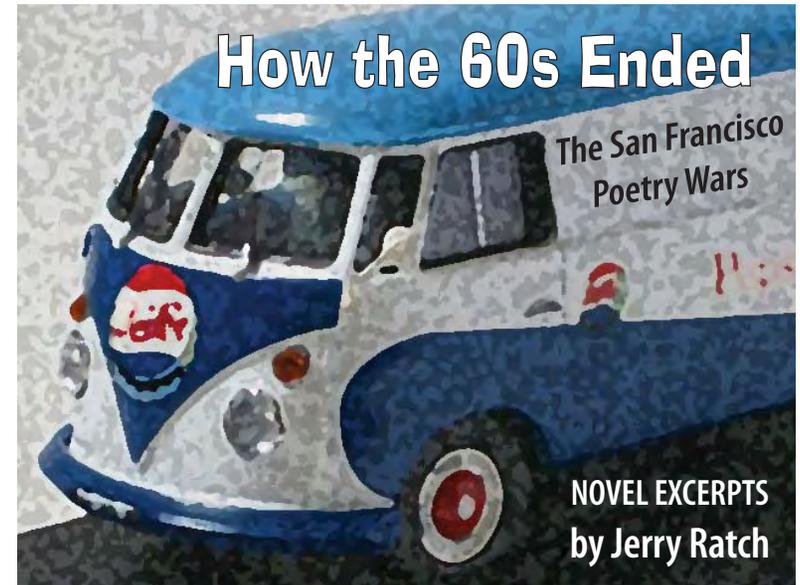


Disclaimer

In no way can it be assumed that any part of this is other than complete and utter fiction. I mean, people believing that poetry can honestly make a difference in their lives? Get serious! And an angel with a number? Whoever heard of such? Read my lips: this is a complete work of fiction, and that is all. And whoever heard of going to war over another Helen? Wasn't once enough?

However, the author would like to express gratitude and appreciation for the part that Tony Petracca, Peter Koch, and Michael Todd Burns had in encouraging me to go forward with this story, even if parts of it were dangerously close to the truth.

No, seriously, it is complete and utter fiction. Totally! That being said, if you see even a hint of something that looks like the truth, report it immediately to the authorities of the Foul Language Movement of Poetry, or FLMP, sometimes pronounced "Flamp." Just kidding! (Please don't report it.)



Wordrunner echapbooks | March 2012

Whitebread College	1
Red, White and Blue Pepsi Van	9
I Think I'm in Love With Mary Jo	24
The San Francisco Poetry Wars.	30
Angel With a Number	39
About Jerry Ratch	42

Whitebread College

My name is Philip Janov, but you can just call me Janov. That's how they always used to do it around Chicago. I came out to San Francisco in a Pepsi van that was red, white, and blue. We drove that van out of the great Midwest, our hungry souls looking for life at the edge of the continent. And to escape the enormous and vacant soul that inhabited the White House in the form of King Richard Nixon, and that also inhabited and ate away at the enormous bloated body of Midwestern mentality that voted this man into office. How could they have done that? we asked. So we fled to California, hoping to find solace and comfort among like souls who lived and breathed poetry from their every pore, day upon living day and night after night. We thought we would be saved from the savages who had nearly throttled us with their flat and even and straight-forward minds and hearts. The ultimate chicken pot-pie of everything that was there.

In those days nearly everyone ate poetry for lunch. It was considered essential for your good up-bringing and mental health. We would skip meals in order to satisfy our word hunger. To hell with dirty politics and meaningless wars on other continents! It was enough to feed upon the poetic battles of the moment, and who wrote what and who read what at last night's reading at the bookstores and cafés, and who went home with whom after the inevitable late night parties that followed. It was the beginning of the end, and we all lived as if we knew it was going to end any minute, which was why we found it so hard to keep it while we had it. It was that lust for life that was crucial to the San Francisco Poetry Wars. It has been said of us: For a small glassful of laughter we would kill. Yes, kill. And it was all true. Every word of it delicious and dirty and true.

