

Meeting Gregory Corso

by Kurt Hemmer

In March 1996, Gregory Corso, the *enfant terrible* of the Beat Generation, was living with Roger Richards, a former book dealer, and his wife Irvyne. They were taking care of Corso, who was broke and had nowhere else to go. I was working on my master's degree at the University of Connecticut, hoping that organizing a reading with Corso would gain me some recognition from the committee reviewing my Ph.D. application. I also wanted a chance to meet the poet who was part of the upper echelon of Beat mythology that I was then studying with the Jack Kerouac scholar Ann Charters. I had arranged a reading for Corso for the following afternoon, and I wanted to see him in action before I drove him up to the university the next day. I imagined handshakes and backslaps from colleagues if I could only pull this off. Sweating and tense, I arrived twenty minutes early. Roger met me outside their apartment on Horatio Street in lower Manhattan, and we went to pick up some lunch at the local market. Gregory wasn't ready to see me yet. I was willing to spring for lunch, but Roger would have none of it. I was the guest and they would provide. We strolled down the street getting to know one another. Allen Ginsberg bought cannollis in this neighborhood. I had heard that Ginsberg was helping Gregory financially, so I asked Roger about him.

"You know the fucked up thing about Allen," Roger told me, "is that whenever you're

in a room with him and some famous person enters it's like you disappeared. He's always got one eye over your shoulder looking to see who just arrived. He's got to be in all the pictures. But you know when we're alone he cries and says he knows he's just a fake. Really, it's terrible."

At the market, Roger ordered some smoked salmon which was weighed, priced, and wrapped in plastic and we walked down the aisle looking for bread and condiments. As he walked slightly ahead of me, still talking about Ginsberg, he stuffed the salmon into the front of his pants. I had to gather myself and think. Maybe this was some hip way of carrying food to the check out. Maybe he had an itch or a rash and the salmon brought some relief. I knew in suburbia, where I was from, he could never pull this off. As soon as you tried to go through the doors the alarm would sound and the doors would lock. But how could I voice my concern to Roger? I'd just met him. I could see it now:

*Graduate student arrested for shoplifting;
unable to drive famous Beat poet to reading.*

I knew that I had to get out ahead of him before he tried to go through the electronic doors. The best thing to do was pretend that I wasn't with him. Roger picked up a few more things, which he didn't stuff into his pants, and waited in the checkout line.

“What does Gregory like to drink?” I asked.

“Vodka,” he said. “There’s a liquor store across the street.”

This was my chance. I would run across the street and when Roger was arrested for shoplifting, I would go back to the apartment and get Irvyne to help bail him out of jail. As I approached the electronic doors I gave one last look back at Roger, hoping that he had removed the salmon from his pants and that the itch had been relieved. But rather than seeing him pull a fish out of his pants I saw him take a small vial out of his pocket. He unscrewed the top, which had a small spoon connected to it, and took a quick snort while nonchalantly waiting in line. Now I knew I had to get out of there immediately. I didn’t think I had enough money to bail someone out on cocaine possession. I made my way out into the street, bumped into a cop on his beat, and nearly put something in my own pants.

Gregory wasn’t the only one who needed a drink this afternoon, so I found a big bottle of vodka and paid for it, anticipating the arrest of Roger across the street at any moment. But when I turned around, there he was smiling and talking, ready for lunch.

As we walked back, he said, “We got the salmon for free. I swiped it.”

“I know,” I said.

“You saw that? Well don’t tell Gregory. He’d be very upset. But we’re low on funds and salmon is so damn expensive in the city, but Gregory loves it.”

I’d been warned. Gregory Corso is a sexagenarian barbarian liable to pull down the panties of any co-ed he can get his hands on. I’d heard stories about him agreeing to read at other universities and not showing up. Or maybe he would show up and throw up on a college Dean or the Dean’s wife. Or maybe he’d get drugged-up and start yelling at librarians. Some people were sure that they’d heard of him standing up in the middle of a reading, walking to the back of the stage and taking a piss. Notorious for heckling other poets, he’d bellow obscenities at friends and foes alike. He’d scream “faggot” at Ginsberg when he was reading in a hall full of Ivy League professors. But this time he’d be by himself. He’d left a message on my answering machine yesterday, his sixty-sixth birthday: “Happy birthday! It’s a fucking beautiful night! Tomorrow for lunch at eleven is great. Maybe we can see my kid in New Haven on our way to the college. I haven’t seen him in years. His mother is keeping him away from his old man . . . yeah . . . maybe we’ll try to see him.” He blew a birthday party horn into the phone and hung up.

