

The Great San Francisco Poetry Wars, 6

by Jerry Ratch

When I got word from Mary Jo, she warned me that Mitchell Parkman was out looking for me with a butcher knife. I knew immediately what I had to do. I packed up my things and sold the Pepsi van and moved up to a room on Regent Street in Berkeley, all the way across town from Mary Jo, not far from Alta Bates Hospital. I rented a room in a big old house from a woman named Marie who would sublet rooms to students at Cal mostly. And that was where I ran into Penny, our Helen of Troy of the Poetry World. Penny was thin with short dark curly hair and quite normal, really. She looked more like a boy. I don't know how or why she got mixed up with that crowd of Foul Language Poets, but there it was. You don't always get to choose wisely whom you get in bed with in life. But what the hell — I should talk!

Every morning two women undressed across the way in the house next door and took showers with the windows wide open. Now and then a man would enter the shower with them, and all three would start lathering each other with a white bar of soap. This was an elaborate daily event. It was timed to perfection. I could set my clock to it. I would drag a chair out in the hallway and sit down and watch them, and they knew it and didn't care. They laughed and lathered, making all sorts of noise, shouting at times.

Christ, I thought, this is how life should be, always. I was glad I was now living in Berkeley, land of the free spirit and free soul, where love happened spontaneously. Except, like I said, I could set my watch to their bathing ritual. Then they went off to wherever it was they went. Maybe to work, I never found out. It didn't seem like it, somehow. There were scads of people around Berkeley who didn't work, ever. Later I would come to find out the town was filled with trust-funders. People who didn't have to work because their

dads had set them up with enough of a monthly stipend that they could slack off and lay around doing nothing with their lives whatsoever.

I didn't have such luck. My brother Harris took everything our family had to our names and invested it in a huge land-pyramid scheme up near Lake Shasta and we promptly got taken for everything we had. Including a lump sum I had saved up from my year teaching at Whitebread College. That was when Harris left his family in Orinda and ran off with his secretary at work, a hick from Oregon named Francine. He became a nudist, and a swinger, of all things. None of us in our family could believe it when that happened. He ran off to Hawaii with this woman and got married in a blowsy nudist ceremony. They even showed us the pictures of their wedding one day, waltzing down a staircase out in Waikiki naked as jay birds, my brother's pronounced beer belly hanging right out there for everyone to see, and Francine with her tits hanging down to her waist, with a navel that was about as deep as a shot glass.

That was my one and only brother, who had saved my little life once, pulling me up by the hair out of Lake Michigan at a beach in Chicago when a wave had pinned me to the floor.

I was really getting hard up for cash. I started going over to Alta Bates hospital and stealing rolls of toilet paper to keep the expenses down. But the main thing I wanted was for Mary Jo to come over to see me in my room. I lay on my stomach with a hard-on half the day. I couldn't stop thinking about her and what I would do to her when I got her in my room.

One day she finally came by and told me she was going to try going back with her husband and that we couldn't sleep together. It was terrible. I began groveling. I felt like I was going to weep any minute. Men weren't supposed to weep. I knew better than that. What was going wrong with me? I was used to dating three women at a time back in Chicago, sometimes one after another on the same night. Well, one time anyway. I grew afraid I was getting weak. I was getting flabby in the soul. What the hell was wrong? This was not me.

But unfortunately it was.

I had lost something important and precious to a man. I had become a weak emasculated poet. And Von Rotten would find this out about me, and rub salt in my wounds when the time came. He knew how to remain strong. He had grown tough under King Richard Nixon. Only he and his kind knew exactly how to behave. They would shed their souls in advance and come out shining and new into the world, like garter snakes. They knew how to make it in this new world order. I, myself, would be held back by the very nature of the surreal world I found myself engulfed in.

As if sensing my time of great need, Warren Jeffries moved up to Berkeley right about then. He got a tiny studio apartment that was so small he had to build himself a platform above his boxes of possessions on which to sleep. It was really the converted back porch of a house over near the campus at Cal, just above College Avenue, surrounded by sorority and fraternity houses where he got a job bussing dishes at a frat house dining room. He started riding his bike all over town and ran into this woman poet who was older than him by five years and who turned out to be a lesbian. But for some reason she began sleeping with him. None of us could figure out why.

