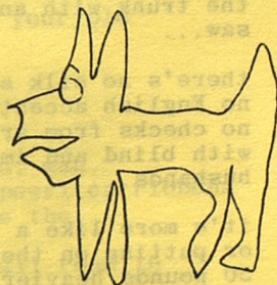




CHARLES BUKOWSKI'S

55 BEDS IN THE SAME DIRECTION



200 years

sitting over this white sheet
sober at 4 p.m. in the afternoon,
I received a letter from a poet this morning
telling me that I was one of the most
important writers of the last
200 years.

well, now, one needn't believe that
especially if one has felt as I have
this past month,
walking about,
thinking,
surely I am going crazy,
and then thinking,
I can't write
anymore.

then I think of the factories
the production lines
the warehouses
the timeclocks,
overtime and layoffs
and flirtations with the Mexican girls
on the soldering line...
everything was handled for one,
there was always something to do,
there was more than enough to do,
and if you didn't keep up,
if you weren't clever and swift and
obedient
you were out with the sparrows and
the bums.

writing's different, you're laying out in the
white air, you're hanging from the wire,
you're sitting in a tree and they're getting at
the trunk with an electric
saw...

there's no silk scarf about one's neck,
no English accents,
no checks from aristocratic ladies in Europe
with blind and impotent
husbands...

it's more like a hockey game
or putting on the gloves with a man
50 pounds heavier and ten years
younger, or
it's like steering a ship through fog

while a mad damsel sucks at your
left ball.

and all along you know you've gotten away
with some tricks, quite obvious stuff that
you've been given immense credit for.
that you either wrote off-hand or
hardly meant or hardly cared
for.

well, it helps to be
lucky.

yet, in reverse, you have sometimes done
it as if you always knew how it was to be
properly done, and you knew it was there
and you knew that you were there
and that you had done it better,
in a way,
than anybody in a long time
or
than anybody about, and
you allowed yourself to feel
good about it
for a very short
time.

they put the strain on you
with statements about 200 years,
and when only one says it, that's all
right
but when 2 or 3 or 4 say it --
that's when they tend to lay you open for the
kookoo bin.
they tell you to give up cigarettes and
booze, and then they tell you that you
have 25 more years of good production and
then
ten years to loll about in your old
age
to suck upon
carrots, rewards and
memories.

Patchen's gone, we need you, man.
we all need you for our typewriter ribbons
and that feeling just above the
bellybutton --
knowing you are in some small room in
West Pasadena killing
flies with a torn
flyswatter.

they can kill you,
the praisers can kill you,
the young girls can kill you,
the blue-eyed boys in English I
who send warm letters
hand-written
on lined paper
can kill you,
and they're right:
2 packs a day and the bottle
can kill you
too.

of course,
anything can kill you
and something eventually
will. all I can say is that
today
I have just inserted a new
typewriter ribbon
into this old machine
and I am pleased with the way it
works. that makes for more than just an
ordinary day, thank
you.

finish

it's all over, she says,
laying on top of me,
it's all over, I can feel that it's
all over.

it is 11 a.m. and the sun is coming
through the curtains and in the upper left
corner of the room
a red spider builds a new
web.

you've got all these women primed,
she says,
you laying around on their beds and
smoking cigarettes and talking about
books and music, Virginia Woolf and
Bach and all that
shit.

but they don't kiss like I do, she continues,
they kiss like this...

like that? I ask. umm, that's pretty good.

like this, this is how they kiss, she says.

ah, that's nice, I say.

how about a shave? she asks.

o.k. but if you cut my throat I promise you I will strangle you to death before I die.

(she gets the things and comes back, lathers me and begins...)

you oughta let the hair grow more on the sides... you got those two holes there where you got teeth missing and your face goes in there. open your mouth. I want to see your teeth.

no.

come on, open your mouth.

no.

ooo, I cut you! I cut your throat.

it's all right.

now I've cut your throat on the other side.

it's all right, I do it myself.

you'll never know another woman like me.

I suppose not.

(she puts the things away and comes back...)

I've picked every blackhead out of you, now you'll be ready for the next woman.

I better get out of here, I say,
I haven't done any work
today.

here, let me comb your
hair. going to take me to the harness
races tonight?

they don't run until
September.

o. well, let's have a baby then.
a little Charles. wouldn't that be sweet,
running about?

