

# A Word, It's Just a Word

## Rick Tuttle's Flag Day Poem in Four Parts

"and the tiny tin voice of the radio man  
saying love must stand,  
love, forever and ever must stand."

James Taylor  
"All on the Fourth of July"

### PART I I need a new answering machine

Ok Babe,  
This is how it started  
ok?

When the rough craggled voice  
came over the answering machine,  
I thought it was Tom Waits finally  
returning my call,  
but it wasn't him, it was someone else,  
saying I had to write a flag day poem  
but  
I couldn't hear the el in flag.

I was taken aback

A little shocked actually

But then I thought  
wow

what a great opportunity  
to testify to all the loving kindness  
I've known in our gay friends.

ya know?

But then I called back, ya know  
and they said it was Flag Day  
with an el

What the el

I was a little bummed,  
but I said ok  
ok?

But then...well, you know  
how much poetry means to me,  
how i've always said that good poetry  
is usually better than it's author  
cause it leads you on, makes you say  
things  
you might normally be afraid to say.  
yeah

I mean flag - poem, poem - flag  
It's crazy, they don't really go together  
they're antithetical, opposites  
no babe,

They've got the wrong guy!  
I mean

Did they ask Billy Collins to write  
a flag day poem?

And while we're at it  
does he only write letters to the  
female poet laureates of Three Oaks?  
I mean

How can I write a poem  
about something so full of blood  
and guts,  
so full of history,  
so designed to preserve  
its history of desire  
and its desire to hide  
in pretty little poems?

I mean, for me babe,  
it feels like  
like the flag has been usurped  
by those same proud, angry men  
who stole the name of my religion,  
Those same guys who would exclude  
me  
from their plan  
merely for the books I've read;  
the poems I love, an  
And wow Babe!

I was upset,  
yeah, and scared too.  
I mean, I can't write a poem  
full of swear words, I know that.  
    But it kept building  
and, but then,  
    yeah babe, you're right  
I wasn't really angry  
it was actually kind of sweet  
that they asked me  
    to do this

It was just that  
    that old rage of mine  
you know,  
    we've talked about it

That roaring enraged thing  
    that's always there  
inside me;  
    that I decided would never go away  
Because  
    it was only that part of me  
    that needed to protect, defend  
    that thing in me that is still  
    sweetness,  
    innocence,  
    yeah babe

## PART II

### song of innocence

When the rough cragged voice  
came over the intercom  
saying that President Kennedy  
Had been shot

My God!

I never told you this!

I never told anyone this!

But,

I laughed

Oh Babe, I know I was only twelve,  
I know it was a nervous reaction,  
but why couldn't I tell you this  
till now?

I mean

how, how could

I mean,

By the age of twelve,

I had already

cried watching those little kids  
get spit on and sworn at  
and hosed and shot  
just trying to go to school  
in Alabama and Mississippi  
and Chicago

I mean, I already

knew how Geronimo  
had been crushed and smashed  
all for wanting

to defend his borders.

And in the years to come  
I would read about all the other  
dead Indians

the brutalized slaves

downtrodden negroes

the pillage of Latin America

Henry Kissinger destroying  
the largest, longest living  
Democracy in Latin America

and America,

my America, ignoring it.

I mean Babe!

All this madness! not to mention  
the bloody carnage of heroism.

Yeah Babe,

I know there were real heroes.

Amazing men, we will always have to  
love.

But even in the "Great War"

"The Great Justifiable War"

our Fathers and Grandfathers

came home to fifty years of

nightmares

Because they couldn't say out loud  
what they knew and saw.

and how many fifty year nightmares

did we engender today?

And in the face of this

of all this

this knowledge

still

still I was ashamed

and still,

I could not say,

admit out loud

that I had laughed.

## PART III

### how to tell the difference between a flag and a poem

alright Babe,

a flag is about defending your borders.

a poem is about exploding them.

I mean, a poem can be rectangular.  
it can have four corners like mine does.

but  
it can not border, create boundaries.  
It should be like that 'Just Man' Billy  
Blake talks about  
in his 'Marriage of Heaven and Hell'

Once meek and on a perilous path,  
out beyond the borders,  
along the vale of death,  
planting roses and nurturing honey  
bees,  
so that we, who seek only comfort  
can move in and  
chase him further out.

Did you know babe  
that Billy and his wife also liked to  
hang out naked in their garden?

But anyway,  
A poem cannot justify you.  
legitimize your hold on property.  
You cannot take it into  
an international court of law.  
You cannot go to war for a poem.  
You cannot wave a poem and inspire...

Well maybe,  
yeah you can.

But,  
like Estlin says,  
"as freedom is just a breakfast food"  
and  
oh babe, you're right  
and poems  
are  
used to advertise breakfast food,  
I don't know

But should a poem be used to advertise  
the flag?  
It's been done.

But, but  
But a flag can't Rhyme!!

A flag can't give you you're heart  
up in your throat...  
well,  
maybe it can  
but it can't lead us out beyond  
the borders  
of our frightened  
little selves  
but  
alright babe  
maybe it could  
maybe it should  
Oh Babe,  
whadamigonnado?

## PART IV

### song of experience

ok Babe, this is it...

