

BUKOWSKI IN THE BATHTUB

Philomene Long & John Thomas

Bukowski in the Bathtub

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Beyond Baroque Books

Second Printing

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Nonfiction is not possible without a collective effort by many people. Some of their names already appear in the main text. Others do not, but were equally important in the development and writing of Bukowski in the Bathtub.

Thanks to Jamie Jamison for constructing this book you're holding.

Charlotte Gusay, my agent, deserves high gratitude for her support, and for her heroic efforts on behalf of this book. Nor shall I ever forget her timely exhortations. "When the get goes going, the tough go get!" Something like that. In any event, the right words at the right time.

Gratitude to Carrie Arce, Gary Baldwin, Laurel Ann Bogen, Gayle Davis, Diane di Prima, Tommy Dougherty III, Fred Dewey (Beyond Baroque), Seisen Fletcher Sensei, Tenshin Fletcher Sensei, Michael C. Ford, FrancEYE, Marsha Getzler, Allen Ginsberg, S.A. Griffin, Carlos Hagen-Lautrup, Doug Knott, Grace Kono-Wells (Keysrokes), Jay Kugelman (Pacifica Radio), Timothy Leary, Maureen Luna Long, Patrick Moore Long, Pegarty Long, Suzanne Lummis (LA Poetry Festival), Taizan Maezumi Roshi, Valarie Macht, Spiros Mantities, John Maynard, Bill Mohr, Michael Montfort, Wendy Egyoku Nakao Sensei, Harry Northup, Holly Prado, Frank T. Rios, Tristine Rainer, Lollie Rogers, Sheri Rose, Vanja Seiss, Tony Scibella, Aya Tarlow, Lisa Walford, Roy Walford, UCLA Extension Writers' Program, Fawn Walenski, Bob Zachary, Joan Zachary, and Mariano Zaro.

Thanks to John Thomas, who so generously took time out of his life to hang around Bukowski and me.

I especially would like to thank Linda Bukowski, Hank's widow, for her encouraging words about a nearly-final version of the book. "I had a blast with it! A hoot! Zen words!" she said. This brought an abundance of primal energy, which saw me through the completion of this work.

My thanks, finally, to Charles Bukowski himself-- for having had the grace to live and write in our time.

--Philomene Long

*In the sutra it says, "The mystic feeling of
taking a bath made sixteen men enlightened."
How do you understand it?*

--Zen Koan

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1

BOILING IN THE POT, BOILING IN THE BOXES

For over thirty years lost poems, photos, drawings, and audio taped conversations of Charles Bukowski and John Thomas were stacked in cardboard cartons in a basement in Echo Park beside a sewer pipe which broke, leaving the floor swimming in shit, then wedged in a hole in the ground under a house in Cypress Park, (a suburb of Los Angeles).

Before these cardboard cartons saw the light of day they lived among the resident cockroaches in Venice, California where we live. Then on to Silver Lake where they survived when the hillside flooded into the garage where they were resting. Back again to Venice, where for years the photos and tapes gathered dust in the back of our closet, the images and voices silent among our ghosts and mice, silent under our dirty laundry. There they survived a fire in our apartment building, "The Ellison", heaped twenty feet away from the twenty-foot flames.

In March of 1994, when Bukowski died, we pulled the cartons out. When we opened the boxes the photos and drawings were dusty, the tapes a little gritty, preserved with an occasional cigarette ash or cockroach skeleton. Some short bits of splicing tape had dried out and had to be fixed. But the images, the voices, had quietly survived, rather sneered at leaks from the upstairs neighbor's overflowing toilet, the 1994 Northridge earthquake, lived silent with only the ghosts to watch and mouse ears to listen to them.

Unpacked, again, finally the cardboard cartons sat in untidy stacks on our floor around our bed, gritty but ready at hand, ready for selective looking and listening while our conversations to times back across the dusty decades.

Digging through the boxes we uncovered extraordinary Bukowski material we had neglected for a long time: poems, essays, letters, photographs, drawings, and audio tapes from over three decades ago. It was a time between the years 1965 to 1970 when Charles Bukowski, ("Hank," as he preferred to be called by his friends) showed up at John Thomas' door, sometimes four or five times a week, after his evening shift at the Post Office. This was the agonizing and terrifying period of Bukowski's life before his explosion into world fame, before the rich final years with his wife Linda Bukowski. In Charles Bukowski's personal history, it was a time when in Hank's words, "he made a place when there was no place to go, a place to go when all was closing in..."

Here is the image: Hank in his not-quite-decent tacky sport shirt that was a little too tight, with his six-pack of Miller High Life and his White Owl cigars. And John Thomas in his Goodwill shirt, Goodwill pants, Goodwill suspenders, Goodwill shoes, sitting in his Goodwill

chair wearing a motoring cap, his walls plastered with layers of pictures and words, the room heaped with books, jammed with tapes, microphones, and jerry-built audio equipment. The tape recorder was always running. Reel after reel wound away.

* * *

Philomene: Tell me about the relationship between you and Bukowski during those long nights between 1965 and 1970.

John: As Hank said on the tape that we really rattled heads some of those nights, he and old big John Tommy. He would say that the first challenge came on to old big John Tommy when old big Charles Bukowski showed up. And old big John Tommy and big Charles Bukowski decided to become pals.

Hank saw the two of us as mighty men who came together from different places -- different places in the mind, different places in the world, different places in art and even in time -- but, yes mighty men who challenged one another and did a lot of head-dumping, but then became...what was the word? Yeah, pals.

I suppose I agreed with him. "There were giants on the earth in those days," I said to him once, early on. And we toasted one another --- Hank holding a can of Miller High Life, the deponent holding a glass of nasty lime Kool-aid.

Yeah, as he said, we were pals, that there was no need for argument on any other goddamn thing. Baby, we will make it together. Two great men. Here's to you, big John. (raising his can of beer) Down the hatch. Right, I mean it!

We toasted one another then; I toast him now.

2

BUKOWSKI IN THE BATHTUB

Philomene: What did Bukowski see when he looked into a mirror?

John: I remember once, referring to his seeing his face in the mirror,
 he said. "That guy ought to be dead. If I had the balls, I'd kill him."

Philomene: Did you ever see him look into one inadvertently?

John: Yeah. There was one long, there was a wide mirror in my living room which
 was pretty much opposite the couch on which he would sit. And he would
 from time to time glance up at it with some suspicion.

Philomene: What would be his expression?

John: The expression of a nervous horse.

Philomene: Would he avert his eyes from the mirror?

John: No. But sometimes he would avert his face and steal malicious glances out
 of the corners of his eyes.

Philomene: Once Bukowski saw his own face mirrored in the eye of a hog. He said he
 believed the first basic horror is a true revelation of the whole scene, that the pigs
 and the spiders and the leaves on the trees are all the same goddamn thing! And
 that this hog had the face of ten thousand human beings... everybody he had seen
 at Seventh and Broadway. It was there. And it had warts and pimples and scars.
 And a beard. And ears, and eyelashes. And the hog looked at Bukowski. And

Bukowski looked at the hog. And the hog's eyes were big. They were human eyes. And to Hank the hog had the eyes of all the people that ever lived, inside that skull.

John: What he was saying was that the steer was him.

Philomene: Yes. "All the same goddamn thing." I feel that is why so many identify with Bukowski - it is that deeper identity.

John: One more thing about Bukowski. He would bathe many times a day without any soap. He would sit in a hot tub and sort of rub himself, mainly soak, get up and dry.

Philomene: Why, do you think?

John: For one thing, he told me that soap irritated his skin. And there is one simple aspect to it-- the places he lived in (hotel rooms and small apartments) had tubs and not showers.

Philomene: But many times a day?

John: It can be a place to soothe oneself.

Philomene: A bath relieves pain, is contemplative, slow, amniotic, even -- floating in this "floating world." Gives time to think.

John: Yep.

Philomene: Soaking in the bath is a major element in Japanese life. Zen speaks of "bare attention." Funny, the word "bare" in this context. At its deepest meditative level, samadhi (or enlightenment) actually means absorption. Hank, bare naked, soaking in the tub.

John: He would sit in the bath for hours. It is hard for me to put myself in his, as it were, shower shoes, since it has been many decades since I've taken a bath unless out of sheer necessity.

Philomene:

In America most people take showers. Bukowski took baths. I recall Michael Montfort (Bukowski's principle photographer) saying that his favorite photo of Hank is of him lying in a bathtub, smiling, holding a rose. Lovely image-- Bukowski in the bathtub.

Charles Bukowski, John Thomas, Philomene Long, 1986. Photos by Sheri Rose

3

HIS REMARKABLE FACE, HIS BEAUTIFUL LEGS, HIS EYES, HIS BICEPS

John: Not that it matters, but this is a little thing that popped into my mind. He used to talk, not infrequently, about how ugly he was. Joking, not moaning about it. One Halloween, you know those things, maybe they still do put them on the top of dash boards? The little plastic virgins, you know what I'm talking about.

Philomene: Yes, I do.

John: OK. One Halloween I was in a supermarket and wandering past the kids' toys section and there was a bin of little plastic toys, among them a toy Frankenstein, the same height as those dashboard things. So I bought it and glued a little disk magnet under the base of it and gave it to him as a present. So in the old car that he had in those days he always had it sitting up there on top of the dash.

Philomene: Like the Virgin Mary.

John: Yes.

Philomene: He saw his face in Frankenstein.

John: I don't recall him making the connection. He always drove very slowly, by the way.

Philomene: Do you think he was afraid of death?

John: No. He was terrified of being pulled over for speeding and that the cop would take him to jail, so he drove very slowly and sort of slumped down in the seat.

Philomene: Of course that's exactly how he would be seen by a cop.

John: Yeah.

Philomene: Did he ever speak to you about death?

John: One thing he used to say in his late forties, “If I live to be fifty, I’ll live forever!”

Philomene: Doesn’t Frankenstein do that? Live forever?

John: They would periodically freeze him up. He would appear to die, but in the next picture he would come back.

Philomene: Let’s end with that, because he is an immortal now, so to speak. [*holds up photo of Hank, John, Philomene in San Pedro*] Let’s talk about his remarkable face.

John: As a kid he started having these horrible boils, eczema.

Philomene: I recall one time seeing Bukowski’s face lit from the bottom by a bald refrigerator light. Horror-movie lighting. It was in Joanna Bull’s apartment in Venice, 1971. He was opening her refrigerator door with his right hand, holding a bottle of wine in his left. His face, lit up like that, appeared to be a cratered moon. Joanna was behind him saying to me, ““Look at that face! Just look at it! Isn’t it beautiful?” I screamed horror-movie screams. The scream seemed to flatter him. Eyes luminous, he sauntered towards to me, bowed, and in Mae West tones asked to pour me a glass of wine.

John: He was vain about his legs, though. He thought they were enormously thick and strong.

Philomene: He appeared interested in women’s legs. Do you think there was a connection?

John: No.

Philomene: He just liked legs.

John: I think once a long time ago a woman had complimented him on his legs. The idea was that they were thick and strong and I remember him saying about a woman wrapping her legs around him, him standing and fucking, holding her up. And she was saying, according to him, “Oh Honey, your legs are so strong!”

Philomene: So that left a lasting impression.

John: I guess so. Somewhere on the tapes a woman was flirting with him and he was saying that he was ugly but had these great beautiful leeeeeegs. And he pulled his trouser legs up to show off his legs.

Philomene: And what was her reaction?

John: She giggled and said, “To me they look like blue cheese.” His skin was very pale so the blue veins were quite visible. She said then, “That's all right, my legs get gray. Sometimes they get green.” And it went on from there to other things.

Philomene: Interesting woman. What was her name?

John: Carol Sides. She was a black woman. She was an artist and pretty good, also a film student in those days at UCLA

Philomene: What did you find remarkable about Bukowski?

John: Physically? His hands. He was also proud of his hands, which were rather small for a man his size. Little pointed fingers. Soft hands.

Philomene: In the photograph his fingernails are shining. But no, what did you find remarkable mentally? The way his mind worked.

John: There is, somewhere on the tapes, my saying that he was open. Not open in the sense that he was frank and forthright, but open to emotional experience in a way that I was not.

Philomene: That's interesting. Elaborate.

John: Well, he could write about what to him had be such painful things.

Philomene: That took a strength.

John: While on the other hand he saw himself, in fact bragged about it, as being a great coward. He would say that great creative genius had some kind of positive connection to cowardice and fear. And that brave men were stupid men.

Philomene: Good. I like it. Anything else?

