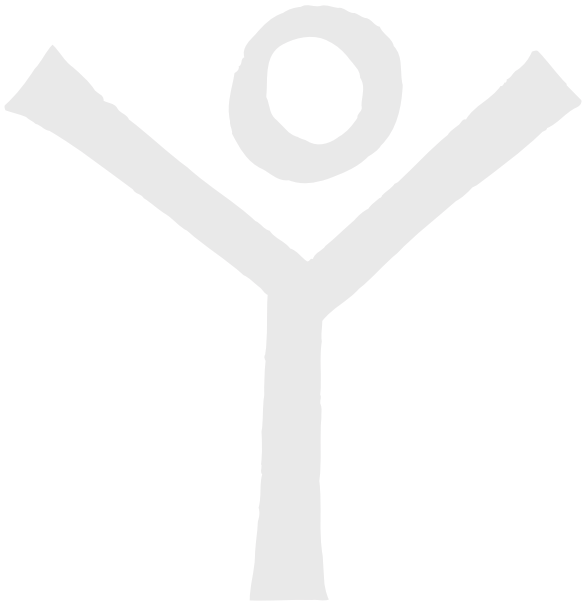




CITY LIGHTS  
BOOKS

THE **MATHEMATICS** OF THE  
**BREATH** AND THE **WAY**



This PDF file remains the property of  
CITY LIGHTS BOOKS, and may not be  
reproduced, copied or used in any way  
without prior written permission.

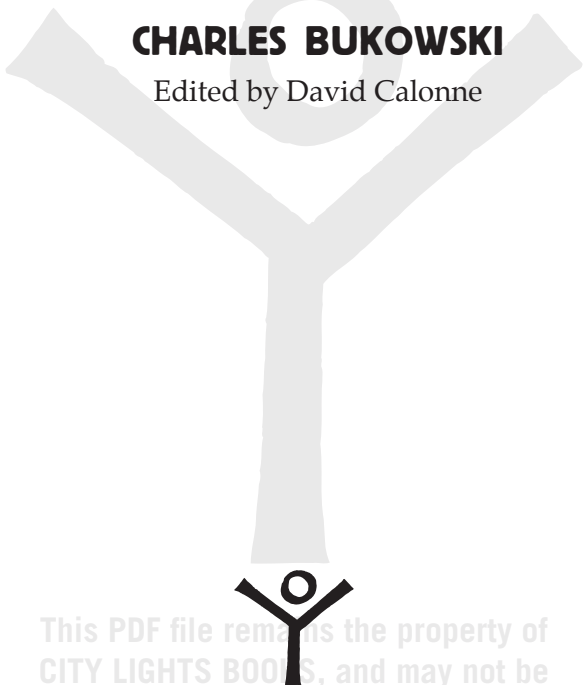
CITY LIGHTS

THE **MATHEMATICS** OF THE  
**BREATH** AND THE **WAY**

ON WRITERS AND WRITING

**CHARLES BUKOWSKI**

Edited by David Calonne



This PDF file remains the property of  
CITY LIGHTS BOOKS, and may not be  
reproduced, copied or used in any way  
without prior written permission.  
City Lights Books | San Francisco

Copyright © 2018 by The Estate of Charles Bukowski  
Introduction copyright © 2018 by David Calonne

All Rights Reserved

Cover illustration copyright © 1998 by Robert Crumb  
Cover and interior design by Linda Ronan

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Bukowski, Charles, author. | Calonne, David Stephen, 1953– editor, writer of introduction.

Title: The mathematics of the breath and the way : on writers and writing / Charles Bukowski ; edited by David Calonne.

Other titles: Writers and writing

Description: San Francisco : City Lights Books, [2018] | “The Mathematics of the Breath and the Way: On Writers and Writing presents a variety of Bukowski’s introductions and essays on authors, explorations of his poetics, and other samples of the ways he continually incorporates writerly themes in his fiction” — Introduction. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018000977 (print) | LCCN 2018009809 (ebook) | ISBN 9780872867826 | ISBN 9780872867598

Subjects: LCSH: Authorship.

