



TRANSLATING BUKOWSKI AND THE

An Interview with Carl W
by JAY DOUG

BUKOWSKI
KOMMT NACH HAMBURG

Carl Weissner listens to a tape of Charles Bukowski in Mannheim, Germany, 1978.



Carl Weissner was born in 1940 in Karlsruhe, West Germany. He attended the universities of Heidelberg and Bonn from 1961-1967, majoring in English and German. In 1967, he went to New York City on a Fulbright grant and stayed in the U.S. for a year and a half, working on a novel and documenting the New York poetry scene on tape. Upon his return to West Germany, he worked as a script-writer for WDR Radio, Cologne, and as an out of house editor for J. Melzer Publishers in Frankfurt.

In the fall of 1969, Weissner showed Melzer a first edition copy of *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* by the then-obscure American writer Charles Bukowski. Bukowski and Weissner had been corresponding since 1966, when Weissner started a little magazine and asked Bukowski for some poems. Their correspondence, much of which is now stored at the libraries of the University of California at Santa Barbara and at Northwestern University, contains some of the most rich and energetic epistolary exchanges of either man's career, and is especially interesting for the glimpses it gives the reader into Bukowski's struggles to become a self-sufficient writer and into the evolution of his eventual success, as well as

his thoughts and feelings concerning art, writing, and life in general. Excerpts from much of that early correspondence appears throughout this interview and the talk with Bukowski that follows.

By the time, then, that Weissner appeared in the offices of Melzer Verlag with the Essex House (North Hollywood) edition of *Notes of a Dirty Old Man*, his understanding of Bukowski was obviously better than anyone else's in Germany. And when the publisher expressed enthusiasm about having it translated, Weissner was clearly the one for the job. So began both Carl Weissner's career as a translator and literary agent (he is representing Bukowski and Black Sparrow Press throughout Europe and South America) and the astonishing success of Charles Bukowski in West Germany and other countries. (In 1983-84, three Bukowski titles appeared on the best-seller list in Brazil, two of them simultaneously.)

Bukowski's books, all but two of which Weissner has translated into German, have attained sales of over 2.5 million copies to date in West Germany, more than in any other European country. The books are all in print and can be found in virtually every department store, train station, and book store. Indeed, both the popular and critical response to Bukowski has been markedly more favorable in West Germany than in the U.S. itself, a fact that has precipitated much curiosity and many theories in explanation.

The following interview, conducted in Mannheim, West Germany, where Carl Weissner lives, was compiled from roughly twelve hours of tape-recorded conversations with Weissner over a seven-day period, from December 23, 1987, to January 1, 1988. Congenial and outspoken, Weissner discussed a wide range of topics on which he better than anyone can provide information: Bukowski's popularity in West Germany and the reasons behind it, the German literary scene, his translation philosophies and practices, and the reception of other American writers he has translated.

In all, Weissner has translated close to eighty books from English into German, including books by Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Nelson Algren, Denton Welch, Bob Dylan, Frank Zappa, and Hunter S. Thompson. His work room, where he has but a desk and an old-model manual typewriter, along with hundreds of books, magazines, and newspapers, is on the top floor of an apartment building on one of the main streets in Mannheim, where cars constantly rush back and forth, providing the city equivalent to the sound of ceaseless waves slapping the sand. The room has one lamp, and that bows over the typewriter with which he translates directly from the book to the page, working ten-plus hours per day, often long after light no longer pours in through the large windows overlooking the street.

i.a. aug
HERE THE PASSIVE FO
SPRINKLING THEIR BELL
hello Carl Weissner:
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go by, but if I do
r letter arrived da
n Andernach, Germany
language.
from various writers
using ~~the~~ false addi
done at drugstores.
rom creditors, has
y--transmission bro
d the foreword to,
to some early poems
ed that writing for
ending here, people
nobody is crazy enoug
he beach with my litt
ng because I am sick
e rainy November.
fall off my monkey st
speaker comes the c
ring me will go away
half-hearted exam
e and didn't want t
roubles too--how's
room to handle the
must eat something
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tiny snakes... re
ater, heidelberg.
seasnails and unburnt

GARGOYLE: Your English is extraordinarily good. Did you learn it primarily in school?
CARL WEISSNER:

In school and in the streets. After the war, most of the houses on our street were occupied by GIs, and there was a black Master Sergeant with his wife and kids living next to us. We were surrounded by Americans, and I was running around with their kids shouting "Hey! Ba-ba-barce-bop!" Old Sarge would go on a pheasant hunt and bring us back one of those birds pumped full of lead and throw it over the fence. He used to play Duke Ellington and Woody Herman records for hours, full blast. I loved it. What a break after those bellowing Nazis with their awful music. I guess I didn't give any thought to the fact that these strange new neighborhood types were the same ones who'd been dropping tons of bombs on me. What mattered to me was that they really knew how to have a good time.

Later, in high school, I formed a band with a couple of friends, and we played at American NCO clubs around town. I picked up some more English that way. I mean, stuff they didn't teach you at Bismarck High.

G: And how did you find the academic life when you enrolled at Heidelberg University in 1961?

CW: Quaint, a little stuffy, easy, and largely irrelevant. They left you alone and didn't demand too much, outside of memorizing endless vowel shifts. Tuition was minimal, as it still is, but then they really didn't have much to offer. American literature practically didn't exist for these people, and English literature seemed to stop at Thomas Hardy. So you can imagine. . . I mean, here I was sitting around cafeterias between classes, nursing a cup of coffee and reading *Naked Lunch*, *On the Road*, *Tropic of Cancer*. And after that, you know, going back to another seminar on Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*—on a level which seemed a throwback to Junior College days—well, that was rather discouraging. Then, all of a sudden, things started to happen. . .

G: You found out about the underground?

CW: Exactly. I think it was the Spring of '65 when the *Times Literary Supplement* did those two fat special issues on the "avantgarde." They covered some of the little mag scene in the States and England, France, South America. With addresses and everything. That was a real find. And I thought if I had a magazine of my own I could exchange copies with some of these editors and just take it from there. So I started a magazine. I called it *Klactoveedsedsteen*, after a Charlie Parker tune. Just a little mimeographed thing. My model was Jeff Nuttall's *My Own Mag* in London, probably the craziest and most adventurous mimeo rag of those years. And soon I was corresponding with, and publishing, people like Nuttall and Burroughs, Mary Beach and Claude Pelieu in New York, Harold Norse in Greece, Margaret Randall and Alexandro Jodorowski in Mexico City, Malay Roy Choudhuri and other poets of the "Hungry Generation" in Calcutta, Douglas Blazek who was doing his *Ole* magazine in Bensenville, Illinois. Diane diPrima. Larry Eigner. I had a great time, saw very little of the University, and

used the campus largely as a short cut between the jazz club and a friend's place where we used to get together for some serious stud poker at five in the morning. Also, I was totally fascinated with William Burroughs' cut-up thing, and I was doing all these cut-up collaborations with Burroughs, Nuttall, Pelieu, Mary Beach. Tape experiments and whatnot.

G: And how did you first come across Bukowski and his work?

CW: In March '66 I got a magazine called *Iconolatre*, edited by Alex Hand in West Hartlepool, England, one of those out-of-the-way places in the Northeast. It had some solid prose; the poetry didn't seem so hot. . . until I came to this section of seven poems by one Charles Bukowski, and boy did they stick out! Jesus Christ. I remember, one of them was "Officers Club, A.P.O.": "For those dishwashers in Germany, young, hanging around delirious, on edge, perched like piss-ants on a cliff. . . you'll end up famous, you'll end up bankers, you'll end up dead, but now it's good thinking of you, in the stink of it, in the greasy slime and shit, alive enough to hang Christ by his heels, upside down, in the orange dirty morning. . ." Hell, I thought, who is this guy? Here was one who apparently didn't give a damn about poetic niceties; he was pissed, he was mad, and he just let it all out.

Great. And the next one, believe it or not, was called "Swastika Star Buttoned to My Ass" [laughter]:

"Sitting around here burning spiders to death with my cigar, I can hardly believe that all your pussies are as sweet as mine used to be. I did it in fireplaces, on fire escapes"—ah, ah—"in cornfields, in mother's bedroom (with mother) (sometimes)!" [laughter]. . .

"between bomb explosions at Nantes and St. Etienne, over the sink of the men's crapper in a train passing through Utah. . ." God. On and On. Relentless. "I've done it sober, potted, crazy and

l.a. augy 20, no 19, 1966
WHERE THE PASSIVE POLK LOLL IN GREYASH DEATH
SHRINKLING THEIR BELLIES WITH FISH EYES...



hello Carl Weissner:

—dog large as the sky just walked past my window—thought that was it; haven't been feeling too well, and more or less girding for the tooth, but it may all fall away without trouble. but good you found the poems bottom of Atlantic and OLD BROKEN CROSS, etc. you run quite an ivory head gang in your sheet so I knew I had to turn the burners up. on OLD BROKEN CROSS, tho, note a spelling error:

"namplan" should read ~~napalm~~ "napalm"
(page 20)—stop napalm bombs!

never could spell. just more work. if I ever get to it, I will send you one of my oil pastel drawings. they were all over the walls here until the other night I got drunk and ripped them down. you can't get nailing tubes in this town so it means chopping up cardboard boxes and all that, almost like climbing a mountain in a snow storm, so weeks, months may go by, but if I don't die it will probably get done. —THE MAKING.

your letter arrived dated ~~Aug 16th~~ August 16th., 1966, which was my 46th. birthday, was born in Andernach, Germany, but carried over here at age of 2 and now can't even speak the language.