John: At the moment no. This was something he liked in Céline: Céline's fears, terrors. And there was some remark Céline made, I forget where, "You can't be frightened enough."

Philomene: That's a good one to end with.

John: I have another anecdote—the barbell tucked under his writing table. I guess he used it to do curls because he was very proud of his biceps. They were undistinguished biceps. But he thought he had something going there. Frequently when drunk he would hold out his arm, flex his biceps, and say, "Want to feel my egg?" Egg pronounced like a long drawn out "Aaaaaygg."

Philomene: That's three or four "a's", one "y" and two "g's".

John: I would dutifully squeeze his biceps and compliment it, to his intense satisfaction.

Philomene: That observation is suspect, John. It's the identical way you speak about

my biceps. You could be off.

John:

Maybe most of us are off.

4

SMALL, GRIMY, AND NOTHING IN THE REFRIGERATOR

- Philomene: Let us start at the beginning, when you met. What was the situation? What was your first image of him?
- John: It was at a collating party. Collating is when you assemble something. It was in John Bryan's house in Silver Lake. John Bryan and I had edited a magazine called *Notes From Underground*.
- Philomene: Which issue?
- John: I think it was the second issue.
- Philomene: Did you edit the first issue with him?
- John: No. This was a magazine that Bryan began in San Francisco. When he began it he called it *Renaissance*. I was in that also. Bukowski was in it. This was 1962. And actually Bukowski and I are in the same issue. Here I have it, right here. There is a hand on the cover. *Renaissance*, 1962, Issue # 4.
- Philomene: Who else is in there?
- John: Curtis Zahn.
- Philomene: He gets around everywhere.
- John: Let me see.. "Renaissance... the Peace Scene... We reject death as an institution..." Here, in Issue #3 - Lenny Bruce, Gregory Corso, Charles Bukowski. Actually, that *Renaissance* #3 was the last magazine I ever submitted to. *Renaissance* #4, he had to ask me. John Bryan came down to L.A. shortly after I did. We knew one another in San Francisco. He came down to take over the *L.A. Free Press*.

Philomene: So how soon after you arrived in L.A. did you meet Bukowski?

John: Six months. Early '65. That's thirty years ago. Bryan decided to start the magazine up again but he changed the name from *Renaissance* to *Notes From Underground*.

Philomene: I wonder if Bukowski got the title for "Notes From A Dirty Old Man" from that?

John: I think Bryan may have come up with the title. Because originally that stuff had been in a underground paper that Bryan started called *Open City* and the column had been called "Notes From A Dirty Old Man." I had a column in there too. "Myriorama". The pages of the magazine had all been printed and needed to be assembled in the proper sequence, stapled together with front and back covers, and then the spine glued on with black tape. I have the magazine around somewhere.

Philomene: Explain collating. I realize for the readers..

John: They know what a collating party is.

Philomene: Hell, they do.

John: Some of them were contributors, others just John's friends sitting around the dining room table assembling the pages and putting on the covers, gluing spine tape on them.

Philomene: Do you recall Bukowski's entrance?

John: He just strolled in. He came in a little late.

Philomene: What were people's reaction at the time to his presence?

John: Oh, he was considered very important.

Philomene: Even then?

John: In underground little mags.

Philomene: What image did you have of him? His clothing, what he was wearing?

John: He was wearing very tacky clothes. These were hippie days, you know. He was wearing some kind of polyester pants and the kind of polyester shirt that you could wash in the sink and dry overnight. And a plastic belt. He could have been a barber in some small southern town.

Philomene: And you?

John: I was probably wearing Levi's and a sweat shirt with the sleeves cut off. Probably that same sweat shirt in the photograph sitting in Echo Park with the earphones on. I didn't feel like collating. And he didn't plan to collate. He just came over. We had talked on the phone once or twice before. We went into the kitchen to talk. I forget about what. But apparently that got him interested in me. Not *apparently*. It *did* get him interested in me. Because a few nights later he got my number, called me on the phone and invited me over to his house that night. I didn't feel like it. And he said, that I'd have a good time! There are some great poets over here and we would talk about poetry.

Philomene: He really said that?

John: Yeah. I said "What great poets?" And he mentioned Alvaro Cardona-Hine. Do you remember him?

Philomene: No.

John: I think he was a big early connection for Holly Prado. She might have been in one of his workshops.

Philomene: What happened next?

John: I'm still on the phone with Bukowski and I said, "What, Alvaro Cardona-Hine?! A great poet?!" Sort of sneering. Anyway, I told him I couldn't make it that night, maybe another time. He got sour and offended that I wasn't going to dash over immediately to his place.

Philomene: Was he used to that?

John: Yes, in L.A. apparently in the poetry scene that was a big thing. Actually I did come over a few nights later and took my tape recorder.

Philomene: Do you have that tape?

John: I haven't been able to find that one. Maybe it's at Carlos Hagen's house.

Philomene: At Carlos's house, John?

John: Don't you remember that Carlos said that he had picked up some boxes of my tapes. Anyhow, I stayed a long time at Hank's that night, because I was on speed. He started saying that he knew I wanted to leave. Getting belligerent and hurt about being abandoned. I had given no indication that I wanted to leave. I was on speed so I could have stayed another three days. I teased him about that attitude. I sneered at him. A couple hours later he sort of fell asleep, a drunken sleep, and I left.

Philomene: So you've known him two days and you've already sneered twice. How did your and Hank's friendship develop?

John: Before I forget this: He started calling me a lot on the phone. And in those days I hated telephone chat. When I moved into that Echo Park house there was a lot of phone activity, and I didn't even like to *answer* the phone. I told him this. And we made an arrangement, a signal. He would ring three times, hang up, and ring again. So I would always answer for him.

Philomene: Always?

John: Always. He liked that idea so it was our mutual thing. When I called him I would ring three times, hang up and dial again and he would know it was me. Of course in his case he would frequently pick it up after the first ring.

Philomene: Describe his house.

John: There was a little bitty porch. When you came in there was living room, bedroom, kitchen and bath. It was probably a furnished apartment. It looked like a place for transients. Obviously second- hand furniture. Living room floor covered with cheap linoleum, one sheet of linoleum that was rolled out like carpet, but all curled up around the edges. Step in the front door and on the right hand side in the corner was his writing table with his typewriter. It was sitting underneath a window, out of which you see the wretched yard and some of De Longpre. A lot of what he wrote had something to do with what he would see out that window. Tucked under the writing table was a barbell with a pathetically small amount of weight on it. On the left hand as you went in was a ratty old couch, a couple of uncomfortable chairs.

Philomene: The bathroom?

John: Small bathroom, unremarkable.

Philomene: No evidence of excessive scrubbing?

John: No.

Philomene: The bedroom?

John: A sort of nothing bedroom, a bed and a dresser.

Philomene: The kitchen?

John: Small, grimy, nothing in the refrigerator except cans of Miller High Life and three eggs. On the dirty stove, a frying pan containing two partially-eaten fried eggs and a fork. He obviously ate the fried eggs out of the frying pan over the stove.

Philomene: How did he respond to your bringing a tape recorder with you?

John: He was flattered ... until I told him I taped everything. But then he said, that *these* tapes are going to be valuable to me someday.

Philomene: He said that to you thirty years ago? And here for decades we've had them. Just sitting on it.

John: Crushing it.

Philomene: What was Hank's first image of you?

John: Brilliant, tough guy. He put it in the poems.

Philomene: That sounds arrogant. Do you want me to take that out?

John: It's not arrogant. It's the plain truth. Well, he formed an image of me which was no threat to him. And at the same time formidable. He even wrote a poem, I forget which one it was, about a person that he had always wanted to meet but never met, with a fierce tigerish eye, but some kind of gentleness.

Philomene: And he thought you were that person.

John: I don't want to say I was that person.

Philomene: Why not?

John: That person was his fantasy. I was who I was.

Philomene: And who were you?

John: Lord knows who I was. But I know that I, as I am today, would not, if I met me as I was then, form the impression of me that Hank did. And what was the first image he had of *you*?

Philomene: Hank told me that he read faces. He said that my face was too open and that would cause me great pain.

John: Yep.

5

GIVE THE READER SOMETHING SEXY TO LOOK FORWARD TO

Philomene: What were some of your first conversations?

John: Stock footage Bukowski stories. But some of them were funny as hell. Want to hear some?

Philomene: Why not?

John: Okay. Well, I recall Hank passing on some stories his De Longpre landlady told him.

There was a high-rise building next door and apparently the tenants were always having arguments with the manager. One day somebody dumped a load of tar and feathers into the swimming pool.

Philomene: The swimming pool? Tar? And feathers?

John: So Hank said. Or so he said his landlady told him. Twice-removed, yeah, but funny.

It seems one of the tenants, a little Japanese guy, came out and jumped in the pool. He climbed out in a New York second -- with feathers all over him. Like a bird. Hank's landlady (another drunk) thought at first that it was some kind of ceremony -- until she heard him cussing in Japanese. Then his wife ran out with a hose and squirted cold water on him. And that was the worst thing she could have done, because it hardened the tar. He ran back into the building, still cursing, looking like an Oriental chicken.

Then somebody cut up the fire hose. And someone else turned up the pool temperature as high as it would go. A hundred degrees, maybe. And another tenant came out, in his swimming trunks, and dove in.

Well, you know, when you jump into scalding hot water like

that, it's hard to get out. They practically boiled the poor guy. You could hear him screaming a block away. He came out as red as a crab.

Ah, Hank's landlady! Really, she was the alcoholic manager's alcoholic wife. That was one boozy little court. But she gave Hank some good stories.

There was a guy named Freddie who lived at the back of the court. Another drunk. A solitary, lonely whiskey drunk. Freddie was always bugging Hank, banging on his door. Hank would send him away, or hide in the bathroom until he gave up the door-pounding.

Philomene: What about Freddie?

John: Hank said Freddie was a daytime drunk. And he found daytime drunks disgusting. Well, Freddie worked in the movies, as an extra or something, and whenever it rained there was no work, so Freddie would just sit around and slug bad whiskey.

Anyhow, Freddie knocked on her door one rainy day. And she said, "Freddie, go away." He was swaying on the porch, barefoot, and she could only see the whites of his eyes. She slammed the door on him.

She heard him fall off the steps. But he'd done that many times before and just picked himself up.

It was pouring rain. Hard. A "frog-strangler", as they say down South. Three hours later it was still raining. Harder, if anything. And her son came by and knocked on the door.

"Hey, Mom, what the hell is this, outside?"

It was Freddie, of course. He was caught, tangled up in their banana tree, upside down. His head was on the ground and his bare feet were in the air. And he couldn't get out of the banana tree. The rain was pouring down between his toes, and he was staring up at them with eyes like boiled halibut eyes. He'd been in that tree for three hours.

Well, the son pulled him out and stood him up on his feet. He cursed hell out of them and staggered back to his apartment. He

never

caught a cold. Hank attributed that to the whisky. Thought whiskey

dried

out a man's innards, made him immune to little things like that.

Philomene: Great stories!

John: Yeah! Hank, you know, thought you could get fine stories like them out of ordinary people. Because they tell them naturally and without ... what was his words? “Aplomb”.

Philomene: What came after the stories?

John: A lot would come up about his unhappy life.

Philomene: More unhappy than in his books? Or different?

John: Well, in the books it would be more situations-- Bukowski, in ugly, grotesque and unpleasant situations. In conversation it was more Hank talking about how unhappy he was. There's a difference there.

Philomene: From what wound did it emanate?

John: Well, there was the time when he was living in a small apartment with his daughter Marina and Frances. He would refer to her as, let me spell it the way he said it: “the mother of mah chaaald.”

Philomene: I don't think I'll put names in.

John: Yeah. Great reminiscence of Bukowski with nobody named.

Philomene: They were all at De Longpre.

John: Yes.

Philomene: In that postage stamp of an apartment.

John: Yes. They moved out after I had come to know him but that is where they had been. And he was actually in that situation *because* of his writing. She had read his work in a little magazine. I think she was from back East

somewhere.

Philomene: And they got hooked up together.

John: They had this poetry-and-smoldering sex correspondence. And I don't know whether he knew it in advance, or she came to the bus station from some place far away, maybe back East and just called him. He goes to the bus station to meet her and she's got her suitcase with everything in it, ready to move in. Which she did...the mother of his chaaaald.

Philomene: He wrote that she was the only person he knew who never harmed anything.

John: *I* never harmed him—except by turning down his desperate invitation to an orgy with him and another "unnamed person." Her initials are Linda King.