What follows is how I found them, my characters. And myself among them. All of us, equally lost in the Midwest. This was how we came to occupy ourselves.

"Write it, Bancroft!" Greg Penn was yelling from under the kitchen table. "Exactly as I said it. Go ahead and put it on the sucker's paper, will you? Chrissakes, just write it! *Write it!*"

Some of the excerpts in *How the 60s Ended*
have been previously posted, in a different form,
on fictionaut.com

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Steve Bancroft was holding his head in his hands with his elbows on the table, where there were stacks of student papers scattered in disorderly piles. “Okay, what?” he asked. “What? Go ahead and repeat it, would you? ‘*At first... At first I thought...*’”

“Okay. You’re ready now? Jesus, you pussy! ‘*At first I thought you were putting your foot in either my mouth or yours. Now I realize you were using both feet.*’ Write it. It’s perfect. Perfect!”

“You can’t go putting that on somebody’s precious little essay about their childhood,” Steve complained.

“Just write it, you little turd.”

We walked into the kitchen. From his outlook under the kitchen table, Greg Penn could probably only see so many feet that we may have seemed like a human caterpillar. He was on all fours, all six and a half foot of him, bumping against the underside of the table like a Shetland pony. These were my two best students at Whitebread College in the middle of Illinois. They were grading papers for me while my “assistant” Allison Sheffield and I went out drinking at Jack’s Bar on the town square. Tomorrow’s big inquisition was coming fast and I didn’t really care anymore what was going to happen to me. Greg Penn and Steve Bancroft, were both completely soused on two six-packs I’d left for them as payment for grading my students’ papers, which I simply could not bring myself to do anymore. My short career around that town and that precious little college was all but over.

“Who is that? Janov, that you? Jesus, how many feet do you have now? It feels like Alice in Wonderland under here. We’re out of beer, by the way. Who in hell’s that with you? Sheffield? Sheffield, is that you?”

“What exactly are you doing under the table, Greg?” Allison asked.

Greg snorted, then let out with a massive otherworldly belch. “I’m up to my elbows in vomit and oblivion,” he said, and belched once more. “Obviously.”

I was teaching at this small college in Illinois. It was late in the spring of 1971, near the end of the semester, and it was the perfect end to the idealistic Sixties deep in the cornfields of central Illinois at a liberal arts college known for the fact that its students ran the entire campus except, of course, for the teaching and the administration. That was left for dummies like us.

The town had an actual town square, around which a shell-shock case from World War II named Mac Fox still walked, every day since returning home from Normandy Beach. The only bar on the square, Jack’s Bar, was run by a man with an enormous nose who was the exact spitting image of Lyndon Baines Johnson, the president who’d been hounded out of office by our protesting the war in Vietnam. It was very spooky and very weird to have the ex-president of the United States asking, “What’ll you have to drink?” He would always stay focused on your nose, probably to establish that you were old enough to be ordering a drink. His own nose was so red and enormous, he looked like he should be sitting on a stoop in the Village in New York, chomping on a cigar butt and feeding pigeons out of a paper bag.

I was drinking myself into oblivion, as much as you can do that sort of thing, trying to forget exactly where I was, while still trying to make a living of sorts, at the same time trying to keep from getting fired for not holding my 8 a.m. class in Stoddard Hall, but rather at my own house on College Avenue at 8 p.m. instead. Every one of my students showed up at the night class at my house. Everyone except one tiny old lady from town. That was where my troubles with the Dean and the President of that fine institution began.

That night we took out a tall ladder and wrote one of my poems with a magic marker across the 12 foot ceilings of my college-owned faculty house. My assistant, Allison Sheffield, was short with luscious curls of reddish-brown hair, and a burst of baby fat and freckles in her cheeks. More freckles scattered over her arms and chest, stopping just below her breasts. There was something childlike about her. She came from a farm outside St. Louis where her father raised horses for riding and lambs for eating. She’d been riding horses more or less from the day she was born, but she kept her lambs for pets.