The early letters from Bukowski to Weissner that are excerpted
begin span a period from August 1966 to September 1969.

sane. . . I've done it with animals, I've done it with dead meat. . ." And it ends with, "I am going to rob a bank or beat hell out of a blind man any day now, and they'll never know why."

Perfect. I absolutely had to find out more about this one. Got the address from the editor, wrote Bukowski a letter, asked him for some poems, and he promptly wrote back and stuffed in two or three he'd just pulled out of the typer.

So. That's how it all started.

G: What were the personal situations of Bukowski and you at the time?

CW: Well, Hank [Bukowski] was working at the Post Office, stuffing letters for hours and hours, and it was driving him up the wall. The rest of the time he tried to stay drunk, and when he wasn't at the racetrack, he was banging out poems and five-page letters to all kinds of people, enormous bursts of energy, anger, frustration, black humor. Just railing against the world and in a suicidal mood half the time. Or most of the time, I guess. Bad affairs with women, bad run-ins with the cops, just one thing after another.

As for me, I didn't have it half as bad. I had no problems except how to keep the magazine going and scrape by somehow, working odd shit jobs. At one time I was doing night shifts at the Institute of High-Energy Physics—at a buck-and-a-quarter an hour, if you can believe it—and that was one of the better part-time jobs available then. In the basement they had a huge darkroom with all these scanning machines hooked up to a computer, and you had to scan

I hear from various writers. one today, opened his letter--he is picked up for cocaine rap, using ~~###~~ false address or something, I don't quite get it, but something that is prob. done at drugstores. 2nd. time this year. another writer down in Mexico, has run away from creditors, has 2 or 3 kids, a wife, writes crap for the nudey mags. his letter today--transmission broken in his car and his is broke, and no copies of his book which I did the foreword to, publisher won't answer his letters, so farth. I did a foreword to some early poems of this guy when he first came out of a madhouse and before he decided that writing for the Nudey mags was a big thing. meanwhile, the weather is heat-ending here, people stinking and sweating, handling their gold pieces with forceps. nobody is crazy enough to want a job like mine so I disappear for 4 days... one at the beach with my little girl, 2, 2 at the track, another staring at the walls and worrying because I am sick and insane and will end up in a curb along side the pavement some rainy November. but I go back to work and nothing said. I turn green and almost fall off my monkey stool. the other workers chatter, giggle, puke in my ears. over the speaker comes the call: OVERTIME! o holy mother, mercy! ...well, maybe what is bothering me will go away (my life). the doctor says I am o.k. but ran me through a kind of half-hearted exam and stuffed me off. well, hell. he just finished chopping up my asshole and didn't want to be blamed for any hangovers or botches. can't blame him--he's got troubles too--how's he gonna spend all his money?--and not enough chairs in his waiting room to handle the sick.

still very hot. I must eat something and go back in. we are all pasted to the walls. if I could work it out in COLOR. some signal--you know. maybe we could all spring free to the tune of marching bands and writhing 18 year old wenches twirling and burning on the laams... battleships laughing at one a.m., atomic toilets, christmas in the nostrils like tubes of newly born tiny snakes... red balls in lurch... I gotta eat, make more heat. see you later, heidelberg.

seasnails and unburnt toast,

Buk
Charles Bukowski

endless films of bubble-chamber experiments where they tried to discover new sub-atomic particles. The films were rather dark, as if underexposed, and you had a hell of a time trying to locate the tiny little events they were looking for. I had to get out after seven or eight months of this because I noticed I was ruining my eyes.

I had enough of Germany, and the stifling atmosphere of the country was getting to me. I said to myself, *Look, New York is where it's at, so what are you doing here?* I didn't have the money, so I decided to apply for a Fulbright. And got it, in the summer of '67.

G: What was your Fulbright project?

CW: A thesis on Olson. My English professor, who was supposed to be an authority on Pound, had never heard of Olson. But he did realize that this was something you can *only* do in the States. . . [laughter]. When I got to New York, I found out that there were at least five people at Buffalo who were working on practically the same thing and had a big head start on me. So that was that. Why go on and be Number Six? Besides, I wasn't so hot for more academic work anyway.

G: What did you do instead?

CW: I wrote a book, *The Braille Film*, published by Jan Herman's Nova Broadcast Press, San Francisco 1970. I edited a special issue of Allen DeLoach's *Intrepid* magazine in Buffalo, with material I had collected from all kinds of "underground" poets in India. And I documented a good part of the New York poetry scene on tape for the German Avantgarde Archive, which is run by an old friend of mine. I think I wound up with about a hundred hours of tape. It was a good cross-section: Ginsberg, Ted Berrigan, Diane DiPrima, Ray Bremser, Jackson MacLow, Dick Higgins, and Allison Knowles. Ron Tavel. Jack Micheline. John Wieners. Ed Sanders.

G: How did you think people like Bremser and Sanders saw you?

CW: Oh, just as a strange, crew-cut, German heterosexual, uh, *square* [laughter]. No, I mean, they knew the magazine I was putting out; some of them I had published or corresponded with, so they knew what I was about. Plus I was

living in the neighborhood, on the Lower East Side, East 6th and Avenue C, and my roaches were the same as theirs. Ginsberg a few blocks down, Ted Berrigan a few blocks in the other direction, Andrei Codrescu around the corner. Ray Bremser was around and occasionally hit me for a fiver, claiming he'd just gotten burned by his connection down at the corner. Jack Micheline used to drop by and try out his street songs on my fire escape. It was a great place to be, and I felt right at home in their company. More than I ever had back in Germany.

G: And when did you first meet Bukowski in person?

CW: In the summer of '68 I was staying at Jan Herman's place in San Francisco; he was editing *The San Francisco Earthquake*, one of the great magazines of the sixties, and I helped him a little with that. And of course I went to L.A. a couple of times to visit Bukowski.



Carl Weissner, Linda and Charles Bukowski in Mannheim, before the Hamburg reading.

About the Hamburg reading:

"Nobody was even sure if Hank would show up. They kept calling us in Mannheim:

"Is it on?"

For Hank's reading the place was crammed with 1200 people, and outside were several hundred that had to be turned away."

Hank was still living on DeLongpre Avenue at the time—I remember the street looked like an abandoned air strip from World War II—in an old ramshackle bungalow, one of the few that were left on the street. I guess the rent was cheap, and he got along fine with his landlord and landlady, an old couple that lived in back. He used to drink beer with them, and they would sing old time songs, and so forth. He had just published his first poetry book with Black Sparrow Press, *At Terror Street and Agony Way*. Which reminds me—he's written this great poem about one of the other tenants of the old couple, a guy called Buffalo Bill, who always got in trouble because whenever somebody came to his door, a Jehovah's Witness, say, he'd show them his thing, you know. So one time the cops had come and gotten him again, and Hank was sitting with the old couple drinking beer, and after awhile he said, "Who'd you rent his place to?" "Oh, we don't rent his place; we always

keep it for him. . . we like him. . ." [laughter]. Hank really must have hated it when the bulldozers finally came and he had to give up the old bungalow.

Meanwhile he had started writing his column, *Notes of a Dirty Old Man*, for *Open City*, one of the two underground papers in L.A. Against impossible odds. I mean, he had to deliver once a week, and the damn job at the post office was slowly killing him—those night shifts, with overtime, would regularly come to eleven hours or more. And what with making first post at the Hollywood Park racetrack at 1:30 p.m. or so, I have no idea when he slept or when he wrote all his stuff. Most of his columns came out as short stories—or long ones, rather—and he kept it up, producing this great material, one week after another. I could only admire the man. For me he was a fucking genius. Period.

G: When you returned to Germany and worked as an editor for J. Melzer Publishers, was *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* your first project?

CW: Not quite. Let's see, I first did a cut-up anthology and one last issue of my magazine, in an oversized tabloid format this time, an international, ah, ah, revolutionary cut-up issue [laughter]. I mean, half serious and half fun. Melzer put up the money for 3,000 copies. And I translated J. G. Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition*, which I consider to be one of the seminal books of the 20th Century and which to me was every bit as important as *Naked Lunch*. Then, in the fall of 1969, Bukowski sent me a copy of *Notes*. I showed it to Melzer; he sat down, read the first one-and-a-half pages, and said, "I want to do this. Can you get me a contract for the German rights? Will you translate it for me?"

The German edition was published in the spring of 1970, got a handful of good reviews—even in our news magazine *Der Spiegel*, normally fairly conservative—and sold exactly 1200 copies.