Philomene: I *am* putting in the names now. But I don't know if the sex should go in yet.

John: Everything you think should not go in, should. That's how a memoir is written.

Philomene: You don't know how to write a memoir. Give the reader something sexy *to look forward to*. Now, how did it end, the situation with Frances?

John: She left.

John Thomas and Charles Bukowski, 1965.
Photo by John Bryan

6

BATTLING BUKOWSKI

Philomene: *[holds up photo of John and Hank on De Longpre]* What were the circumstances surrounding this photo of you and Hank clicking beer cans, toasting one another?

John: It was on De Longpre. John Bryan took it. Bryan had to leave because he was going to be at a big “love-in”. He was then running that paper *Open City*. He was going to go and cover the “love-in” for *Open City* and take photographs. That is why he had his camera with him. Then (I guess it was mid-morning the following day after that photograph was taken) it was just the two of us in his living room over there on De Longpre. And Bukowski wanted to spar.

Philomene: And how did he suggest that?

John: I had given him some speed and in the midst of some heroic narrative..

Philomene: About himself...

John: About Bukowski the pugilist. And I suppose I was chuckling at some of his gargantuan feats of fisticuffs.

Philomene: I'm sure that word alone would have instigated it. Did you actually say fisticuffs?

John: I'm sure I did. That's what speed will do to you. And he said that I could laugh, but he could whip my ass. And I laughed some more and he glowered dramatically and said he could whip my ass right then. And I said "OK" and took off my wristwatch and we got to it.

Philomene: Describe the fisticuffs.

John: We did “open hand.” And the way it went, we would get in diagonal corners of the room. And (amusing now that I recall it), his corner was the corner by his typewriter. We would come out of our corners to spar open handed. And he was just terrible! Slow hands. Slow, slow hands. And I would pop him...

Philomene: I am sure this is not the way he would tell the story.

John: “It really happened...” (mimicking Hank’s voice)

Philomene: Go on.

John: We'd spar for maybe a minute. He was unable to touch me, not once. Then we retired into our corners. He would sit there in front of his typewriter, way out of breath.

Philomene: Of course, *you* were breathing with ease, right?

John: Yeah. And by the third round, he was wrecked. Huffing and blowing. Came wallowing out and almost fell on me. So I picked him up by the belt and under his armpit, threw him across the back of my neck, walked over and heaved him onto his couch. He landed on his back on the couch, puffing and blowing and groaning.

Philomene: Saying he won the fight?

John: No. I sat there and read for a while, maybe a half an hour, until he was able to get up again. I gave him some more dexamyl. Then he drove me home to Echo Park and collapsed on my couch, fell asleep, snoring very loudly. Slept there on the couch for about four hours, snoring.

Philomene: What did his snore sound like?

John: Almost like a burlesque snore, a lot of snorts and snuffles. Actually, I have that on tape. I made that tape montage. I told you about that, didn't I?

Philomene: It was the end of the world and somebody was snoring, something like that.

John: No, this is another one. The car crash of the century.

Philomene: Do you still have that?

John: Somewhere. On the tape I keep saying, "Hank, are you awake?" There is the sound of his snoring, and finally the sound of a car crash, which is on a loop so that the car crash grinds on for about a minute. He loved that tape.

John Thomas and Charles Bukowski, 1980.
Photo courtesy of Michael Montfort

7

POETS SWIMMING IN THEIR WINE CUPS

Philomene: *[holds up photo of Hank sparring with John]* He would often spin yarns about himself as a fighter.

John: I can't think of anyone we both knew at that time who could *not* have whipped his ass.

Philomene: How do you think *he* would tell the story about the two of you sparring on De Longpre?

John: Battling Bukowski never spoke about that one. That was our secret.

Philomene: Like you never speak about *you* and *me* wrestling—I conquering what you called your “PERFECT cradle hold,” repeatedly dismantling it. I notice you don't tell that one. Or the fact that I won every tumble with you until recently when I lost my upper-body power. But I still have the agility and the powerful legs--the legs that lifted you up, all 350 pounds of you at the time, and flew you through the air. Your only comment about that one was how strange and light it felt, being almost 400 pounds and flying through the air.

John: Why should I? You tell everybody. It would be duplication of effort.

Philomene: Nope. It's just not one of your repertoire.

John: Nobody believes you anyway.

Philomene: But that's a good story about you and Hank. How did Hank speak of other poets?

John: He couldn't, wouldn't talk about poetry except to sneer at one or another

poet. He liked to set himself up with the ancient Chinese poets as the only *real* poets, that is to say simplicity and no bullshit.

Philomene: Nothing wrong with that. The Taoist, the Buddhist, the Confucian. Early Chinese drunken poets. The only *real* poets swimming in their wine cups.

John: Li Po was an influence. Li Po was supposed to have died during a drinking party on a lake when he saw the reflection of the moon in the mirror of the lake, jumped over board to embrace it. An Ezra Pound poem refers to the drunk Li Po dying embracing the moon. So drunk he reached out to embrace the moon, but it was the reflection of the moon in the water. Hank hadn't known the Li Po story but when I told him he was delighted. Of course it is just a story. Interesting, the measure of value Li Po put on a poem (or so the legend said). Until and unless he had shown to an old ignorant neighbor woman and she liked it and could understand it. Who knows in a thousand years what the legends will say about Bukowski.

Philomene: Anything else about the influence of Chinese poetry upon his?

John: They used various forms.

Philomene: The forms the Japanese took and turned into Haiku?

John: I don't remember the names of their forms, but they implied fixed numbers of lines and fixed numbers of character, ideograms within the line.

Philomene: How did that line-count influence Hank, it doesn't seem like it did.

John: It didn't.

Philomene: So it was the simplicity and the lake of bullshit, whoops, the *lack* of bullshit.

John: The supposed simplicity.

Philomene: And the influence of John Fante upon him?

John: Exaggeration.

Philomene: Interesting opposition to the Chinese, right? There was the exaggeration of one author, the simplicity of another. The result - condensed exaggeration.

John: Yeah. Celine was an author that we had in common, one of the few. And reading Celine had, in a sense, changed our lives. I remember one evening Hank instructed me. He said that he was a coward, that cowardice is what gives the great imagination. Hemingway's courage is worth nothing. Well, today, years later, I have to say, Hank was right.

Philomene: Terror is at the root of it all.

John: Celine knew it. Hank knew it. I didn't know it yet. There were other

writers who did influence Hank and he would not really admit it, in fact, its fun to

mention their names and watch him try to veer wildly to another subject.

Philomene: Why?

John: Because the influences were so obvious. For example, Nathaniel West.

Philomene: *Day of the Locust? Miss Lonely Hearts?*

John: Yes. And more particularly, a less-well-known author, Horace McCoy, the guy who wrote *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* In fact, even Faulkner spent his time as a Hollywood writer and Hank, as a youth, spent a lot of time on Santa Monica Beach sunning his boils and reading Faulkner.

Philomene: So you got the impression he read a great deal more in his youth. I have the impression he read much as an adult.

John: He didn't.

Philomene: His writing became his reading.

John: That and the racing form.

Philomene: How do you perceive the horses influenced his writing? I know in the tapes he would say that when it went well with the horses, it was well

with his writing. There is the Zen saying, “Catch the vigorous horse of your mind.”

John: In a way Hank was a fantasy Cartesian man. Descarte saw a man as a soul riding a little machine, the body. Samuel Beckett, another Cartesian, frequently has his main character a hopeless bicyclist. With Hank, it was the horse and the jockey.

Philomene: Hank was both.

John: He saw that pairing as beautiful and heroic.

Philomene: He did not think of public poetry readings and publishing as a pairing of the beautiful and the heroic. He said that the idea of reading in public and pushing too hard ... that something happened. One got the idea that living as a poet one had the right to live and not to work. *Because I write poetry! Take care of me!*

John: That goes back to Thomas Wolfe ... the myth of the artist as tragic hero.

Philomene: Hank was a poet who supported himself without his poetry. He was Charles Bukowski, who works in the Post Office. He would say that sometimes in a moment of greatest strife, a man is coolest and that everything counts and that everything has its inch. Hmmm, John, to me there are times when Hank seems like a Zen monk talking.

8

DID BUKOWSKI EVER USE YOUR BATHTUB?

Philomene: Did Bukowski ever use your bathtub?

John: Sure.

Philomene: When?

John: He used my bathtub once when he was sneaking around behind Linda King's back with some Greek woman. The woman was crazy. She stayed at a private nut hospital. She was a woman in her fifties, not very good looking. She may have been at one time. He asked if he and this crazy woman could use my place. I had to make the bed with clean sheets. They came over and I left. Afterwards he was telling me that it was very scary to him, because that little bedroom had pornographic pictures covering the wall.

Philomene: Yuk. I go along with him there. Did he bathe before or after sex, or both?

John: Just before. If he bathed afterwards, it was in someone's else's bathtub. I even gave him clean sheets.

Philomene: Do you have a sense of why he bathed before sex? Was he was washing off another woman's smell.

John: No. The crazy Greek woman knew about Linda. Rather than bathe and primp himself he did it at someone else's house.

Philomene: Hmmm.

John: Sometimes he would sit in the tub over and over again. Sometimes jacking off, sometimes not.

Philomene: Doesn't that cloudy up the water, so to speak? What happens with the semen in a tub of water?

John: It goes down the drain.

Philomene: Then he should be smelling of semen.

John: I can't smell semen.

Philomene: It's a powerful smell. So he must have smelt faintly of semen.

John: How much could there have been in proportion to the bath water?

Philomene: Gallons, according to him.

John: No matter how much male bragging you've heard, there's not much male semen.

Philomene: So let me get this picture of Bukowski in the bathtub.

John: The door was shut. I wasn't in there.

Philomene: What did you hear?

John: A little bit of delicate splashing.

Philomene: Of delicate semen-scented water. Let's penetrate this further. Why was he taking a bath before? Isn't that unusual for a man? I've never heard of it.

John: You must have had a tacky sexual past.

Philomene: Tacky, yes. A shower, yes. But a bath? How did you find the bathtub after he finished? Immaculate?

John: No. Not immaculate, because it was not immaculate before he got in.

Philomene: How were the sheets after he finished?

John: Actually the sheets were in pretty good shape because he had taken several bath towels from the bathroom, and when they came out he had the towels rolled up in a ball under his arm. Put them in my hamper. I didn't inspect them.

Philomene: You have to admit, its a striking, incongruous image--Bukowski in the bathtub. Why?

John: I don't know why.

9

HOUSEHOLD REMEDIES

John: Bukowski's first time on marijuana makes a pretty funny story. It was the first time he bought a lid. Actually in those days it *was* a lid. A Prince Albert tobacco tin with a hinged lid. It would hold about a once of marijuana. He'd smoked it before, or so he said. And he had surely smoked it a few times at my place. But he had never bought any. So I guess he won some money at the race track and spent ten dollars for an ounce of pretty good grass. If I recall, it was something called "garbage grass", because it would lay a smell on your fingers like you had been handling garbage. And for the period, anyway, it was pretty powerful.

Philomene: What's so interesting about that?

John: Wait. So, he took his lid home with him and came back a day or so later asking what's goin' on? I said, "What do you mean? What are you talking about?" He said that he took the grass home I sold him and was there all by himself going to get a real good high. The first thing he did was take a bath.

Philomene: Of course.

John: I said, "You're always taking fucking baths." He said that he wanted to get all clean and virgin and pristine. So he got out of the bathtub and dried himself off and put on clean under shorts and a brand new white T-shirt...

Philomene: Now it's getting interesting.

John: He was sort of grouching. He said that he went into the living room, got some cigarette papers, opened up his new lid of grass and rolled a great big joint. His big bomber was all lumpy. Anyway he laid down on his

back on the rug and lit his joint and lay there puffing on it, looking at the ceiling. Then, Jesus, it was like fireworks! There were all these fucking little explosions! Sparks kept dropping down and burning holes all over his brand new T-shirt.

Philomene: So those were real sparks.

John: Yeah. Real sparks. Wrecked his T-shirt! Some of the sparks even burned through and burned little blisters on his chest.

Philomene: And you said?

John: I said, "Hank, you got to clean that shit." He said something to the effect of what do you mean? I cleaned me. Was I supposed to give the marijuana a bath, too?

Philomene: I'm waiting for the funny part.

John: I said, "Hank, that stuff is full of twigs and seeds. You've got to take those out. That was marijuana seeds burning holes in your T-shirt." He said that that it was a beautiful T-shirt and after this he was not going to buy anything from me but LSD.