Warren came by my room to cheer me up and get me up off my bed and out into the great light of day. We took a walk along Telegraph Avenue. I hadn't been out of my room, (except for runs to Alta Bates Hospital to steal rolls of toilet paper or swuck down some Jello at the dining room they had there,) waiting for Mary Jo to show up and swallow me alive. When he came up the stairs and first appeared at the door of my room, I was asking God Almighty to come and take me if He didn't want me to be with Mary Jo. Why not just take me right now? C'mon, take me, God, take me. But as a famous poet once said: "The infinite skies were silent."

"She's sleeping with her husband again," I told Warren. I was whimpering like a baby. "I can smell him on her."

“Hush, little baby, don't you cry. Momma's gonna sing a lullaby,” Warren sang. “You've got me here now. Don't you worry about that old hag.”

“She's not a hag,” I protested. “I'm in love, I'm so in love. What am I going to do? Oh, this hurts so much!”

Warren insisted we go outdoors into the light. So off we went to Telegraph Avenue for my Season in Hell.

And that was where I met the darkest poet of our times, a man named Eugene Forcer who'd been to prison and who was a purist disciple of Ezra Pound, who was a god to him, but who was nearly indecipherable to the rest of us, except for his maxim to “make it new.” That was something everyone knew about, but practically nobody knew how to practice in actuality. Eugene Forcer just added to my surreal feeling of despair.

Greg Penn also came up to Berkeley along with Steve Bancroft. They took rooms at a flophouse hotel on Telegraph Avenue. So we were reunited again. We would come to be known as The Surreal Gang of Four, to those who knew and loved us. And thus the stage was set for mayhem in the poetry world.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

Telegraph Avenue in those days was the stage for every kind of drama, and it all centered around Cody's Bookstore and the reading series they had there on Wednesday nights. There was always a party at somebody's apartment afterwards. That's where everybody met everyone who was anybody in the poetry scene. That was where I met Regina, who would come to be the publisher of my first book, Puppet X. The one and only Bust Loose Press.

But that would come later. First I had to get my feet wet at the very beginning of the Great San Francisco Poetry Wars.

I took a walk up Telegraph Avenue with Warren, and it so happened that Penny came along with us that first day. She was on her way to the campus, she said. And that was the day we ran into the great Von Rotten standing stiffly outside Cody's Books as we

came walking up. Von Rotten eyed me suspiciously. He didn't have a blemish on his face, and his features were chiseled as if he'd been sculpted out of fine marble from Italy, except that he was a combination of British and German, though mostly it was the German that stuck to his fine-boned frame.

"And who might this be?" he asked when introduced. He pointed at Warren.

"I might be his boyfriend," Warren replied. Warren had a pretty terrific sense of wit and didn't mind pushing the edges a little.

Von Rotten look relieved. "That's what I thought, of course," he said.

"And you are?" Warren asked.

"I am Von Rotten. Of course."

"Vaughn?"

"Von."

"That's what I thought you said. Vaughn."

"Von, Von, you idiot!" he snorted.

"Yeah, Vaughn. I knew that."

"The name is Von! Just plain Von!" He was growing turbulent red.

"Oh," said Warren, "Vonilla?"

"No, no, just plain fucking Von!" He was absolutely fuming now.

"Easy there, Chucky Cheese."

Von Rotten glared at Warren like he was going to kill him.

Penny stepped in, saying, "It's hard on somebody who's running a movement."

And that's when Warren said it. "Maybe he should try running the Bowel Movement."

Penny grabbed Von Rotten's arm and began dragging him off toward the campus.

"Faggot!" yelled Warren at Von Rotten's backside. Von Rotten stopped and the whole world seemed to stop along Telegraph Avenue. He turned around. The sunlight dimmed slightly when he turned about, I think.

“What did you say?” he asked from across the street.

“What?” asked Warren, cupping a hand behind his ear. “I can't hear you.” Warren loved puns more than practically anything. They would be his downfall some day.

Von Rotten was taller than Penny by at least a foot, and was as skinny and fragile as a newly planted sapling. He bent in the wind along the Avenue, then turned toward the campus, gripping Penny's hand all the more tightly. Their clothes rippled along after them.

