

dear jon,

this is the letter i owe you. then we're even.

it's because you finally got it right that i'm writing this.

you were always dying, trying to die, the lament got to be a routine, over the years, in and out of hospitals, always needing money and always spending too much on the books, standing there for hours shoving paper into your press and shoved into you the tube or pipe-line that kept you alive. the post-cards and letters i got leaving a trail of blood across the country; you were dying in san antonio and dying in nashville and dying in tuscon. somehow you and lou went from bed to hospital to bed again, and the books kept coming out, THE OUTSIDER on the walls. after a while, i didn't believe you any more, you kept coming back for more, feeding that press with metal and paper, feeding us all with poetry; not the poetry of the words, the poets' words, but your idiotic soul, in there with the glue and the paper and the book in my hands. you kept coming back like a punch-drunk fighter, i've been in the ring with a few of them, i got tired of hitting them and danced around to make it look good and felt like laughing. and believe me, tragic as it was, you were never above comedy. i mean, let's face it, after a few pages of floods and rats in the type and lou in one bed and you in the other and damaged press parts and more rain-storms and more sickness, it got to be comic, you just had to laugh, sometimes i'd think of the face on that punch-drunk fighter and laugh, "what is he, crazy?"

dying, dying dying.

it got so i just didn't believe you.

so.

so you finally got it right.

oh, they'll remember you all right, i can always say i knew jon webb and he published some of my stuff and they'll say "yea!" and i'll say "yea, it was really something," shaking my head, "that man putting out those beautiful books and dying dying dying."

jon, i know how serious you were, but forgive me, i don't think you really want tears. you know

lou's really something, as laughable as you were, she was over not too long ago, really not very well, but she got into talking about you, how you died, and before she finished she was calling off a list of names, people she was just going to kill, "oooh, i'm gonna kill that doctor, oooooh i could just kill that stupid doctor, that's what i'm gonna do, i'm gonna kill him!!" she sat on the floor the nite before you died, and the doctor came over to her and said to pray for a miracle, and the next day he came back and said, "mrs webb, i'd like to talk to you, i think you misunderstood what kind of miracle i was talking about," and then a few hours later miracle or not, you got it right.

and now i have to say something to help set the record straight. something about historical perspective and the contribution of THE OUTSIDER. you know, i'm going to fail you on that score. i'll say what i can about what i know, but what's going to count is the books themselves, the pretty ones as well as the magazine itself, and the poets in them, and the poets like myself who read them and then went out and did what poets do. i remember a teacher i had in high school who used to say "if i can help just one student, teach just one student what knowledge and living is all about, i'll have felt i succeeded." i know, it's rather corny, but the point is, you gave Bukowski a dignity in book that led to the respect his poetry deserved. Miller didn't need you and Patchen was done justice and i'm writing this letter to you because ten years ago almost to the day i brought you some poems and we sat on the curb in the cold on the corner of royal and iberville streets and you read the poems and i watched the buses go by. to this day i can see you sitting there wearing that little hat and the royal street bus going by like an elephant to the john, those faces staring out, the tourists looking for a streetcar but it's a bus now and it's not even called desire. i was 18 years old and had no idea who you were or were going to be, had never heard of the poets you were going to publish, but i know who most of them are now, and that should count for something.

you went into your little closet stuck in the wall, outside resting on the sidewalk against the building were some of lou's paintings and a few Patchen water-colors. i didn't know who Patchen was, that's really all it was a closet with a wooden bench and poems poems poems tacked all over the wall.

later you showed me the press, we walked up the old french quarter stairs the same stairs Whitman had walked up and we walked into a room, the same room

Whitman had written in, and we looked out across the street at a building in which the DOUBLE DEALER was first published, introducing Hemingway and Faulkner and Sherwood Anderson. for you folks in the upper balcony let me tell you, that sounds pretty good.

the first issue came out finally after 4,500 hours, it took you 3 days to do one page, and if the 100 pages of poetry wasn't enough there was always your lament in the back going through how long it took you to do how many pages at how many cranks of the handle-pull, but like you said, you weren't in this to publish a tombstone.