Classification: LCC PS3552.U4 (ebook) | LCC PS3552.U4 A6 2018 (print) | DDC

814/.54—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018000977>

This PDF file remains the property of  
CITY LIGHTS BOOKS, and may not be

City Lights Books are published at the City Lights Bookstore  
261 Columbus Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94133  
[www.citylights.com](http://www.citylights.com)

# CONTENTS

## INTRODUCTION

Charles Bukowski on Writers and Writing 11

## MANIFESTO

Upon the Mathematics of the Breath and the Way 25

## TALES

A Dollar for Carl Larsen 35

Hell Yes, the Hydrogen Bomb 41

Dialogue: Dead Man on the Fence 47

Autographical Statement 51

Bukowski Meets a Merry Drunk 53

Notes of a Dirty Old Man  
("Can't you keep those motherfuckers quiet?") 57

Bukowski's Gossip Column 61

More Notes of a Dirty Old Man  
("You may not believe it") 65

More Notes of a Dirty Old Man  
("I was put in touch with them") 69

More Notes of a Dirty Old Man  
("I swung three deep out of Vacantsville") 73

Notes of a Dirty Old Man  
("Tony Kinnard was a great poet of the '50s") 77

Notes of a Dirty Old Man  
("They'd been married 32 years") 81

Notes of a Dirty Old Man ("We walked in") 88

Notes of a Dirty Old Man  
("I'm not in the mood for an immortal column today") 93

- Notes of a Dirty Old Man  
("I had given up on women") **100**
- Guggenheim Application:  
Narrative Account of Career **108**
- Notes of a Dirty Old Man ("‘Harry,’ said Doug") **110**
- Notes of a Dirty Old Man  
("I was too early at the airport") **116**
- Notes of a Dirty Old Man  
("They were drunk and driving along the coast") **125**
- Notes of a Dirty Old Man  
("The Great Poet had finished his reading") **129**
- Notes of a Dirty Old Man ("Hello Mom") **135**
- Notes of a Dirty Old Man ("Lydia got out of bed") **140**
- Notes of a Dirty Old Man  
("I left L.A. International with a tremendous  
hangover") **147**
- Politics and Love **153**
- Dildo Man **162**

## **INTRODUCTIONS AND CRITICISM**

- Editors (and others) Write **167**
- Little Magazines in America: Conclusion of  
Symposium **168**
- Introduction to John William Corrington,  
*Mr. Clean and Other Poems* **172**
- The Corybant of Wit: Review of Irving Layton,  
*The Laughing Rooster* **173**
- Introduction to Jory Sherman, *My Face in Wax* **181**
- Lightning in a Dry Summer: Review of John William  
Corrington, *The Anatomy of Love and Other Poems* **186**
- Another Burial of a Once Talent: Review of John William  
Corrington's *Lines to the South and Other Poems* **190**

- Foreword to Steve Richmond, *Hitler Painted Roses* 198
- Essay on Nothing for Your Mother Nothingness 202
- Who's Big in the "Littles" 204
- The Deliberate Mashing of the Sun (d.a. levy) 206
- Charles Bukowski on Willie: Introduction to *The Cockroach Hotel* by Willie [William Hageman] 209
- Introduction to Doug Blazek's *Skull Juices* 210
- The Impotence of Being Ernest: Review of Hemingway's *Islands in the Stream* 219
- An Introduction to These Poems: Al Masarik, *Invitation to a Dying* 223
- Foreword: Steve Richmond, *Earth Rose* 226
- A Note on These Poems: Appreciation to Al Purdy's *At Marsport Drugstore* 228
- About "Aftermath" 229
- Preface: *The Bukowski/Purdy Letters 1964–1974* 232
- Introduction to *Horsemeat* 233
- Foreword: Douglas Goodwin, *Half Memory of a Distant Life* 239
- Foreword: Macdonald Carey, *Beyond That Further Hill* 240
- Further Musings 241

## INTERVIEWS

*Stonecloud* Interview 247

Confessions of a Badass Poet 256

Craft Interview for *New York Quarterly* 274

Gin-Soaked Boy 282

*Lizard's Eyelid* Interview 289

This PDF file remains the property of  
CITY LIGHTS BOOKS and may not be  
reproduced, copied or used in any way  
without prior written permission.

# CITY LIGHTS BOOKS

## INTRODUCTION



This illustration is the property of  
CITY LIGHTS BOOKS and may not be  
reproduced, copied or used in any way  
without prior written permission.

**"Now EAT YOUR SPINACH..."**



# Charles Bukowski on Writers and Writing

David Stephen Calonne

Although many modern authors have made writing itself a central theme in their works—"metafiction" is a ubiquitous example—Charles Bukowski was particularly obsessive in defining himself constantly as a writer in his texts while simultaneously questioning what this might signify: he exists in a purely literary universe that spins out of and around the idea of writing. Experience exists in order to be turned into poetry and prose, but he also is constantly mocking himself and the pretensions of the "artist." In *The Captain Is Out to Lunch and the Sailors Have Taken Over the Ship*, he tells us: "Old Writer puts on sweater, sits down, leers into computer screen and writes about life. How holy can we get?"—a scene masterfully portrayed by R. Crumb.<sup>1</sup> *The Mathematics of the Breath and the Way: On Writers and Writing* presents a variety of Bukowski's introductions and essays on authors, explorations of his poetics, and other samples of the ways he continually incorporates writerly themes in his fiction.