I suppose. listen, I'll be back tonight,
9:30 o.k.?

o.k. look, that red spider gets closer and
closer...

don't worry, if he's male you won't have any
trouble.

don't forget, she says, to clean your teeth with
dental floss or you're going to lose the rest
of them.

sure, I say,
9:30.

55 beds in the same direction

these brilliant midnights
gabardine snakes passing through
walls, sounds
broken by car crashes of drunks in
ten year old cars

you know it's soiled again and then
again

it's in these brilliant midnights
while fighting moths and tiny
mosquitoes,
your woman behind you
twisting in the blankets
thinking you no longer love her;
that's untrue, of course,
but the walls are familiar and

I've liked walls
I've praised walls:
give me a wall and I'll give you a way --
that's all I asked in
exchange. but I suppose I meant:
I'll give you my
way.

it's very difficult to compose a
sonnet while sleeping in a flophouse with
55 snoring men
in 55 beds all pointed in the same direction.

I'll tell you what I thought:
these men have lost both chance and
imagination.

you can tell as much about men in the
way they snore as in the way they
walk, but then
I was never much at sonnets.

but once I thought I'd find all great men on
skid row
I once thought I'd find great men down there
strong men who had discarded society,
instead I found men who society had fiddled
away.

they were dull
inept and
still
ambitious.

I found the bosses more
interesting and more alive than the
slaves.

and that was hardly romantic. one would like things
romantic.

55 beds pointed in the same
direction and
I couldn't sleep
my back hurt
and there was a steady feeling on my
forehead like a piece of
sheet metal.

it really wasn't very terrible but somehow
it was very impossible.

and I thought,
all these bodies and all these toes and all
these fingernails and all these hairs in
assholes and all this stink

immaculate and accepted mauling of
things,
can't we do something with it?

no chance, came the answer, they don't
want it.

then, looking all about
all those 55 beds pointed in the same
direction
I thought
all these men were babies once
all these men were cuddly and
pink (except the black ones and the yellow ones
and the red ones and the others).

they cried and they felt,
had a way.

now they've become
sophisticated
phlegmatic
unwanted.

I got
out.

I got between 4 walls
alone.

I gave myself a brilliant
midnight. other brilliant midnights
arrived. it wasn't that
difficult.

but if they had been there:
(those men) I would have stayed there with
them.

if I can save you the same years of error
let me:

the secret is in the walls
listening to a small radio
rolling cigarettes
drinking

coffee
beer
water
grape juice

a lamp burning near you
it comes along --
the names
the history
a flow a flow
the downward glance of psyche
the humming effect
the burning of monkeys

the brilliant midnight walls:
there's no stopping even as your head rolls
under the bed and the cat buries
its excreta.

well, now that Ezra has died...

well, now that Ezra has died
we are going to have a great many poems written
about Ezra and what he meant and who he
was and how it went
and how it still is with
Ezra gone.

well, I was shackled with this alcoholic woman
for 7 years
and I kept packing home the CANTOS through the
door, and she kept saying,
"For God's sake, you got POUND again? You know
you can't read him. Did you bring any
wine?"

she was right. I couldn't read the CANTOS.
but I usually brought the wine
and we drank the
wine.

I don't know how many years I packed those
CANTOS back and forth from the downtown public
library
but they were always available in the shelves of
the Literature and Philology section.

well, he died, and I finally went from wine to
beer and now he's died,
I suppose he was a great writer
it's just that I'm so lazy in my reading habits,
I detest any sort of immaculate strain,
but I still feel rather warm for him and Ernie
and Gertie and James J., all that gang
gripping to world war one
making the 20's and 30's available
in their special way; then there was world war 2,
Ezra backed a loser and got 13 years in with the
loonies, and now he's dead at 87 and his mistress is
alone.

well, this is just another Ezra Pound poem
except to say
I could never read or understand the CANTOS
but I'll bet I carried them around more than
almost anybody, and all the young boys
are trying to check them out at the library
tonight.

