

CHIRON review

ISSUE #140, SPRING 2026

ST. JOHN, KANSAS



Gregory Corso and Robert Yarra, Rome, 1986



interviewed by John Wisniewski

Life, Literature, & Luminaries: An Interview with Robert Yarra, Founder of the Golda Foundation

JOHN: When did you begin writing, and what inspires you?

ROBERT: Books have always been my passion, and most of my heroes were writers. I started writing in Miss Fontana's 4th grade class – then stopped for half my life when I became an immigration attorney – before taking it up again after selling my law practice.

I write stories from my life, mostly about the extraordinary people I've known, as well as the wacky and wonderful adventures and misadventures I've had, which are the inspiration for my writing.

MEETING CORSO

The first time I saw Gregory Corso was in the fall of 1983, one day when I was wandering the streets of North Beach, San Francisco. I was too shy to approach him, so I just followed him for ten or fifteen minutes until, at last, he went into Gino and Carlo's Bar on Green Street. But, almost immediately, he

came out again, and with two big guys at his side. Pointing his finger at me, he roared, "That guy is following me, man!" I beat the scene, pronto. [Photo above, Corso in Italy, below with Vali Myers, Italy.]



A few days later, on the way to my law office in North Beach, I stopped at the Caffè Trieste, and there again was Gregory. He was sitting at a table with people I happened to know, the poets Rosemary Manno and Marty Matz.

They invited me to join them. I did. I never made it to the office that day, as, hours later, I was dining and drinking

wine with my new friend Gregory Corso, whose friendship changed my life. Through Gregory, I met Allen Ginsberg, Vali Myers, and a treasure trove of other luminaries whom I wrote about in my book, *Gregory Gave Me the World*.

MEETING GINSBERG

In 1984, Gregory invited me to meet him at the Royal Albert Hall in London for a reunion of the 1965 Wholly Communion International Poetry Incarnation, at which he, Allen, and other luminaries had read. Delighted, I accepted the invitation. I arrived in London the week before the event and telephoned the hotel where Gregory had said he and Allen would be staying.

The hotel operator put me through to Allen, who said that Gregory's flight had been delayed, and to meet him at the hotel. We talked for a while, then Allen invited me to accompany him to Liverpool, where he had a poetry reading scheduled. I was thrilled by his offer and, of course, accepted.



Traveling with him for a few days, with stops and visits with his friends on the way to Liverpool, was heady and glorious. I remember at one stop eating haggis (a pudding, as you may know, containing sheep's heart, liver, and lungs), a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, I pray. [Photo above: Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and Robert Yarra at Naropa, 1985.]

Allen was a real pro, and I admired his preparation, with sound checks and other details, before the reading in Liverpool. He read brilliantly to an adoring crowd, and, afterwards, we returned to the grand old majestic Adelphi Hotel where we were staying.

There, at the hotel bar, Allen started reciting William Blake's poem, "London," from his *Songs of Experience*:

I wander thro' each charter'd street,
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,

And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infants cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.

How the Chimney-sweeper's cry
Every blackning Church appalls,

And the hapless Soldier's sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls.

But most thro' midnight streets I hear
How the youthful Harlot's curse
Blasts the new-born Infant's tear
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.

When he had finished reciting the first stanza, I chimed in for the second. Blake was my favorite poet, and I knew that poem by heart. Then Allen recited the third stanza, and I did the fourth and last – after which we smiled at each other for a few seconds, memorable smiles of recognition and friendship.

Later that evening, there was a knock on my hotel room door, and there was Allen dressed only in his white tee shirt and underpants. Immediately understanding his amorous intentions – which I hoped to divert – I said, enthusiastically, “Let’s call Gregory!” and placed the long-distance call to San Francisco. So, they spoke together for about fifteen or twenty minutes. Afterward, Allen turned to me with an innocent look and said, “You must be rich!” Without answering that, I grabbed him by the shoulders, turned him gently around, marched him to the door, and whispered a tender good-night.

On our return to London, Allen chose me and a funny, quick-witted fellow named Alan Wyse to buy heroin for Gregory, who would be arriving junk-sick at Heathrow Airport the following day. Wyse had overseen the arrangements (lodging, transportation, etc.) for the poets at the Royal Albert Hall reading.