The earliest work included here—Bukowski's 1957 story "A Dollar for Carl Larsen"—is an example of his experimentation with combining fiction and illustration: he submitted several "graphic fictions" to Whit Burnett's celebrated *Story* magazine. While it ostensibly treats an encounter with a "big blonde" at the racetrack, the tale begins and ends with mysterious literary, extra-textual allusions. The epigraph reads: "dedicated to Carl Larsen, owed to Carl Larsen, paid to Carl Larsen," and at the close we are told: "I thought about Carl Larsen down at the beach rubbing the sand from between his toes and drinking stale beer with Curtis Zahn and J.B. May. I thought about the dollar I owed Larsen. I thought maybe I'd better pay it. He might tell J.B." Larsen was actually the publisher of *Existaria*, a little magazine in Hermosa Beach, Southern California,

hence the “sand from between his toes”; three Bukowski poems appeared in the September/October 1957 issue. Later Larsen would launch Seven Poets Press, which published Bukowski’s *Longshot Pomes for Broke Players* (1961).<sup>2</sup> Readers are left to speculate that Bukowski may have owed money to Larsen, perhaps for a subscription to *Existaria*. In any case, it is noteworthy that the intertextuality here to the little magazines is brought directly into the narrative, indicating Bukowski’s later practice of constantly foregrounding the fact that for him, reality exists in order to be turned into literature. Another person mentioned—Curtis Zahn (1912–1990)—had been incarcerated for a year as a conscientious objector against WWII and was a journalist and playwright; John Boyer May (1904–1981) was the editor of *Trace* magazine—which began as a little magazine directory in 1951 in Los Angeles—until 1970.<sup>3</sup> Bukowski submitted several letters/brief essays to *Trace*, which was extremely important for him during his early career because this directory provided outlets to which he would send his poetry.

Bukowski also produced a number of literary “manifestoes,” and “Upon the Mathematics of the Breath and the Way”—first published in Tony Quagliano’s *Small Press Review* in 1973—is one the strongest essays in this genre, in which Bukowski explores the connections between daily life and the transformation of experience into poetry.<sup>4</sup> And in his several introductions to fellow poets’ works, he often takes the opportunity not only to praise the author, but also to adumbrate further aspects of his own poetics. For example, in his introduction to Doug Blazek’s *Skull Juices*, Bukowski declares:

It is not easy to realize that you are dying in your twenties. It is much easier not to know that you are dying in your twenties as is the case with most young men, almost all young men, their faces already oaken slabs, shined puke. They only imagine that death might happen in some jungle war of nobody’s business. Blazek can see death and life in a shabby piece of curling wallpaper, in a roach

wandering through the beer cans of a tired and sad and rented kitchen. Blazek, although he would be the last to realize it and is not conscious of it at all, is one of the leading, most mangling, most lovely (yes, I said, "lovely")! Sledges of the new way—The Poetic Revolution. It is difficult to say exactly when the Revolution began, but roughly I'd judge about 1955, which is more than ten years, and the effect of it has reached into and over the sacred ivy walls and even out into the streets of Man. Poetry has turned from a diffuse and careful voice of formula and studied ineffectiveness to a voice of clarity and burnt toast and spilled olives and me and you and the spider in the corner. By this, I mean the most living poetry; there will always be the other kind.

In announcing a new "Poetic Revolution," which he dates as beginning in the mid-Fifties—interestingly, about the time Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* appeared—Bukowski is also describing the so-called "Meat School" of poetry which began to loosely coalesce around him with the appearance of Blazek's *Ole* magazine and with which poets William Wantling and Steve Richmond were associated. In *Ole Anthology* (1967), Blazek declares the rationale for the new poetry:

But remember, there are still things to celebrate & the best celebration is expressed in song & the logical extension of song is a shout. So, don't be timid. If you still care, if that goddamned sun strikes you in the eye right & you feel jubilant, THEN SHOUT! Put your teeth into those words. Lift some weights. Get that blood to cooking. Sneak in a peek between your crotch & see if you still have hair there. If there *is* hair, *say* there is hair. Don't hide the balls either. If there are balls then include the balls & make them look like balls, know they are balls. POETRY WITH BALLS! POETRY THAT IS

DANGEROUS! MEAT POETRY! Juice to make the ears jump . . . SOMETHING! as Bukowski says.<sup>5</sup>

Although Bukowski himself never acknowledged being either a founder or member of such a movement, it is clear that both he and the poets he inspired attempted to loosely formulate an aesthetic position which distinguished them from the other “schools” of American poetry: Confessional, Black Mountain, Deep Image, New York, Objectivist, Imagist.