Philomene: I'm still waiting.

John: He said that my LSD would make me miserable but at least it won't make a bonfire out of his T-shirt. That's all for now.

Philomene: That's it?

John: And the LSD did make him miserable. I had turned him on to his first acid a month or so before.

Philomene: You were turning him on to everything?

John: Well, now, the LSD was very good stuff. I didn't want to waste it on him.

So when he first came over that night I gave him some DMT.

Philomene: Oh, my God!

John: The Reader's Digest trip. So called because it will knock you on your ass, but it will only last twenty, twenty-five minutes. Then you're straight again. But for twenty-five minutes or so it will knock you on your ass.

Philomene: Did he take a bath to prepare for that one?

John: No. He wanted me over to watch him.

Philomene: Isn't DMT the elephant tranquilizer?

John: DMT is the alkaloid in ayahuasca. Or some people call it yage.

Philomene: Ah, yes, *The Yage Letters*...Burroughs.

John: Extra strong, extra quick. In fact, these days people are calling it "the Yuppies' lunch hour high." So, it's a liquid, and you soak it into mint leaves. Then you put a pinch or two of the saturated mint leaves into one of those little brass opium pipes and light it.

Philomene: Then everything, probably even this story, is funny after that, right?

John: The stuff I had, anyway. You wanted to be sure you were sitting down with your back against something before you lit it up. I've seen people split their scalps wide open, falling from a standing position, falling straight back on a wooden floor.

Philomene: Everyone was taking anything they could get those days.

John: Some were taking up their valuable time preparing and smoking dried banana peels, and even imagining they were high.

Philomene: Household remedies. Drinking cough medicine because it was loaded

with codeine. Morning glory seeds, magic mushrooms...

John: Scotch broom.

Philomene: People thought you could take aspirin and Coca Cola and get high.

John: We used to make beer out of Wonder Bread.

Philomene: Are you serious?

John: Yeah. You needed a bunch of loaves of Wonder Bread and a metal pipe. You'd jam the pipe full of Wonder Bread, then slowly pour warm water down through it. The water would turn a pale, pale yellow: you'd be pulling sugar out of there and flour and yeast. Then you'd take that pale, pale, yellow stuff and pour it through again and again. Finally it would start to foam and you could add a little sugar and seal it and bury it—so if it exploded it wouldn't hurt anybody. When I was really young, I remember smoking pretzel sticks.

Philomene: I remember it was etiquette, a simple common courtesy to turn the cats on.

John: I remember watching someone smoking kitty litter.

Philomene: Why was everyone using, do you think?

John: Aside from the element of fashion, if you can't change the world outside, change it inside.

Philomene: Many of their insides turned into corpses.

John: Back to Hank and the DMT. I loaded the little pipe, gave it to Hank and held a match over the bowl. And he huffed it all. Nothing happened.

Philomene: Uh oh. That's a bad sign.

John: He didn't even hyperventilate, and you usually hyperventilate on ...

Philomene: DMV?

John: DMT. He just kept talking about his most recent horse race betting system. Nothing. Half an hour later I gave him another hit. After five hits I gave up on him and he got the big stuff, the LSD.

Philomene: Were you trying to kill him!

John: The other stuff should have gone through his system by then.

Philomene: *Your* system.

John: In about twenty minutes he stopped talking about horse racing and started shivering and began to talk about his abdomen. Wagging his head, he was asking what was that stuff. I said, “What’s the matter?” He said that he had gotten a lump of ice in his stomach the size of a bowling ball. And it was sort of jiggling around down there. The next thing he said, and he said it again and again over the next six hours that a man who can rule his stomach can rule the world. He never asked for LSD again.

Philomene: That’s a good one—who can rule the stomach.... But I would add the tongue.

John: He drove home late the next morning, went straight to his bathtub and sat in it for eight hours.

Michael Montfort, Linda King, John Thomas, Philomene Long, 1999.
Photo courtesy of Philomene Long

10

BACK TO THE BUSTS

- Philomene: Talk about some of his women, e.g., Linda King.
- John: How about her famous bust of Bukowski? But really there were two busts of him. The famous bust is bust number 2.
- Philomene: Explain.
- John: She wanted to do a bust of me, either because she had seen me or Hank had talked to her about me. Hank picked me up one afternoon and drove me over to her place. And he sat around drinking beer while she began to model my head in clay. She had just finished the clay model of the *famous* bust. But not really. You'll see. So I sat on a stool and she was working at her kitchen table. And she was pretty good in a conventional way. She could slap together a likeness with some skill. Well, she just about finished my bust at the first sitting. And it was a fair likeness. Then Hank had to go somewhere so we got in his car and he was going to drive me home. We were somewhere on Western and I saw a theater running a movie I wanted to see. I forget what it was. I was broke, so I said, "Hank, lend me five dollars."
- Philomene: It wasn't five dollars for a movie in those days. More lies.
- John: I know it was not five dollars in those days. But the five dollars was going to cover the admission, the popcorn and soda pop.
- Philomene: And the price of your modeling fee?
- John: And the bus fare back to Echo Park. This was a big number for him, lending money to *anybody*. But he finally did it, although he was very worried.

Philomene: As he should have been. Back to the busts.

John: You'll see about that. I saw the movie, ate the popcorn, drank the soda pop, took the bus home. I'll get back to the subject of the busts. So I owed him five dollars. And the next time he came around to the house he was very drunk.

Philomene: Very grump?

John: *Drunk.* It was night time and in parking his rusty old boat...

Philomene: Yellow? I foget.

John: It might have been. Sounds good. Anyhow, in parking, did some damage to the rear end of my car. He promised to pay for the damage. And I said, "You could knock the five I owe you out of that." Thirty dollars altogether. It took him months to pay. But back to the busts. As I said, mine was virtually complete. The clay was still damp.

Philomene: Mush.

John: It was sitting on Linda's kitchen table beside the completed bust of him, which was dry.

Philomene: Stunning image.

John: So then one night he came over, as he always did, and I was really worked up about it. I was mildly curious. I said, "Hank, what's happening with my bust?" And he flushed and said that he was sorry, that he and Linda King had had a fight. I said, "What's that got to do with anything?" He said that she had flipped out and began throwing things.

Philomene: And your head was the first?

John: No. First, he said, was the scrambled eggs. Then she threw the frying pan at him. Then she grabbed the bust of Bukowski and threw that at him.

She came pretty fucking close with it too. And that fucker smashed and fell into a million pieces.

Philomene: So all that was left was your head?

John: So I said, "Who cares? I was asking about *my* bust." And he said that he was standing there in the kitchen with bad scrambled eggs over his clean shirt.

Philomene: *He* threw it!

John: ...Staring down at all these little bitty pieces of clay on the rug that used to be his bust. I said, "Yeah, your monument." He said that he felt something big and damp hit him in the back, like a giant toad had jumped on him. But there wasn't no toad. It was wet clay. My bust. It slid off his back onto the kitchen floor. Flop! He looked down at it and all that was left of me was a little bit of my nose and one ear. All the rest of it was just a lump of clay like a big lump of cow shit.

Philomene: So then she made the second bust of him, which was exactly like the first one?

John: She could have started it fresh five hundred times and it would still look just the same. Then, I think, at some point it got cast in bronze, and has been heavily photographed.

Philomene: What ever happened to the lump of clay that had been you?

John: Probably what is going to happened to the lump of clay that is me now. After a little longer than it took with *that* lump of clay, look at what's left of me and see maybe a bit of nose and one ear.

Philomene: And Linda King?

John: At that time-- a strong undercurrent of dangerous hysteria.

Philomene: How long had they been together when the busted bust scene occurred?

John: Oh, a month or two. Also, she introduced him to some bedroom tricks.

Philomene: Like oral sex.

John: Not many men in his generation had done it. What he would have called “blow jobs” were highly thought of and much talked about. But what Hank would have called eating eating p-y.

Philomene: I can’t stand that word. I won’t write it.

John: ...was considered shameful and disgusting.

Philomene: When I first met him he was referring to it as a “rose bud.” He said he could make it open.

John: Major event in Bukowski's life, I guess.

Philomene: So basically it was the sex and the fights.

John: The dramatic intensity.

Philomene: Oh, here we go.

John: This was much later. I think in 1974. He asked me if we wanted to come over and have an orgy with him and Linda.

Philomene: His idea or hers?

John: My guess, a little bit of both.

Philomene: And your response was?

John: I invented something I had to be doing that night.

Philomene: I recall the orgies in those days. People doing it in heaps. Ant hill sex.

John: Right, like grunion. He was shy. He probably really had to work himself up to ask. It might have been his next big sexual step after cunnilingus. And I wriggled out of it.

Philomene: Did he have group sex after that?

John: I think he might have, I don't know.

Philomene: I can't remember where he's written about it. I don't remember it in any story. Do you? Must have been awkward.

John: I think he had a lot of fears.

Charles Bukowski giving his first poetry reading, 1969.
Photo courtesy of John Thomas

11

WHAT DID YOU *NOT* KNOW?

[John holds up photo of Bukowski giving his first poetry reading]

Philomene: What did you *not* know, in the beginning of your friendship with Bukowski, that later you *did* know, aside from the fact that he was a very clean dirty old man?

John: Sort of an odd question. Are you writing that down?

Philomene: I'm writing everything down.

John: Well, that he threw up a lot. Over at my place he would excuse himself and go to the bathroom frequently and I thought he just had to pee. But a lot of those times he was throwing up. He was just so neat and quiet about it.

Philomene: Why do you think he threw up so much?

John: Weak stomach.

Philomene: Weak stomach and drink. So it was a form of athleticism to drink.

John: He liked to fake it, too, with a beer bottle. He would put the bottle to his lips, tilt it high, and then you would see his Adam's apple working up and down. But when he set the bottle down afterwards you would see that the level had dropped very little. You can see it right here in this picture. This is a picture of his first poetry reading. December 21, 1969. I brought the reading lamp he's using. Can you see it in the picture? I made it out of a microphone stand and little metal lamp shade. See it? And there are the galley-proofs dribbling down off the table onto the floor. I sat there holding his hand while he read. Not literally.

Philomene: I know. You can hear that on the tape.

John: He was nervous as shit. There's a sidelight to this. I know you won't like it, but anyone else reading this thing will. Deena Metzger was there. I knew she was coming. I knew she would be sitting in the front row. She always sat in the front row. So I wore tight jeans and strapped a dildo against my inner left thigh.

Philomene: You didn't!

John: An eight-inch one. She couldn't take her eyes off it all evening.

Philomene: So it looked like you were so excited that you had an eight inch erection during Hank's first poetry reading?

John: No. It didn't look like I had an erection, it looked like it was eight inches long, *soft*. Did I tell you about the cat?

Philomene: Go on.

John: He was reading from galley-proofs, which are long narrow strips. And as he was reading them they were sort of dribbling down beneath the table onto the floor. Now, the owners of the coffee house, called "The Bridge", had a cat. And the cat was very sick that night. In fact, on the tape I made of the reading you can hear the cat from time to time howling and moaning. And several times while he was reading the cat wandered under the table and puked on his galley-proofs.

Philomene: You can't see the cat in the picture but the Adam's apple. Can you see him manipulating it?

John: No, it's a *still* picture. You just see how he would tip the bottle back.

Philomene: Why would he tip it back like that?

John: It's a gesture, like a jazz player with the saxophone. I taped that reading.

His first reading. And I still have the tape. It's in great shape. Anyone who wants to come to the house can listen to it for \$135.00. By appointment only. Bring your own beer.

Philomene: So there was something of the theater in his drinking?

John: Yeah.

Philomene: Where do you think that originated, over dramatizing the affect of drinking?

John: He thought it was "tough guy," manly. Also, he had another tough guy thing—he would occasionally dust his cigar ashes into his glass of beer.

Philomene: I noticed when the reporter from the "Herald Examiner" interviewed him at the premiere for "Barfly" he would write down what Hank said only after he had taken a swig. There appeared to be a reciprocity. The theater aspect developed to a peak after his notoriety, didn't it?

John: Part of the popular image.

Philomene: And he took it from the thirties movies.

John: Thirties and forties. He used to brag that the last movie he had seen, and the last book he had read, was "Lost Weekend". Ray Milland. The main character is a drunk and a writer. The drunken jealousy and the drunken fighting with the woman.

Philomene: He had that theme already.

John: He would fake a lot of that. I remember a party at Linda King's house in Silver Lake. He began to work up this number that she was flirting with all the men at the party, and at one point he took his half-full beer bottle and threw it at her from six feet away. Quit obviously deliberately missed, smashing against the wall.