Ah, me. Warren Jeffries — and me by association — would come to pay for that insult. O yes. As skinny as he was, Von Rotten had the voluminous memory of an elephant, encased in a very big head. And he was infinitely paranoid as well. You were either with him or against him. There was no in-between.

Well I, for one, was not with him. He was a little too Stalinesque for my taste, though I happen to know he envisioned himself more a Vladimir Lenin leaning out, lecturing a crowd of followers on a square in Moscow or Berlin. Moscow, preferably. Or Berlin, if need be.

We went into a nearby café and there sat Eugene Forcer, the ex-prison poet who idolized Ezra Pound. We noticed he was reading an absolute tome called “The Pound Era.” I mentioned that Pound was a noted anti-Semite, and Eugene Forcer looked at me soberly.

“He's the greatest poet that ever wrote. Dark, admittedly, but the greatest.”

“And a Nazi,” I added.

“Sit down, young man,” Eugene said. “You've an education to learn. The price of this table is a cup of coffee.” Eugene Forcer wore thick glasses and a goatee that was starting to go gray already, at a pretty young age. It was a hard life in prison. He was certain to let anyone who would listen know all about it. But the good thing about him was that he hated the academics almost as much as I did, which probably accounted for my affinity to him. But he was like an academy unto himself, as it turned out. It was just a different

academy. There were too many academies out there, I think. Who needed them anyway?

But I was a little too young and inexperienced to know about this yet. I mean, I didn't even know what the hell a Foul Language Poet even was, for Chrissakes. What did I know?

I got right down to it and started writing my long sequence called Puppet X. I started burning up the roadmap in the poetry world. Once I got started, you couldn't stop me. I was on fire. Almost immediately I fell in with the Soup Kitchen gang who had started a small street rag called Poetry Flash. I did a reading from my new material at a reading series there. This was on Telegraph Avenue right down the street from Cody's Bookstore. Afterwards we all went up the street to have some wine at a pub with sawdust on the floors and we kept drinking and drinking. We shut the place down. Then we staggered back down Telegraph on our way home to the rooming house. In the hallway upstairs I ran into Penny, who gave me a smoldering look, I thought. She looked so innocent, somehow. She had these long eyelashes and such a young thin body. You could almost see right through her skin.

"I was in the back at the Soup Kitchen," she said. "I heard your reading."

"What did you think?"

"Did you hear the guy who was moaning?"

"Yeah. He must have absolutely hated it."

"He was cutting his thigh with a pen knife the whole time, right through his Levis. I saw the blood myself. Just enough to bleed a little."

"You're kidding me?"

"He was really enjoying it."

"Really?"

"Yeah." She was looking at me strangely. "That was one of the Foul Language poets. You're in big trouble, you know."

Penny kind of shivered. I saw the goose bumps along her bare arms. I grabbed hold of both forearms.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

She let me pull her toward me. Her body bent toward mine like a sapling and we kissed in the hallway. I was very, very hungry. I needed some real loving after that reading. Marie's dog, Teddy, began barking at the foot of the landing downstairs, and through the door marched Von Rotten himself. He was dressed in a tweedy workers cap and looked every bit the spitting image of Vladimir Lenin.

And as Mr. Vladimir Lenin proceeded up the stair, I vanished into my room like the next of kin to a Czar.

* * * * *

That was the start of the Great San Francisco Poetry Wars. As with all wars throughout history, it began over a woman, same as with Helen of Trojan War fame. No one raped anyone or carried off anyone or sacked anything. It was just a delicate kiss in the hallway of love in Berkeley, California. But that was where it all began, I'm here to tell you. It all started over some little goose bumps up and down the arms of this New World Helen who had such thin skin you could see right through to her blue veins underneath. It made her seem vulnerable, I don't know why. Appealing and alive and vulnerable. And she really did look more like a boy than a girl. That's what's so remarkable and strange. But there it is.

I began receiving angry notes from Von Rotten. He wanted to stage some sort of debate at Cody's Bookstore. Penny would drop off whole packages of these notes tied with a nice neat knot with brown twine, almost like love notes saved over years and pulled down off a closet shelf. But these were well thought out notes, tomes really. Von Rotten imagined every sort of debauchery between Penny and myself. I saw her in the hallway one day, and noticed her glance down. There were those small goose bumps along her arms again.