Another distinguishing feature of Bukowski’s autobiographical prose/fiction is its structure as an extended *roman à clef*. Fellow writers continually appear under different names and he settles scores with them—as D.H. Lawrence often did in his satirical portraits of friends and acquaintances—while also often portraying himself in the worst possible light. For example, “Tony Kinnard” is Kenneth Patchen, and although the story carried a disclaimer—“Note: There is no intent to hurt or malign living persons with this story. I am sincere when I say this. There is enough hurt now. I doubt that anything happened as happened in this story. The author was only caught in the inventiveness of his own mind. If this is a sin, then all creators of all times have sinned . . . c.b.”—Kenneth Rexroth was reportedly infuriated by the tale, vowing that he would cause physical injury to Bukowski were they ever to meet.<sup>6</sup> Bukowski’s relationship with another poet—William Wantling, here named “Jim”—forms the background of the story involving the woman “Helen,” actually Ruth Wantling, the poet’s widow. Bukowski picks Helen up at the airport and then spends several odd days and nights in boorish emotional combat with her. Again, Bukowski describes his own boorish behavior as he attempts to get Helen into bed. Yet another example is the story about “June” and “Clyde,” editors of the magazine *Dustbird*—clearly Jon and Louise “Gypsy Lou” Webb, editors of *The Outsider* and publishers of two Bukowski poetry collections, *It Catches My Heart in Its Hands* (1963) and *Crucifix in a Deathhand* (1965).<sup>7</sup> Here again he makes a pass at Gypsy Lou, another widow of a

close friend. In other stories not included in this volume, John Bryan—editor of *Open City*—is pilloried, as is Harold Norse. Clearly, Bukowski lavishly criticizes others, but he also holds himself up for ridicule. Like Henry Miller, he enjoys magnifying his faults and madness, delighting in caricatures of sins of all kinds.

During the early 1970s, Bukowski's fame increased following the premiere of Taylor Hackford's documentary on public television and his readings in San Francisco. Linda King figures in the story describing his reading at City Lights: here literary figures again proliferate as we find allusions to Ginsberg, McClure, and Ferlinghetti. Furthermore, a story dealing with the early days of his relationship with Linda King—some of which reappears in Bukowski's novel *Women* (1977)—is entirely composed and shaped within a literary framework. The tale begins with an allusion to W. Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge* and to the composition of Bukowski's first novel, *Post Office*; he then meets Linda at a poetry reading. King has read Bukowski's writings about women and critiqued them; they write letters to each other; he writes a poem about her; and finally writes the story itself. In fact, several of the most important women in Bukowski's life were connected to him through his writing. Barbara Frye was editor of *Harlequin*, where his early work was published; Frances Smith was herself a poet who became curious about him after reading his work; Linda Lee Beighle also knew of Bukowski through his writings and met him for the first time at a poetry reading.

After quitting his job at the post office, Bukowski began to earn his living by giving poetry readings, as well as from his royalties, book sales, and writing for periodicals. His account describing two readings at university campuses, which appeared in *Candid Press*, December 20, 1970, opens with a bravura non-stop paragraph containing not a single period: "I swung three deep out of Vacantsville, like bursting out of a herd of cow, and next thing I knew we had set down, the bird burst its stupid stewardesses, and I was the last man out, to meet a teacher-student in a shag of yellow and he said, you, Bukowski, and there was something

about his car needing oil . . ." and the energetic sentence continues unimpeded on its way. Several of our selections depict him in a typical scenario: arriving on a college or university campus, drinking, giving his reading, and ending up in bed with a usually admiring female. Again the role of "writer" is both celebrated and lampooned as he exaggerates, jokes, and gives comical answers to ponderous questions: "I mean, I write poems, stories, novels. The poems are basically true, the rest is truth mixed with fiction. Do you know what fiction is? . . . Fiction is an improvement on life." The poetry reading becomes the scene of raucous insults and the post-reading party provides opportunities for the lofty poetic impulse to be brought back down to one of its purposes: the song, like a bird's, to attract a female.

Bukowski the journalist and book reviewer is also represented in these selections. In one of his earliest columns for the *Los Angeles Free Press*, on March 17, 1967—"Bukowski Meets a Merry Drunk"—the narrator reveals at the close that his "little talk" with the "merry drunk" might appear in the *LAFP*.<sup>8</sup> In his essay concerning the Rolling Stones, we can see Bukowski the journalist at work. He also reviewed a Rolling Stones concert in "Jaggernaut," an essay published in *Creem*: here he narrates the same event but takes a different approach, dramatizing the experience from a fresh angle.<sup>9</sup> This is of course his method as an autobiographical writer: he constantly tells and retells his life history from a variety of viewpoints throughout his prose and poetry. Bukowski describes his adventures writing for erotic magazines, describing a trip to an adult bookstore where he is nonplussed by the sophomoric level of the content of these productions, while in "Politics and Love," he depicts a hapless journalist sent to interview a violent South American dictator.