Philomene: Was she flirting?

John: Not really.

Philomene: What else?

John: Something else about his faking. He wasn't very well read but he liked to pretend that he had read practically nothing at all. The self-made genius. He would deliberately mispronounce names, so Sigmund Freud became "Sigmund Froood".

Philomene: And Wagner was "Wag" (like a dog) "ner".

John: Goethe would be "goat".

Philomene: In conversation it would come out inadvertently in conversation that he had read a lot more than that.

John Thomas, Neeli Cherkovski, Philomene Long, 1994
Photo courtesy of Philomene Long

I'M CHARLES BUKOWSKI, BABY

Philomene: Besides LA's lowlife, with whom did he spend the most time? Who were some of his male friends? Neeli Cherkovski, for example, who later became his biographer. (entitled Hank published by Random House)

John: Neeli was later.

Philomene: What was their relationship?

John: At that time Neeli was a kid who would tag along with him.

Philomene: And Hank would call him his "little Rimbaud." Describe that scene, Hank and Neeli.

John: If I'm not mistaken, Neeli was living in San Bernardino and he would drive over to see him as much as he could. Neeli was a nineteen-year-old poet. I don't even think he was nineteen. I think he was sixteen. He would tag along with Hank and sometimes they would go to Barney's Beanery. I went over there with the two of them one time. Hank was a little drunk. In fact, that night he started saying (loud enough so that people around him could hear), that he was Charles Bukowski, the great poet. And nobody there seemed to notice.

Philomene: That's funny.

John: And then one of the waitresses went by, and he said it again that he was Charles Bukowski, the great poet. She went right on moving, Hank glaring after her. And I said, "Hank, you're wasting your time. If you want to get her attention, don't tell her you're a poet. Tell her you're..."

Philomene: A dentist....

John: ...A producer. Or that you're big in the oil business."

Philomene: And did he try it?

John: No, he wasn't able to try it. Too drunk by then.

Philomene: When did Gerald Locklin emerge?

John: The first time I remember running into him was at Hank's sixtieth birthday party. He was a professor at Long Beach State, a great admirer and friend of Hank, who wrote many articles about him-- and recently a book, *Bukowski: A Sure Bet*.

Philomene: Water Row Books.

John: Yeah.

Philomene: Hank's talk was frequently about other poets.

John: He mentioned Jack Hirschman a couple of times, mainly to brag about how he had bloodied Jack Hirschman's nose, which is no big thing to brag about.
I remember once Hirschman was attacked, chased and soundly bitten and had his pants leg all ripped to shit.

Philomene: By Bukowski?

John: By a Chihuahua in Echo Park.

Philomene: What are trying to say? Jack is egalitarian? Go on about the bloodying of Hirschman's nose. You were off on the Chihuahua.

John: May be it was Bukowski that bit him and the Chihuahua that bloodied his nose.

Philomene: Would you get on with the story!

John: That *is* the story. Hank liked to tell it. He would repeat it over and over.

Philomene: So tell it!

John: I don't know what the occasion was, but he went to visit Jack and Ruth Hirschman. They were still living together then. And Hank was drunk. He went in and plopped himself down.

Philomene: Was this at their house on Quarterdeck in Marina del Rey?

John: I don't know. I know Neeli was with him. Hank demanded drinks. And Jack and Ruth didn't have any or didn't want to give him any. Hank got very obnoxious, and finally Jack said he had to leave. So Hank punched him in the nose and left.

Philomene: I wonder what was the real story.

John: I heard it from both of them.

Philomene: What was Jack and Ruth's version?

John: I mean I heard it from both Hank and Neeli. I guess they got their story straight between them.

Philomene: And the infamous Chihuahua?

John: Hirschman told me about the Chihuahua, because he was coming over to visit me when he got bit. That was years later after Ruth kicked him out and he was living in Paul Vangelisti's basement in Echo Park. He had walked over the hill to visit me, Hirschman had. Every dog along the way barked at him. And this little Chihuahua got out under the fence and bit him.

Philomene: There must be more to that story. I recall one evening at Jack and Ruth's in 1968. Wally Berman was there. Michael Moore, Eileen Ireland, Harold Norse. Bukowski showed up drunk asking to come in. He got in

the door for ten or fifteen minutes before Jack persuaded him to leave. Harold Norse wasn't going for it, because he'd just returned from Greece or something like that and didn't want Hank there. Norse wanted all the attention. He was vain, wasn't he?

John: Vain, and an enormous hypochondriac. Norse is not his real last name. I forget it. He's from one of the Baltic countries. He thought Norse was more dramatic.

Philomene: My point is that statistically speaking if you and I, John, had been at the Hirschmans on two separate occasions and the identical scene took place, Hank must have been at their door relentlessly.

John: He might have been, but it might also have been the only two times.

Philomene: So let's get back to Bukowski's male friends.

John: What male friends?

Philomene: He spoke of Stuart Perkoff.

John: He had never heard of him until I played some tape of Stuart reading his poetry.

Philomene: And how did he respond?

John: Of course he said he didn't like it. And he sneered at Stuart for reading in public. This was before Bukowski read in public.

Philomene: I recall telling Stuart that Bukowski was calling himself the greatest living poet and Stuart responded, "*I am the greatest living poet!*" But Stuart had the wisdom to add that every poet thinks he is the greatest living poet while writing the poem—which you and I can verify.

John: Yep.

Philomene: Did Hank hear of Frank Rios?

John: From me.

Philomene: Any other poets he would speak about?

John: Nope, that's it.

13

YOU GOTTA CHEAT AT THIS GAME

- John: He was always corresponding with editors of little magazines.
- Philomene: I respect that. He never stopped sending work to small press poetry magazines. In back of the issue of *Black Ace 4* there is a note which he wrote to Tony Scibella (October, 1992) and sent along with some of his poems. And this, I believe, is touching—he included a return self-addressed stamped envelope.
- John: [*holds up tape*] Here's a conversation we had about publishing. It is late evening, mid 1967, at Hank's apartment on De Longpre.
- Philomene: [*picks up tattered collage with letter*] Looks like both mice and sewer water got to this one.
- John: Bringing acute indigestion to the occasional silverfish. He wrote these letters when he was poet-in-residence at the University of Arizona in Tucson in 1967.
- Philomene : About publishing Hank says that greed is a helluva fucking thing.
- John: I told Hank that he was lacking in experience. But what he was lacking in experience, he said, he made up in bullshit. I didn't mean that, though. And if he did bullshit, he counterbalanced it with ... and he cut in. He invented, he said. He improved on experience. That is, he lied.
- Philomene: "You gotta cheat at this game." That's what Stuart Perkoff said.
- John: Hank said that he was simply a recorder. Sometimes, he invented, but mostly he recorded what happened. And he did work in a tradition, if

rather loosely. A definite tradition. It was a waste of time, these kids trying to imitate him, imitate his style. He had nothing to teach them in the way of style. The main thing --he' kept open. I marvel at it, still. The writing part is easy, but the keeping open is hard. And it's something I admire more. Keeping open in one's life.

Philomene: I certainly found his portrait of Maezumi Roshi in "Great Zen Wedding" to be invented. I can attest that the Maezumi portrayal resembled him approximately 00.001 per cent. Which would mean Bukowski would have improved upon it about 99.999 per cent. And I hardly recognized you, my love, as the central figure in the story. Rose was pleasant, but nondescript. Do you have something to say about "Great Zen Wedding"?

John: Nope.

Philomene: What's this about Machado?

John: Hank wrote a lovely long piece about Antonio Machado. Sent it out somewhere and they sent it back. Then he was wondering about sending it to *Evergreen Review*. Some of his work was in their December issue and he was very excited about that. He showed me. "Charles Bukowski. Published six volumes of poetry, two of prose....Writes a weekly column, 'Notes of a Dirty Old Man' The excellent title of his next book, *At Terror Street and Agony Way*, which will be out in the Fall...." It made him feel prestigious and "literary."

Philomene: He may have lived to regret that.

John: I think he did. And there was a bullfight thing coming out in the next issue of *Evergreen Review* with a story by Roy Walford, I said. Roy, right. Our friend Roy, the pathologist, the Biosphere man. I told Hank that Roy had gotten something in the *Atlantic*, too, and he had given me something for editing it for him. Hank laughed and said that I could expect t for saving his *Agony Way* poems. But not much. He told me that was because John Martin (of Black Sparrow Press) had said three or four

hundred dollars royalty. But Hank would be “generous.” I had put the poems on tape or they never would have survived, right? It was just that he needed money worse than I did. Fine with me, I said. Greed, Hank laughed, was a hell of a thing. I reassured him. He was scuffling, and that was different from greed.

Philomene: Yes. And he was trying to quit the Post Office right then. Made him nervous. He had a dream, though. That is, it was only a dream then. To play the horses in the daytime and write at night. To make it both ways. He’d be like an electric current.

Philomene: Did you edit *At Terror Street and Agony Way* for him?

John: I determined line-breaks for him and saved the lost poems for him on audio tape.

Philomene: And he never paid you.

John: Nope.

14

BUKOWSKI WITH BUKOWSKI

Philomene : Did you ever see him in the act of writing a poem?

John: One time only, when John Bryan and I, one evening stopped by his
place on De Longpre.

Philomene: First what did you see? Did you see him alone through the window?

John: Yes. Sitting at his writing table, bent over the type writer, hunting and
pecking.

Philomene: What was his posture?

John: Hunched over. He was more than a little drunk, that was obvious. He was
bent over the type writer, swaying slightly, and nodding his head
as if nodding at something he heard in his mind.

Philomene: Was it as if he were listening to a voice rather than the voice coming
through him? Some kind of separation?

John: He seemed to be listening.

Philomene: His facial expression, was it relaxed, strained, neutral?

John: His face seemed to have moved entirely into his forehead.

Philomene : That would suggest at this time anyway, there was...

John: I whispered to John Bryan, “Let’s not knock, the fucker’s writing.” Brian said, “No. No. I gotta see him.” But in any case, at that moment, Hank paused for a swig of Miller and saw us through the window screen. And gestured for us to come in.

Philomene: Let’s go back to the private moment, John. Bukowski with Bukowski. Who was with whom? There seemed to be almost a conversation going on-- Bukowski with Bukowski.

John: Sort of a one sided conversation.

Philomene: Between whom and whom?

John: I’m trying to find a word here.. between Hank and his... what was that word

 Lorca used? and his ...

Philomene: “Duende”.

John: Yeah. Lorca used the term frequently. The muse was a being who

 entered you from the outside and wrote through you. Your duende, as Lorca understood it, was a semi-demonic being that dwelt inside you. You battled with it as much as you yielded to it.

Philomene: So, basically, Bukowski the writer was a reflection of Bukowski the duende. Perhaps they exchanged glances in the mirror from time to time.

John: He might have been infested with duendes. It wasn't the beer, but maybe sometimes drinking enough beer woke up that duende and got him off his ass.

Philomene: One way of him stepping aside.

John: Or being shoved aside.

15

HE BURIED HER

John: Here's another mirror thing. Remember that crazy Greek woman he was sneaking around with while he was with Linda King? And how one afternoon I let him use my bedroom for an assignation he had with her. Well, before they came I changed the sheets and the pillow cases. When they came back down he whispered to me, asking the mirror I had up there, propped against the wall, so you could see yourself on the bed. He said that it put ice cubes in his veins seeing them in that mirror, that it was like the mirror was watching them. He said that he was sorry he draped a towel over the mirror, and had forgotten to take it back down, asking how I could stand to watch the action in the meat market.

Philomene: Where did he meet the women?

John: A lot of women he met, not that there were that many, he met through the mail.

Philomene: Let's get to the women.

John: That's what *he* would like to do, but he couldn't.

Philomene: He always saw women in those terms.

John: Yes.

Philomene: He basically saw them for what he wanted sexually.

John: Pretty much.

Philomene: How would you see women react to this rather limited characterization?

John: I don't know how they responded.

Philomene: It was more than just sex. The women he wrote about were characters. I know he had mainly a friendship with a mild sexual aspect with Joanna Bull.

John: So you claim.

Philomene: I saw it. I was making the point that sex wasn't a major issue with Joanna Bull.

John: His ideal was a woman with a lovely body and long legs, sexy black lingerie, and an aged ravaged face. These ladies are hard to find. On occasions when I've been around him and a woman would come on to him, he'd get very shy and tongue-tied.

Philomene: And the one he buried?