I wanted to tell you about  
how I was living, alone in Chicago  
in my apartment

    watching a tv show  
about the 25th anniversary of  
John Kennedy's murder,  
    yeah

and I found myself weeping  
    uncontrollably  
like a baby.

    I wanted to tell you  
how I got angry at myself  
    for crying  
for this guy  
    who I knew was not  
all I thought he should have been.

And I struggled with it  
    like I struggle with this poem  
until I recognized

    that I wasn't crying  
for him,  
    but for that still sweet

twelve year old boy  
    who believed  
an wanted to know  
    what he could do  
for his country.

    Oh Babe,  
Ya notice how I say "Oh Babe"  
every time I wanna swear?  
    (Thanks for that)

I wanted to tell you about how  
my favorite Fourth of July  
was the time my cousin from the city  
came to the fireworks with us and

I convinced her that in our little town  
we couldn't afford all those big shot  
rockets.

So we got all these big muscled farm  
boys  
to throw them  
    high up in the sky.

an I wanted to quote Lennie Bruce  
saying

"It's just a word, man."  
so that little girl would never  
feel hurt again.

so he could show how words  
become poetry  
when they stop being  
markers or flags  
(with or without els)  
and instead become journeys  
to better understanding.

an  
and that great gay poet of America,  
of loving kindness, brother Walt  
who wrote the only flag day poem  
that will ever be complete  
and will always be incomplete

an I wanted to say, "If I had a hammer"  
an make my poem blowin in the wind

an I wanted to say how that James  
Taylor CD  
that sweet brother Mikey gave me  
made me cry when I was sick,  
    still does, yes babe,

Because I didn't

    don't  
    want to leave  
the community,  
    the love,  
    the friends,  
    the loving kindness,  
you...

how I wanted you all, with me, close  
gazing out over our garden  
that is the best poem I will ever write.

so much

I wanted to say  
but I can't babe  
nope

I'm sorry  
Because I was given my poem  
laid in my lap  
so to speak

It was sweet brother David,  
full of loving kindness,  
came to me and said,  
"there's this girl, Julie.  
She's real sick,  
and  
like so many Americans who pray daily  
to die instantly  
so that their family will not know  
economic difficulty,  
she has no insurance.  
and

and I think we need to help her  
ya know?"  
So I said ok  
And so, in order  
to get the story out  
and the community involved,  
I had to write a PR release,  
an so I went to the café to get the story  
(little did I know I was double tasking)

And there I met cousin Tim  
and sister Susan and niece Nicole  
and Mom Joan and Aunt Jean

And they began by telling me  
the history of her illness

and I was embarrassed for having to

ask  
personal questions I had no business  
asking  
so I told them about my chemo and  
radiation  
so we might feel a little more even

and they opened up

and in their eyes, I could see their rage  
(I don't need to explain the rage, do I,  
Babe?)

(No)

but it was like all of their rage  
poured out of them like  
like honey  
it was sweetness, Babe  
loving kindness  
innocence.  
And they kept moving backward  
through the story  
all the way back to the  
turn of the century and Grandma Nina  
the matriarch of the family  
and how she was a county health official  
and a nurse and midwife  
and how she brought many  
Three Oakers into the world  
in her cabin out on East road

And I started to think  
that everything  
was sweetness and rage

And they told me how Julie was a  
carpenter  
and contractor,  
but they kept going back  
to how she was a tomboy  
and rode the tractor  
out on Aunt Jean's farm.

And I thought about all the Three  
Oakers

who only want things to go back to the way they were

And I was thinking about Saint Edna, I think, saying that "childhood is the kingdom where no one dies."

an I was thinking that that is from where all rage emerges

And I think now of all the sweet Moma's full of rage whose sweet little boys died for a folded flag

an I think of the proud angry men who fought only because they were in love

An I remember, remember babe? how we decided that on 9-11 a fireman might climb two or three or even four flights of stairs in a burning building out of a sense of duty, yeah but a man who would climb ten or twenty flights would only do it because he was (and here you can insert the only swear word I'll permit myself in this poem) in love

because he was efen in love with the world he lives in.

the world we live in babe is it gonna be love or fear?

an I think of the proud angry men

who want us to defend our borders and outlaw gay marriage (does that condemn us to sad marriage?) and want us to live in a Christian world where the mistakes of our past are forgiven and sweet Jesus full of loving kindness comes down and gives us back the kingdom where no one dies, and

Oh man! Oh babe!

Can I swear again?

I mean wow,

This is what I was afraid of, How poems lead you into places you never intended to go.

Make you crazy

make you want to rage

I mean

shiiiiishkebob

I mean,

we can't go back

we can only move forward

into the world we make,

an if we stop raging

the sweetness might die

but if it does,

the rage might end,

an, an,

an I want us to rage

but I want us to

remember the sweetness

that engenders it

Oh Babe,

I just wanted my poem

to be about love

No

not courage

Because that only confirms

the fear

Oh Babe,

we all know what

is good

and true  
    and loving  
        and best  
in us  
    and our world, and

an oh babe  
    this is not a very good poem  
but maybe we could make it  
    into a flag  
I could stand beneath.