He also happened to be the manager of the singer Nico, who was herself a heroin addict, so he was hip to the drill. However, he and Nico lived in Manchester, and he lacked heroin connections in London. So, all night, we went from one junkie haven to another, trying to score for Gregory – without getting robbed and murdered. Finally, at dawn, we copped from a dwarf in a drug den at a seamy housing project, and had just enough time to get to the airport to meet Gregory. When he spotted me, he asked, “You got it?” I handed him the stuff, and he went posthaste to the bathroom. He emerged a new man.

Allen was waiting for Gregory when our car pulled up at the hotel, and I witnessed a pattern of behavior which, I eventually came to know, was their way of greeting each other after a long absence. They would touch foreheads, look into each other’s eyes, and talk about whatever was important at the time.

With their foreheads touching, I heard Allen say, sadly, to Gregory, “Our friend Trocchi is gone.” Alexander Trocchi, the Scottish novelist

– was also a heroin addict – who had taken part in the 1965 “Wholly Communion” reading at the Royal Albert.

After our time together in England, Allen was always good to me, and sometimes included me in his activities. Once, he invited me to go to Czechoslovakia with him to meet Vaclav Havel, but I couldn’t go because of work commitments. Indeed, I used to get calls from all over the world – from clients he had referred to me. Altogether, I found Allen to be brilliant, fearless, and generous. Here’s an example: at a dinner with the promoter of the Albert Hall event a few days before the reading, Allen told the promoter to donate Allen’s own \$3000 reading fee – a lot of money in 1984 – to four poets, and to tell them that the money came from him – the promoter. Three poets, whose names I’ve forgotten, were to split \$1000 three ways. The other \$2000 was to go to Basil Bunting, a once-renowned but now pretty much forgotten poet, 84 years old, living in obscurity in Northumberland. Bunting was so grateful that he positively glowed during the poetry reading and at the party that took place the next day at the swanky Chelsea Arts Club. It was a resurrection for him to be once again among famous poets of the time. And Allen’s timing was prescient, as Bunting died the following April. Generosity was in Allen’s DNA, and, in various ways, he helped out many people. The last time I saw him was in New York in 1996, when I introduced my son Gabriel to him. Playfully he said, “You have your father’s eyes. You’re doomed.”

MEETING BURROUGHS

William Burroughs was my professor at CCNY one semester in 1974, a course titled “Literature and the Supernatural.” William had taken “the cure” in London. Now, he needed a job, and it was Allen who got him the gig at my college. There was no syllabus. Mostly, it was William telling stories in his nasally voice, while dragging deep on the cigarette he held in his left hand – the one missing the top digit of his pinkie finger, which, in connection with some odd romantic episode, he had cut off with poultry shears. He was writing about the mobster, Dutch Schultz, at that time, and he would tell us extraordinary stories about him – or anyone or anything else that came to mind. Every freak in New York showed up to audit that course, and he gave all the enrolled students an A.

One day I sent him a story I had written, with the title, “Dude University,” along with a letter asking some questions, including why he had shot his wife.

Here is the answer he sent me:

January 18, 1975
77 Franklin St
NYC 10013
USA

Dear Robert Yarra:

Sorry to be months late in answering your letter(.) Have been traveling giving reading in short trying to hustle a living and despite rumors to the contrary I have no other source of income and that answers one of your questions right there: 'Why are you a writer and when did you realize it?' I realized it when I sold my first book Junkie in 1953. I became a writer when I found I could make a living from writing. That also answers your question as to why I keep going.

If some one falls down stairs or runs his car into a tree on some level he intended to do just that. If he is not able to contact the level of intention he says it was an accident from which we can derive a definition of an 'accident': an event over noe [sic] has or had no conscious control therefore doesn't know why he did it. The death of my wife was to the best of my conscious knowledge an accident. I just don't know.

Your letter is also difficult to answer since you seem to have me confused with Kerouac and two more dissimilar individuals would be hard to find. I am not Kerouac nor was meant to be.