John: I think her name was Jane.

Philomene: Did you know her?

John: No. Jane died before Hank and I ever met. She was a good drinking partner.

Philomene: She was a death knell over his early life.

John: He just felt for a long time strong sentimental feelings about her having died.
Part of it, I think: physically she might have resembled his sexual fantasies.

Philomene: The way he described her: great legs, great ass and a ravaged face.

Philomene: Do you have a tape of him speaking about her?

John: Yeah. I think so. Here. He's sitting in that junkyard of a living room in Echo Park. His baby daughter Marina is snoozing in his lap. And he's speaking about the passion, the boozing, the drunken bottles, the awful end of it. [*They listen.*]

Philomene: Right. He buried her. Her son came all the way from Texas in a "MerSEEDIES-Benz." And that son--he said he'd send money for a tombstone, but Hank knew he was lying.

John: He says here that she caught him, hooked him in. The old face and the beautiful body that he'd been after ever since. So he used to run down the street, you know, if he saw a woman, thinking it was her in front of him. He found that very embarrassing, "cornball."

Philomene: That is sad.

John: Every woman he saw, he'd think, "oh, that's her!" But he would run up and see that that wasn't the shape of the ass. But he "tamed her," he said. She got more and more....she'd stay home, stay home. Then finally he didn't like it any more. So he kicked her out...

Philomene: He broke her, he says. She couldn't even pick up guys on the street any more.

John: She got a job as a waitress, he says. As a scrub woman, almost, in some cheap hotel. Says he used to go over and see her, bring her a bottle of wine. And she'd say, "I love you, Hank!" When she died they took her to General Hospital. She didn't have any money.

Philomene: He saw that she got buried. And he spent fifteen bucks for roses.

John: How's that for a nice guy?

Philomene: Very nice. Most moving the way he wrote about her-- "... her photos stuck over the glass / neither move nor speak / but I even have her voice on tape / and she speaks some evenings, / her again / so real she laughs / says the thousand things, / the one thing I always ignore; / this will never leave me: / that I had love / and love died; / a photo and a piece of tape / is not much, I have learned late, / but give me 14 days or 14 years, I will kill any man / who would touch or take / whatever's left." ("Remains" from *The Days Run Away Like Wild Horses Over the Hills*, Black Sparrow Press.)

John: Well, he survived it. Or so he said. Maybe he did. I told him about Bill Margolis (a poet who was confined in a wheelchair, having jumped out of a third-story window over a woman). He said he'd never jump out a window over a woman ... or at least he was pretty sure he wouldn't. Anyway, I told him that Bill jumped out of a *third-story* window and just paralyze himself. For life. Hank nodded, saying that Margolis should have gone from lower or higher. He picked the wrong floor. It should've been the second or ninth.

16

BEST DAMN POET IN TOWN

Philomene: *[holds up copy of essay written by John Thomas for the Los Angeles Free Press for March 3, 1967 under the title "This Floundering Old Bastard Is the Best Damn Poet in Town"]*

THE BEST DAM POET IN TOWN

Even Hank's gifts seem to conspire against him. So many poems! For years nearly every little poetry magazine on the rack has had some of Bukowski's work on exhibit. He's in the good ones, he's in the asswipers, he's in those sad little one-shot collections from the bleakest corners of Scribbler's Limbo. Sometimes his is the only name you recognize among the contributors; the others read like a roster of student monitors from a Pittsburgh junior high school you never attended.

You think, Mother ass! He's stuffing envelopes day and night with both hands, firing mail in every direction at once, addressing half of it to "Occupant"! Is he trying to top Tracy Thompson? (T. T. is one of the nation's most published poets; he is also one of the ten dullest, most hopeless poets in the world.) Or you might spot him, as I have, in a magazine full of writers who are on your personal shit list. He has often shared page space with whiners, whores, lying bastards and bunny rabbits I'd like to see sterilized or thrown to the vivisectionists. It is easy to imagine a browser with several prejudices in full flower before he has actually read a single poem by Charles Bukowski.

The contour of that poem, once read, isn't likely to clear up anything. To me Hank's poems all look like...like pond ice--flat expanses of lustreless ice, margins arbitrary and uninteresting (fixed simply wherever the pond's edge was when the water had risen as high as it ever would). The surface is nowhere really smooth, like the ice of a hockey rink can be, but it is flat enough for skating and of course the little kids can slide.

So anyone who can read simple English can skate across any Bukowski poem at a business-letter clip. And if he does it at that speed and you ask him later what kind of poem he'd read, he'll tell you it was nothing but "free verse" written by a man who is no craftsman. Or if he thought he enjoyed the poem, perhaps he'll tell you why in words like those of the Poetry Editor of DARE Magazine: "[Bukowski's] work is characterized by an earthy directness and a lack of

structural complexity. Many of his poems...bear a strong resemblance to the modern short story.” (DARE Magazine is distributed nationally--free of charge--to selected barber shops, all fraternities, men's clubs and prep schools.

You can hear so much bullshit from nearly anyone when he is telling you about a poem he thinks he has read! There are more bison in America today than there are people who know how to read a poem. My metaphor of the ice pond was almost certainly wasted.

Here follows one of Hank's poems, which I have selected at random. It is a rough poem and a flawed one, this I grant you readily, but attend:

A NICE PLACE

It isn't easy running
through the halls lights out
trying to find a door
with the jelly law pounding
behind you like the dead,
and #303 and in, chain on,
and now they rattle and roar,
then argue gently,
then plead,
but fortunately
the landlord would rather have his door
up than me down
in jail...
“...He's drunk in there
with some woman. I've warned him
I don't allow such things,
this is a nice place, this is...”
soon they go away;
you'd think I never paid the rent;
you'd think they'd allow a man to drink
and sit with a woman and watch the sun
come up.
I uncapped the new bottle
for the bag and she sat in the corner
smoking and coughing

like an old aunt from New Jersey.

(reprinted from NOTES FROM UNDERGROUND 3)

And I'm pretty sure the poem will never be worked on again. (There are houses you drive past sometimes on empty country road--sullen, solitary things obviously designed by the same sour fools who did the building, nearly completed, and then abandoned in the middle of driving a nail, twenty-five years ago.)

Free verse? Verse is never free, not for anyone. Some of us have a credit card or two and pay in easy monthly installments. Charles Bukowski has been paying cash in advance for years.

Free verse? If you need other terms for his craft you may use these: the "chopped line" (which is as much as to say, Hank doesn't articulate in accord with the limits of his line but with the limits of the image), the "shot"--read Mayakovsky if you care to locate Bukowski in a tradition--and he has even devised refinements for use when the image cramps him; he never hesitates to smash it, finally, like a windowpane is smashed by a drunken elbow, and use the jagged shards...which can yield a (to me) gorgeous line all stippled and clotted with the blood of solitary drunken battle--a line all raging. A line that slugs and butts, stumbles and clinches, blinded by rosin and spitting teeth, only to tag his cacodemonic opponent at the bell with a short right, clubbing him just in front of the ear so he drops crooked in his own corner, must haul himself up and aside so they can place the stool he'll squat on--yes!--deafened, his whole head numb, several small four-pointed stars slowly bobbing and circling before his eyes.

Free verse? A layman's term--one which said layman trots out with confidence. He has you in a corner at some pitiful party and he intends to keep you boxed in there until you understand that he is more than he seems--that he is sensitive, by God! He's always loved Poetry. Especially, you know, Free Verse. Next he'll ask you if you've read any of Carl Sandburg. Or perhaps he'll spring Kenneth Patchen on you. Patchen is steadily gaining ground on Sandburg, as is Bobby Dylan. If your tormentor is a lay woman you can expect to hear about Walter Benton or Khalil Gibran...

Since it seemed only fair to allow Hank some voice in an article devoted to him and his work, I wrote out a few questions to which he might respond if and how he chose. Here they are, Hank. Take your pick--any or all--and if you'd like to answer one I haven't asked, go right ahead; I'll insert the question afterwards and swear you had nothing to do with it.

Q: The Kennedy assassination and its attendant phenomena are big news once again.

Do you favor any of the current conspiracy theories? Are you even interested?

A: I think you guessed it. I am just about not interested. History, of course, makes a president big news and the assassination of one more so. However, I see men assassinated around me every day. I walk through rooms of the dead, streets of the dead, cities of the dead: men without eyes, men without voices; men with manufactured feelings and standard reactions; men with newspaper brains, television souls and high school ideals. Kennedy himself was 9/10ths the way around the clock or he wouldn't have accepted such an enervating and enfeebling job--meaning President of the United States of America. How can I be over concerned with the murder of one man when almost all men, plus females, are taken from cribs as babies and almost immediately thrown into the masher?

But I must admit that Kennedy, like Roosevelt, had an almost creative force of leadership, but political nevertheless and, in this sense, dangerous as a matter of trust and not at all a stimulative factor as to true fire, growth...something to make you feel good, better, bigger, more real. The whole assassination thing--Kennedy--the murder of Oswald-- the death of Ruby-- all the attending things do seem to STINK of something. Yet it is also possible that the whole was simply a continuous error and erring of humans in moil and unworthiness. The Human Being can be very stupid, especially in the half-light of almost 2,000 years of semi-Christian culture where emotionally barbaric ideals are mixed through with educational systems of learning based upon national, regional, economic and status forces. The development of the Pure Mind in America is almost impossible unless a man is fortunate enough to spend the first 25 years of his life in a madhouse or in some other entombed or untouchable state.

Q: LSD is getting a lot of play now, too. Would you care to add to the heap of...ah...material already in print on the subject?

A: I think that everything should be made available to everybody, and I mean LSD, cocaine, codeine, grass, opium, the works. Nothing on earth available to any man should be confiscated and made unlawful by other men in more seemingly powerful and advantageous positions. More often than not Democratic Law works to the advantage of the few even though the many have voted; this, of course, is because the few have told them how to vote. I grow tired of 18th century moralities in a 20th century space-atomic age. If I want to kill myself I feel that should be my business; if I want to get hooked on the mainline that should be my business. If I go out and hold up gas stations at night to pay for my supply it is because the law inflates a very cheap thing into an escalated war against my nerves and my soul. The law is wrong; I am right.

What more can you do with the dead than kill them? Look at our safe, undrugged populace now in the buses, at the sporting events, in the supermarkets, and tell me if they are a pleasant sight, And why should the M.D.'s be the dolers out of the goodies? Aren't they fat

enough now? Wealthy enough? Spoiled enough? And, really, don't they make as many mistakes as I do? What good are their books? More often than not, a decade later, they find that they were doing the worst thing possible for the patient while taking all his money.

My objection to the current LSD-craze-phase-blaze is that it has been taken over by the hippies, the swing-kitties, the dull-heads, as a kind of private stomping ground, as a substitute for soul. It works like this: there is a huge Hare Brain Mass halfway between the Artist and the Common Mass. This Hare Brain Mass is essentially rejected by the money-making society (the Common Mass), and although they would like nothing better than to be in with the Common Mass they cannot make it. So, borrowing a page from the Artist they say that they reject society. And having stolen one page from the Artist they try for the whole book--but they simply lack the talent to create because they are essentially sprung from the Common Mass. So they are hung between the C.M. and the Artist, unable to make money, unable to create. Now being unable to do either of these things is not a crime.

But being unable to take the truth, being unable to face an honest mirror, they PLAY AT SOUL, at being IN, bop, boot, beard, beret, hip, pop, anything. Long hair, short skirts, sandals, anything, psychedelic parties, paintings, music, psychedelic grapefruit, psychedelic guerrilla front, pop cups shades, bikes, yoga, psyche light-sounds, disco, girls are Richards, fuzz now Soap, Kid Goldstein the super pop new boy, The Jefferson Airplane, Hell's Angels, anything, any damn thing to give them identity, to give them a facade of Being to cover the Horrible Hole. Bob Dylan is their soul: "Something's happening and you don't know what it is, do you, Mr. Jones?", the Beatles are their soul, Judy Collins and Joan Baez are their chambermaids, and Tim Leary is their Elmer Gantry.

"mariwanna was all right
but acid, man
that's the fright"

Now you get busted for acid and you're IN, cabman, you're IN. Or a group of them get down on the floor in a circle and pass the grass and talk about Leary and the good old Left, talk about Andy Warhol, and how horrible the war in Vietnam is, and only a damn fool can hold a job, and who wants to drive?--walking is better. And somebody ought to shoot Johnson. And there are candles on the floor. And the boys are mother's boys and the women are twice-married, twice-divorced, grey, bitter and in their mid-forties. Don't think! Freak-in. Freak-out. Lights. LSD. Leary. Guitars. Love. MAKE LOVE! They screw each other like dry rocks rubbing together. March for Peace. March for the Negro. Burn your draft card. Johnson shot Kennedy.

