

ROBERT WENNERSTEN

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## Paying for Horses:

*an interview with Charles Bukowski*

*Charles Bukowski was born in Andernach, Germany. When he was two years old, his parents brought him to the United States; and he was raised in Los Angeles, where, after a long period of bumming around the country, he still lives.*

*Bukowski, mostly self-educated, began writing in his early twenties. Ignored, he stopped. Ten years later he started again and since then has published about twenty books of poetry, hundreds of short stories and one novel, Post Office. Bukowski's writing is about an existence he once sought out for himself, so knows firsthand: he writes about the lower classes paddling as fast as they can to avoid drowning in the shit life pours on them. His characters, if they are employed at all, hold down dull, starvation-wage jobs. Off work they drink too much and live chaotically. Their attempts to make it—with women, at the race track or simply from day to day—are sometimes pathetic, sometimes nasty, often hilarious.*

*On the day of this interview, Bukowski was living, temporarily, in a typical Los Angeles apartment building: low and square with a paved courtyard in the centre. He was standing at the top of the stairs that led to his second-floor rooms. Broad, but not a tall man, he was dressed in a print shirt and blue jeans pulled tight under a beer belly. His long, dark hair was combed straight back. He had a wiry beard and moustache, both flecked with grey. 'You didn't bring a bottle,' he said slowly, chuckling and walking inside. 'My girl was afraid you'd bring a fifth and get me so drunk that I wouldn't be able to take care of business when I see her tonight.'*

*In the living room, he sat down on a bed which also served as a couch. He lit a cigarette, put it in an ashtray and clasped his hands between his knees. Aside from reaching for that cigarette or lighting another one, he*

*seldom made a gesture. To the first questions, his answers were taciturn, just one or two sentences; yet he frequently accused himself of being long-winded. Reassured that he was not, he gradually became more and more talkative.*

*When the interview ended, Bukowski rose and walked to a table on the opposite side of the room. He picked up a pamphlet, flipped it open and said, 'Look at this. Something's going on.' The pamphlet turned out to be an autograph dealer's catalogue, and it listed about a dozen Bukowski letters for sale. He stared at the list a moment, tossed the catalogue back on the table and mumbled, 'I'll make it, man. I'll make it.'*

R.W.

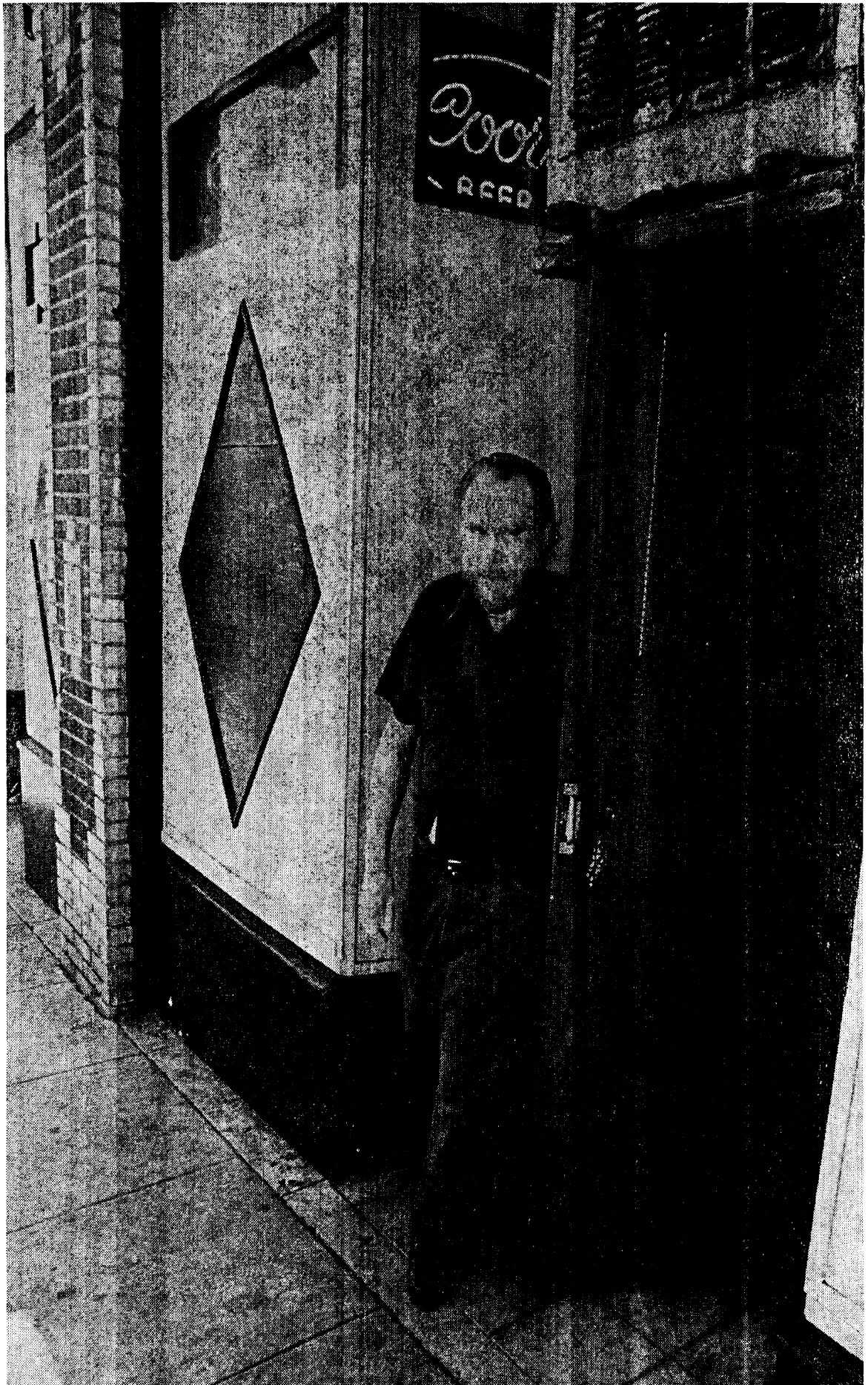
Robert Wennersten. *What were your parents and your childhood like?*