"Can't you do anything about this guy?" I asked.

She shook her head.

"What the hell does he want? Like a showdown or something at the OK Corral? He's out of control."

She nodded. She looked hungry, in a waif sort of way. Her brown eyes shone with their own inner light. They were so dark they were mesmerizing. I couldn't figure out why they had such a hold on me, but I was fixated. I looked down at her bare arms and shivered. Goose bumps shot up along my own arms. I can't say which of us had stopped breathing first, but neither was breathing. I was sure of it. Then she breathed out and turned away.

"Wait." I reached out to her.

"Maybe we'd better not," she said. "He has spies everywhere. It's like they're reading my thoughts, and you can probably imagine what I'm thinking. Maybe it's not so hard to see through me."

"But..." She reached up and put a finger against my lips. "I can see your blue veins," I said.

She looked at me for the longest time. I began melting at the edges.

She winced and breathed out. "It would be devastating."

She went in her room, but without closing the door all the way. It was still open enough for me to see her take off her top. Her tits were nearly perfectly round and high up on her chest, with nipples that were large and dark, waiting to be sucked. I loved the way they wobbled a little when she moved or brushed against them. Then she came back to the door. I saw her smile before she closed it all the way. Ah, me.

I was a goner. I was hooked. There was bound to be trouble now in the wide world of poetry. I was elated and I was doomed at the same time and Penny and I both knew it.

We were long time lovers already, as if from a different era, and had barely touched. Well, we had touched. O yes. That was all we had done. Well, not completely true. But we had barely been together. Still, I went into my room and put an ear against her wall to see if I could hear something or feel her heat through the plaster, or anything. I swear I could feel her presence right through that wall. Her body, the blood rushing through her veins, right on the

other side of that wall. I thought I could smell her dark, dark hair, which had put a perfume on my soul.

In my mind I saw her lifting up her shirt and letting those tits fall loose. Over and over again I saw them wobble that slight wobble. Oh, man! I was so screwed!

That was when I distinctly heard her laughter, and her voice: "Philip, are you there?"

Yeah, baby. I was there.

Though I couldn't be absolutely 100% positive, if you want to know the truth. In hindsight. If you had to be an absolute stickler about it. I honestly don't know what all the shouting is about when it comes to hindsight anyway.

Greg told me I was probably hearing things. He was always good for a damned hindsight opinion.

That was when Mary Jo came by to tell me she and Mitchell were through. He had moved out of the house, and I could move right in with her now. I couldn't believe it. His secretary had flown out to California to be with him. He had taken an apartment down on Milvia Street practically next door to where Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder had once lived. Mitchell bought a brand spanking new bright yellow Volkswagen convertible and was driving around town in it with the top down, with Rosemary sitting right next to him like a new-born pasha. Mary Jo seemed completely agitated and annoyed by the prospect of him rubbing it in her face so boldly. But there it was. She wanted me to meet her children first, so she set up a meeting with them at a neutral spot, which was in the parking lot at the Claremont Resort Hotel, not that far from where we'd first fucked in a field in the hills above.

I had to walk up Ashby Avenue to the Hotel. It was a hike, well not that bad actually, but it was blowing and cold out that night. Her kids took one suspicious look at me. They were all packed in her van. They didn't even want to get out. I could see the enmity in their faces. Here was the enemy, the one who had made it all go wrong, somehow. They needed someone to blame, and I was it. The hate was so apparent that I didn't want to go through with it. I thought

about Penny and the goose bumps along her arms and her blue veins. And those lovely tits falling loose, wobbling a little the way they did.

“So, this is the crew,” Mary Jo said. “When can you move your things up the hill?”

“How about tomorrow?” I said. I don't even know why I said it. It was like a challenge. Maybe I was still drunk from the jug of red wine I had shared earlier that afternoon when Greg came over. It all happened so quickly, I don't know.

“Fine,” she said. “I'll come by. Have everything packed in boxes.”

She shut the door and off they drove in that enormous van, swaying as it rounded the curve out of the parking lot. My fate was sealed. I really was a gutless idiot.