tarot

the world has a rose in its mouth
the world has a tongue in its mouth
the world has blood in its mouth
the world has me in its mouth
and I taste like
vanilla, apricots and
dogshit.
when I met Gregory Corso
he read the tarot cards for me
and some good cards were pulled,
then he said, "now, this last card is very
important; it will really be
you," and he had many rings on his fingers
and he wore a medallion
and a bright red shirt
and he was high on wine and pills
and the world had a rose in its mouth
the world had a tongue in its mouth
the world had blood in its mouth
and me in its mouth
and Gregory held the cards to me
and I pulled one and it said --
THE EMPEROR.
I liked Gregory very much, a
very fine sort.
and then he gave a tarot reading for Jon
Webb
and one for Louise Webb
and one for this professor
but they weren't as lucky
and we drank and talked the remainder of the
night and then they left
and I slept on Jon and Louise's couch
and the next day I met Corso
and we drank in a bar on skid row across
from the train station
as two bums had a fistfight in the center of
the bar
and the bartender was a 280 pound woman
with the word LOVE

tattooed above her right wrist
as the world spit out the rose
and one of the bums fell to the floor
losing the fight
and as the other kicked him in the ribs
I bought Gregory another
drink. I liked him very much, a very
fine sort.

Eleven

now I've been to the tracks for 32 years
and I've seen some strange things
but the other day
it's the first race
they're putting them into the gate
I'm 3 or 4 away from the betting window
I want to bet five win
when the announcer says, "The flag's up!"
I am about to say, "Eleven,"
and this arm comes up from below me with a five
in its hand and the voice says,
"Eleven," and I grab the arm by the wrist
and look down and here's some guy on his hands and
knees, he's crawled up under me and
I hold his wrist and tell him,
"just wait a god damned minute!"
and then I say, "Eleven,"
and I get my ticket just as the buzzer rings
shutting off the machines
and I go out to watch the race.
the Eleven runs up to fourth around the final curve
then falls back.
I lost my five dollars
and I saved him five,
but I wondered what could look so good about a
fifteen to one shot
reading up off of an eight to one morning line.
this man actually crawled on his knees,
his hands and knees and came up under me
with a loser.
I almost hit him
but I got my ticket
and I saw the cop running up to ask this man
what he was doing
and then I went out to see the Eleven come up to
4th., then fall
back. I still don't understand
it. it was a bad bet.

I think the next time I see that track cop
I'll ask him what he did
with that guy.
I've never seen him before.
I know they put the Eleven horse back in the barn.
the winner paid \$11.40, which is reasonable,
and the girls were wobbling and shaking and looking
for a winner, but I tell you
after 32 years at the track
this guy crawling on his hands and knees to bet
a loser
was one of the saddest acts I have ever
witnessed
as the girls wobbled and shook and the sky
was almost
blue.

no bra, no panties...

the lights are on, the lights are
off, I am sitting in an apt. on
S. Oxford Ave., I am 53 years old
and I do not answer the door and the
telephone co. says they can't give me a
telephone, well, there are many things I can't get
and now that I think of it I really don't want a
telephone because whenever it rings it is usually
somebody I don't want to see who wants to come over
and we end up drinking until 4 a.m.

but the other day I did let one
in, she had on a light green smock
no bra no panties...
looked like she'd been living with a jazz musician
who was on the shit and beat her 5 or 6 times a
week.
anyhow, she sifted about the room, ass wobbling,
standing in front of the blinds
letting me look at her cunt and her ass
and she said she knew
Bob Dylan, Ginsberg, knew Kerouac too once, even
met Mailer (a real shit), and Capote (a real shit) and
she knew McClure and some of the Beatles and even
Rod McK., and she knew Neal too once, and Ken, and she
knew Edward A. and this guy on the Rolling Stones, she'd
met Burroughs, Captain Kangaroo and x-mayor Yorty...

"what can I do for you?" I asked.

she stood in front of the blinds and said,
"do you have a shower?"

she went in and took a shower and I presume she washed away Karl Shapiro, Native Diver, Jesus Christ, the Stanley Steamer, Ezra Pound, Sugar Ray Robinson, Tom Jones, and Mickey Mouse...

she then sat in a chair across from me:
"you got real soul."

"yeh?"

15 minutes went by. 30 minutes. then she said,
"what the hell's wrong with you?"

"I don't know."

"are you a fag?"

"I don't think so."

then she got up, pulled this cape out of her purse made out of tabby cats, put it on, faced me:

"well, I'm going..."

"can I drive you somewhere?"

"you're too drunk..."

then she walked over to the couch, unzipped me and gave me 8 or 9 sucks...

"I'm going," she said.