Charles Bukowski. Oh, God. Well, my parents were of German extraction. My mother was born there; and my father's people were German, although he came out of Pasadena.

My father liked to whip me with a razor strop. My mother backed him. A sad story. Very good discipline all the way through, but very little love going either direction. Good training for the world, though, they made me ready. Today, watching other children, I'd say one thing they taught me was not to weep too much when something goes wrong. In other words, they hardened me to what I was going to go through: the bum, the road, all the bad jobs and the adversity. Since my early life hadn't been soft, the rest didn't come as such a shock.

We lived at 2122 Longwood Avenue. That's a little bit west and a little bit south of here. When I first started shacking with women, I lived near downtown; and it seems like through the years each move I make is further west and further north. I felt myself going towards Beverly Hills at one time. I'm in this place now, because I got booted out of the house where I lived with this lady. We had a minor split, so all of a sudden I came back south a bit. I got thrown off course. I guess I'm not going to make Beverly Hills.

R.W. *What changes have you seen in Los Angeles during the years you've lived here?*



C.B. Nothing astounding. It's gotten bigger, dumber, more violent and greedier. It's developed along the same lines as the rest of civilization.

But there's a part of LA—you take it away from Hollywood, Disneyland and the ocean, which are places I stay away from, except the beaches in wintertime when there's no one around—where there's a good, easy feeling. People here have a way of minding their own damned business. You can get isolation here, or you can have a party. I can get on that phone and in a hour have a dozen people over drinking and laughing. And that's not because I'm a writer who's getting known a little. This has always been, even before I had any luck. But they won't come unless I phone them, unless I want them. You can have isolation, or you can have the crowd. I tend to mix the two, with a preference for isolation.

R.W. *One of your short stories has this line in it: 'LA is the cruelest city in the world.' Do you believe it is?*

C.B. I don't think LA is the cruelest city. It's one of the least cruel. If you're on the bum and know a few people, you can get a buck here and there, float around and always find a place to lay up overnight. People will tolerate you for a night. Then you go to the next pad. I put people up overnight. I say, 'Look, I can only stand you for one night. You've got to go.' But I put them up. It's a thing people in LA do. Maybe they do it elsewhere, and I just haven't seen it.

I don't get the feeling of cruelty here that I get from New York City. Philadelphia has nice rays, too; it has a good feeling. So does New Orleans. San Francisco isn't all they say it is. If I had to rate cities, I'd put LA right up on top: LA, Philadelphia, New Orleans. Those are places where somebody can *live*.