The next day was my faculty trial at Whitebread College. A large crowd of students gathered around the base of the dominating three story building that housed the administrative offices, where my hearing was to be held. The meeting room was on the second floor. They ushered me into a room with a long varnished wooden table, around which sat the heads of every department

on campus, including the art department's, Mitchell Parkman, more or less my only ally on the faculty, possibly at the insistence of his wife Mary Jo, who admired me for reasons I couldn't yet fathom. President Gordon, an old, old man without a chin, occasionally walked over to the window and peered out at the lawn below where the crowd kept growing like a stain. on the lawn. You could hear shouting voices from below. "Burn, baby, burn! Burn, baby, burn!" Two hundred students held their fists in the air to gesture solidarity. It was a serious matter, and kind of scary. With every shout of "Burn, baby, burn!" heads of the faculty turned and looked at one another. Only Dean Brown seemed unconcerned. He kept thumbing through his usual stack of memos in a huge manila folder in front of him. Here's what had led up to that mess.

Early on in the year, they'd given me an early morning class. I was a late night poet kind of guy. So when many of my students were having trouble making it to class at 8 a.m., I suggested moving the class to my house and meeting at 8 p.m. in my living room. Brilliant! Almost every student showed, and everything seemed to be going great until a grey-haired old woman named Mabel Rose from town who was taking my class (God knows why) complained in writing to the president of the college that I wasn't making my 8 a.m. class on campus. Apparently, she was an early morning person. And our two worlds simply collided.

President Gordon told Dean Brown to collect data on my malfeasance so they could try me in front of the faculty senate and fire me. And Dean Brown with his crew-cut, button-down Richard Nixon jowls, took on the task of writing the memos.

"Okay, Dean Brown, why don't you present the evidence against Mr. Janov and let's get on with it," said President Gordon.

Dean Brown shoved the entire folder across the table. "Mr. Janov ignored every one of these messages. Even after repeated warnings, fifteen of them, to be exact. He persisted in meeting his 8 a.m. class at 8 p.m. at his house instead of on campus at 8 a.m. as designated in the Whitebread College Fall 1970 course catalogue." Brown tapped a long finger on the folder and sat back with a pleased smile.

President Gordon looked down his nose over his spectacles. He cleared his throat. "And what do you have to say to the charges, Mr. Janov?"

My back stiffened. "Well," I said, "I was meeting my class at my house at 8 p.m. The students' attendance improved dramatically, as did their participation. I never got any warnings or messages from Dean Brown. I didn't know this presented a problem."

"You never got Dean Brown's memos?" President Gordon shoved the folder closer to me. "Here they are."

I opened the folder and thumbed through a few of the memos. They were hand-written in neat curlicues on yellow notepad paper. "Mr. Janov didn't show up at yet another of his classes at 8 a.m. today!!! I went there myself! At 8 a.m.!" Things of that sort. They looked official. They were memos all right.

I sat bolt upright in my chair. Okay, I may have squirmed a bit. "I never received any of these," I said.

Mitchell Parkman, who was the head of the Art Department, and who looked a little like a hawk with wild bushy black hair, suddenly interjected, "Who are these memos written to?"

"Why, to myself, and Mr. Janov, of course," Dean Brown answered. "The carbon copies are for Janov."

"What?" I exclaimed. "But I never saw these things before! I never got these."

"But I wrote them," said Dean Brown.

"Well," asked Mitchell Parkman, "how did you deliver them exactly?"

"Well, I didn't ... exactly. I wrote the memos covering the situation, as I was instructed to do."

"But, so, you didn't deliver them to Mr. Janov?" Mitchell Parkman had a habit of raising one eyebrow when asking or stating the obvious.

The rest of the faculty in the room turned to stare at Dean Brown.

"Well ... no," said the Dean.

You could hear the shouting rising up from the crowd swelling on the lawn below. It kept getting louder and louder. Somebody had brought a bullhorn now.

"How did you expect him to respond then?"