Earlier that week, he told me he was considering making this his last reading at a university. He really didn’t like these gigs. Too stuffy and critical. But his friends, James Rasin and Laki Vazakas, who had helped me get the Beat muse Herbert Huncke to read at UConn, had spoken highly of me. They watched *Monday Night Football* at Roger’s. James was working with Robert Mapplethorpe’s ex-lover, Jack Walls, on a screenplay about Mapplethorpe’s romance with Patti Smith in

the early '70s. Laki was working on a documentary about Huncke, but he wasn't going to be able to make Gregory's reading. Maybe he knew something was up. Maybe he thought the Dean shouldn't wear his new suit. But, then again, maybe this time was going to be different. It had to be different. My future as a graduate student depended on it.

The English Department at the University of Connecticut wasn't so sure Corso was a good idea. They were willing to give a few hundred dollars to get him up at the school, but they wanted me to take care of all the details, alone. That way when the puke hit the Dean I'd take the fall. Even Ann Charters warned me that I was taking a risk on this one.

"Gregory is still a wild boy," she told me. "Don't be surprised if he makes a scene."

Another professor recalled seeing Corso read at some Ivy League school in the '60s. Corso had played the clown, getting drunk and becoming belligerent with the audience, before taking off, probably with someone's girlfriend. The professor didn't plan on coming to the reading I'd spent a month preparing. Even Corso's friends from New York were full of trepidation. "You never know how Gregory's going to feel," they told me. "Just make sure you don't sit him next to the Dean." Maybe, if I was lucky, he would pass out on the stage and the police wouldn't have to be called in.

Driving down I-95 South on my way to Roger Richards's place to pick up Corso, I felt like the only one who believed this reading could be done and put me on good terms with the

serious scholars. As I merged with the city traffic, the realization hit me: I was going to bring to the University of Connecticut the man who named the flophouse at 9 rue Git-le-Coeur in Paris, the "Beat Hotel," the man who seduced dozens of Parisian girls with talk of graveyards, Rimbaud, and Shelley, the man who'd had visions in the Parthenon, the man who stole Kerouac's girlfriend from under his nose, the man whose name struck fear in the hearts of organizers of poetry readings throughout the world. Maybe my intrepidness would look good to the department chair. This event would show my commitment to the profession. Wasn't I bringing the twentieth-century Shelley to Storrs? But maybe I was delusional.

I agreed that the salmon episode would be Roger's and my secret. When we made our way into the apartment, Gregory Corso came out of the living room bouncing and smiling, inviting me to have a seat on the couch next to him. He was no longer the taut demon lover with curly, dark hair and the intense glare. His wild hair was white, pulled into a frenzied ponytail, much longer than how he wore it in the early Beat days. He had a lot more flesh on the chin, his nose seemed to have grown longer, and his eyes looked tired behind glasses that I hadn't recalled seeing in any of the Beat photos. The black turtleneck sweaters and long black overcoats had been replaced by a colorful paisley shirt. He looked like a friendly, but wearied troll, portly but animated, and his jocular presence made me blush at my initial apprehension. His movements were quick and spontaneous, not stylized and cool, and he seemed to be having

more of a dialogue with himself than with anyone else in the room. When I realized he wasn't going to attack, I began mixing the vodka with apple juice for myself. No one else was drinking. Here I was drinking next to Gregory Corso and somehow I managed to throw out the name of his favorite poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley.

"That man was a saint," said Gregory in his endearing nasally whine that seemed to fit how he looked now more than it did the handsome hooligan of the 1950s. We talked about William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, about what a coquette Claire Clairmont was and what a piss poor father Byron had been. We talked about the mind of Mary and how it might not have been Shelley's child that Harriet was carrying when she drowned herself. He told me about seeing the original painting *Shelley at the Baths of Calcutta*. I had recently read Richard Holmes' *Shelley: The Pursuit*, and Gregory and I began exchanging our favorite anecdotal stories about Shelley. "Shelley loved the Irish," explained Gregory. "He'd write pamphlets about the emancipation of the Catholics that really stuck it into the English arses." I recalled how a copy of Keats was in Shelley's pocket when he washed up dead on the shore after his boat, the *Don Juan*, flipped over in a storm. I was in.

The talk moved to William S. Burroughs, author of *Naked Lunch*, who had shot his wife in Mexico City in 1951 while playing William Tell cocked on gin. Burroughs had claimed that the incident was the result of being possessed by something he called the Ugly Spirit. "Bill never forgave himself for

that," Gregory told me. "Here was a man who prided himself on being the most intelligent, the most rational, and then he goes and does something just plain STUPID like play William Tell while he's drunk. He invented that whole possession by the Ugly Spirit bullshit because he couldn't face the fact that he had just done something fucking stupid."