I've left LA many times, but I always come back. You live in a town all of your life, and you get to know every street corner. You've got the layout of the whole land. You have this picture of where you are. When I hit a strange town, I seldom got out of the neighbourhood. I'd settle within an area of two or three blocks: the bar, the room I lived in and the streets around them. That's all I knew about a town,

so I always felt lost; I was never located, never quite knew where I was. Since I was raised in LA, I've always had the geographical and spiritual feeling of being here. I've had time to learn this city. I can't see any other place than LA.

R.W. *Do you still travel a lot?*

C.B. I've done my travelling. I've travelled so damn much, mostly via buses or some other cheap mode, that I've gotten tired of it. At one time I had this idea that one could live on a bus forever: travelling, eating, getting off, shitting, getting back on that bus. (I don't know where the income was supposed to come from.) I had the strange idea that one could stay in motion forever. There was something fascinating about constant motion, because you're not tied down. Well, it was fascinating for a while; and then I got un-fascinated, or non-fascinated. Now I hardly travel; I hate going to the drugstore.

R.W. *What turned you off about New York?*

C.B. I didn't like it. I didn't have a taste for it. I don't think I could ever like New York, and there's no need to go there. I guess New York was almost the beginning of American civilization. Now it's the top of our civilization. It represents what we mean. I don't like what we mean, what New Yorkers mean.

I landed there with \$7 and no job. I walked out of the bus station into Times Square. It was when all the people were getting off their jobs. They came roaring out of these holes in the ground, these subways. They knocked me about, spun me about. The people were more brutal than any I'd ever seen anywhere else. It was dark and dank, and the buildings were so damned tall. When you only have \$7 in your pocket and look up at those huge buildings . . .

Of course, I deliberately went to New York broke. I went to every town broke in order to learn that town from the bottom. You come into a town from the top—you know, fancy hotel, fancy dinners, fancy drinks, money in your pocket—and you're not seeing that town at all. True, I denied myself a full view. I got a bottom view, which I didn't like; but I was more interested in what was going on at the

bottom. I thought that was the place. I found out it wasn't. I used to think the real men (people you can put up with for over ten minutes) were at the bottom, instead of at the top. The real men aren't at the top, middle or bottom. There's no location. They're just very scarce; there aren't many of them.

R.W. *Why was San Francisco a disappointment?*

C.B. You get the big build-up, you know, in literature and movies and God knows where else. I got up there and looked around, and it didn't seem to live up to it. The build-up was too big; so when I finally got there, there was a natural letdown. And when I hit San Francisco, I knew I had to hustle a job. I knew some guy would hire me, pay me a bit of money, and I'd have to bust my ass and be grateful that I had a job. It was the same as everywhere else.

Most cities are alike: you've got people, a business district, warehouses, police who hassle you and a bunch of bad poets walking around. Maybe the weather is different, and the people have slightly different accents; that's about it. But, like I said, LA has a spiritual and geographical difference which, because I've been hanging around it, I've picked up on. I have an acquaintanceship with LA, you might say.

Now, women are a lot different than cities. If you're lucky, you do all right. You've got to be lucky with women, because the way you meet them is mostly through accident. If you turn right at a corner, you meet this one; if you turn left, you meet the other one. Love is a form of accident. The population bounces together, and two people meet somehow. You can say that you love a certain woman, but there's a woman you never met you might have loved a hell of a lot more. That's why I say you have to be lucky. If you meet someone up near that possible top, you're lucky. If you don't, well, you turned right instead of left, or you didn't search long enough, or you're plain, damned unlucky.

R.W. *Did you do much writing while you were on the road?*

C.B. I got some writing done in New York. In Philadelphia, St Louis and New Orleans, too, in my early days. St Louis was very lucky for me. I was there when I got rid of my first short story—to *Story* mag, which was quite a mag in its day. (They discovered William Saroyan and reprinted top-class writers.) I don't remember if I wrote the story in St Louis, because I was moving pretty fast then; but I was there when it got accepted.

You've got to have a good city to write in, and you've got to have a certain place to live in to write. This apartment is not right for me; but I had to move right away, and I got tired of looking around. This place isn't rugged enough. The neighbours don't like any noise at all. It's very constrictive, but I'm not here most of the time. I'm usually over at Linda's big house. I write there and lay around. This place is for when things go wrong with her. Then I come running back here. I call it my office. You see, my typewriter isn't even here; it's over there. I used to pay rent over there. Then we had a split. Now I still live there, but I don't pay rent. That was a smart move.

R.W. *How did you end up, at one point in your life, on the bum?*

C.B. It just occurred. Probably through the drinking and disgust and having to hold a mundane job. I couldn't face working for somebody, that eight-to-five thing. So I got hold of a bottle and drank and tried to make it without working. Working was frankly distasteful to me. Starving and being on the bum seemed to have more glory.