"Oh, I pretty much knew he wouldn't respond. In fact, I was sure of it. He's from California."

Mitchell Parkman looked around the room at the heads of all the other departments. There was a steady murmur, which seemed to last about two decades.

“Well, I think it’s pretty obvious what our course of action has to be.”

Nearly all of the department heads nodded in unison.

“We can’t afford a lawsuit here,” Parkman said. “I move to dismiss the charges.”

There was so much silence in the room, except for the shouts from outdoors from the students. I saw a woodpecker pecking away at a dead tree.

“Second,” came a weak voice from the other end of the table. I couldn’t tell which one of the heads had said that.

President Gordon’s head swung around for a moment. “Oh, fer Chrissake!”

“All in favor, raise your hands.”

One by one the hands went up around the table. This took about another decade.

Mitchell Parkman rose from his chair and extended his hand. “You’re free to go, Mr. Janov. Want to go get a beer at Jack’s bar?”

To my surprise, the students let out an audible groan when they heard about the dismissal. This would have been their chance to stage a real protest, since they had missed most of the protests against the war in Vietnam so far. They wanted to damage something. I wanted to tell them, “Not to worry, they would get their chance. The troops are always on their way somewhere else. There is always another war.”

We went over to Jack’s bar. Mitchell’s wife Mary Jo was already there, holding two long tables that had been put together. Allison had to order a diet Pepsi, but the rest of us were drinking bottles of Pabst Blue Ribbon. I kept ordering in groups of six at a time, so Jack couldn’t tell who was old enough. The crowd was too big and disorderly anyway, since numerous students from the disgruntled crowd followed us to the bar. The afternoon dragged on into the early evening. We’d forgotten completely about eating anything, and things were getting raucous.

Jimmy Pond, another member of the English faculty was there with Ann Hedstrom, the head of the English Department, who had hired me to replace someone on sabbatical. Ann had soft eyes and deep pock marks that spread over her entire face from a terrible bout with adolescent acne. Their being together as a couple was the result of one drunken night on my living room couch. Jimmy

was from New Orleans and had about the longest Southern drawl I’d ever heard. Ann pounced on Jimmy over his loud protestations one night after his wife left him, which had been exactly two days after their arriving in the cornfields of Illinois from New Orleans, where they’d been raised. She’d simply never heard so much silence in her life, and she ran from it faster than it took for a suitcase full of Cajun-accented cockroaches to make themselves at home in their kitchen on the prairie. Jimmy’s ex had run for her life, possibly the smartest woman in Illinois, or New Orleans, for that matter.

Jimmy was pontificating in his usual Southern manner about writers from the south, when all of a sudden Mary Jo looked at me and squeezed the bottle of mustard she’d been fondling. A long arc of mustard shot across the double table, landing on Jimmy Pond’s white shirt, a perfect arc of bright yellow streaking through the air. It couldn’t have been a more precise shot if it had been planned by NASA scientists. Every mustard-laden molecule landed on Jimmy’s perfectly laundered and starched white shirt. Jimmy nearly always wore a necktie, because he was a proper New Orleans gentleman who could cook up a mean plate of red beans and rice. You could eat a whole plate without farting once.

Jimmy looked up, then down at his shirt again, to be sure, then back up at Mary Jo. The air flew right out of Mitchell Parkman’s mouth. Mary Jo had the nerve to laugh out loud. She kept looking over at me, to make sure I knew what this meant. I had no idea whatsoever what it meant.

“Can I see you outside?” she said to me. She got up from the table without another word and flew out the front door of the bar. She had the habit of wearing shapeless hippie dresses so you couldn’t tell what her body was like. She had four children traipsing along behind her at home. Mitchell kept her pretty much barefoot and pregnant.

I looked back and forth between Jimmy Pond and Mitchell Parkman. Mitchell shrugged and took a long draught of beer from his glass. Mitchell’s secretary, Rosemary, was sitting right beside him. A blonde girl with a long nose and a huge chest, she was also their baby-sitter, though not tonight apparently, because this was too big an occasion to miss.