Ernest Hemingway returns like a leitmotif throughout Bukowski's work. In his "Introduction" to *Horsemeat*, Bukowski points out that "Hemingway liked the bullfights, right? He saw the life-death factors out there. He saw men reacting to these factors with style—or the other way. Dostoevsky needed the roulette wheel even though it always

took his meager royalties and he ended up subsisting on milk." This theme returns in a seminal essay "Upon the Mathematics of the Breath and the Way," a central document of Bukowski's poetics in which he speaks of the centrality of the struggle of the horserace as metaphor for the act of creation. In the preface to one of his early plays, William Saroyan—an influence on Bukowski and an author to whom he frequently alludes—noted that the writer "must put his inner force, and the inner force of all living and all energy into the contest with non-existence. He simply must do so."<sup>10</sup> For Bukowski, Saroyan's "contest with non-existence" is the horserace, which confronts him with the contingency of chance and luck in their confrontation with free will, determinism, and the mystery of time. In his review of Hemingway's posthumously published *Islands in the Stream* (1970), Bukowski asserts: "This book does not make it. I wanted this book to make it. I have been pulling for Hemingway to hit one out of the lot for a long time now. I wanted another novel like *The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell to Arms*, or *To Have and Have Not*. I've been waiting a long time. . . ."<sup>11</sup> Bukowski admired the later section *Islands in the Stream*, which he calls "the best part of the book"—the section chasing the German submarine—and presciently remarks that "there's a movie in this part, and a good one": the novel was indeed made into a film starring George C. Scott in 1977, seven years after his review appeared. Hemingway was a wounded man whose work charts a continual drama of revealing and concealing his own vulnerability, a clear pattern in Bukowski as well.<sup>12</sup>

Bukowski also produced a number of essays, reviews, and introductions to the work of other writers. As we have seen above, he often used his introductions as places to espouse his own poetics. For example, in his "Introduction" to Jory Sherman's *My Face in Wax*, Bukowski writes: "When I run my hand across a page of poetry, I do not want oil or onionskin. I do not want slick bullshit; I want my hand to come away with blood on it. And goddamn you if you are otherwise." One of Bukowski's finest essays on poetry is his introduction to Steve Richmond's *Hitler Painted Roses*.

Richmond earned a law degree from UCLA, worked in his father's lucrative real estate business in Santa Monica, became friends with Jim Morrison, and published Bukowski in his magazine *Earth Rose*. Here again, Bukowski declares: "There is just one man thrown upon the earth, belly-naked, and seeing with his eye. Yes, I said 'eye.' Most of us are born poets. It is only when our elders get to us and begin to teach us what they teach us that the poet dies."<sup>13</sup> Bukowski also composed two essays celebrating d.a. levy, a central poet of the mimeograph revolution who committed suicide. levy's 7 Flowers Press in Cleveland had published Bukowski's *The Genius of the Crowd* (1966), and when levy was indicted for "obscenity," Bukowski responded with two essays registering strong support of his bravery.<sup>14</sup> Bukowski also admired Canadian poets Irving Layton and Al Purdy as well as the work of actor Macdonald Carey, for whose book *Beyond That Further Hill* he contributed a "Foreword." Bukowski's preface to *The Cockroach Hotel* by "Willie" requires a brief explanation: "Willie" is William Hageman, with whom Bukowski corresponded and who appears in Bukowski's short story "Beer and Poets and Talk."

Bukowski was consistent through the years in his list of favorite writers: Hemingway, Hamsun, Céline, and the early work of William Saroyan. Saroyan appears in "Hell Yes, the Hydrogen Bomb"—first published in *Quixote* in 1958—along with a fugitive allusion to the Czech writer Karel Čapek (1890–1938). As we see in his review of *Islands in the Stream*, and in scattered comments throughout the essays and stories presented here, he objected to Hemingway's lack of humor. Bukowski was also heavily influenced by the Russians Dostoevsky, Turgenev, and Gorky, as well as by Knut Hamsun's *Hunger*, in which the protagonist wanders the streets of Kristiania on the verge of starvation. The novel opens: "It was in those days when I wandered about hungry in Kristiania, that strange city which no one leaves before it has set its mark upon him." Bukowski's many poems about his hellish encounters with landladies also find an analogue in Hamsun as we learn in *Hunger* that our starving writer "stole quietly down the stairs to