How much actual clinical madness have you seen? To me insanity and madness are the least interesting things because a psychotic is reactin(g) compulsively and therefore predictably to past conditioning. Press the same button and the same thing happens every time. And I find that about as boring as anything could be. I suspect that by madness you mean excentricity. No I have not met thousands of madmen or even excentrics. Most of my time for the past 15 years has been spent in front of a typewriter writing. And for the past seven years I have led the life of a recluse seeing almost nobody, except the characters I created on paper. Writers just don't have time to lead glamorous extroverted lives and know thousands or even hundred of people. Here in New York there are only a handful of people that I see regularly ... Allen Ginsberg, John Giorno, Gragor Corso occasionally, several painters, a few writers, some business contacts.

Liked your university idea but feel you could develop a more detailed curriculum. I mean how do you train people to be all around sons of bitches?

Well, all the best for 75 and success in a difficult and often thankless profession. Give me a ring if you feel like it. I'm in the phone book.

Have a good year.

William Burroughs

The next – and last – time I saw Burroughs was at Naropa University in 1985, when he was teaching there, and Gregory and I were roommates at the “Varsity Townhouses” in Boulder, Colorado. One day, Gregory and I walked into Burroughs’s office, and James Grauerholz, Burroughs’s manager, bodyguard – he was a big man – and all-around aide-de-camp, upon seeing Gregory, jumped up, stood in front of him, and said, in a mildly menacing voice, “We aren’t going to have any trouble, today, Gregory, are we?” Gregory told me later that he had once said some hurtful things to William about how he had raised his son, Billy Burroughs, a novelist and drug addict who died tragically at the age of thirty-three, and concerning whom William felt great remorse and guilt.

Gregory told me later that he and William had since been reconciled.

THE GOLDA FOUNDATION

I started the Golda Foundation – which I named after my mother – at the urging of my accountant, who saw me writing numerous checks to my impoverished artist friends and thought that creating a nonprofit foundation would provide a tax break. The tax break never really worked out, but the foundation has continued for around twenty-five years. Our goal is to help artists, primarily by publishing their writing. The Golda Foundation has published eight books so far, and there are two more in the pipeline. Then, I plan to retire on my laurels from the business, a business where I’m guaranteed to lose money, and sometimes friends. All my books are love letters to my friends, in the hope of keeping the memory of them, and their legacy, alive.

I don’t write poetry. However, the Golda Foundation has published poetry by Ira Cohen, Herbert Kearney, Ronald Sauer, and Rosemary Manno.

FAVORITE PAINTERS OR WRITERS, EXCLUDING POETS

I could name a hundred names, and still forget a hundred more.

Writers: Rabelais, Swift, Flaubert, Melville, Blaise Cendrars, Celine, Hamsun, Henry Miller, Kerouac, Hemingway, Scott Fitzgerald, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Gorky, Dickens, Orwell, Cervantes, Joyce, Huysmans, Cormac McCarthy, Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett,

D.H. Lawrence, Malcolm Lowry, Virginia Woolf, Thomas Wolfe, James Baldwin, Henry James, Doris Lessing, Steinbeck, Conrad, Poe, Mark Twain, Ralph Ellison, Kurt Vonnegut, J.D. Salinger, Thomas Hardy, Thomas Pynchon, Saul Bellow, Hawthorne, Fielding, Oscar Wilde, Ford Madox Ford, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Roberto Bolano, Mario Vargas Llosa, Kafka, William S. Burroughs, J.M. Coetzee, Fielding, Faulkner, Irvine Welsh, E.M. Forster, Joseph Mitchell, Mohammed Mrabet, Paul Bowles, George Orwell, Orhan Pamuk, Tennessee Williams ... I could go on, but I won't.

Painters: Rembrandt, Titian, Bosch, Van Gogh, Monet, Picasso, Chagall, Max Ernst, Cezanne, Kandinsky, Arshile Gorky, Turner, Matisse, Gauguin, Munch, Vermeer, Miro, Artemisia Gentileschi, Courbet, Klimt, Delacroix, Botticelli, Edward Hopper, Dali, Magritte, Leger, Whistler, Renoir, de Chirico, Toulouse-Lautrec, John Sloan, Reginald Marsh, and my friends, Rik Lina, George Long, Aung Aung Taik, and Gustavo Rivera.