Poor Jimmy was dabbing the mustard off his shirt. Ann Hedstrom kept applying more napkins to the bright yellow squiggle.

I walked out the front door of the bar. Mary Jo dragged me by the arm to the curbside.

“See what you made me do?” she said. “By the way, Mitch is fucking that secretary of his, little miss Rosemary with the tits. That’s the third one and I’m sick and tired of having my nose rubbed in it. But I’m sure he’s already told you all about it. Everybody in town knows. They always do. Fucking little Peyton Place. You better not be leaving town any time soon. We haven’t gotten to know each other yet. Do you ever hear the frogs talking around here?” I didn’t have a chance to breathe as she kept going non-stop, as if she couldn’t talk fast enough. “I thought you might. They live in the gutters and when it rains they come out and talk to anyone who’ll listen. Have you heard them? I love your poetry, you know. I think you’re a great writer, Janov.”

“Wow, I—”

She pulled my head down to her face and kissed me hard on the mouth, and she wouldn’t let me pull back. Her tongue worked its way into my mouth.

“Don’t you go leaving me behind in this unholy little town, you hear?” Mary Jo had a deep appealing voice, with slight southern St. Louis accent.. It left the impression that she wasn’t finished saying everything she had to say.

A blinding brightness entered my eyes when she kissed me. Something lit up in my future. But the next day my students drove me out to a used car lot on Route 66, and I bought that red, white and blue Pepsi van, and by the end of the week, when the semester ended anyway, we were off to the West Coast on our 3,000 mile trip.

Red, White and Blue Pepsi Van

We packed my king-sized mattress, given to me by an old teacher at Irvine, onto a sheet of plywood in the Pepsi 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. (It wasn’t until we were finally out in Berkeley that Steve’s fiancé flew out to try taking him back home with her, to settle down.) This worked 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. Not getting laid made her grumpy. She was so small that it was like being with a virgin every time we had sex. She would groan, and wriggle around underneath me, then moan, then gasp and groan again. I could never understand how she could bear so much pain. I guess it was the mixture of pleasure and pain, or maybe she was practicing to have children.

Our plan was to take the northern route out through Wyoming, then straight across to Portland before turning south and heading 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 meant for deliveries on the plains, not the mountains. It didn’t have the requisite dual rear wheels needed for stability around mountain curves. Neither did it have four gears, only three on the column. You need the extra gear when you’re going down a steep incline. As we were heading down our first steep incline in Wyoming, we discovered that our gearshift wouldn’t stay in second without holding it up in position with one hand. We had no way of 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. 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 down mountain roads.

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, who was trying to learn how to drive a stick shift, 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. The van lurched forward, letting out a peal of rubber as he swung around the corner on two wheels. Steve Bancroft kept hollering out the right side door, holding up his middle finger as we tore up the street. When he turned around, he was so red in the face I thought he was going to pass out. He collapsed on the mattress in a spasm of laughter and coughing.

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 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 and her four kids. The kids were running all over the front yard when Mary Jo spotted our truck. She came to the curbside. 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 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 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 firm and muscular. She was a painter, like her husband. There were small spots of white paint along her arms. I stepped back, 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 Mac 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 toward the Coast.

In downtown St. Louis, as we were passing an Army surplus store, Greg shook me by the arm. "Stop the truck! Stop the truck!"

"What? What?" Thinking it was some emergency, or I was about to hit something I couldn't see, I rammmed on the brakes.

"I need to get me some pants," he said. "You can wait right here, just keep the motor running. Ass-wipe, you come inside with me." He dragged Steve by the arm. They ran into the store. The instant they went inside, Allison and I started making out. But before I could get a good hard-on, they came running back out of the store.

"Go, go, go!" shouted Greg. Steve was laughing. The store door opened and a store dick came sprinting 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.

"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 kicked 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, 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 to the base of the Wyoming highlands, a huge raised plateau before the Rocky Mountains. I 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 north of St. Louis, Allison said to pull down this side road. We 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. Allison's mother and father's house had been two miles south.

