

Visions

Bukowski:
Dirty Old Man As Poet

By John Fox,
Katy Jacobson and Keith Witt
"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 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 ol' 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
Bukowski 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 falling I'm

falling

*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 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

foots.

He is almost finished. He is

smashed and inarticulate. His

poems come out broken and

stumpy. 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 deprived and quote the

classics, summon breath taking

images of nature and hear Liza'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