avoid attracting the attention of my landlady; my rent had been due a few days ago and I had nothing to pay her with anymore."<sup>15</sup> *Hunger* became a central text for Bukowski, who himself recounts eating candy bars in a floorless tarpaper shack in Atlanta and writing his stories on the edges of newspapers. In his essay "About Aftermath," we see how Bukowski recounted his early years of starving and writing. William Saroyan's famous short story "The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze" and Arturo Bandini in John Fante's *Ask the Dust* continue this line of sensitive, impoverished writers who provided models for the ways Bukowski would portray himself. Starving leaves no room for self-delusion: one encounters the bedrock self which engenders a bedrock literary style.

In the interviews we also learn about Bukowski's writing rituals: symphony music on the radio, a bottle of wine and cigarettes nearby. In his interview with Chris Hodenfield, he reveals how much of the screenplay of *Barfly* was indebted to his times in that famous bar in Philadelphia where "We had a roaring time. And we'd be sitting there, eight guys. And suddenly somebody would make a statement, a sentence. And it would glue everything we were doing together. It would fit the outside world in—just a flick of a thing, then we'd smile and go back to our drinking. Say nothing. It was an honorable place, with a high sense of honor, and it was intelligent. Strangely intelligent. Those minds were quick. But given up on life. They weren't in it, but they knew something. I got a screenplay out of it and never thought I would, sitting there." Bukowski often affirmed that he did not want to be taken as a guru, and in his *Lizard's Eyelid* interview, he declares: "I have no message to the world. I am not wise enough to lead, yet I am wise enough not to follow." Bukowski also describes his life during the early seventies when he began work on his second novel:

It's called *Factotum*, and it's about my ten years on the bum. I read *Down and Out in Paris and London* by George Orwell, and it's a pretty good book, but

I said "This guy hasn't been through anything—I can play the piano better than that, as far as experience goes." He had some rough trips but he didn't have as many as I did. So, it'll be an interesting book, I think. We'll see. So I've been making it on my writing the last three years, since I quit the Post Office. It's all right, I can't complain. Little checks come in, royalties . . . I'm a professional writer, man, get up at noon, get up at six, get up at three, hell, my life's my own. But that can get rough too, you know, you have to face yourself, it's all sitting on you. But it's lively.

Thus we can see how throughout his work, Bukowski's first love perhaps was neither women nor alcohol, but rather writing. From his very first short story, "Aftermath of a Lengthy Rejection Slip," to his final poems, stories, and essays, he returns obsessively to the primal question: "Old Writer puts on sweater, sits down, leers into computer screen and writes about life. How holy can we get?"

This PDF file remains the property of  
CITY LIGHTS BOOKS, and may not be  
reproduced, copied or used in any way  
without prior written permission.

# CITY LIGHTS BOOKS

## MANIFESTO



## Upon the Mathematics of the Breath and the Way

I was going to begin this with a little rundown on the female but since the smoke on the local battlefield has cleared a bit I will relent, but there are 50,000 men in this nation who must sleep on their bellies for fear of losing their parts to women with wild-glazed eyes and knives. Brothers and sisters, I am 52 and there is a trail of females behind me, enough for five men's lives. Some of the ladies have claimed that I have betrayed them for drink; well, I'd like to see any man stick his pecker into a fifth of whiskey. Of course, you can get your tongue in there but the bottle doesn't respond. Well, haha among the trumpets, let's get back to the word.

The word. I'm on my way to the track, opening day at Hollywood Park, but I'll tell you about the word. To get the word down proper, that takes courage, seeing the form, living the life, and getting it into the line. Hemingway takes his critical blows now from people who can't write. There are hundreds of thousands of people who *think* they can write. They are the critics, the bellyachers and the mockers. To point to a good writer and call him a hunk of shit helps satisfy their loss as creators, and the better a man gets the more he is envied and, in turn, hated. You ought to hear them razz and demean Pincay and Shoemaker, two of the greatest jocks ever to steer a horse. There's a little man outside our local tracks who sells newspapers and he says, "Get your paper, get your info on Shoemaker the Faker." Here he is calling a man who has ridden more winners than any other jock alive (and he's still riding and riding well) and here's this newspaper guy selling papers for a dime and calling the Shoe a fraud. The Shoe is a millionaire, not that that's important, but he did get it with his talent and he could buy this guy's newspapers, all of them, for the rest of this guy's life and into a half-dozen eternities. Hemingway, too, gets the sneers from the newspaper boys and girls