When we got back into our Pepsi van, Greg had put on his newly stolen Army cargo pants, which were loose and baggy.

I didn'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, when he disappeared into a food store and emerged with his pants bulging. 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 wondered what he didn't have jammed into those pants.

I said, "What happens if they catch you?"

"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 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 we crossed 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. That was Day 1.

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 in California 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 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, who acted as suspicious as possible. 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. Right behind the man, out slipped Greg with his cargo pants bulging with goodies. Out of his pants Greg pulled a pound of bacon, a dozen eggs, a squashed loaf of Wonder bread, and two enormous Idaho potatoes. Then some green onions, and two 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 quality time drinking our asses off. I kinda thought we’d be there by now. 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 out to California.”

“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 Wyoming border. 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 has a rifle, man! Floor this sucker! Go! Step on it!” I hesitated, not quite believing them this time.

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

Somewhere between Cheyenne and Rock Springs, Wyoming, they ground me down, and I pulled over. 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 five-foot pyramid of wood, and sat down to do some serious drinking on logs that acted as benches around our fire. We waited for darkness before striking a match. 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 a howl came out of the bushes. 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 howled with whatever it was that was out there, and I turned and noticed the moon which swerved over the horizon, which began way back in Illinois where we had started. I grew certain I could see all the way back to the beginning of time from our plateau in Wyoming.

"I saw the moon swerve," 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.

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 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 have gone into the waste lonely places / Behind the eye; the lost acres at the edge of smoky cities..." 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 from Allison's skin. It was still warm out, but a wind began picking up, making the flames 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."

"How can I rest in the days of my slowness?

I've become a strange piece of flesh....

I need an old crone's knowing....

Often I think of myself as riding—

Alone, on a bus through western country.

I sit above the back wheels, where the jolts are hardest....

All journeys, I think, are the same..."

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. The passing of the Sixties. None of it mattered. An internal river of words carried us away.

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. Allison screamed out with the pain and the joy.

At one point in the middle of the night I heard Greg saying, "Will you put your dick away, ass-wipe?"

After three days of complete and utter debauchery in our little encampment on that plateau in Wyoming, we headed west again. 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 passed 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 Clark. 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 honey-sotted bees. We'd been on the road so long, this seemed the ultimate return to civilization. It didn't seem possible one woman could contain so much soul. I had seen Janis 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. 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 would just

pound through your bones 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 to fight it off. 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, Zbigniew 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."

After stealing enough grocery food to last us two days on the road, we took Route 5 out of Portland, then turned to the coast.

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 a 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, we kept trying to hold the gear shift up in second to gear the truck down, because 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 mop 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 a red,

white and blue Pepsi van, going down the mountain, their turf. The nerve! 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! NASTURTIIUMS!

Then, suddenly, our brakes gave out., Fortunately we were at the bottom of our long descent into Eureka. We got out and looked at the blue smoking wheels of the Pepsi van. The awful, asbestos smell stuck in our throats and lungs. 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 limped, the whole way there in first gear.

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 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. 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. He got that van up on jacks and started right in by 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. We got a chance to slow down and relax. And Bo took us out at night to 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 only broke out about midday for about an hour, then it would get swallowed up in fog. All that grayness all the time wore on us. People would 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 all the time. Bo and his wife really started sniping at each other. We needed to get

the wheels back on our van and get the hell out before full-blown mayhem erupted. 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 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 Meckel. Ground Zero of the San Francisco Poetry Wars.

But we didn't settle in yet. Instead we continued down the coast until we came to Santa Cruz where parking was free. This seemed like a good town, situated right on the sea, with a boardwalk and an amusement park with roller coaster. It seemed untouched by time — 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. Who the hell puts a light post right smack dab in the middle of a campus parking lot in Irvine, California? I looked at everybody. They all stared at me dumbfounded. They'd gotten used to trusting in me with all the driving, like I was their father. I think it woke us all up.