EARLY YEARS

I grew up on the Lower East Side of New York, when it was dangerous and dirty. I was always the smartest kid in my class through junior high school. Then, I went to Stuyvesant High School, a school for smart boys where, probably, all the students had been the smartest in their classes, and that experience rather humbled me.

As a teenager, my family and I moved from our tenement apartment at 420 Grand St. – \$41 a month rent, roaches included – to the Masaryk Towers at 71 Columbia St., a tough neighborhood close to the low-income Baruch Housing Project. The new friends I made there were hoodlums and criminals, mostly ex-Yeshiva boys, who liked to live on the edge – and often beyond. We had wild adventures, did crazy things, things that would have gotten us arrested nowadays, but, back then, around 1969, 1970, the New York City cops didn't bother you if you didn't bother them. We had a crash pad on East Second St. near Ave. C – no-man's-land at that time – where we got wasted on whatever was available, and then two or three of us would head out, looking for runaway girls or any girl unsuspecting enough to be lured into our den. Those were wild times, and many of our crew died young. Somehow, I was lucky.

FUTURE PLANS

I plan to publish two or three more books. One I'm excited about is Edgar Oliver's book of plays, *The Ghost of Brooklyn*. Edgar is a

renowned actor, poet, and playwright based in New York, and he is also a storyteller for The Moth, the traveling story-telling group. I also plan to publish the poems of the New York poet, Theodore Schroetter and the Italian poet, Gianni Menichetti.

I hope to retire from publishing soon, but continue to write.

I've had enough of America for the present and will continue traveling to Asia, Mexico, Europe, and Medellin, Colombia, where my son lives.

Most of my closest friends are dead, so I keep moving – to forget them and have new adventures. The road still beckons, and I want to keep going while I can.

All my parts are working, and I have some cash in my pocket. I'm a lucky fellow.

ROBERT YARRA: The above writings on Gregory Corso and Allen Ginsberg have appeared in the following two books: *Gregory Gave Me the World* (Counter Culture Chronicles, the Hague, Netherlands, available on the Golda Foundation website, www.golda-foundation.org); and *Gregory Corso: Ten Times A Poet* (Leon Horton, Ed., Roadside Press). And my piece, "Don't Step Lively, Lads," a satire – but a loving one – on Corso, Burroughs, Ginsberg, and a few other of the Beats, has also been published by the Counter Culture Chronicles. And I hope more is to come.



Gregory Corso, Rome, 1986
photo by Robert Yarra



Robert Yarra

Robert Yarra

Don't Step Lively, Lads!

To Poet, and My Captain, Ira Cohen

*For dear gone poets: Ira Cohen, Gregory Corso, Bob Kaufman,
Marty Matz, Howard Hart, Kirby Doyle, Allen Ginsberg,
and William Burroughs*

Captain! O, Captain Ira! Methinks we got us a mutiny on our hands, sir.

This crew won't do a thing I tells 'em. A rum lot the bunch o' 'em, sir. I suspect they be buggerers, sodomites, sods, wankers, degenerates, perverts, and deviants, the lot of 'em!

I tells 'em "All hands on deck!" They tells me I says, "All hands on dick!" And proceeds to have a circle jerk! Was half a mind to join 'em meself, sir. It looked like they was havin' a fine ol' time. But, I didn't, you know. Discipline, sir.

I threatens 'em with the lash and they begs fer it!

I promises 'em grog if they behave, but they yells fer absinthe, and laudanum, and faery dust! What do they think, we're in a fancy French cathouse and not out at sea?

I don't likes it one bit, sir. No. Not me. There's trouble a-brewin'. I kin smell it.

I thinks the leader o' this foul pack o' jackals is a fella by the name o' Gregory. A bad 'un, sir. Always has a snarl on his face. Always tellin' me to dig the ballgame. What ballgame when we be miles from land! Always rearin' his head back like he's a betteren' me, tryin' to be tall like, which he ain't, and sayin' "I'm the Poet, man. I took the shot." What's he meanin' by that? Always tellin' the rest o' the crew "Here and now, boys. Here and now." He's up to somethin'! He's the ringleader, all right. Got the map o' trouble written all over 'is face, that one.