G: What was your reaction to such poor initial sales?

CW: Oh hell, I just sagged. I had done two radio programs on Bukowski; there had been write-ups by several of my friends in the

nov. what 187, 1966
the land of pure hell clear hell butter hell and the palm fronds stick in my guts
through the dirty window...

hello Karl:

heard from Georgakas, SMYRNA PRESS NEWSLETTER, and being full of bullshit at the time I wrote him a couple of semi-drunken, no, totally drunken letters expressing both my madness and a kind of lucky slant into areas of life and letters and love and war and grass growing. he says he is going to use a portion of one of my letters which expresses something about Choudhury which disturbs my belly. perhaps you won't like it; that can't be helped... but I am not out to run for governor of Calif. by the way, you asked, should you like to run excerpts from any of my letters, please do. although I have an idea I have not written much. it is odd, but letters from you seem to calm me, give me some place... I do not quite stare at those rusty razorblades in the same dream-like stutter-stance. I do not mean that I need honey-pie custard soothing, but statements of actual face and torture of men within civilization make me realize that I am not the only man alive who has to fight himself to keep from driving an icepick straight down his bellybutton.

alternative press, but it didn't make a dent. Of course, there hadn't been any advertising worth writing home about. Melzer couldn't afford it because he was deep in the red and his creditors were crawling all over him. But the real reason was that the readers in this country weren't ready for someone like Bukowski. Particularly the students, who were still in the throes of their '68 rebellion and practically didn't read any fiction. Yards and yards of Marcuse and Marx. That was the order of the day. So. Another book by an unknown author that didn't get off the ground. That's the way it looked.

G: So then what was next? *Post Office*?

CW: Yes. Two years later. Ah, a novel, I thought. Now that should do it. A big publisher in Cologne did a first printing of 4,000 copies—and they had trouble unloading them. A big pocketbook company in Frankfurt bought a license for *Notes of a Dirty Old Man*. They did a first printing of 15,000, which showed that they had no confidence in the book. Meanwhile, City Lights Books had published a 480-page volume of Hank's stories, *Tales of Ordinary Madness*. I was totally overwhelmed by it and felt sure that this would do the trick. I sent it to some of the big publishers—not to Melzer, because he was about to go out of business. And they were offended! They wrote me angry letters. One of these editors actually said, "Spare us the unsavory ramblings of this low life drunk. Do you think young people want to read that?" And I wrote back, "Up yours, Schmidt." Today I would shrug it off, but I was new in the game

then, and I just got livid. I mean, I had learned not to have a high opinion of our editors, but I assumed that at least they would be able to recognize a good solid story when they saw one. Naturally, I'd had a feeling all along that it was a shame to be relying on the established publishers. But there seemed to be no choice. The small presses, the underground, didn't offer any alternative. They came and went; they failed to get organized in terms of distribution. 150 copies. 200 copies. That didn't seem to be worth the trouble. **G: So you felt that you had reached a dead end?**

CW: No. I thought, Weissner, you are so stupid. The one thing we haven't

tried yet is the poems—why? I mean why not? It may have been an unconscious thing: poetry doesn't sell, period. That's a given. But then Hank's poems were radically different from anything that was around. So I sat down and translated ninety pages worth of his toughest and most sardonic poems. Serious ones, dirty ones, hilarious and desperate ones. And I gave them to a Bukowski fan down south, in Bavaria, who had just started a small press. Strictly a one-man operation. He was excited about the poems and went completely overboard. This was going to be his first real book, and he was going to get behind it, 100 percent. And he did. He put it out within two weeks, in a first printing of 2,000 copies. Everybody thought he was nuts. Even books by well-known German poets didn't sell more than 600 or a thousand copies. Big anthologies of the New American Poetry had flopped. Okay, never mind.

And while I was at it, I chose a looong title-- which in German, of course, came out twice as long. . . [laughter]: *Poems Written Before Jumping Out of an 8th Story Window*. It was the title of a small collection of Bukowski poems, published by somebody in Berkeley in '68. Another no-no in this racket: never use a title that people can't read at a glance. This one you had to bend down for. But if you did, you were rewarded.

G: This book was Bukowski's breakthrough in Germany. How do you explain it?

CW: It sold 50,000 copies. And nobody, including me, has been able to come up with an explanation. Except that readers will always be unpredictable. And that, at least once in a while, it's still possible, to make it on quality alone.

The Bavarian had sent out 150 review copies; it took eight or nine months to sell the first printing. Then all of a sudden the book took off. Until then, the publisher couldn't afford any ads except a few small ones, mostly in little magazines. There was a flurry of enthusiastic reviews in the alternative press. That, and word-of-mouth, which is the only true test for a book and for an author.

I see it as a kind of poetic justice that Hank made his breakthrough in this country on the strength of his poems, and entirely on his own.

G: How had the zeitgeist in Germany changed since the publication of *Notes*?

CW: Well, obviously a couple ten thousand readers had gotten thoroughly disgusted with the flabby introspective blah of anemic characters like Peter Handke who were dominating the literary scene. I guess it also helped that poetry in this country, at that time, was just nowhere.

G: Did Bukowski have an influence on contemporary writers?

CW: There were busloads of bad imitators, just like in the States. But he also encouraged some people with real talent—including some women poets—to become more open, direct, and outspoken. All of a sudden there were lots of very personal, narrative poems, loose, colloquial, even tough. He's been credited with practically triggering a poetry renaissance here. Among the prose writers, his influence is clearly visible in

the work of Jorg Fauser, for instance, who came to prominence in the seventies with a bunch of really excellent short stories and with the columns he wrote for the leading magazine of the alternative press, *Tip* magazine in Berlin. Incredibly stuff. A direct result of Hank's *Notes of a Dirty Old Man*.

G: All right. Then...

CW: Then, three volumes of stories, all from *Tales of Ordinary Madness*, all published by the Bavarian small press. 150,000 copies. And then an 800-page volume collecting *Notes*, two novels [*Factotum* and *Post Office*], and *South of No North* [stories]. That was done by Zweitausen-

into one. Feature stories in *Der Spiegel*, in *Die Zeit*, the leading liberal weekly here, high-brow as hell. And the same kind of coverage in Austria and Switzerland. After that, it was plain sailing.
G: Who are Bukowski's readers in Germany?

I wish you had told me earlier that you would like to look over more poems, just got rid of 1/2 dozen with drawings to *WORLDWOOD REVIEW* (will appear in special center section, I'm told). I get my limbo kicks with my drawings... like to draw people fucking each other, strangling each other, staring at walls, smoking cigars, lost among bottles under an electric light. once had a book of drawings due out but the guy just collected money on the ads and now sits on the drawings and no book, no response to inquiry, no return of drawings. a real shit. the world of the arts is full of shits too, both editors and writers, so beware, Karl. I was an editor once and I got some very nasty responses, esp. to my one or two page rejection slips which I used to write everybody. instead of soothing rejection this simply brought out the fangs, yellow ones, esp. from writers of reputation. "who the hell are you? I've never seen your name on any of the little magazines? how can you tell me about my work?" so forth. or a simple little slip back saying, "SHIT." it was true, I hadn't begun to write. I began at 35. but I knew whether I liked a poem or not. and why. and men don't write with their reputations; they write, most of them, with typewriters. each time you sit down reputation is gone with yesterday's ink/sun; every man begins even again. right now, I am very glad I do not have a hotshot reputation--it keeps me clear with myself.

yes, Varabond, this poor guy used to work as a dishwasher... fired twice, but gets the mag out. he's got 5 or 6 of my poems in his back pocket, and he's a live one--tough and odd and wild. got his accept on the poems on sheets of lined yellow paper, in drunken ink scrawl, I could see him sucking on the wine bottle and the cigarette as he wrote, and he threw in a poem of his own. these strange creatures keep SPEERING FROM THE EARTH GIVING US CHANCE AND GUT TO GO ON, it's marvelous and also difficult to believe. excuse my grammar but I do not like grammar it gets in the way of my head thoughts like slivers or stilts. it's best to roll and punch out.

deins in Frankfurt, our top mail-order outfit for books and albums. They had more than 10,000 advance orders before the binders could even deliver the first printing. They ultimately sold about 120,000 copies of that one. And parallel to the big book, they offered part of the stories in *South of No North* as a very low-price pocketbook, kind of an appetizer, which sold another 150,000. Saturation coverage in the media ensued. TV documentaries, a *Playboy* interview, an eight-page spread in *Stern* magazine, which has a circulation of 1.8 million and is something like *Life* and *Paris Match* rolled

CW: Ha. One of our best writers, Arno Schmidt, used to say that there are no more than 350 serious readers in this country, meaning that those were the ones he was writing for. Okay, he was an Olympian. Forget it. But if a book of poems sells

good that Norse is mending. I can't say enough about his work. he is one of the few men whose work lifts me. some of the more famous leave me quite flat and empty, and angry with their dull tricks and empty kookoos. but Norse has this CLASSICAL SENSE OF REALITY. he can't write a bad line; I've never seen one. he uses the language perfectly. I don't. my work is full of stones, clipped little droppings out of the side of broken mouth. they have kicked too much shit out of me. I try to stammer out a phrase of fire but by the time I get it from my head-gut to the page it begins to look like an ad for a used car. my vocabulary dribbles down more and more to 30 or 40 words and there isn't anything I can do about it. Norse tells me how (in his work) but I can't follow him, I have to play with my own marbles. treat him well, he is one of the great ones of our rather strange times.