Not all their ideas are totally without merit but in the essence of all thinking alike on like

subjects they cover the Horrible Hole, they imagine themselves objective, lovable human beings. How can a man who hates war, fights for the Negro, loves dogs and children and folk songs, jazz, wants better government, how can a man (or woman or lesbian or homosexual) be anything but a good juicy human being if he or she stands or sits among candles for these things?--But really they are one big shit-mind of jelly grabbing at LSD like the Holy Cross and making me hate it because their footprints, their mindprints are across my eyesight. Maybe when they move on to their next hype I will test a little acid. Until then, let them wallow in it until they get a pigbellyful.

Q: What do you think about Vietnam, civil rights, the recent spasms on the Sunset Strip, or any equally weighty matter? Rant now, Hank! Who knows how long the Bukowski vogue will last?

A: The Sunset Strip matter resides in the same context as the LSD matter, only here the idiots are a little younger. It is one hell of a mellow Revolution. IT IS A COMFORTABLE REVOLUTION. IT IS A BORED AND YAWNING REVOLUTION OF YOUNG MINDS ALREADY LAID OUT TO REST. If baby gets hurt, angry papa and mama will come get them out, and you cops had BETTER NOT HURT MY BABY; These kids don't look angry, they don't look hungry, they don't look ill-clothed or unhoused. They have to stand along Sunset Strip, a former symbol of wealth and lights. I'd have a lot more for them if they gathered in Boyle Heights. I had a lot more for them when they gathered in Watts. These kids want comfortable kicks. These kids are yawning. They have no center, no platform, no voice, no nothing. Police Brutality is all they can think of. I've seen police brutality in jails and in the skidrows of cities that they would never believe possible. What they consider Police Brutality is the gentlest of treading on their soft pink toes. See you on television, girls, next Saturday night. WOW!

Q: Yes, this Charles Bukowski vogue...it's definitely forming up. How do you view it?

A: I am not aware of a Charles Bukowski vogue. I am too much of a loner, too much of a crank, too anti-crowd, too old, too late, too leery, too foxy to be sucked in and carried away. This appears to be a third interview within two weeks, but I view it more as a mathematical oddity than a vogue. I hope that I never become a vogue. A vogue is damned and doomed forever. It would mean that there is something wrong with me or something wrong with my work. I think that at the age of 46, having worked eleven years in silence, I think that I am fairly safe. I hope the gods are with me. I think they will be.

But I view even these three interviews in an odd light. I cannot see justification for them. I write poetry. Therefore that poetry should be the stand, the base, the platform in itself. And it doesn't matter a damn what I think of Vietnam, the Strip, LSD, Shostakovitch, or anything else. Why should the poet stand as Visionary? But look how many of them have, do and will fuck

up. Watch them get on stage so the crowd can view them. Watch them opionate. Watch them orate. Watch them suck into souls of sponge. To me it is still one man alone in a room, creating Art or failing to create Art. All else is bullshit. I answer these questions in an attempt to let the people know that I want solitude and why I want solitude. Perhaps it will work. Not many people come to my door now. I am grateful. Perhaps less will in the future. This doesn't mean women; I will always lay down my work to lay down a woman. I am no good with the soul here and I don't pretend to be.

Q: Why do you piss away so much time and money at the race track?

A: I piss away time and money at the racetrack because I am insane--I am hoping to make enough money so I will not have to work any longer in slaughterhouses, in post offices, at docks, in factories. So what happens? I lose the money I have and am further nailed to the cross. "Bukowski," some people tell me, "you just like to lose, you just like to suffer, you just like to work in slaughterhouses." These people are more insane than I am. The track does help in certain ways--I see the faces of greed, the hamburger faces; I see the faces in early dream and I see the faces later when the same nightmare returns. You cannot see this too often. It is a mechanic of Life. Also, being at the track most of the time, it gives me very little time to write, very LITTLE TIME TO PLAY AT BEING A WRITER. This is important. When I write it is the line I must write. After losing a week's pay in four hours it is very difficult to come to your room and face the typewriter and fabricate a lot of lacy bullshit. But I certainly wouldn't suggest the racetrack as the incubator and inspirer of poetry. I just say it might work for me-- sometimes. Like beer, or screwing a good woman, cigars, or Mahler with good wine and the lights out, sitting there naked watching the cars go by. My suggestion to all or any is to stay away from the racetrack. It is one of Man's neatest traps.

There had been four more questions, and Hank tried to answer them on tape. But he was as drunk as a striped-assed ape by the time he started, so the result was mainly incoherent meandering, useless. He called me two days later, trying to fill in the gaps in his memory of the performance. He had been afraid of that, he said, when I told him how he'd blown it. We agreed not to bother with those questions after all. The tape is not for sale.

This floundering old bastard is the best poet in town. True, there are only four real poets here to choose from, but that is Los Angeles' worry and not his. If the town harbored forty poets, probably Hank would still be king.

And now he is on the verge of becoming "known." In a world of men this would be a good thing and overlong deserved. But Hank lives here in Southern California so the fame will almost certainly prove a misfortune. If he's lucky it will simply be tiresome. But I fear that pretty soon all the creeps and enthusiasts will know him by sight. Yes, I can picture it: they'll dog his days, waiting for the show to begin, for Hank to live up to the Bukowski image--tough

guy, whorehouse athlete, howling geek. But they will never forgive him if his poor mangled asshole should mend at last, so that all his future shits be gentle and ruminative, vaguely sensual and uniformly tidy; they will turn on him should turds die out of his poems like smelly little Mohicans. And thus for lack of bloody underdrawers Hank will be a pariah once more. Since I love the man I would gladly help nudge events into such a saving course; I would truly and with fervent heart pray for that ghastly old ass hole of his to be healed by grace, yes! But I cannot discover which of the many saints is the acknowledged patron presiding over such matters.

In fact, Hank's image and his reputation are largely moonshine (I intend no pun), which makes him the rarest type of celebrity this silly town could spawn. He is sane, he is normal, he is neither beautiful nor arrestingly ugly, he draws his strength from solitude, and his best work is solid and thoughtful. Think upon this, O Los Angeles! At last you have a resident culture hero who is neither actor nor freak! Why, he could merge with any group of great men and no one would be the wiser; no one could point him out as the Gentleman from California!

Best of all, my city, match him (he's enough, just him) against San Francisco. San Francisco, so self-consciously California's Official Cultural Columbarium, is actually up to her prancing ass nowadays in poetry freaks and poetry frauds! Every Hollywood bullshitter whose criminal specialty is versification has already flown to San Fran or is presently in transit. Please, Los Angeles, consider the unlikely nature of your good fortune, and don't waste Charles Bukowski! Make no more corny Bukowski myths, and simply let the old one die.

v* * *

John: Hank liked the essay. But he grumbled that I said "best poet in town" instead of "the world."

Philomene: Your essay was prophetic.

John: Yep. If you're into prophecy.

Philomene: I hate the word "into."

John: Give you bad vibes? I'm hip. You dig?

Philomene: Michael Moore in the early seventies was managing Papa Bach Book Store. (Bill Mohr was also editing Bachy.) Michael Moore recalls two readings Bukowski gave in the back room of Papa Bach in which he

describes him as beginning to "act crazy on purpose."

John: I didn't go to them.

Philomene: I do recall Bukowski, then in his early fifties, complaining to me about his burgeoning fame. He kept repeating that it came too late. It came too late.

17

HANK EMBARKS ON A NEW CAREER

Philomene: *[Picks up audio tape of a conversation between Charles Bukowski and John Thomas recorded the night before the Buk was to quit his job at the Post Office to live solely off his writing.]* This audio tape is a piece of literary history. Tell me about the circumstance in which it was recorded.

John: It may be mentioned in Hank's novel, *Post Office*. The Post Office was trying to get Hank in trouble, called him down to a hearing. I'm paraphrasing. MR. BUKOWSKI, INFORMATION HAS COME TO US THAT YOU ARE WRITING A SCANDALOUS ACCOUNT OF THE UNITED STATES POST OFFICE. IT MAY BE NECESSARY TO HAVE AN OFFICIAL HEARING AND YOU COULD EVEN BE SEPARATED FROM YOUR GOVERNMENT EMPLOYMENT.

Philomene: Did that have anything to do with his quitting?

John: Nope. Some modest recent success with the horses and John Martin's promised stipend gave him sufficient courage not to roll over for those jerks.

John Martin had offered him a reliable amount just to write. So he and John Martin came together at a most fortuitous time for both of them. They hung together so that they wouldn't be hanged separately.

Philomene: John Martin gave Bukowski what Virginia Wolfe called “A room of one’s own”, gave him the poet’s Holy Grail-- time.

John: No more leaning half his ass against the hard edge of a stool and sticking mail all night. No more hemorrhoids for Henry.

Philomene: But Hank was uneasy, one foot just lifting from safe ground, about to take the big leap. On the tape it took the form of bravado.

John: Whistling up the wind.

Philomene: This was the summer of 1967?

John: Close enough. Anyway, this will give future Bukowski scholars something to do with their time, checking out the dates. Consider Stendhal scholars. He’s been studied so exhaustively by so many generations of fresh scholars that now they know his life in fifteen minute increments.

18

WHAT IS A MAN?

- John: When his father died Bukowski took one of his father's suits and he told me once about seeing himself in the mirror wearing his father's suit. And they did look an awful lot alike. And Bukowski getting the feeling while he was staring at this image in the mirror thinking that Christ, he'd love to kill this bastard. And then realizing, shit, he's already dead.
- Philomene: As a boy, his father beat Hank mercilessly. *[holds up drawing Bukowski drew of John Thomas]* When did he draw this picture of you?
- John: Oh, one night in the late sixties at his house. Actually that evening we were drawing each other. I gave him my drawings of him as a gift. He gave these to me. In them I have on my beret. Actually it had been a Canadian World War II tank corps tam-o-shanter with a little pompom on the top, but I cut the pompom off. In this picture there's a knife on the floor, because he was interested in the fact that I carried a lot of knives. I still carry them.
- Philomene: They're no use now, with all the Uzi's around. Did Hank think that was tough and manly of you to carry knives?
- John: Once, when Red asked him "What is a man?" Hank responded that a man is a person.... a man is a person who does what he wants to do, as much as possible, within restrictions put upon him.
- Philomene: Many women, then, could be men.
- John: Yeah, but Hank was speaking from the male viewpoint. on "manliness." This was as close as he could come to it. In other words, a fulfillment of what he's supposed to be, as much as possible.

Philomene: And what is “manliness” in the male?

John: He thought that it was a natural growth of what there is. That's the only answer he could come up with to “what is a man?” saying that all his thinking is vague. Even his poetry was vague. Purposely so, because he was untrained--and didn't care for training. He thought it was a trap. So his vague definition of a man is a vague man, and that's as far as he would go... adding that we try so hard here to be masculine, you know. We try hard all over. It just means different things in other places.

Philomene: *Man Sane Enough to Live with Beasts*. There is Hank as a young lad dressed in his mother's shoes with white paste all over his face to hide his boils, hiding in the closet from the neighborhood kids....

John: ...and they find him.

Philomene: And Hank's reaction, I love this one-- that his legs looked good in his mother's shoes, that he'd never seen a woman with legs like his!

19

WHAT KIND OF WOMAN WOULD BUKOWSKI HAVE BEEN?

- Philomene: What kind of woman do you think Charles Bukowski would have made?
- John: Huh! I can't imagine him as a woman. How about a very unhappy woman?
- Philomene: He would be a womanly woman. Feminine with a mildly foul mouth.
- John: Yep.
- Philomene: He would wear high heels most of the time, regardless of how they hurt. Long pointed red fingernails. Big hats. Lots of make-up. His dresses would long chiffon in his favorite color, yellow.. Underneath he would be wearing a pair of red satin Everlast boxing trunks. He would speak and saunter like a Mae West. "I'm Charlotte Bukowski, Baby! The great poetess!" But if a poet, Charlotte Bukowski would have to be made of iron.
- John: It is sort of odd, whenever in conversation he would cite something a woman had said, or whenever he read aloud from a poem or story he had written, and was utilizing a woman's voice, it was always the identical sound—high, whinny, affected, and extremely unpleasant.
- Philomene: Whom did it replicate, his mother?
- John: Never heard his mother. But it was always the same woman. He could be quoting Greta Garbo and make it sound like "I want to be alone" (whinny, screechy). Imitating a man, there would be a variety. He had *their* voices much better in his head, *their* sounds.
- Philomene: I know it's futile to ask why. What about his ideals of masculinity, femininity?