There was this bar I went to in Philly. I had the same barstool—I forget where it was now; I think it was on the end—reserved for me. I'd open the bar early in the morning and close it at night. I was a fixture. I ran errands for sandwiches, hustled a little. I picked up a dime, a dollar here and there. Nothing crooked, but it wasn't eight to five; it was 5 a.m. to 2 a.m. I guess there were good moments, but I was pretty much out of it. It was kind of a dream state.

R.W. *What poets do you like reading at the moment?*

C.B. Auden was pretty good. When I was young and I read, I liked a lot

of Auden. I was in a liking mood. I liked that whole gang: Auden, MacLeish, Eliot. I liked them at the time; but when I come back on them now, they don't strike me the same way. Not loose enough. They don't gamble. Too careful. They say good things, and they write it well; but they're too careful for me now.

And there's Stephen Spender. Once I was lying in bed, and I opened this book up. You know what happens when a poem hits you. I was thinking of that one with the touch of corn about the poets who have 'left the air signed with their honour'. That was pretty good. Spender got them off. I can't remember them all, but I know that he set me off three, four, five, six times. The more modern poets don't seem to do this to me.

It could be that I was more spiritually available to be turned on at that time and that I wasn't as much into the game. To be sitting in the stands as a spectator and see a guy hit a home run: Holy God, that ball goes flying over the fence, and it's a miracle. When you get down there and play with them and hit a few over yourself, you say, 'That wasn't so hard. I just seemed to tap that ball, and it went over the wall.' When you finally get into the game, miracles aren't as big as when you're looking on from the sidelines. That has something to do with my lack of appreciation now.

Then you meet the writers finally, and that's not a very good experience. Usually, when they're not on the poem, they're rather bitchy, frightened, antagonistic little chipmunks. When they get turned on, art is their field; but when they get out of their field, they're despicable cretures. I'd much rather talk to a plumber over a bottle of beer than a poet. You can say something to a plumber, and he can talk back. The conversation can go both ways. A poet, though, or a creative person, is generally pushing. There's something I don't like about them. Hell, I'm probably the same way, but I'm not as aware of it as when it comes from another person.

R.W. *Do the classical poets—say, Shakespeare—do anything for you?*

C.B. Hardly. No, Shakespeare didn't work at all for me, except given lines. There was a lot of good advice in there, but he didn't pick me up.



These kings running around, these ghosts, that upper-crust shit bored me. I couldn't relate to it. It had nothing to do with me. Here I am lying in a room starving to death—I've got a candy bar and half a bottle of wine—and this guy is talking about the agony of a king. It didn't help.

I think of Conrad Aiken as classical. He's hardly Shakespeare's time, but his style is classical. I feel it was influenced by the older poets way back. He is one of the few poets who turns me on with classical lines. I admire Conrad Aiken very much. But most of the—what shall I call them, purists?—don't pick me up.

There was one at the reading the other night. William Stafford. When he started turning on those lines, I couldn't listen. I have an instinctive radar, and it shut me off. I saw the mouth move, I heard sounds; but I couldn't listen. I don't want to take castor oil.

R.W. *What do you look for in a good poem?*

C.B. The hard, clean line that says it. And it's got to have some blood; it's got to have some humour; it's got to have that un-namable thing which you know is there the minute you start reading.

As I said, modern poets don't have it for some reason. Like Ginsberg. He writes a lot of good lines. You take the lines separately, read one and say, 'Hey, that's a good line.' Then you read the next one and say, 'Well, that's a fair line'; but you're still thinking of the first line. You get down to the third, and there's a different twist. Pretty soon you're lost in this flotsam and jetsam of words that are words themselves, bouncing around. The totality, the total feel, is gone. That's what happens a lot. They throw in a good line—maybe at the end, maybe in the middle or a third of the way down—but the totality and the simplicity are not there. Not for me, anyway. They may be there, but I can't find them. I wish they were there; I'd have better reading material. That's why I'm not doing all the reading I should, or like people say you should.

R.W. *How much reading should you do? I've always thought that writers who don't read are like people who always talk and never listen.*

C.B. I don't listen very well, either. I think it's a protective mechanism. In other words, I fear the grind-down of doing something that's supposed to have an effect on me. Instinctively, I know ahead of time that the effect won't be there. That's my radar again. I don't have to arrive there myself to know that there's not going to be anything there.