We talked about Gregory's visit to see Burroughs in Tangier, where he also met Tennessee Williams. "Tennessee Williams was one of the kindest men I ever met. I wasn't queer, but I was much better looking back then. We were drinking at a table, a whole group of us. Someone had told him that I was broke, and while we sat there he slipped me some money under the table. He didn't want me to pay him back. He was taking care of one of his own."

Suddenly, Gregory demanded silence. Kato was on *Geraldo* and Gregory had to hear what was going on with the O. J. Simpson trial.

"I hope they nail that fucker," snarled Gregory.

At the end of the show, Gregory told me it was time for his nap. I said ok and expected him to go into his room. But he just sat there and stared at me. Eventually it occurred to me that his bed was the couch we were sitting on.

I sat with Irvyne just outside the kitchen and watched Gregory sleep. Drunk and glowing after my afternoon with Gregory, I thanked her and Roger for having me over. I

left a handful of books for Gregory to sign, and the next day I discovered that he had signed each one differently and not stolen a single one.

Gregory Corso was born on MacDougal Street in Greenwich Village across from the San Remo bar on March 26, 1930 to Michelina and Fortunato. The birth was geographically auspicious. A few decades later in the San Remo, Corso would frolic with Jackson Pollock, Gore Vidal, Miles Davis, and fellow Beat writers. But unlike some of the other Beat writers, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs, Corso did not have the cushion of falling back on the family when his funds ran too low to maintain his bohemian lifestyle. He was more like the Beat muses Herbert Huncke and Neal Cassady—a street kid. His mother abandoned him when he was six months old, and his father sent him to foster care. Three sets of foster parents later, he returned to his father and his new stepmother. When he wet his bed, his stepmother would scream through the tenement halls, “He wets the bed, he wets the bed!” He was sent to a youth home after stealing from the neighbors and there he smashed his hands through a window.

Finally, he landed at Bellvue Hospital children’s observation unit at the age of twelve. After getting out and spending time in another home, he lived a life of stealing his meals from little girls on their way to school and sleeping on subways among derelicts and junkies. At the age of sixteen, with two accomplices, he organized an elaborate robbery of a Household Finance office, using two-way radios. When

his partners in crime were caught, they informed on him and he was picked up in Florida decked out in a zoot suit, and sent to Clinton State Prison. The good-heartedness of the Mafia inmates and his screwball antics kept him from being the resident bitch. During his three-year internment he educated himself with the help of another inmate. They read Dostoyevsky, Flaubert, and Greek mythology. Corso began writing poetry.

In 1950, shortly after his release from prison, while having a drink in the Pony Stable, a lesbian bar in the Village, he struck up a conversation with a quirky, bespectacled man. The guy was putting the make on Corso, but he claimed to be a fellow poet and admired the collection of neatly typed poems Corso had with him. As legend has it, Corso described to his new friend a couple he had been watching across the street from his new apartment who frequently had sex with the blinds open. As the couple made love, Corso would jerk off. As it turned out, the male half of the couple who had given Corso so much pleasure was his new friend, Allen Ginsberg. The irony, of course, was that Ginsberg was predominantly gay. The two were instantly tight. Soon Ginsberg introduced Corso to the girl across the street, to Kerouac, and his other Beat friends, and Corso became part of the movement known as the Beat Generation.

Over the years Corso gained the respect of many poetry enthusiasts and scholars, and was even touted as a descendant of European traditions as much as a Beat bad boy. His poems were published in major anthologies and his name was frequently encountered

in biographies and articles examining the Beats, though the fame achieved by Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs eluded him. Moreover, Kerouac pissed him off by basing the character Yuri Gligoric, the betraying friend who steals Kerouac's girlfriend in the novel, *The Subterraneans*, (1958) on him. Defending himself, Corso told me, "Back then everyone was fucking everybody."

On March 28, 1996, morning of the reading, I was feeling a bit sour after spending the night after visiting Gregory on the upper-West side. We didn't have time to stop and see his kid in New Haven on the ride up to UConn. Gregory was nervous about the reading and drinking vodka from the bottle, spilling some of it in the back of my car. We had to make a few piss stops before arriving at the university. I put him in my dorm room with Roger, had some vodka myself, and made sure everything was going well at the Doris & Simon Konover Auditorium, where he would read at 4 pm. When I got back, I found Gregory sitting on the bed trying to look nonchalant, like I wouldn't notice that the room reeked of cologne. He had helped himself to a bottle of *Obsession* by Calvin Klein, which I kept on the dresser, but he was trying to distract me by looking at the shelves.