--woman and child just by, my little girl, Marina, age 2, I shot 2 hours non-study, great, but the execution draws near, the March to the Gallows. sucking on wonderful 2nd. beer and may end up drunk yet. god christ, how I hate to flatten out what is left of my brain. but hope to continue to live, the writing becomes easier, more natural, it teaches me when I write, I teach myself--the walls look better, the moon, everything but the people packed in their new cars with their stone-shining faces. god, how I wander on!

50,000 copies, it means that it is read not only by a majority of people who are into poetry, but also by a handsome percentage of those who will only pick up a book if it gives them something they find useful in their everyday lives. And if a heavy load of fiction like that 800-page volume sells more than 100,000 copies in a small country like Germany, it means that you're really blanketing the area.

This friend of mine in Cologne, who did a TV documentary of Bukowski's reading in Hamburg, started it off with maybe six or seven minutes of random interviews in the streets—near his place in Cologne. He just walked up to them and stuck a

microphone in their faces. "You know Bukowski? Read any of his stuff?" He didn't have to search. He could take his pick: a cabdriver, a B-girl, a rookie cop, an architect, two girls from a high school, a painter, the 75-year-old wife of a steel magnate, a street musician, a guy who's just done ten years for armed robbery.

G: I suppose there were also enviers and the usual detractors. . .

CW: The list is endless, from a former speechwriter of Willy Brandt who called Bukowski the most overrated writer of the century to the right-wing Munich paper that tried to put him down as "a marginal figure of the U.S. porn scene." And the hardcore feminist writer who claimed that, unlike the dumb Germans, the Italians were smart enough to ignore him. This all came at a time when the Italian press had been full of Bukowski features for months, and it took *La Stampa* two-and-a-half pages just to give an interim report on the clean sweep he was making down there.

G: Can you tell me about his Hamburg reading in 1978? A recent *L.A. Times Magazine* spread on Bukowski begins by saying that his European readings are held in sold-out concert halls, as if there have been many. But this was in fact his only reading ever outside the U.S., wasn't it?

CW: Yes, except for one or two readings in Canada, I think. The Hamburg reading came about when Christoph Derschau, a Hamburg poet and a friend of Hank's, visited him in L.A. Hank mentioned that he was going to fly to

Germany to visit his uncle and me—he had a 90-year-old uncle in Andernach-on-Rhine, where Hank was born—so Christoph persuaded him to give a reading. He knew this great place in Hamburg, run by a defrocked priest: they had rock concerts there, political cabaret, and so forth. It was an old scruffy concert hall, the center of the alternative scene in Hamburg. And this was on rather short notice. I think they had only two weeks to print posters and plaster them all over town. There were a few short notices in the local papers. That was all. Nobody was even sure that Hank would show up. They kept calling us in Mannheim: "Is it on?"

Gunter Grass, our literary big-shot, had read there a few months before, in front of 300 people. For Hank's reading the place was crammed with 1200 people, and outside were several hundred that had to be turned away.

G: And what kind of crowd was it?

CW: Mostly young people, the kind of crowd you would see at a Joe Cocker concert.

Whoever had the beer concession in this place made a small fortune that night. And there were the usual hecklers, some vociferous women's libbers among them, Hank trading insults with them in perfectly good humor. Everybody was having a great time. I remember there was a guy at the far end of the hall, sitting in the

rafters, who kept yelling a question which Hank couldn't understand because of all the noise. Finally he leaned close to the mike and said, "Write me a letter!" It brought down the house. "You Germans are too tough for me. . . hell, you're talking more than I do!" he said.

Of course, word had somehow gotten around and there were also fans from Denmark and Sweden. I talked to some guys who had come over from Amsterdam. And the media had turned out in force—photographers, reporters, camera crews, even a team

Burroughs, Ginsberg... how does it feel to be communicating with the Lights of the Age, and also with me. B. and G. have disappointed me at times, but let's admit that they have done things, and that no man creates pure Art day after day. me, I get rejected enough and it's good for the asshole, it makes my cock hard. the editor of ILLUMINATIONS writes that Creeley attacked me at some place, he named some name, a club or reading place I'd suppose and the editor defended me. that Creeley searched me out for attack show that I am functioning along the right trail. Creeley's type of writing has always disturbed me as being anti-life, scratched-out with snob and comfortable wire. that he has noticed the opposite of his writing and that it bothers him, that's fine. I do not say that sometimes Creeley does not create Art; he does not create my kind of Art. the years that I have worked in slaughterhouses and factories and gas stations and so forth, these years do not allow me to accept the well-turned word for the sake of the well-turned word... there must be more for me or I am just another suicide in a cheap room or in the alley or in the sea or in the gas cloud. I do not treat my work as holy or necessary except to myself. the reason I send it out? #to see if I am totally mad or not. I think. I think, but am not sure. there may be some ego there too. ~~Charles~~ Charles Bukowski on a page. so that when I roll over in a drunk tank or am having my guts cut out or my ~~ass cut out~~ or my soul cut out, I feel like I've saved a fraction, a matchstick. save what you can under all conditions, that's my motto, Thurrah! it's only the man who gives it all away who is truly ugly, who does not deserve to walk under a tree and inherit the earth. I am talking here to keep from studying. forgive me. I am frightened of pain, there has been so much; it seems like one more inch of pain and I will start babbling.

from Austrian television that had flown in from Vienna.

G: Of all the European countries, is Germany indeed the one in which Bukowski is the

magazine, for God's sake. There was a big spread on him in *Rolling Stone* as far back as 1976. But I know what you mean. For instance, he refuses to get involved in the publicity hype and the reading circus. He stopped giving readings ten years ago. He prefers to stay near the typer and the racetrack. And he likes to be able to go to a restaurant without being accosted by a bunch of shrill groupies. In the wake of the

I know that I owe you an original color drawing but do be patient. I have been short of change and have mailed or sold these things to collectors who shoot me \$\$\$\$. (I am very corrupt. I don't know whether they buy my paintings because I ~~write~~ write poetry or because I paint paintings but whatever it is, it has helped because I have missed many days work because of sickness and insanity and these stinking dollahs have kept me off the streets, and I am getting pretty old for the streets, I have had so many years there, the streets, the jails, the parkbench, the flophouse, and there aren't any heroes down there, Carl, there aren't any who choose that--they are all Wall Street Industrialists who didn't make it, or crazy people just getting by on the dead edge of starvation like I do. they do not discard life; life discards them. if it were the other way I would be down there with them now. but right now the only way is to try to keep these rented walls around my body and seep and test and relax and escape and ponder like a drunk monkey and try not to go ~~nuts~~ nuts. you follow? of course you do. it is only when the Artist is dead that the masses enjoy his suffering and go to warm ~~the~~ movies and eat popcorn and enjoy it. I was guilty of it myself. I remember when I was in the Village I went to see a movie about the life of Verdi. if I remember, there was a part there where he got a bag of muts from an old woman in the street. he was starving. I liked that. I have starved many times trying to cut some insignia into the cement. I shouldn't have liked it, the Verdi thing. but then when he came back famous with the beautiful woman at his side and he gave the old woman a batch of money for the bag of muts that night, I didn't care for that too much. he was degaming her act, showing off to his broad. he should have taken the old woman to his place and fucked her and drank wine with her and asked her to talk to him across a kitchen ~~table~~ table. but then Verdi was not perfect. I make some mistakes myself.

most popular?

CW: Well, commercially he is most successful here, but his popularity is the same in France and Italy. Or Yugoslavia.

G: To what do you attribute his relative obscurity in the U.S.?

CW: Relative, yes. I mean, he gets reviewed in the major papers: *New York Times*, *L.A. Times*. He gets written up in *People*

Barfly movie, I think, he turned down invitations to *20-20*, *60 Minutes*, and the Johnny Carson show, because he knows that the constipated format of these shows doesn't allow you to be yourself. You can't even bring a bottle of wine. He drank two bottles on this live show in France, the most popular in the country, before the host could get him removed by two bulky security guards. On camera. Off camera, Hank pulled a knife on the two bullies. He got a great press the next day for showing that overrated host that wasn't taking him seriously. That would be unthinkable in the States. I mean, Hank isn't interested in hyping his books and playing the game. And he's damn right. He even likes to downplay his U.S. sales, and this gets picked up by people who don't bother to check the facts. I remember this thing in *Time* magazine in which they dutifully

noted his European success and then reproduced the old myth about his books "which typically sell only 5,000 copies" in the States. Bullshit. His novel *Women* must have sold at least 100,000 copies, *Post Office* 150,000 or more. And some of his poetry collections are in their twentieth printing by now, and this without a big New York publisher and without a single pocketbook edition. I guess some of his stuff would be too raw for the mass paperback companies anyhow. He's better off with his present publishers, City Lights and Black Sparrow. With them he can be as raw as he likes, total freedom to write whatever he pleases. Well, okay, they may shy away from a story about a sudden outbreak of coprophilia among dentists [laughter].