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

Red crease marks ran across their foreheads. Their mouths hung open.

When we got to Laguna Beach, we stopped at the apartment house where one of my ex-students from Irvine, 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 that had three swings hanging in the darkness. We were both slugging down the 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.

“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. 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 my history there 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.

I Think I'm in Love With Mary Jo

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 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. (Poor Allison had gone back to her family's farm outside St. Louis, probably to raise lambs and raise babies.) 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 and do something wild with a poet. She'd made 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 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. After a few weeks of this, I began pushing Pamela off, saying I had more work to do. Well, she did not understand at all how anybody could refuse her sex. Men had never ever turned her down before. 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. That would be on Labor Day weekend.

We all went out to the woods together. Mitchell set up a big campfire and erected tents. All the kids were in one tent. Mitchell and Mary Jo had another tent. Pamela tagged along with me, and Greg and Steve, of course. Warren Jeffries, another ex-student of mine from my Irvine days, 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. They were yelling at the top of their lungs, so much so that people at neighboring campsites kept looking over. 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.

Her hand tightened its hold.

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

I nodded. She took my head and bent it to her upturned face. "I'll treat you real good."

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

That night I took Warren Jeffries out on a walk 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. My heart was racing. My head spun with the possibility of it all. Warren had just taken a mouthful of red wine.

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

"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. It was a real dare.

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. 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 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 played. Then on into San Jose, the future heart of the not yet invented Silicon Valley. The geniuses were already gathered in their garages there inventing. 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 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 buttery creaminess between her thighs. Jesus, I thought. Jesus.

We drove 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 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. 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 put it back on anyway. 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. 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 muumuu 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 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. 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.

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 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. 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 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, Puppets 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.

The San Francisco Poetry Wars

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 lie 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. This just happened overnight. 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 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 to steal rolls of toilet paper to keep expenses down. But the main thing I wanted was for Mary Jo to come over to see me. 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

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. 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.

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. 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.

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 Meckel standing stiffly outside Cody's Books as we came walking up.

Penny had met Von Meckel when he took 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.

Von Meckel 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 didn't mind pushing the edges a little.

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

"And you are?" Warren asked.

"I am Von Meckel. 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 Meckel 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 Meckel's arm and began dragging him off toward the campus.

"Faggot!" yelled Warren at Von Meckel's backside. Von Meckel 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 Meckel 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 Meckel 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 got a lot 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?

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. 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 Meckel 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 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 Meckel. 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 Meckel 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. They looked at me like a pack of baby raccoons. 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.

Angel With a Number

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 hitchhiked everywhere. It was almost normal then. We didn’t give him a second thought as we rolled past. But that was when the motor coughed and sputtered, and simply went dead. I pulled over onto the shoulder, and that was when he stepped 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 growing belly and smiled. He had a nice warm smile. You could say he sort of beamed. Well, I could say it anyway.

“Just head straight up Highway 1,” he said. He adjusted his wings so they fit the seat behind him better. “I’m heading north to Canada.”

I didn’t even touch the key and suddenly the motor was running again.

“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. You could see the number 1508 engraved in dark blue on his left forearm.



“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.

“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? I am sooo drunk!”

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 and suddenly 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. “Watch,” the creature touched one end of the cigarette. It started to glow as though someone were puffing on it.

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

“Ow!” he, jerked 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. He stuck his hand in the brown sack at his side and twisted the cap off his 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!*”

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, 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.

We heard the growling, bejeweled voice of King Richard Nixon. And we pulled the van to the shoulder of the road and stopped.

We sat looking at each other. Angel 1508, had a twisted, mystical smile on his lips, almost as if he knew beforehand what would be said.

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

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 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.

About Jerry Ratch

Jerry Ratch has published 13 books of poetry, the novel, *Wild Dreams of Reality*, and the memoir, *A Body Divided*, the story of a one-armed boy growing up in a two-fisted world. His latest book of poems is *Six-Second Rule*. His work can be purchased at www.jerryratch.com.



Jerry Ratch, age 25