"You got us all up there," he said, looking at my collection of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs, and probably happy to see most of his books up there, too. At least he'd smell good for the Dean. I showed him a poem I had written, "An Unpublished Poet," inspired by his poem, "I Am 25." In that work, Gregory goes to the homes of old

poetmen and "rip[s] out their apology-tongues/ and steal[s] their poems."

He looked at me like he had just caught me with his daughter, his hands clenched the bed sheets and his eyes bulged. Didn't I know how uncouth it was to force my drivel, like so many other hacks, on his tender and poem-wary eyes? But he sat on the edge of my bed and read it, probably figuring that he owed me as much for the cologne. "You go much further than me. I only steal the old poetmen's poems, you murder them," Gregory observed. "But I like it anyway."

Waiting outside the auditorium he paced with nervous energy. Flapping his arms, running his hands through his hair, talking to himself incessantly, and swigging the bottle of vodka, he looked like a man psyching himself up for a brawl. "They won't like me," he said. "Do these kids even know who I am, Kurt?" All the self-doubt was creeping back into him, even after all these years. Not wanting to be rejected, not wanting to be abandoned. Out in the audience over one hundred people waited for him. I finally got him onto the stage and he immediately began to speak. "You can hear me back there?" he asked the audience.

"Can I introduce you?" I asked him.

"*Pardon*," he said.

"Don't let it happen again," I said, feeling by this time I could joke around with him. "Please welcome my friend and poet, Gregory Corso."

But he really wasn't my friend. Excited by our time together, happily surprised by

his politeness, his humor, and charm, I wanted to be his friend. But I wasn't. Introducing him after all the planning and organizing, and bringing him from New York, was a thrill and a relief. I had done it. Yet the real highlight came just before he read "I Am 25," when he told the audience, "This is one Kurt likes, I didn't like it because I used the word 'hate.'" But he read it anyway, and I thought it was just for me.

"I HATE OLD POETMEN!" belched Gregory. An English professor in the audience turned to one of my friends and whispered, "O, how the mighty have fallen."

During the reading, Gregory said, "I wouldn't even call myself a poet, I don't know what the hell I am." But his performance inspired cheers. At the end I gave Gregory a hug, but he tightened up, not feeling we were that close yet. I was happy that the Dean didn't need to go to the cleaners (as a matter of fact, the Dean hadn't shown up at all).

People lined up to get books signed. One young woman came up with a napkin. "I won't sign a napkin," snarled Gregory. The young woman's heart sank. I felt bad for her. "But I will sign a poem," he said with a smile, which she graciously returned. He was flirting and probably reminiscing about the times when he used to get laid after gigs like this. He read out loud as he wrote, "I want to stick . . ." I started to sweat, looking around to see if anyone important was listening. The place seemed to have gone suddenly silent. ". . . my rose . . .," Gregory continued, to my relief and apparently to the relief of a few gentlemen in line, as well. ". . . into your . . .," Gregory

began again. I could feel a collective holding of breath as the tension reached its peak. ". . . heart," Gregory concluded, as I looked for the vodka bottle, despite my relief, and secretly wishing I had been the one asking him to sign a napkin.

After the book signing, someone brought their four-year-old cherub, a little blond girl in white, who looked up at Gregory in disbelief, to meet the old Beat. She looked up at Gregory in disbelief as if she had been enchanted by a sorcerer. She gazed at him in amazement as he recited lines from, of all things, "Bomb": "BOOM ye skies and BOOM ye suns/BOOM BOOM ye moons ye stars BOOM/nights ye BOOM ye days ye BOOM/..." I was ready for him to double-snap clap, slap his head, and go "woob woob woob" like Curly, the Stooge. His screwball antics had the cherub laughing sweetly, and maybe we got a glimpse of how he survived Clinton State.

That afternoon in Storrs, Connecticut he wasn't the sexagenarian barbarian I had heard about. There was no puke on the Dean (though I was rejected from the Ph.D. program a month later anyway). With a friend, I took Gregory and Roger to Hartford for their train back to New York. I played pinball with Gregory before the train came. He asked me if I wanted something to eat. I was too juiced up and excited to get anything down.

"I don't like it when people don't eat," he said solemnly to himself. We shook hands good-bye, and he waived from the train—the last time I ever saw him.