of writing. They didn't like his exit. I thought his exit was quite fine. He created his own mercy killing. And he created some writing. Some of it depended too much on style but it was a style he broke through with; a style that ruined thousands of writers who attempted to use any portion of it. Once a style is evolved it is thought of as a simple thing, but style not only evolves through a method, it evolves through feeling, it is like laying a brush to canvas in a certain way and if you're not living along the path of power and flow, style vanishes. Hemingway's style did tend to vanish toward the end, progressively, but that's because he let down his guard and let people do things to him. But he gave us more than plenty. There is a minor poet I know who came over the other night. He is a learned man, and clever, he lets the ladies support him so you know he's good at something. He is a very powerful figure of a man growing soft around the edges, looks quite literary and carries these black notebooks around with him and he reads to you from them. This boy told me the other night, "Bukowski, I can write like you but you can't write like me." I didn't answer him because he needs his self-glory, but really, he only *thinks* he can write like me. Genius could be the ability to say a profound thing in a simple way, or even to say a simple thing in a simpler way. Oh, by the way, if you want to get one angle on a minor writer, it is one who throws a party or gets one thrown for him when his book comes out.

Hemingway studied the bullfights for form and meaning and courage and failure and the way. I go to boxing matches and attend horse races for the same reason. There is a feeling at the wrists and the shoulders and the temples. There is a manner of watching and recording that grows into the line and the form and the act and the fact and the flower, and the dog walking and the dirty panties under the bed, and the sound of the typewriter as you're sitting there, that's the big sound, the biggest sound in the world, when you're getting it down in your way, the right way, and no beautiful woman counts before it and nothing that you could paint or sculpt counts before it; it is the final art, this writing down of the word, and the reason for valor

is all there; it is the finest gamble ever arranged and not many win.

Somebody asked me, "Bukowski, if you taught a course in writing what would you ask them to do?" I answered, "I'd send them all to the racetrack and force them to bet \$5 on each race." This ass thought I was joking. The human race is very good at treachery and cheating and modifying a position. What people who want to be writers need is to be put in an area that they cannot maneuver out of by weak and dirty play. This is why groups of people at parties are so disgusting: all their envy and smallness and trickery surfaces. If you want to find out who your friends are you can do two things: invite them to a party or go to jail. You will soon find that you don't have any friends.

If you think I am wandering here, hold your tits or your balls or hold somebody else's. Everything fits here.

And since I must presume (I haven't seen any of it) that I am being honored and criticized in this issue I should say something about the little magazines, although I might have said some of it elsewhere?—at least over a row of beer bottles. Little magazines are useless perpetuators of useless talent. Back in the '20s and '30s there was not an abundance of littles. A little magazine was an event, not a calamity. One could trace the names from the littles and up through literary history; I mean, they began there and they went *up*, they became. They became books, novels, things. Now most little magazine people begin little and remain little. There are always exceptions. For instance, I remember first reading Truman Capote in a little named *Decade*, and I thought here is a man with some briskness, style and fairly original energy. But basically, like it or not, the large slick magazines print a much higher level of work than the littles—and most especially in *prose*. Every jackass in America pumps out countless and ineffectual poems. And a large number of them are published in the littles. Tra la la, another edition. Give us a grant, see what we are doing! I receive countless little magazines through the mail, unsolicited, un-asked-for. I flip through them. Arid vast nothingness. I think that the miracle of our times is that so many people can write

down so many words that mean absolutely nothing, but they can do it, and they do it continually and relentlessly. I put out 3 issues of a little, *Laugh Literary and Man the Humping Guns*. The material received was so totally inept that the other editor and myself were forced to write most of the poems. He'd write the first half of one poem, then I'd finish it. Then I'd go the first half of another and he'd finish it. Then we'd sit around and get to the names: "Let's see, whatta we gonna call this cocksucker?"

And with the discovery of the mimeo machine everybody became an editor, all with great flair, very little expense and no results at all. *Ole* was an early exception and I might grant you one or two other exceptions if you corner me with the facts. As per the better printed (non-mimeo) mags one must grant *The Wormwood Review* (one-half hundred issues now) as the outstanding work of our time in that area. Quietly and without weeping or ranting or bitching or quitting or pausing, or without writing braggadocio letters (as most do) about being arrested for driving drunk on a bicycle in Pacific Palisades or corn-holing one of the National Endowment for the Arts editors in a Portland hotel room, Malone has simply gone on and on and compiled an exact and lively talent, issue after issue after issue. Malone lets his issues speak for themselves and remains invisible. You won't find him beating on your door one night with a huge jug of cheap port wine saying, "Hey, I'm Marvin Malone, I printed your poem *Catshit in a Bird's Nest* in my last issue. I think I'm gonna kick me some ass. Ya got anything for me to fuck around here?"

