

# Visions

## Bukowski: Dirty Old Man As Poet

By John Fox,  
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"Let's get this goddamned  
reading over with," snarls pock-  
faced poet Charles Bukowski as  
he drains another glass of beer.  
He glances contemptuously at the  
crowd which has filled Baudelaire's  
to hear this self-styled  
"dirty old man" read his poems  
and do his nasty drunk routine.

Located on Santa Barbara's  
wino-infested lower State Street,  
Baudelaire's is the perfect setting  
for Bukowski, no stranger himself  
to the skid rows and flophouses of  
America.

*drunk of' bukowski drunk  
i hold onto the edge of the table  
with my belly dangling over my  
belt  
and i glare at the lampshade  
the smoke clearing  
over  
north Hollywood  
the boys put their muskets  
down*

*lift high their fish-green beer  
as i fall forward off the couch  
kiss rug hairs like cunt  
hairs  
close as i've been in a  
long time.*

*His jeweled face is flushed, his*

hair greasy and thinning. His  
hands tremble slightly and his  
mouth maintains a curious half  
smile. It seems faintly pleading.  
The dark tired eyes, just begin-  
ning to cloud over with beer, gaze  
out at the audience with vicious-  
ness and fear — like a stray dog  
that has been beaten too many  
times.

Spitefully Bukowski is getting  
drunk and he demands questions  
before the reading.

"Charles" (Bukowski winces)  
"Charles, what do you think of  
women with big noses?"

"Jesus Christ," he spitters, "I

have to sit here and try to answer  
your dumb shit questions. It's  
awful hard to be clever all the  
time. You don't realize the strain.  
Sammy Davis Jr. can do it. He's  
got gagwriters... what do I think  
about big nosed women? I'm not  
interested in their noses."

A murmur of polite laughter  
greets his response and Bukowski  
sighs with relief. That one was  
alright. They liked that one.  
Almost as an afterthought Buk-  
owski tells everyone to "fuck  
off."

Finally he is ready to read. He  
opens his brief case and pulls out  
a pair of socks and some white  
jockey shorts. Someone makes a  
crack about the underwear and  
Bukowski snaps, "People like you  
make me sick!"

He picks up some papers.  
"Let's get this reading going and  
fuck and suck and collect our  
money and get out."

He begins to read and suddenly  
amidst the confusion and anger  
and self loathing the brilliance of  
his poetry begins to burn  
through.

He finishes, and his eyes dart  
defensively out into the crowd in  
the short silence before the  
applause. He apologizes for the  
poem, "deadly serious death jive  
shit," he murmurs, and reaches  
for another glass of beer.

More poems; a furry animal  
that smells like dirty socks and  
goes "grop"; a beautiful flower  
that will bite off your face; an  
angry man smelling other men on  
his woman, pulling out a butcher  
knife and slicing off his testicles  
so he truly won't care any more.

He downs the beer faster with  
each new poem. The insults come  
spattering out with unconscious  
abandon.

"I can't hear you almost as well  
as you can't hear me."

"You disgusting creatures...  
you people make me sick... make  
me puke..."

"I failed again but I've got your  
money in my pocket."

*the poetry reading  
at high noon  
at a small college near the  
beach  
sober  
the sweat running down my  
arms  
a spot of sweat on the table  
i flatten it with my finger  
blood money blood money  
i'm tense lousie feel bad  
poor people i'm failing i'm  
failing*

*a woman gets up  
walks out  
slams the door*

*a dirty poem  
somebody told me not to read  
dirty poems  
here*

*it's too late  
my eyes can't see some lines  
i read it  
out—  
desperate trembling  
lousie*

*they can't hear my voice  
and i say,  
i quit, that's it, i'm  
finished*

*and later in my room  
there's a Scotch and beer:  
the blood of a coward.*

*this then  
will be my destiny:  
scrabbling for pennies in dark  
tiny halls  
reading poems i have long  
since become tired  
of.*

*and i used to think  
that men who drove buses or  
cleaned out latrines  
or murdered men in alleys were  
fools.*

He is almost finished. He is  
smashed and inarticulate. His  
poems come out broken and  
stodgy. He slobbers the beer that  
has put a safe distance between  
himself and his listeners. He  
fondles and licks the microphone  
(fears in the audience that he will  
be electrocuted). The poems he  
selects to read portray only his  
bitter side.

Bukowski has a tender side too.  
He can be amusing and sad. He  
can speak the language of the  
most depraved and quote the  
classics, summon breath taking  
images of nature and hear Liszt's  
Rhapsody #2 in the rainfall.

Married once, he has a young  
daughter he loves dearly. He  
spent 14 years as a disgruntled  
postal clerk, finally quitting five  
years ago. Besides living on skid  
row Bukowski spent much of his  
life as a professional gambler as  
many of his stories reflect.  
Though he has been writing for  
decades Bukowski was not recog-  
nized until eight or nine years ago  
with his column "Notes of a Dirty  
Old Man" in the now defunct LA  
underground paper Open City  
(now in the LA Star). Since then  
he has published about 20 books  
of poetry and prose and his



Photo by Bob Klinger