I hit the library pretty hard in my early days. I did try the reading. Suddenly I glanced around, and I was out of material. I'd been through all the standard literature, philosophy, the whole lot. So I branched out; I wandered around. I went into geology. I even made a study of the operation on the mesocolon. That operation was damned interesting. You know, the type of knives, what you do: shut this off, cut this vein. I said, 'This isn't bad. Much more interesting than Chekhov.' When you get into other areas, out of pure literature, you sometimes really get picked up. It's not the same old shit.

Any more, I don't like to read. It bores me. I read four or five pages, and I feel like closing my eyes and going to sleep. That's the way it is. There are exceptions: J. D. Salinger; early Hemingway; Sherwood Anderson, when he was good, like, *Winesburg, Ohio* and a couple of other things. But they all got bad. We all do. I'm bad most of the time; but when I'm good, I'm damned good.

R.W. *At one point in your life, you stopped writing for ten years. Why was that?*

C.B. It started around 1945. I simply gave up. It wasn't because I thought I was a bad writer. I just thought there was no way of crashing through. I put writing down with a sense of disgust. Drinking and shacking with women became my art form. I didn't crash through there with any feeling of glory, but I got a lot of experience which later I could use—especially in short stories. But I wasn't gathering that experience to write it, because I had put the typewriter down.

I don't know. You start drinking; you meet a woman; she wants another bottle; you get into the drinking thing. Everything else vanishes.

R.W. *What brought it to an end?*

C.B. Nearly dying. I ended up in County General Hospital with blood roaring out of my mouth and my ass. I was supposed to die, and I didn't. Took lots of glucose and ten or twelve pints of blood. They pumped it straight into me without stop.

When I walked out of that place, I felt very strange. I felt much calmer than before. I felt—to use a trite term—easygoing. I walked along the sidewalk, and I looked at the sunshine and said, 'Hey, something has happened.' You know, I'd lost a lot of blood. Maybe there was some brain damage. That was my thought, because I had a really different feeling. I had this calm feeling. I talk so slowly now. I wasn't always this way. I was kind of hectic before; I was more going, doing, shooting my mouth off. When I came out of that hospital, I was strangely relaxed.

So I got hold of a typewriter, and I got a job driving a truck. I started drinking huge quantities of beer each night after work and typing out all these poems. (I told you that I didn't know what a poem is, but I was writing *something* in a poem form.) I hadn't written many before, two or three, but I sat down and was writing poems all of a sudden. So I was writing again and had all these poems on my hands. I started mailing them out, and it began all over. I was luckier this time, and I think my work had improved. Maybe the editors were readier, had moved into a different area of thinking. Probably all three things helped make it click. I went on writing.

That's how I met the millionairess. I didn't know what to do with these poems, so I went down a list of magazines and put my finger on one. I said, 'All right. Might as well insult this one. She's probably an old woman in this little Texas town. I'll make her unahppy.' She wasn't an old woman. She was a young one with lots of money. A beautiful one. We ended up married. I was married to a millionairess for two and a half years. I blew it, but I kept writing.

R.W. *What happened to the marriage?*

C.B. I didn't love her. A woman can only tolerate that so long unless

she's getting some other type of benefit out of it, either fame or money from you. She got nothing out of our marriage, neither fame nor money. I offered her nothing. Well, we went to bed together. I offered her that, but that's hardly enough to hold a marriage together unless you're a real expert. I wasn't at the time. I was just some guy dressed in clothes who was walking across the room, eating an egg and reading a paper. I was tied up with myself, with my writing. I didn't give her anything at all, so I had it coming. I don't blame her, but she didn't give me much either.

She was arty and turned on to artistic types. She painted badly and liked to go to art classes. She had a vocabulary and was always reading fancy books. Being rich, she was spoiled in that special way rich people are spoiled without knowing it. She had this air that the rich have. They have a superior air that they never quite let go of. I don't think that money makes much difference between people. It might in what they wear, where they live, what they eat, what they drive; but I don't think it makes *that* much difference between people. Yet, somehow, the rich have this separation value. When they have money and you don't, something unexplainable rises up between you. Now, if she'd given me half of her money so that I could have had half of her feeling, we might have made it. She didn't. She gave me a new car, and that was it; and she gave that to me *after* we split, not before.