A vast grinding lonely hearts club of no-talents, that's what the littles have evolved to, with the editors a worse breed than the writers. If you are a writer seriously interested in creating art instead of foolishness, then there are, at any moment, a few littles to submit to, where the editing is professional instead of personal. I haven't read the mag that this piece is submitted to but I would suggest, along with *Wormwood*, as decent arenas: *The New York Quarterly*, *Event*, *Second Aeon*, *Joe DiMaggio*, *Second Coming*, *The Little Magazine*, and *Hearse*.

"You're supposed to be a writer," she says, "if you put all the energy into writing that you put into the racetrack you'd be great." I think of something Wallace Stevens once said, "Success as a result of industry is a peasant's ideal." Or if he didn't say that he said something close to that. The writing arrives when it wants to. There is nothing you can do about it. You can't squeeze more writing out of the living than is there. Any attempt to do so creates a panic in the soul, diffuses and jars the line. There are stories that Hemingway would get up early in the morning and have all his work done at noon, but though I never met him personally I feel as if Hemingway were an alcoholic who wanted to get his work out of the way so he could get drunk.

What I have seen evolve in the littles with most new and fresh talent is an interesting first splash. I think, ah, here's finally one. Maybe we have something now. But the same mechanism begins over and over again. The fresh new talent, having splashed, begins to appear everywhere. He sleeps and bathes with the goddamned typewriter and it's running all the time. His name is in every mimeo from Maine to Mexico and the work grows weaker and weaker and weaker and continues to appear. Somebody gets a book out for him (or her) and then they are reading at your local university. They read the 6 or 7 good early poems and all the bad ones. Then you have another little magazine "name." But what has happened is that instead of trying to create the poem they try for as many little mag appearances in as many little magazines as possible. It becomes a contest of publication rather than creation. This diffusion of talent usually occurs among writers in their twenties who don't have enough experience, who don't have enough meat to pick off the bone. You can't write without living and writing all the time is not living. Nor does drinking create a writer or brawling create a writer, and although I've done plenty of both, it's merely a fallacy and a sick romanticism to assume that these actions will make a better writer of one. Of course, there are times when you have to fight and times when you have to drink, but these times are really anti-creative and there's nothing you can do about them.



Writing, finally, even becomes *work* especially if you are trying to pay the rent and child support with it. But it is the finest work and the only work, and it's a work that boosts your ability to live and your ability to live pays you back with your ability to create. One feeds the other; it is all very magic. I quit a very dull job at the age of 50 (twas said I had security for life, ah!) and I sat down in front of the typewriter. There's no better way. There are moments of total flaming hell when you feel as if you're going mad; there are moments, days, weeks of no word, no sound, as if it had all vanished. Then it arrives and you sit smoking, pounding, pounding, it rolls and roars. You can get up at noon, you can work until 3 a.m. Some people will bother you. They will not understand what you are trying to do. They will knock on your door and sit in a chair and eat up your hours while giving you nothing. When too many nothing people arrive and keep arriving you must be cruel to them for they are being cruel to you. You must run their asses out on the street. There are some people who pay their way, they bring their own energy and their own light but most of the others are useless both to you and to themselves. It is not being humane to tolerate the dead, it only increases their deadness and they always leave plenty of it with you after they are gone.

And then, of course, there are the ladies. The ladies would rather go to bed with a poet than anything, even a German police dog, though I knew one lady who took very much delight in claiming she had fucked one President Kennedy. I had no way of knowing. So, if you're a good poet, I'd suggest you learn to be a good lover too, this is a creative act in itself, being a good lover, so learn how, learn how to do it very well because if you're a good poet you're going to get many opportunities, and though it's not like being a rock star, it will come along, so don't waste it like rock stars waste it by going at it rote and half-assed. Let the ladies know that you are really there. Then, of course, they will keep buying your books.

And let this be enough advice for a little while. Oh yes, I won \$180 opening day, dropped \$80 yesterday, so today

is the day that counts. It's ten minutes to eleven. First post 2 p.m. I must start lining up my horse genes. There was a guy out there yesterday with a heart machine attached to himself and he was sitting in a wheelchair. He was making bets. Put him in a rest home and he'll be dead overnight. Saw another guy out there, blind. He must have had a better day than I did yesterday. I've got to phone Quagliano and tell him I've finished this article. Now there's a very strange son of a bitch. I don't know *how* he makes it and he won't tell me. I see him at the boxing matches sitting there with a beer and looking very relaxed. I wonder what he's got going. He's got me worried. . . .

*Small Press Review*, Vol. 4, no. 4, 1973

This PDF file remains the property of  
CITY LIGHTS BOOKS, and may not be  
reproduced, copied or used in any way  
without prior written permission.