

*BERKELEY DAZE: PROFILES OF POETS IN BERKELEY IN THE '60S* (the missing pages from the online Big Bridge version  
<https://bigbridge.org/BD-TOC.HTM>)

## Patricia Turrigiano



**PATRICIA TURRIGIANO** was born in 1940 in San Pedro, California. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Berkeley and a MFA in art from Mills College in Oakland. She now lives on the Mendocino coast where she continues to do art and write.

## WHY DO WOMEN FALL FOR POETS AND THE DAY I MET GINSBERG

Poets make lousy husbands. They should be made to wear signs around their necks reading “Beware, Approach at your own Risk.” But they don’t, and young women fall for them like “nine pins down on the donkey’s commons.” Why do women fall for poets? Falling for a poet is a bad idea. Most women who do are marked like the blue whales attached by giant squid; the grappling takes it toll. But still in the long run, the women survive, and these same poets can make pretty good ex-husbands. “Why?” Well it could be because they’re already dead from a life of whoring, drinking and drugs, and can’t make you miserable anymore, but on a more positive note, it is often because they came to their senses at the edge of oblivion, the brink of extinction, got religion, took the cure, married again, tried fathering again, became loving respectful sons again, even monks or priests, in short, they decided to live and write and not bite so much.

Berkeley in the early 60’s was a young person’s paradise, a seeker’s candy store, a miracle, a double edged sword, a giver of gifts and a taker of dreams. And, if you got a poet raw and untamed, the way Richard Denner came to me, it’s like grabbing the tiger by the tail. Richard is still the quintessentially quirky Berkeley poet. His galloping, lopsided inquisitiveness is fueled by an immense creative spirit and sense of the absurd. He has an off the wall sense of humor, and in the old days was hampered only by his annoying lack of mental equilibrium. He often could and did look like a dark bird of prey walking the Berkeley streets in his black pants and jacket, his pale skin set off all the more by his lank black hair which fell to his shoulders, his fingers stained yellow from nicotine. He was a mighty sight, self-absorbed, narcissistic and a pain in the ass for anyone who loved him. But in a fey sort of way, outrageously beautiful. Ergo, the perfect example of an angst torn poet. Perfecto!

We took classes or hung out on Telegraph Ave at the Café Med sipping espressos and cappuccinos. We saw the entire repertoire of foreign films at a small pillar infested theater on Telegraph Ave. All seats were a buck and no one complained about the pillars. We craned our necks to read the subtitles and were riveted by the dramas unfolding on the screen. The movies were a revelation, an education. We stumbled out filled with love, sorrow, and rage, transfigured by the beauty and pain of existence. It was a baptism of fire. We drank cheap Mountain Red, drank strong coffee, smoked thousands of Gaulois and unfiltered camels and sat up until dawn debating philosophy, politics, poetry, literature and music. We would leave the Café Med in a tangle of lovers and friends and walk down to San Pablo Ave to seedy blues and folk music dives like the Blind Lemon, where we’d continue our enthusiastic conversations until they closed shop. We thought we had the world by its balls and we loved it.

Richard was an enfant terrible: terribly naïve, terribly attractive, and terribly narcissistic. Not a good combination for a mate, but compelling as a poet lover. We had called it quits by the time of the Berkeley Poets Conference, but remained friends, and he dropped by on occasion to visit the kids. So, I wasn’t alarmed when he asked if he could have a few poet friends over my house – he had no place to entertain friends – after the Berkeley Poets Conference. I was a bohemian at heart, of course I said yes.

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I don't know if Ginsberg remembered meeting me, but I remember meeting Ginsberg. My house full of young men in black. They were in the hallway, in the front room on the couch and floor, in the bedrooms perched on the beds, they were going through my kitchen cupboards and refrigerator scouting for food. There were jugs of red wine, and in the center of the room, a whole key of marijuana being cleaned and prepared for smoking.

I carried the girls into their bedroom at the back of the house to put them to bed. Kirsten who was 3 and ½ years old was asleep in minutes, but Gina, who was 2, was still in diapers and needed changing. I had her feet clamped firmly in hand, wash cloth at the ready, her bare bottom pointing like a compass directly at the bedroom door, when it swung open revealing Richard, as serious as a priest, leading a stocky older man with a head of kinky hair, and a big nose. I looked up from my task. They looked down, then quickly up, their eyes flicking uncontrollably as they struggled to focus on me, when with as much dignity as he could muster, Richard cleared his throat and said in a portentous voice as if introducing God, "Pat, this is Alan Ginsberg, Alan this is my wife Pat." I had read *Howl*. I knew who Ginsberg was. Ginsberg's eyes slipped down again. He was like an alien witnessing resident specie's biological oddities and thinking, "Man, this is something to howl about." To his credit, he managed a courteous bow and nod of the head. I nodded back, they withdrew, and the door closed. There I was, marooned, immersed in the world of children, and there they were moving off to the praise of their admirers. I mentally chalked up one more point against Richard.

Once the girls were asleep, I wandered around for a while listening to snatches of conversation and bits of poems. The young men were piled in drifts at Ginsberg's feet, like sand blown against a rock. They hung on his every word, and when a young boy started to read his poem and solemnly pronounced "Fuck, fuck, fuck" and I found myself having to turn away, to hide my smile. I went back to the kids. It was OK.