And then there's a bloke name o' Bobby. A dark one he is, sir. Won't follow not one order I gives 'im. Always jabberin' about some bloke named Lorca. And "all those ships that never sailed." And here we be a thousand miles from land! Can't make him out no way, sir. Definitely has a screw loose.

And there be a mate by the name o' Marty. Now I never seen a lazier fella in all me life! Don't never get out of 'is bunk 'cept to snort somethin' or swig somethin'. Always talkin' about butterfly wings and tortured serape and perpetual wanderer. And that he hears stone growin' in a cliff! Who ever heard o' such a thing? Half the time, I

can't makes out what he means. An' he and that Bobby fella always have their heads together. They be cookin' up somethin' foul. O' that, I'm sure.

And there be a fella name o' Howard. He ain't a bad 'un really, but he is a bit daft. When he gets all crazy he starts in a-playin' with his own excrement! Kind of ecstatic. Like he sees visions. Soon he'll be talkin' in tongues. Got a voice sounds like a cornet. Not half bad. Always talkin' about someone named Lady Day or sayin' "my lady must be cool." That don't do no good talkin' about ladies when there ain't none around, and him a stirrin' up the few mates who might not be sodomites, to start in on a-buggerin' each other!

And then there's a bloke name o' Kirby. He's a big 'un. Wouldn't want to tangle with that one. No sir. Not me. Can tell that he's a bit tetched in the head, sir. Strange, though, from such a big an' rough bloke, all these pretty high-falutin' words come out o' his mouth. You wouldn't o' thought that he could speak the King's English as good as he does. But you can tell that he don't like authority. Not one o' them rascals do! This Kirby is always a-railin' 'gainst somethin'. Usually the church. I think he be a heathen. Not a God-fearin' Christian fella. Not him, sir. And he talks to hisself! You can leave fer an hour and come back and there he be, still a-cursin' an a-yellin' an a-railin' away. I wouldn't want to be a preacher on this ship, not with the likes o' him around. Wouldn't be safe.

Then there's a fella name o' Allen. A Hebe, sir. Tain't none of 'em any good, sir. He's always a stirrin' up trouble, always organizin' somethin'. It's in that Hebe blood! I got a feelin' that he be a Bolshevik. An' he's always a tryin' to get the few non-pederasts on board to bugger him! It happened to me, sir. It really did. He came into me hotel room in the middle o' the night in Liverpool wearin' only his skivvies! I had to think mighty fast to get outta that one! He's definitely the organizer. No doubt about it. He's promotin' those other fellas to do somethin' big. He a fearless 'un, though. Gotta give him that. Helps his mates, and is generous, too. But he's always takin' off his clothes and sayin' that he ain't got nothin' to hide. Gotta watch out fer one like that!

And finally, there's a fella by the name o' William. There's somethin' mighty strange about 'im. Don't dress like the rest o' the fellas. Always dressin' like he's a goin' to church. But I bet he never does. I think he be carryin' a pistol. We gotta be careful. Looks like he could shoot someone on a dare. Talks in a kinda nasally voice. Got a feelin' that he's on drugs, too. Got that feelin' about the lot o' 'em! This one, William, I think he's kinda kinky, kinda queer like. Probably an agent provocateur type o' fella. Could be a plant. Better hold on to

your knickers 'cause Willy the Rat is on board! And he and that Allen fella. Always a gigglin' together like little schoolgirls. Almost never sees 'em apart.

Well, that's me report, sir.

If you woulda been a more innerested kind o' captain, you woulda known this fer yerself. Half the time, no one understands yer orders. I can't hardly figger out what ye be a sayin' meself. An' yer never here when we need yer. A fine captain ye be. No wonder the crew's in such a sorry state! Could tell ye'd rather be off on a mountaintop, dancin' and singin' and incantin' with yer ragtag buddies, under the moon and stars. Yer no better than the rest o' these lubbers. Ye'd fit right in with this crew.

I got me a good mind to drop yer all off at the next port. In Xanadu. Or Ithaka. Or Byzantium.

And me, here, workin' me fingers right down to the elbow fer all these years, while ye all be out there havin' a merry ol' time. Makes no sense. No, sir, it don't make no sense. What was I a-thinkin'? Was I a-thinkin' at all?

Now that I finally think about it, is it too late to join ye?