gentlemen./ We see the near future/ through you."* I also saw the end. "For the first time in six years,/ I spoke." All I had to do now was fill in the middle 65 pages.