John: Well, I guess, given his horrible complexion and his awkwardness, as an adolescent he never had a girlfriend. He was hostile, contemptuous, shy.

Philomene: With a powerful sex drive, that's a complex combination. When you read his women characters in his books do you find them limited?

John: A limited number of obtuse, composite, pathetic misunderstandings. And you?

Philomene: Some of it is hard to chew on as a woman.

John: Nope. What about his portrayal of you?

Philomene: His portrayal of me was as an old time woman's libber eating up the air speaking passionately about Wanda Coleman -- how she wore large hoop earrings and read with such exuberance they bounced beautifully. He added, that it looked like with me you had the whole nine innings in your hands.

John: Do you have something to say about that?

Philomene: Nope. Only that my daughter liked it. The men in his stories are rather shadowy.

John: How about me?

Philomene: Excuse me. Your reaction to any other of his portrayals of you?

John: Well, I wish you hadn't even asked the question. Never did much care how he portrayed me.

Philomene: But his last poem to you was moving. It moved *me*.

John: I didn't feel like the person that he was speaking to. Maybe I was, but it didn't feel like that to me.

Philomene: Well, I was moved by it.

John: I was moved by it, too, but that doesn't mean I recognize myself in the poem.

Philomene: I did. But point is, that is how he saw you over a span of thirty years. I
did think it was his way of saying good bye.

John: Maybe.

A DRUNKEN FANTASY FINALLY REALIZED

Philomene: [*reads from last poem Bukowski wrote for Thomas “The Strong Man.” in Black Ace 3*] I feel that in this poem are his final words to you: ... “He made a place when / there was no / place / a place to go when all /was closing in... when there was no / voice, no sound / no sense / he lent the easy / saving / natural / grace.”

He ends the poem with: “I feel that I owe him / one / I feel that I owe him / many / but I can hear him / now, that same / voice / as when he sat / so huge / in that same / chair / “Nothing is owed / Bukowski” / you’re finally wrong / this time / John Thomas, you / bastard.”

John: Why are you crying?

Philomene: Because that *is* you.

John: It reminds me of the first time he came over to visit in Echo Park. That would have been 1965. I gave him directions over the phone. Because Echo Park has twisty side streets and ends of streets. He was going to be over in two hours. He didn’t show up. But a couple of hours later he did show up, said he was sorry but he had gotten lost trying to follow my directions. Ended up on some little path in the hills there, really lost. Of course he was lying about it, but he said, I paraphrase-- John, up on that hill I stumbled into an ancient Chinese village that had been there for seventy-five years and nobody had known anything about it!

Philomene: You know, John, you do have a Baltimore sneer. I hardly recognize your voice in them.

John: That is because I was on speed. I was gobbling down the pills and he was sucking Miller High Life.

Philomene: I do notice that although you are a gentle giant now, when remembering

the past, you speak now as you spoke then.

John: Hmmmmm.

Philomene: Anything you observe about the voices when you hear them now?

John: I'm not dropping Dexamyl anymore and he is not drinking Miller High Life.

Let's leave it at that. Remind me to tell you this one about the Arab and the

Jewel. He said that sometimes when he was drunk he would imagine that he

was going to see on the street an Arab type in robes step out between the

cars and offer him a magic jewel which, if he took it, it would do anything for

him. This was a favorite drunken fantasy of his.

Philomene: A drunken fantasy finally realized in his final affluent years.

THE LONG BATH

Philomene: We'll save that story for another time.

John: There was more than one private image. Surely the image that he gave Linda was not identical to the one he gave me.

Philomene: Describe what you saw between Hank and Linda, for example, at the book signing in San Pedro.

John: Affection and tenderness. What do you remember?

Philomene: No matter how far Linda's orbit extended from Hank, I had the feeling there was a loving gravity in their connection.

John: Like Venus circling wildly around the sun. She was caring towards him.

Philomene: How did you see this caring expressed?

John: I didn't see them together often. I recall one of the times at his sixtieth birthday. There was a lot of the usual hugging and kissing.

Philomene: Of course it's not always that usual between married couples.

John: He came down the stairs barefoot and wearing baggy shorts. He seemed very benign. He was proud of his house, gave me a tour of the ranch. He showed me their crop of sweet corn in the backyard and bragged about his wife the farmer. He brandished an ear of corn saying something like (I'm paraphrasing here) "Look at this, Big John, she has me eating vegetables. Grows them herself. But come

in now, and let's have some wine. And can you believe this? She
got me off of beer on to wine. Very damn good wine at that.
Come on back in, I want to show you."

Philomene: What about Bukowski's bathtub?

John: I don't remember the bathtub. But before pouring more wine he *dragged*
me into the bathroom. There he showed me the brand new oak toilet
seat and said (I'm paraphrasing this again), "Look. Best damn
toilet seat my ass ever sat on in my life. Look what the Empress got the
Emperor." And as he passed by the bathroom mirror, I noticed that
Hank didn't flinch.

Philomene: So he ends his life with Linda Bukowski. (At this point the fire alarm
goes off in John and Philomene's apartment)

John: That's Hank howling from the grave.

Philomene: Howls for Linda.

John: I didn't see them together that many times. Probably, altogether, six
minutes ... outside of his premiere of "Bar Fly" and his sixtieth birthday
party ... at which time he popped her, accusing her of coming on to me.

Philomene: You're sounding like an arrogant ass. How do you spell arrogant?

John: You're going to end the book saying I'm "an arrogant ass" and you want
me to spell arrogant for you?

Philomene: I would like to end it with his golden years with Linda.

John: I don't know the end.

Philomene: He ends his life in San Pedro with Linda Bukowski. Fifteen years with Linda and their beautiful cats. (I think cats, if they could read, would love Bukowski.) He was living his dream: to play the horses in the daytime and write at night. To make it both ways. And there, instead of just a tub, he would have a swimming pool. Instead of a ratty old uncomfortable chair, he would have a large comfortable overstuffed one in which he would meditate, Buddha-like.

John: I don't know the end. You could end it with that one line from this evening's news— "At least four people are dead, and more than a hundred homes totally destroyed."

Philomene: About Bukowski's funeral?. What do you recall?

John: I recall coming to the mortuary chapel. And what I saw there milling around the mortuary was a lot of old fuds.

Philomene: Including yourself.

John: And I saw this kid who I supposed was the offspring of one of the old fuds.

He was wearing an ill fitting black blazer and a white shirt with the wrong kind of collar. And his hair looked funny like he had just gone to the bathroom and slicked it down with sugar water so it was sticking up in pointy tufts.

Philomene: Sean Penn.

John: And there were the Buddhist monks from Thailand and Sri Lanka with

big Buddhist flashy teeth surrounded by little monks.

Philomene: I got the impression those monks did not know whom they were burying.
It was hard to understand through the accent, but it sounded like
the officiate thought he was burying a seven-year-old child.

John: Maybe he was. If it had been somebody else's funeral and Hank and I
had
been there we would have been out lurking behind the bushes catching a
smoke. He despised funerals as do I.

Philomene: Why do you think he despised funerals?

John: I imagine the same reason I did. It is a barbarous ceremony over a being
whose not there. What do you recall about the funeral?

Philomene: That Hank was inside the most beautiful coffin ever. It reminded me of
the toy coffin he once gave you.

John: There is no such thing as a beautiful coffin.

Philomene: Well, Hank's was the most beautiful coffin. What do you think Bukowski
might have been saying from inside the casket?

John: What am I doing here? And who are all these ass holes?

Philomene: What was your reaction when you heard he died?

John: I cried.

Philomene: One last thing-- how long did you say he would bathe?

John: I never, never timed him. It might surprise you that I had better things to do than to time Bukowski soaking and rubbing his body with water.

Philomene: Didn't it ever occur to him to use soap?

John: Obviously he knew about soap. Maybe he had (or thought he had) an allergy, or maybe he just liked to lie around in water and that was an excuse. He liked to take a lot of baths and would lie in the water a lot, so maybe he is one of the few cadavers that are happy. They don't talk about it much, but a lot of ground water usually seeps into the coffins. And he may be perfectly happy. Instead of "The Big Sleep", the long bath.

Philomene: That may be a little much.

John: Your namby-pamby notion of what's a "little much."

Philomene: To paraphrase a Zen poem – from bathtub to bathtub (from birth to death) it's all nonsense. But it does make me want to take a bath.

Top left and top right: John Thomas and Philomene Long reading poems over Charles Bukowski's grave. Photos by Tommy Dougherty III. Center: Linda Bukowski at her husband's grave (her reflection on his gravestone). Bottom: Friends and family gather at Charles Bukowski's gravesite. Photos by Philomene Long

EPILOGUE:
POEMS READ AT BUKOWSKI'S GRAVE SITE

GREAT ZEN FUNERAL

--Philomene Long

A good day for a
Bukowski funeral
L.A.'s having a heat wave
The sky parchment
The starched air
Brittle
In the afternoon light

Here in the chapel
Bukowski's casket is
Wooden, shinning
Beside the huge
Red letters
"HANK"

One of the officiating
Buddhist monks has a
Large black
Ink stain
On his saffron robe
Right where he
Sits
Linda Bukowski wears
Her husband's wrist watch
Still ticking
As Sean Penn quotes Hank,
"Let's suck the shit out
Of death."

Afterwards, being wheeled
Down the slope
To the grave site
The casket
Teeters, starts
To roll out of control
The pall bearers

Catch it in time
Then think to let
It go again
one says, "he's
In there saying
"Do it! Do it!"
But they do not.

At the grave site
Another monk
Places the last
Red rose
On the casket
Turns, smiles toothily
For the camera
It ends.
People stand around
Not knowing what
To do
"As every ending
Should," John Thomas
Say behind
Me

I walk up to the casket
Stroke it
John follows
Gives it a thump

“He heard that one,”
Linda says

At the house
There is talk of
The night before
Hank in the
Mortuary viewing room
Stretched out there
Smiling
In his racetrack outfit
Two pens in his
Breast pocket
Michael Montfort
Had patted
The back of
Hank's writing hand
Said it felt like
Cement
The Mexicans in the
Adjacent viewing room
Were having pizza and Pepsi

Linda moves constantly
Among the guests
John Martin
Carl Weissner
Gerald Locklin
Red, Kim, Concepcion
Her step-daughter Marina
From room to room
Among the cats
Out into the yard
Back again
Checking every corner
“What are you

Looking for, Linda?"
"Hank," she says

Outside on the front steps
I watch the moon
Turn the sky
The poet, his face
Now, the inky night
His voice black wind
Hard mouth, hand
Cut slab of stone
But even in slumber
The ghosts of his poems
Still rising
Alarm
The air

My eyelids become leaden
Linda puts me to bed
She gives me
Hank's pajamas
"The ones he wore
In the hospital."
Freshly laundered.
"This is your home, now,"
She tells me.
Her eyes, tiny
Brown suns.
"This is your home."

I drift in and out of
A dreamless sleep in
Bukowski's pajamas
The most comfortable
Pajamas I ever slept in
John sits all night

In Hank's easy chair.
He is saying,
“I can't see how
Philomene and Hank
Can stand pajamas!”
Linda is laughing-
Chimes

Great slumber
Great Zen Funeral

In my dreamless sleep
The night is the
Round black eyes of
Horses
Just past the
Home stretch
No more need for
Rein or spur or
Snap of the
Whip
All that is heard
Is the faint ringing
Of their long streaming
Manes in the distance
And the dust.

See Hank,
The dust is luminous!

MY FATE

--John Thomas

It happens all the fucking time, Snorky.
I'll bet, even when I arrive in Heaven-
you know, after all the introductions,
and we're standing around sipping greasy Chablis
and gloomily munching the cute hors d'oeuvres-
I'll bet, kid, even then, somebody,
probably Jesus, will take me aside
and ask in an eager, whiny undertone,
"So, tell Me, is it true what I hear?
Did you really know Bukowski?"

POSTSCRIPT

"That's awful!" said Philomene.
"Maybe so," I replied, "but
I'll bet they like it Up There.
You watch: we'll arrive and
Jesus, first thing, He'll say,
"Hey, I know you! You wrote
that poem about Me and Bukowski
Him and Me, in the same poem,
and funny, too! It knocked Me out!"
Talk about your frigid silences, kid.