R.W. *In a short story you made a sort of self-pitying remark that went something like this: 'Here I am, a poet known to Genet and Henry Miller, washing dishes.'*

C.B. Yes, that's self-pity. That's straight self-pity, but sometimes self-pity feels good. A little howl, when it has some humour mixed with it, is almost forgivable. Self-pity alone . . . We all fail at times. I didn't do so well there.

I didn't do so well as a dish washer, either. I got fired. They said, 'This man doesn't know how to wash dishes.' I was drunk. I didn't know how to wash dishes, and I ate all their roast beef. They had a big leg of roast beef back there. I'd been on a drunk, and I hadn't eaten

for a week. I kept slicing this goddamned leg. I ate about half of it. I failed as a dish washer, but I got a good feed.

R.W. *Another time, though, you said you enjoyed anonymity, that you liked the idea of people not knowing who you are. That seems like a contradiction.*

C.B. There's a difference between being known by another writer and being known by the crowd. A good workman—if we can call it that—like, a carpenter—wants to be known as a good carpenter by other carpenters. The crowd is something else; but to be known by another good writer . . . I don't find that detestable.

R.W. *Do the critics' opinions of your work ever bother you?*

C.B. When they say I'm very, very good, it doesn't affect me anymore than when they say I'm very, very bad. I feel good when they say nice things; I feel good when they say unnice things, especially when they say them with great vehemence. Critics usually go overboard one way or the other, and one excites me as much as the other.

I want reactions to my work, whether they be good or bad; but I like an ad-mixture. I don't want to be totally revered or looked upon as a holy man or a miracle worker. I want a certain amount of attack, because it makes it more human, more like where I've been living all my life. I've always been attacked in one fashion or another, and it's grown on me. A little rejection is good for the soul; but total attack, total rejection is utterly destructive. So I want a good balance: praise, attack, the whole stewpot full of everything.

Critics amuse me. I like them. They're nice to have around, but I don't know what their proper function is. Maybe to beat their wives.

R.W. *In Post Office there's an episode about the flack you got from the government because of your writing. Did they actually give you a lot of trouble?*

C.B. My God, yes. The whole scene underground: one dim light, the

handshake, sitting down at the end of a long table, two guys asking me little trap questions. I just told them the truth. Everything they asked, I told the truth. (It's only when you lie that you get your ass in the wringer. I guess the big boys have found that out now.) I thought, Is this America? Sure, I'll back it all the way as really happening. I wrote a short story about it, too.

R.W. *You've been published a lot in the underground press. Those newspapers, now, seem to have lost their original vigour. What happened to them?*

C.B. They've turned into a business, and the real revolutionaries were never there. The underground press was just lonely people who wanted to get around and talk to each other while putting out a newspaper. They went left wing and liberal, because it was the young and proper thing to do; but they weren't really interested in it. Those newspapers were kind of a lark. They were a sign to carry around, like wearing a certain type of clothing. I can't think of one underground newspaper that meant anything, shook anybody.

R.W. *You mentioned your problems with women. Didn't one of your girlfriends recently try to kill you?*

C.B. She found me on my way to another lady's house. I had already been there and gone and was coming back with two six-packs and a pint of whiskey. I was quite high at the time. Her car was parked out in front, so I said, 'Oh, jolly. I'll take her up and introduce her to the other one, and we'll all be friends and have drinks.' No chance. She rushed me. She got those bottles out and started smashing them all up and down the boulevard—including the pint of whiskey. She disappeared. I'm out sweeping the glass up, and I hear this sound. I looked up just in time. She's got her car up on the sidewalk, rushing it towards me. I leaped aside, and she was gone. She missed.

R.W. *Many of your stories read as if they're written off the top of your head. Do you write that way, or do you rewrite a great deal?*

C.B. I seldom revise or correct a story. In the old days, I used to just sit down and write it and leave it. I don't quite do that anymore. Lately I've started dripping out what I think are bad or unnecessary lines that take away from a story. I'll subtract maybe four or five lines, but I hardly ever add anything.

And I can't write except off a typewriter. The typewriter keeps it strict and confined. It keeps it right there. I've tried to write long-hand; it doesn't work. A pencil or a pen . . . it's too intellectual, too soft, too dull. No machine-gun sounds, you know. No action.

R.W. *Can you write and drink at the same time?*

C.B. It's hard to write prose when you're drinking, because prose is too much work. It doesn't work for me. It's too unromantic to write prose when you're drinking.