"got any cigarettes?" I asked.

she threw half a pack, soft red cover, down near my genitals. by the time I lit up she was gone. somehow I did feel a sense of loss. she knew the big ones, had known. she had come to see me. it was like a god being honored before he died. i understood her viewpoint. I had deserved her. well, next time around with the next one. I finished that cigarette and then I lit another, and by the time I had finished that one I was thinking of something else.

a bit of light for the toad:

friend, I thought you understood that the parties were for her, not me.

I dislike parties, you see I am not too happy with the human race

I've been crowded in with them for years in roominghouses, jails, railroad track gangs, the L.A. Country General Hospital, the slaughterhouses and the factories and the warehouses,

I've seen plenty of the crowd...

but she's country, she likes people, she likes to dance and flirt and be happy, play a bit of the sexpot...

she finds all manners of interesting things in people that I find to be just simple state old shit or just a drag-down come-on...

but I lived with her and loved her, anyhow, I understood that there was a 20 year's difference between us on viewpoint and experience

so I made certain sacrifices

one of them being "the party" ...

and for her there always seemed a reason for a

party: New Year's or a housewarming or her first

book, so I handed her a list of names and I said,

"Here, you call them. They're your friends, not mine."

by that I meant that she would enjoy them, I wouldn't.

the list contained editors, professors and tenth-rate

writers who had pushed their way through my door.

and there are tenth-rate writers, toad, plenty of them

and they live in Los Angeles and in Hollywood and

all over the world, even in Long Beach, California.

the parties, the meetings are for her, I don't want

these I don't need these.

when the boy from your English class danced cheek

to cheek with her when nobody else was dancing

that was for her, not for me;

when she got kissed under the stairway by the nice

guy who had been good enough to drive the mimeo editor

and his wife all the way to the party from Frisco

that was for her, not for me;

when I sat there and she sculpted your head making

you look like a Greek god

that was for her (and you) not for me.

take Neeli. when he comes on with that Groucho Marx

shot that you can smell coming and you can smell

long after it has left

she sits there and giggles and laughs,

"O, he's so funny, he's truly comic, I like Neeli."

well, she likes to be entertained and Neeli

entertains her.

I like to be entertained too
but Neeli is not for
me.

these are parties where there are ten men to every
woman. the men either don't have any women or
have enough sense to leave their own
at home. these are parties where the human spirit
hardly emerges as something redeemable.
these are parties where if you called these people
"friends" you'd truly be considered
idiotic -- friends don't try to put the make on your
girlfriend even when she has a nature
that either consciously or unconsciously lures them
to do it.

you tell me that I demonstrate a need for such people;
I tell you that these parties are for her,
not me.

at the last one when the music started and the games
began I quietly took a keg of beer and walked out
into the backyard and sat under a tree and drank my
beer and let all those in there work upon
each other.

I have always been a loner, toad.
it's stuck deep down by the bellybutton,
it will never change.

that I'm not as good as I think,
as you charge,
that's possible,
and that I've been writing a lot of beery crap
lately,
that's possible.
perhaps I have slipped, people do
slip...

but, toad, don't put me down as wanting those
parties,
I may not be as good as Ernie like you claim,
but the parties are for her
not me --
let's get that straight and keep that
straight...
you like to talk the football lingo:

I'm sorry I grabbed at your face mask, Scibelli,
I thought it was your
soul.

p.s. -- o yes, meanwhile, to keep you up to date:
the lady and I no longer live

together. she has her parties
and I have
myself. I read her this poem and she got
mad. she said, "People are going to think
you no longer see me." o.k., people, I
still see her but it's one on
one. o.k., toad, and thanks for the postcard
from Paris.

demise

the son of a bitch
was one of those soft left wing guys
belly like butter who
lived in a big house, he
was a businessman
and he told
her:
"he'll be your
demise."

imagine anybody saying
that: "demise."

we drove in from the track,
she'd lost \$57 and she said:
"you'd better stop for something to
drink."

she wore an old army jacket
and when I came out with the bottle
she took the cap off
and took a straight swallow right down --
a longshoreman's suicide gulp
tilting her head back under dark glasses.

my god, I thought.

a nice country girl like that
who loves to dance.

her 4 mad sisters will never forgive me
and that soft left wing son of a bitch
with a belly like butter (in that big
house) was
right.

-- Charles Bukowski

Los Angeles CA