G: So you don't think he could be another J.D. Salinger if he had a big publisher?

CW: Who knows. No, I guess not. For the reasons I just explained. Plus, if you take the sheer dimensions of the U.S., it is easier to be visible in a small place like Germany where everything is so hyper-organized. You can go into the only bookstore of a small town near the Czechoslovakian border, and if they don't have the book on the shelf, they'll have it for you within twenty-four hours. Two days on the outside. Any book that's in print. Even if you're a small press, as soon as you have a book that sells, the two or three big distributors become interested, and once the book is in their catalog, it's available throughout the country. You don't have that in Barson, Muskogee, or, uh, Kalamazoo. You don't even have it in New York City, for that matter.

G: Has Bukowski's success here opened up the way for other American writers in Germany?

CW: Hunter S. Thompson and William Kotzwinkle, for instance, may have profited from it initially. They were picked up by German publishers in the wake of the Bukowski boom. The Bavarian small press man did stories by Jack Micheline and Gerald Locklin, plus Jack Kerouac's *Book of Dreams*, as well as Jack's daughter's first novel, *Baby Driver*, which got great reviews—one of them by myself. Fabulous book. There was a renewed interest in the Beat writers. And of course there was a demand for

people who were writing Bukowski's type of narrative poem. I did an anthology, with Hank as co-editor, which was called *Turpentine on the Rocks*. It had Diane DiPrima, Charles Plymell, Doug Blazek, Micheline, Harold Norse, Rochelle Owens, Nila Northsun—a Shoshone Indian—tough as nails.

Koertge, Locklin, Sam Shepard, lots of others. Sold close to 50,000 copies.

G: Bukowski himself suggests, in more than one poem, that his success overseas must be due in great part to his translators. Do you think there's anything to this?

CW: That's something you'd have to ask the critics. I mean, okay, if you look at the reviews, some of them really went apeshit over my translations, which was nice, although I couldn't quite understand it. I was simply trying to do a good job.

Apparently that is already exceptional in this country.

I'm sure a good

translation can help to get things rolling. But a good novel will sell even in a mediocre translation—maybe not 100,000 copies, but it'll do okay. With poetry it's different. For instance, after the big Bukowski Reader, Zweitausendeins in Frankfurt decided to publish a 330-page *Selected Poems*. Now that is unheard-of, even in Germany. If you do a thing like that, the translation had better be damned good. Nobody is going to buy two kilos worth of poems in a bad translation.

G: What changes do you feel at liberty to make in translating a book?

CW: None. I don't add anything, and I don't leave anything out. But I take whatever liberties are

necessary to get it across. Not just the exact meaning, but the feeling. The *sound*. In some cases it's easy because you can put it three or four different ways, all of them okay. But in a lot of cases there's only one specific way that makes it. And you better find it.

G: In translating Bukowski or Burroughs, have you been able to come up with any "firsts" in German?

CW: No, not really, although some people seem to think so. I remember this radio program I was on: the guy starts out by claiming that I have invented a whole new language to translate Bukowski, or even that I'm making up a lot of things which are not in the original. He rattles off a few examples. "What's your problem, Arnfried?" I asked. "Don't you ever go into the pub around the corner? What kind of ivory tower are you inhabiting?" One of his exhibits was the inevitable "fuck you." For a casual "fuck you," the German equivalent is *Leck mich am Arsch* [lick my ass], or just *leck mich* for short. But if somebody says it viciously and with real conviction, I translate it as *Fick dick ins Knie!* or "fuck yourself in the knee," in the hollow of the knee, I mean, which really requires some contortions [laughter]. But this expression is quite current and has been around for at least thirty years. I think I first picked it up in high school, in the mid-fifties. So the guy thought it was something I had invented. He must have been moving in some pretty drab circles. Alright. So I don't make anything up, which would be counterproductive anyway, but I do try to make good use of what's there.

now playing some Armenian or Turkish music on radio, from the Fez. a little cafe-like place down next to the Racing Form building. I went up there one night, ~~and I was~~ quite drunk ~~and~~ really, they didn't want to let me in at first, but I was in one of my warm and gentle moods and they relented. I sat on a big pillow on the floor and some big warm wench kept bringing me all kinds of strange drinks but none of them knocked me out like continuous American whiskey would have and I felt warmer and warmer. there was plenty of alcohol in the drinks, I could taste it, the expert, but it only kept me CLEAR. people, men and women came around and sat on pillows and talked to me. I didn't want any ass. I just wanted to feel the people. and it was marvelous. and all the time, this strange music. I just kept laughing and enjoying, all sophistication all ego gone, burned-out. I don't think any man really wants to be a prick, really wants to hate, it is only pressures that make him hate. of course, I don't care for this THOU MUST LOVE, either. I don't like love as a command, as a search. it must come to you, like a hungry cat at the door. what? hearing this music reminds me of that good night. I am not always as hard as my poems.

it is interesting that we all know that the language fails, still the force of the word springs from the individual and if there is enough individual force the language comes alive like a sperm-mad cock, no matter what its failures are. (see Dostovsky).

I certainly sometimes wish that William Carlos Williams had written writing the same way he talked about writing writing. but as you know, he didn't. why? I think, that at first, his job was too comfortable, his fame came too easy, and that there is a difference between saying what is wrong and doing what is right. that is why critics sound so good and write so badly. that is why the Umpire in the Sky is drunk; that is why streetcars have been ~~abolished~~ abolished; that is why slaves do not need chains.

out of drink, so end of letter. must go out and get more. see me in these Los Angeles streets, bent of back, aging, trying to hold on, pitiful man, going down the street for whiskey, haha, Norse sprawled out on his back dreaming of spiders, the whole loop of the sea like a garrote around my breathing, the stars, the moon, the whole universe shit and my knowing it, a hell of a cross, ya, and crossing the street against the signal light, the drunken shoe manufacturers crumbling against their tin lives of love and cursing me, I sail out, hope you are there, somewhere, sensing, Carl, probing for lobsters, lobsters say that don't know what lavender is, all the crazy mixup, all of us wanting to live cleanly until the pure golden death with childrens' hair sweeping our delth dreams, ah, kid, I am really carrying on, but what the hell, where else are you going to get a tombstone like this, folded in, stuck in an envelope, sealed, and placed for your fingers, your mind, your bellybutton, your agony, your wallpaper, the date of arrival, the weather (good or bad or medium), and my old Uncle Fette, over there near you, dear old Hierich, Anderach candymaker, either dead or dying, like I am, like you are, everything exploding and sad and full of tears, jeus just jeus too much. I feel like fc crying, I think I will cry, but first, Carl, dear friend, that small pint, then later and again--the world.

my love,

Buk

G: Do you feel it's been primarily Bukowski who has made you as a translator?

CW: Bukowski and Burroughs. They have been my most important authors. If you just look at the sheer bulk of the work alone. . . let's see. . . the one I'm doing right now, *The Western Lands*, is my eleventh Burroughs book.

G: Burroughs must be rather difficult. . .

CW: He's considered insanely difficult to translate. With good reason. The profusion of different slangs. And of course the cut-up method and some other tricks, which I'm more or less familiar with, so I guess that gives me an edge. But there will always be things where I'm momentarily at a loss.

G: Can you think of an example?

CW: Well, this junkie puts on his old black overcoat and decides, "time to cosq": c-o-s-q. You won't find that in a dictionary of slang. At least I didn't. There was a slim chance that it might be a misprint for "score," a misprint which had somehow survived through all the different editions. But I wanted to be on the safe side, so

I asked Burroughs himself. "No," he wrote back, "it's *cosq* and it simply means 'to hit the street.' " There. Probably an example of strictly local New York City lushworkers' slang of the forties.

G: If you can generalize, what aspects of a book do you think translators have the most trouble with?

CW: Dialogue. Not only slangy dialogue, but just ordinary live dialogue in colloquial English, or French, or whatever.

Most of them can't handle it. It comes out flat, colorless, contrived. You have a lively character who's got a good rap, and they make him sound like a prissy bureaucrat who is talking down his nose. Hopeless. And if you have a story which is 90 percent dialogue—Bukowski has some of these, Nelson Algren, Raymond Carver—then obviously you are ruining the entire story. Forget it.

G: Do you still enjoy translating after all these years?

CW: Certain books, yes. Of course, even if you like a book a lot, it's still hard work.

G: How many pages do you translate, say, per month?

CW: I do maybe a hundred pages. Book pages in the original, I mean. Sometimes more. Never less.

G: And what has been your toughest job so far?