Poetry is something else. You have this feeling in mind that you want to lay down the line that startles. You get a bit dramatic when you're drunk, a bit corny. It feels good. The symphony music is on, and you're smoking a cigar. You lift the beer, and you're going to tap out these five or six or fifteen or thirty great lines. You start drinking and write poems all night. You find them on the floor in the morning. You take out all the bad lines, and you have poems. About sixty per cent of the lines are bad; but it seems like the remaining lines, when you drop them together, make a poem.

I don't always write drunk. I write sober, drunk, feeling good, feeling bad. There's no special way for me to be.

R.W. *Gore Vidal said once that, with only one or two exceptions, all American writers were drunkards. Was he right?*

C.B. Several people have said that. James Dickie said that the two things that go along with poetry are alcoholism and suicide. I know a lot of writers, and as far as I know they all drink but one. Most of them with any bit of talent are drunkards, now that I think about it. It's true.

Drinking is an emotional thing. It joggles you out of the standard-

ism of everyday life, out of everything being the same. It yanks you out of your body and your mind and throws you up against the wall. I have the feeling that drinking is a form of suicide where you're allowed to return to life and begin all over the next day. It's like killing yourself, and then you're reborn. I guess I've lived about ten or fifteen thousand lives now.

R.W. *Just a minute ago you mentioned classical music, and you make remarks about it in lots of your stories. Are you seriously interested in it?*

C.B. Not as a conscious thing. In other words, I have a radio—no records—and I turn that classical music station on and hope it brings me something that I can align with while I'm writing. I don't listen deliberately. Some people object to this in me. A couple of girl friends I've had have objected that I don't sit down and *listen*. I don't. I use it like the modern person uses a television set: they turn it on and walk around and kind of ignore it, but it's there. It's a fireplace full of coals that does something for them. Let's say it's something in the room with you that helps you, especially when you're living alone.

Say you work in a factory all day. When you come home, somehow that factory is still hanging to your bones: all the conversation, all the wasted hours. You try to recover from those eight, ten hours they've taken from you and use what juice you have left to do what you really want to do. First, I used to take a good, hot bath. Then I turned on the radio, got some classical music, lit a big cigar, opened a bottle of beer and sat down at the typewriter. All these became habitual, and often I couldn't write unless they were happening. I'm not so much that way now, but at the time I did need those props to escape the factory syndrome.

I like a certain amount of interruption when I'm writing. I do a lot of writing over at Linda's. She has two kids, and once in a while I like to have them run in. I like interruptions, as long as they're natural and aren't total and continuous. When I lived in a court, I put my typewriter right by the window. I'd be writing, and I'd see people walking by. Somehow that always worked into what I was doing at the moment. Children, people walking by and classical music are all the



same that way. Instead of a hindrance, they're an aid. That's why I like classical music. It's there, but it's not there. It doesn't engulf the work, but it's there.

*R.W. There's a certain Bukowski image that's been created: drunkard, lecher, bum. Do you ever catch yourself deliberately trying to live up to that image?*

C.B. Sometimes, especially, say, at poetry readings where I have a bottle of beer by my hand. Well, I don't need that beer, but I can feel the audience relating when I lift that beer and drink it. I laugh and make remarks. I don't know if I'm playing the game or they're playing the game. Anyway, I'm conscious of some image that I've built up or that they've built, and it's dangerous. You notice that I'm not drinking today. I fooled you. Blew the image.

If I drink two or three days in a row, I get pretty bad. Like I said, I've been in the hospital. My liver is not in great shape, and probably neither are several other organs. I heat up very much; my skin gets red-hot. There are a lot of danger signs. I like drinking, but it should be alternated; so I take a few days off now and then, instead of running a string of drinking days and nights together like I used to. I'm fifty-three now; I want to stay in the game a while longer, so I can piss a lot of people off. If I live to be eighty, I'll really piss them off.

*R.W. Are poetry readings as bad an experience as you make them out to be in a couple of your short stories?*

C.B. They are torture, but I've got to pay for the horses. I guess I read for horses instead of people.

*R.W. How much time do you spend at the track?*

C.B. Too much, too much, and now I've got my girl friend hooked. I never mention the track to her, you know. We'll be lying down, and morning will come around. Or we'll be writing. (She writes in one corner of the room, and I write in another. We do pretty well that

way.) We've been at the track all week, and I'll say, 'We'll get some goddamned writing done today at last.' All of a sudden, she says something about the race track. It could be just a word or two. I'll say, 'All right, let's go. You said it.' That always happens. If she'd keep her mouth shut, we'd never go. Between the two of us, we've got to solve that problem of one wanting to go and the other not.