CW: Bob Dylan's *Texts and Drawings*, published by Alfred A. Knopf. It consisted of everything Dylan had written between 1961 and 1972. 450 pages or so. What made it tough was that he insisted that the rhymes be kept whenever possible. And as you know, well, let's just say that some of his lyrics are less successful than others. And to make it all rhyme in German. . . my God. Took me almost half a year. It was worth it, though. The book was a success—Zweitausendeins in Frankfurt did it, in a 900-page bilingual edition, in 1975. And it encouraged them to go into publishing for real. Until then, they had only done reprints. And thank God they did, because I was able to do several big editions for them: the major works of Burroughs, Algren, Denton Welch.

G: What are your primary ambitions, your working guidelines, when translating a book?


CW: My ambition is to make it sound as if it had been originally written in German, which probably bothers certain of my colleagues whose ambition is to get away with a lot less *laughter*. But if I'm sacrificing three or four months of my life to translate a book, I want to be able to look at it ten years from now without having to blush.

G



Frankfurt Airport, 1978. Parting shot after Bukowski's hugely successful reading in Hamburg.

Hollywood, 1983.



CHARLES BUKOWSKI AND THE OUTLAW SPIRIT

by JAY DOUGHERTY

On West German Success, Letters to Carl Weissner and Letter-writing.

GARGOYLE: Your books have sold over 2.5 million copies in West Germany. They're in every department store, every train station, and of course every book store. As Carl Weissner, your German translator, has said, at this point they sell by themselves; they need no advertising. To what do you attribute your phenomenal success there?

CHARLES BUKOWSKI: I believe that the German public is more open to gamble and new ways of presentation. Why this is, I don't know. Here in the U. S. a more staid and safe literature seems preferred. Here people don't want to be shaken or awakened. They prefer to sleep through their lives. To them, what is safe and old seems good.

G: But what do you feel the German reading public sees in your work? Do you really feel that, as you say in some of your poems, the success is solely attributable to the work of your translators?

BUK: With the German public, I do believe it does help that I was born there. It doesn't help in the sale of millions of copies. Maybe 100,000. I am a curiosity. My translators? Well, they are probably pretty damned good. The books seem to go well in France, Italy and Spain. England, no. Who knows why? I don't know why. You know, I try to keep my word-age and my line structure simple and bare. This doesn't mean I don't say anything. It means that I say it rather directly without a smokescreen. The English and the Americans are used to the old literary bullshit—that is, being lulled to sleep by the same old crap. If they read something and find that it isn't interesting or that they can't understand it, they oftentimes presume it to be profound. Or so I tend to believe.

G: Why do you think Americans have not embraced you so wholly? Is it a matter of circulation, that John Martin, your publisher, doesn't have the means of, say, a New York publisher to advertise your books and get them out to the most possible outlets?

BUK: Yes, Black Sparrow Press has a limited circulation and this tends to hold down being known widely in the U. S. Yet they have published book after book of mine throughout the years, and most of the books are still *in print* and *available*. Black Sparrow and I almost began together and it is my hope that we will end together. It would be fitting.

If I had gone to a large New York publisher, I might have larger U. S. sales and I might be rich, but I doubt that I would continue writing in a workman-like and joyful fashion. Also, I doubt that I would have the same uncensored acceptability that I have at Black Sparrow. As a writer I consider myself in the best of worlds: famous elsewhere and working here. The gods have spared me many of the pitfalls of the average American writer. Black Sparrow came to me when nobody else would. This after

years of working as a common laborer and a starving writer, being largely ignored by the large presses and most of the major magazines. It would be ungrateful of me to seek a large New York publisher now. In fact, I don't have the slightest desire to do so.

G: Your early letters to Carl Weissner, letters which began in about 1961, are characterized by incredible energy and anger and insight. They are some of the most substantive letters by you that I've seen. And yet Weissner, at the time the correspondence began, was

then but a student, one you had never met or heard of before the correspondence started. What were your motivations at the time for writing him these letters? What was your living situation like, your outlook on life?

BUK: I have no idea how it all started with Carl Weissner; that was almost three decades ago. But somehow we got in contact. I believe he saw some of my work in the U. S. little magazines. We began corresponding. His letters were quite incisive, entertaining (lively as hell), and he bucked up my struggle in the darkness, no end. A letter from Carl always was and still is an infusion of life and hope and easy wisdom. I was in the post office at the time and living with a crazy alcoholic woman and writing anyhow. All our money went for booze. We lived in rags and a rage of despair. I remember I didn't even have money for shoes. The nails from my old shoes dug into my feet as I walked my routes hungover and mad. We drank all night and I had to get up at 5 a. m. When I wrote, the poems came out of this and the letters from Carl were the only good magic about.

G: How did you picture Weissner?

BUK: How did I picture him? Exactly as he looked and acted when I met him. One hell of a hell of an amazing human.

G: What would you say has been the most

the next day following earlier letter (1967)

hello Carl:

this quick one, follow up, trying to fight off Marina who won't let me type long (competition), but I screwed up--the photo is evidently of you, and I called it your daughter--so now I've put a dent in your mulch--sorry--but why in hell do they dress little boys like little girls and then hand the photo to a guy with a hangover? the 1944 makes sense to me now. should I consider you wounded forever? don't be. I wish I looked like my daughter. now she's making a train. I hold a conversation with her as I type: "Are you making a train? ah, fine, hum hum. oh, did the train fall down?" Bukowski gone soft as poached eggs for ulcer patients.

(this quick letter to tell you I am sorry I called you your daughter in 1944. in 1967.)

woman from Sacramento just phoned. she says she likes to hear my voice. wow wow. I'd sure like to help her. I'm told she's a looker. writes me 2 or 3 letters a week. she also writes poetry. god damn just dropped a cigar ash on my only good pair of pants and before I could get the damn thing up I burned a hole in the pants, and a hole in the leg. but the pants, that's what hurts. constant tragedy. ah, me. but these letters from Sacramento. little scrolls, tired. "it rained today.. I cleaned the house. ..2 poems accepted by.. I. one of them is about you." I keep this gal going in a kind of haywire way, it's kind of sloppy and bites me in the back of the neck, but I try to remain the fucked up human I am. everybody needs help and I like to help them: especially good-lookers with sexy voices who have read more than the morning paper.

important and substantial correspondence that you've been engaged in?

BUK: Letters to Carl Weissner. I felt that with Carl I could say anything I wanted to, and I often did.

G: Is there anyone today to whom you write letters of comparable length or energy?

BUK: No.

G: Did you see the letters that you wrote to Weissner or anyone else as a kind of practice ground, a testing ground for your writing or ideas?

BUK: No, I never tested my writing abilities in letter writing. For instance, I read that Hemingway often wrote letters when he couldn't write anything else. To me, this would be a betrayal of the person you were writing to. I wrote letters because they just came out. They were a need. A scream. A laugh. Something. I don't keep carbons.

G: Did poems or stories ever evolve out of your letters?

BUK: Few stories or poems came out of the letters. If they did, it was afterwards. A small thought: shit, maybe I ought to use that line or that idea elsewhere. But not too often, hardly at all. The letter came first. The letter was the letter as the letter.

G: Carl Weissner has characterized your early letters to him as "soul food." Whom have you most enjoyed receiving letters from and why?

BUK: As I said, Carl's letters were the best.

They kept me going for weeks. I even wrote him at times to say something like, "God damn, man, you've saved my life." And it was true. Without Carl I would be dead or near dead or mad or near mad, or driveling into a slop pail somewhere, mouthing gibberish.

G: You've always been fairly meticulous about dating your letters, and a lot of energy has gone into at least the Weissner letters. Did you ever at any point--before, that is, you sold the letters to Santa Barbara--sense an audience outside of the person to whom you were writing? That is, do you think you wrote, consciously or unconsciously, with posterity in mind?

"I never thought of an audience outside of Carl in the letters. If I had they would have been shitty letters. I was writing to Carl because . . . he knew what I was saying and his answers would be joyous, crazy, brave."

this is a short short letter and I am sorry if you are a girl. wear high heels, ect.....

you know, it is amazing the ugly number of people in the lit. world hate me. no, don't send me to headshrinker. no complex. thing in present THE SMITH. AN INTERCEPTED LETTER FROM CHARLES BUK, something like that. but really the parody does NOT WRITE LIKE I WRITE. impossible. maybe I do write too many letters. maybe I do write too many poems. but it is simply a matter of energizing into the INCOMPLETE ~~FACTS~~ ABSOLUTE, you follow? yes, you do. it may be a flowing of shit, and yet within all the turds I feel is some tiny flower. you might have to look pretty hard. I have had a lot of hard days... drunk days, days in jail, days of madness, days without ~~because~~ cause or form, and the university boys take heed, they don't like to hear back alley talk. THE MAN IN THE BACK ALLEY IS SUPPOSED TO DAMN WELL KEEP QUIET! no, I ghostly damn well ~~throw~~ throw out the mangled butternut skulls of myself, the sucked-out ~~flies~~ flies, the cardboard faces of Jesus, ~~Sargoyan~~ Sargoyan at Malibu, James Dean & Bob Dylan inflated Dylan Thomas inflated, the inflated fucking raft, Bogey the dull picture hero, myself spitting out my teeth and my life without a chance to breathe. they want the straight-lace picture. novels about the Civil War. novels about daring sexuality within the daring and lovely rich. the UNIVERSITY IS THE THUNDERHEAD OF DEFEAT. the young know this. so they get sucked away from this and they get sucked into other cesspools: Bukowski, Thomas, Dylan, Ginsberg-- anything except by going into that lonely room and finding out WHO THEY ARE OR WHO THEY ARE NOT. it's too hard.

Kennedy was a half-man, hardly that, but a hero of the little punchy ~~guy~~ guy who wanted class and used K's seeding class to fill the hole. I'll always remember the day of Kennedy's assassination, how all the people seemed HOLLOW without impulse or guide. as if they had been scooped out. me, I felt the same. but I got this terrible feeling as if the beehive had been raided and the QUEEN BEER BEES taken out forever. even their faces had no anger. WITHOUT THEIR LEADER THEY COULD NOT EVEN GET ANGRY AT AN ~~seeding~~ INJUSTICE. this was the day I really read the human race down, realized that each man must be HIS OWN QUEEN BEER BEE. and that they could not ever be stuffed with the apple pie of political fairytales to ~~save~~ save their dull asses. you can kill one man. it is a little more difficult (tho possible) to kill a worldful. let's try for a worldful. (Carl do you know any woman in los angeles who could come over and throw me a hot piece of ass? if so, tell her to wear highheels and a tight tight skirt, and my phone number is NO. I-6385) oh shit, it's past ten p.m. and according to the rules I must stop typing. how can I make it? I am just getting warmed up. (Carl, do you know any woman in los angeles with a NOISELESS TYPEWRITER. if you do, tell her to bring it over. tell her to wear highheels and a tight tight skirt, and my phonenumber is the same.)

all areas demolished. nothing but seaweed in Denver across an old copy of T. William's A STREETCAR CALLED DESIRE. an interesting if ineffectual play. the rose of the blood arrived, then diminished. standard. well, I've gone well beyond my 10 p.m. calling, and now there's some mob bitch on radio, my F.M. with horrible scratchy voice to match her soul-- SO MANY PEOPLE THINK THAT EDUCATION MEANS INTELLIGENCE--and I will listen until I am quite sure that she is the same old death con-game, then I will ~~wake~~ wake with hangover and try to make it in this Sunday, 3:24 p.m., wobbly-legged, the gruesome comfortable farting creatures all around me eating the shred that's left of my god damned soul, inch by inch, the mound nub of it, chewing, ~~belching~~ belching me out, ~~talk~~ talking their talk forever of zeroes, no barbarism left in me, swooning swooning, drying again, the same old game in an eggnog of empty faces, eyow, terror and aloneness too great to ever believe, only the floor alive, only the lights, and somebody standing behind me with a great powerful badge saying: WORK SWEAT WORK SWEAT, KILL YOUR FEW HOURS LEFT, DROWN THEM SHIT ON THEM, DIE YOU DULL-HEADED FRICK. and I deserve all they give me because I am not man enough to tell them what is wrong, either in the art-form or the form of the voice. I fail. and now, I try to sleep. good sleep to you, man.

so now again,

Buk

“Men don't write with their reputations; they write, most of them, with typewriters.”

—from a letter to Carl Weissner, August, 1966



Charles Bukowski in his office at his home in San Pedro, California, 1985.

BUK: Carl's letters were sold to Santa Barbara along with other things because that was survival. I didn't even have the letters. I asked Carl for them and he popped them over. Like that. No, I never thought of an audience outside of Carl in the letters. If I had, they would have been shitty letters. I was writing to Carl because I felt he knew what I was saying and that his answers would be joyous, crazy, brave and on the mark. I've read too many literary letters, published, that the famed writers have written. They do seem to write to more than one person, and that's their business unless they write to me.

G: What do you enjoy most about writing letters? When do you write them?

BUK: Writing letters, like writing poems, stories, novels, helps to keep me from going crazy or from quitting. I write letters at night when I am drinking, just as I write my other stuff.

On Poetry and Craft

G: In your poems, you sometimes write about enjoying your time at the typewriter, how easy it is to be a writer, and so on. What are your feelings about the nine-to-five, workaday world and the goals after which most strive?

BUK: The nine-to-five is one of the greatest atrocities sprung upon mankind. You give your life away to a function that doesn't interest you. This situation so repelled me that I was driven to drink, starvation, and mad females, simply as an alternative. The ideal, for one like me, of course, is to make it off your writing, your creativity. I found that I was unable to do this until the age of fifty, when I began to make just enough income to survive without the nine-to-five. Lucky, for me, of course, because at that time I was working for the United States Post Office, and most of the nights were eleven-and-a-half hours long, and most of the days off were canceled. I was near insanity, and my whole body was such a mass of nerves that almost any place I was touched could make me scream, and I had great trouble lifting my arms and turning my neck. I quit the job at fifty, and the writing seemed to arrive in better form.

G: How do you feel that writing poetry—or writing in general—helps you cope with the mindlessness you perceive around you?

BUK: Writing keeps you alive because it eases the monsters in the brain by moving them to paper. The listing of horrors seems regenerative, and often comes out in the writing as a form of joy or humor. The typewriter often sings soothing songs to the sadness in the heart. It's wondrous.

G: You have consistently refused to become political within the literary arena, refused to be associated with literary "schools" or trends. But in a recent poem directed against the "Academics" and the generally conservative poetry they profess, you say:

*we don't care how they
write the poem*

*but we insist that there are
other voices
other ways of creating*

los angeles, calif.
march 3, 1967

hello Karl:

very dull and damp and down today, and for some time....

not too good here. health slipped again. eyew, next thing I knew I am walking around drunk again, unable to make work. worried about THEIR DAMNED WORK, their place, their walls, their trained-seal rules. ummm, umm. LIKE WORRYING THAT A SHARK MIGHT SNUB HIS NOSE STUB HIS NOSE WHEN HE TAKES A BITE OUTA YOU. then I am semplace else and somebody keeps handing me this pill-things in a ~~jar~~ jar and I am transfixed like a thorn upon a rose I cannot see. I turn down fucks. I don't talk. I listen, nervous, uncomfortable, unable to move, not caring too. sun goes up and down. voices say voice things like flutes and beards hidden under some near pier, shern white voices with broken backs. fukes! 36 hours later you get up out of your chair and walk out; it's cold. the car starts. you are cele cele cele COLD. LIKE BONEWET AND PACKED WITH FISHWICE. eyes don't care. you drive out. broke. days away from chicken shit job. you come back to your place and it's a SMEAR OF PAPER AND SHIRTS AND STOCKINGS AND SAD UNDONE THINGS ON THE FLOOR, LETTERS FROM Germany, and letters from peppermint hades, and a letter from a lady who still wants to get FUCKED. I lay down and cannot sleep. I FEEL AS IF I HAVE BETRAYED THE FOOTBALL TEAM BUT THE FOOTBALL TEAM ISN'T ANYWHERE AROUND. round er around. I can't sleep. I don't want to come. have arrived. only the fish smell like selda-wands with ~~fish~~ flick-switches.

:::::write: Karl:

so that's it.

nothing to roll or pipe, no pills, no money but will go out for beer at this place, beer and wine, have credit, whiskey scotch that stuff tears my stomach which is about gone. but shape of spirit strangely gross-strong, like headbreath come-thru, hahaha, maybe I got lucky strings inside, like no matter what happens this butterball thing keeps puffing, yet no long dastardly letter, I allow myself greenbean laxiness, complete stinking of socks, and know n understand and that is fine phine.

by the way, do you have tape machine? I know good madman, poet Edwin Thomas, who has 2 or 3 tape machines, we can send store er mone, ~~fish~~ prefer 3 and 3/4 speed. can you send us something? we will answer from our bearded hills, something.

meanwhile, pray for dead fish,

Buk

other ways of living the
life

in this battle against the
Centuries of the Inbred
Dead

let it be known that
we have arrived and
intend to
stay

Do you see yourself as in the center of a kind of unheralded proletarian poetry that is finding more and more outlet within the small presses and little magazines?

BUK: Regarding the poem in general, I don't see myself as the center of anything but myself. I travel alone. That particular poem you note was written for others than for myself. That is, I feel that a more human, accessible yet true and vibrant poetry is gradually coming forth. I note it especially in some of the little; there is a

movement toward more clarity, reality . . . while the academics are still standing still, playing secret and staid games, snob and inbred games which are finally anti-life and anti-truth.

G: Your work continues to be ignored by most anthologies in the U. S., with the notable exceptions of your appearing in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* and *A*

Geography of Poets (Bantam). Why do you think this is, and how do you feel about being in *Norton*, probably the most widely-used college-level anthology?

BUK: I didn't know that I was in the *Norton*. If I am, alright, I don't think it will kill anybody off. I am not an expert on anthologies. I suppose they are mostly the choice of one man. And my guess is that most of these men are university-connected, hence conservative, careful, and worried about their jobs. What they choose could hardly shock a nun or a bus driver, but it might put them to sleep.