Races are a drag-down. There are thirty minutes between races, which is a real murder of time; and if you lose your money on top of it, it's no good. But what happens is that you come home and think, 'I've got it now. I know what they are doing out there.' You get up a whole new system. When you go back, either they changed it a little or you don't follow your nose: you get off the system, and the horse comes in. Horses teach you whether you have character or not.

Sometimes we go to the thoroughbreds in the daytime, then we jump over and play the harness at night. That's eighteen races. When you do that, you've had it. You're so tired. It's no good. Between her and me, we've had a rough week; but track season closes in a few days, so my worries will be over. Race tracks are horrible places. If I had my way, I'd have them all burned down, destroyed. Don't ask me why I go, because I don't know; but I have gotten some material out of all that torture.

Horse racing does something to you. It's like drinking: it joggles you out of the ordinary concept of things. Like Hemingway used the bullfights, I use the race track. Of course, when you go to the track every day, that's no damned joggle: it's a definite bring-down.

R.W. *What do you think about the Supreme Court's recent decision on pornography?*

C.B. I agree with almost everybody else. It was silly to relegate it to the local area, the town or the city. I mean, a man makes a movie; he spends millions of dollars on it, and he doesn't know where to send it. They're going to love it in Hollywood and hate it in Pasadena. He'll have to sense out how each city is going to react. My idea on obscenity is to let everything go. Let everybody be as obscene as they wish, and it will dissipate. Those who want it will use it. It's hiding things, holding back that makes something so-called evil.

Obscenity is generally very boring. It's badly done. Look at the theatres that show porno films: they're all going broke now. That happened very quickly, didn't it? They lowered the price from \$5 to 49 cents, and nobody wants to see them even for that. I've never seen a good porno film. They're all so dull. These vast mounds of flesh moving around: here's the cock; the guy has three women. Ho-hum. God, all that *flesh*. You know, what's exciting is a woman in clothes, and the guy rips her skirt off. These people have no imagination. They don't know how to excite. Of course, if they did, they'd be artists instead of pornographers.

R.W. *I understand that Post Office might be sold to the movies. If it is, will you write the screenplay?*

C.B. I would tend to back away from it. I'd rather put any energy I have (I almost said 'left') into a piece of paper: beginning a new novel or finishing the one I'm at or starting a poem. I'm like any other guy who's doing what he wants to do in his own way.

It's such a whole new field that, unless I have total control, I don't want to enter it; and I'm not well enough known to get total control. Unless they gave me my own head, I wouldn't want to do it; and if they gave me my own head, *they* wouldn't want to do it. I don't want to fight all those people to get my thing across. Once again, the radar tells me there'd be too much trouble.

R.W. *What are you working on now?*

C.B. I'm putting a novel together. A book of short stories is coming out, and some of those are similar to chapters in the novel. So I'm pulling all these chapters out, patching it up and putting it back together. It's a good exercise. The novel is called *Factotum*. Factotum means a man of all trades, many jobs. It's about many of the jobs I've had. I took the glamorous chapters out, which is just as well. Now I can have the everyday humdrum thing of the alcoholic, low-class, as they call them, workers trying to make it. I got the idea, kind of, from *Down and Out in Paris and London*. I read that book and said, 'This guy thinks something has happened to him? Compared to me, he just

got scratched.' Not that it wasn't a good book, but it made me think that I might have something interesting to say along those same lines.

R.W. *One last question: Why do you put yourself down so much in your stories?*

C.B. It's partly a kind of joke. The rest is because I feel that I'm an ass a lot of the time. If I'm an ass, I should say so. If I don't, somebody else will. If I say it first, that disarms them.

You know, I'm *really* an ass when I'm about half smashed. Then I look for trouble. I've never grown up. I'm a cheap drunk. Get a few drinks in me, and I can whip the world . . . and I want to.

CHARLES BUKOWSKI

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## Life and Death in the Charity Ward

The ambulance was full but they found me a place on top and away we went. I had been vomiting blood from the mouth in large quantities and I was worried that I might vomit upon the people below me. We rode along listening to the siren. It sounded far off, it sounded as if the sound weren't coming from our ambulance. We were on the way to the county hospital, all of us. The poor. The charity cases. There was something different wrong with all of us and many of us would not be coming back. The one thing we had in common was that we were all poor and didn't have much of a chance. We were packed in there. I never realized that an ambulance could hold so many people.

'Good Lord, oh good Lord,' I heard the voice of a black woman