G: Outside of your books with *Black Sparrow*, you continue to publish your poetry mostly in little magazines. What do you think is the state of literary and little magazines? The established quarterlies versus the xeroxed occasionals?



Bukowski in Ladenburg, 1978.

Feb. 27, '68

hello Carl:

yes, I too have 35 or 40 unanswered letters, but now entirely beyond me to answer them; I can't keep up; for each answer to a letter, 3 more come in. I am not in the letter-writing business. I am in a stricken-down stage now, anyhow, bad health, can barely make it about, hang on. I've just decided to let people think I am a shit; it's easier than answering all those letters.

rumours on town hall reading of Bukowski, Corso, Micheline... impossible. didn't you know I have made it known for years that I don't read publicly? I am a shit, Carl. just turned down a reading, with fee, at Univ. of Southern Calif. Festival of the Arts. I've never read in public, don't intend to unless it means the difference between starving in the gutter and starving in a closet. I prefer to starve in a closet. have turned down fees of from \$200 and \$700 and told them to go screw. I believe that if the pricks get a man on stage they get a man jumping through their hoop, they make a jerk out of him. I am not an actor, I am a creator, I hope. I do read on tape because this still leaves an area of solitude and peace, but actually I've done very little reading on tape and any professional actor could read my stuff better. for a general audience. that is.

BUK: I don't read many established quarterlies except *The New York Quarterly*, and I am prejudiced toward them because I have appeared in every one of their issues from No. 7 through No. 34. I find that they are not afraid of newness or warmth, but like I say, since they have been so good to me, I may not be the perfect judge here.

On the littles, I'd say that the greatest weakness is that they publish their own editors too often. Most of the poems are not really fully evolved: an off-hand "so-what" attitude prevails. Yet, within many issues, there are poems that are really there, fully. Now and then, astonishing talents will appear. Most of them don't last too long; something in life swallows them up. But life renews: when you've just about given up on everybody, here comes another slashing through. The hope that's always there makes the littles worthwhile.

G: To you, what characterizes the best and worst poetry being written today?

BUK: The worst poetry copies the best and the worst of the past. Most poets come too much from protective environments. A poet must live before a poet can write, and sometimes the living must be almost enough to kill. I am not suggesting that poets seek dangerous situations, and neither am I suggesting that they avoid them.

G: What contemporary or new writers do you see as holding promise? And what qualities of their work attract you?

BUK: John Thomas. Gerald Locklin. What qualities? Read them.

G: A few commentators have criticized your

poetry, especially your recent poetry, as being little more than prose cut up into lines. Do you feel the same way? What qualities do you feel distinguish your poetry from your prose?

BUK: The critics might be right. I'm not sure what the difference is between my poetry and my prose. Perhaps the styles are similar. The mood probably isn't. I mean, the mood is different in the poetry and the prose. That is, I can only write prose when I am feeling good. Poetry I can write when I am feeling bad, and I write most of it when I am feeling bad, even if the poem comes out in a humorous fashion.

G: I personally disagree with those

who say that even the recent poetry is prose cut up into lines, for I see either conscious or unconscious decisions being made with regard to, for example, line breaks—very often you seem to break a line either to force the poem to be read or stressed in a certain way or to push the reader into a temporary expectation that is then in the next line disappointed. How do you decide on line breaks in your poems?

BUK: Subconsciously, I guess, I

am trying to make my poetry more and more bare, essential. That is, to hang a lot on a little. This might give those critics vent to holler their dirty word "prose." That's what the critics are there for: to complain. I don't write for the critics; I write for that little thing that sits just in and behind my forehead (ah, cancer?).

Line breaks? The lines break themselves and I don't know how.

G: From what I understand, *Dangling in the Tournefortia* was one of the few books, if not the only book, not edited heavily or "selected" by John Martin. Did you insist on the continuity of the poems there?

BUK: John Martin selects all the poems for all the books. I'm not sure a writer knows which of his work is best. If I were to get precious and fuck around with selecting my own poems, then there I would lose time which I could put to better use writing or being at the racetrack or taking a bath or doing nothing. John has a great eye in lining the poems up in order. He loves to have one lead rather into the other, more or less, and if you will check the books of poems you will find that there is almost a little story told,

los angeles, ca if. it's Friday, I don't have a clown's calendar, but I think it's August First, 1968, HOT HOT, and good old cheap Sear's Roebuck fan turned on my ass; well, not exactly, I sit in my shorts, aging, drinking beer, the windows open, and they look at me, 6 p.m., coming in from their little jobs... they have been drowned and shitted upon. well, they belong to my club...

hello carl:

good to hear; I'd thought maybe the literary thumpers and back-scratchers had gotten to you and told you I was a pile of dog turds. but you are the quiet type; it didn't fit in my mind. I remember you behind those dark shades, just smiling evenly, that slight smile there all along. I read pretty good and I don't believe in poking into souls, but I thought, "if Earl has turned, it is very strange. because usually it is the constant talkers, the OPEN-HEARTS, ~~THAT~~ that will leap from boat to boat when the waters seem to change." so good to hear--it keeps my score at 100 percent. hey, wait, can't get a fucking thing on the radio but this dribble-water music. they're playing Gershwin at the Bowl tomorrow night so tonight everybody thinks they have to play Gershwin...

strange thing--3 critical studies of me arrived in the mail in about two days. one a long book, another an article in a sex mag, another some burblings about me in a thing called A BUKOWSKI SAMLER. really, the worst one was the one by the prof, the long book--he just went on winding-cut the spool of literary criticism as he had been taught to do. and to make it more cajoling complete--he called the worst poems the best ones, the best ones the worst, and very bothered with the term "surrealism", I guess something they really jammed into his anus in college. the one in the sex mag was really the best; I got drunk with the guy all night one night so he had something to talk about that I told him instead of something he imagined through reading my crap. after getting a p.h.d. you know? well, the SAMLER thing was all mixed-up. they meant well but, basically, they were too young and not enough had happened to them. I don't mean that you have to be OLD to write, but I do mean that if you are OLD and can still write and have sailed some bloody ships, you've got a little edge.

meanwhile Postoffice has found out I do this weekly column NOTES OF A DIRTY OLD MAN for the local underground paper OPEN CITY and they look upon it most darkly, they seem to think that some of the work is dirty and really not up to what a postal clerk should be doing in his spare time. I have had 2 long interviews with the big boys in long dark rooms and we have ~~spurred~~ sparred back and forth, quietly, neither side giving ground. but, meanwhile, I am still employed and I still continue to write the column. which some smut peddler in North Hollywood wants to put out in book form but I just can't seem to get out to see him--although Bryan says he is good for \$1,000 advance, I am still FROZEN. I get smut-peddler on phone, we talk, I say, "soon soon," and he says, "fine, fine", but I just can't seem to get out there. really FROZEN, Earl. can you understand? it's crazy. people want to do good by me and I won't let them. I guess I'm just tired. too much going on. and I look down at floor as I type this to you and here is this package, still there, looking up at me with its eyeless face, waiting to be mailed to England. ah, England, my England!

the landlady wants to come in here and put up new curtains, I say, "wait, wait, there are dead bodies in there, I don't want you to see all the dead bodies." she laughs, but even she and her husband fuck me up; I just about get straight and she comes on down here and knocks on the door and gets me to come down and they both get me drunk, we sit up all night singing very silly songs and I don't get anywhere.

feel good,

BUK

even though the poems are often about separate things. John loves to do this, in spite of all the work involved, and I am glad that somebody is noticing.

G: You seem to be experimenting more in your poetry with a kind of fragmentary poem, composed solely of images, like "Lost in San Pedro." What changes do you sense or see occurring in your poetry, concerning either technique or subject?

BUK: If the poems are changing in their way, it could be because I am getting closer to death. Poems about whores showing their panties and spilling beer on my fly no longer seem quite apt. I don't mind nearing death; in fact, it almost feels good. But different paints are needed for the damned canvas. Of course, many of the things that bothered me when I was seven years old still bother me now. On the other hand, when things were going the worst, I never felt cheated out of anything or wronged. I might have thought that I was a better writer than many famous writers living or dead, but I considered that a natural course of events--oftentimes those on top show very little. The public creates its own gods and it often chooses badly because the public reflects its own image.

As I go on, I write as I please and as I must. I don't worry about critics or style or fame or lack of fame. All I want is the next line as it truly comes to me.

G: What are your plans for future writing projects?

What are you working on now?

BUK: I am into a novel, *Hollywood*. Now, that's prose and I have to feel good and I haven't felt good lately, so I am only up to page fifty. But it's all there inside of my head, and I hope to feel good enough long enough to write it. I can only hope so because it's a real laughter. Hollywood is at least 400 times worse than anybody has ever written about it. Of course, if I ever finish it, then I'll probably get sued, even though it's true. Then I can write another novel about the court system.



At the Track in Santa Anita, California, 1984.