we talked about the poems on other nights, we argued because you could be so damn stubborn and righteous at times, you were always tired and on the verge of collapse, but you talked to me about the poems, you got THE OUTSIDER out. one day, i told you i was going to send something out, for publication, and you said, yes, go ahead, and when the magazine came in the mail a few months later, my poems in them, i was a little sick, it was a hot muggy summer and as i walked down royal street that night looking for your new apartment you had moved to, one of those light new orleans drizzles started coming down, the kind you curse because it can't seem to make up its mind, just like that crazy city, stuck between centuries. we sat all night and talked, sitting on apple crates up against one corner because there was nothing else to sit on, and nowhere else to sit. the floor was covered with stacks of paper up to the ceiling, and you had built a bunk for lou high up just a few feet from those high ceilings because there was nowhere else to let the heat go and you needed the space for the press and the paper. i looked at those stacks reaching the ceiling and thought, he does all this by hand, just he and lou, and how does he get to the top pages, i didn't see a ladder.

that night, i got the sickness out of my stomach from seeing my poems. i had wanted to be INSIDE, to get in there with all those poets, to be able to say, i'm a poet, and when i finally got in, i knew what claustrophobia was and looked for a window. let me tell you, getting out is half the fun and most of the problem. you told me to write Bukowski that night, and i went home, and i wrote him. he wrote back, and the letters went on between us for some time, but i don't write him anymore. jon, i will again someday, but not now. i like it out here, wherever it is that i am. i took lou to see him the other day, but i didn't say who i was, told him to call me jack, and we had coffee. in the morning Bukowski drinks coffee and it's the worst coffee

i ever tasted. no wonder he's such a good poet. i forgot to ask him where he gets his coffee, and how he makes it. i don't know what he's got to say about you, but let's not let him forget our side of the story. the night my wife and i came back to new orleans to visit, lou was giving susie a shawl and Bukowski was on the phone, cursing and drunk, and i could hear him repeating, "i've got this 25 year old chick, i've got this 25 year old chick." so do i, buk, but i'm not 50, but let me tell you, i look at those 16 year olds and think the same things.

look jon, maybe you weren't ruthless enough. you know, no matter what the poets say, there isn't a poet worth a damn who isn't ruthless, and i'm afraid that's going to be my problem too. but i've got you in mind, believe me. i know you didn't get into it to publish a tombstone, but sometimes others do it for you. lou showed me a picture of the two of you when you were much much younger. god she was a beautiful woman. now she's crazy and that makes her even more beautiful. and you? maybe you were crazy from the beginning. the last time i saw you was in tuscon, remember, not long after the flood had wiped half the Patchen issue out. lou fixed tacos for susie and i and we argued about a line change you had made in one of my poems. i still don't agree with you, but what's a few lines between friends. you had a nice big room for all the paper and type and metal and ink, the room was five maybe six times the size of that room in new orleans, but damn, if everything wasn't piled up again, like greek columns for those of you who have been there and like bettors at the track for those of you who drink your coffee black and burnt.

i don't know jon. sometimes we like to see beauty smashed. i confess, i walk down sunset boulevard sometimes just to see those juicy girls wiggle their empty heads, and i'd like to be a mack sennett cop just for once and dash up to one of them and plaster her face with pie. i don't know. that's the way it is sometimes. what did they want from you. it wasn't the poems in THE OUTSIDER, or the poets. some you liked and some you didn't like. some you heard of, some you hadn't heard of and never did again, some were Bukowski. but that wasn't it. and the books, the beautiful books, sure, there was no arguing with the format, or the design, the sheer poetry not in them but of them. it was something else. something they couldn't define. THE OUTSIDER was so totally outside of anything else, so totally itself, so much you and lou. because i knew you. THE OUTSIDER gave me a sense of what poetry was, what it could be, and most of all, what it could be, and most of all, what i could be, that is, myself, which is the hardest thing of all.

what else can i say? we both came into the sixties with visions. there's been more poetry and poetry magazines put out in the last 10 years whatever the statistic is, that says a lot. a very few lasted the decade, and most of the ones that lasted and are around today died with their second issue. THE OUTSIDER whatever else it did, let poets know that there was a place to go to, away from the footnotes and tea-parties, away from the trumpets. it stood there, what it was, and it pointed in directions even further away.

so what are you gonna do. people sometimes want to see results. well, jon, i'm working on it. Bukowski you don't have to worry about. i'm not really sure why i'm writing this, but it's not because i feel i owe you something. if i do, the poems will have to take care of that. but i don't represent anybody else but myself, and i've told what i know about THE OUTSIDER, one of the ways i know how to tell it, and i hope it's enough. if not, it won't make such a very big difference. i'm not in this for the tombstone, either.

-- marcus grapes 12/17/71

ALL PRICKLES -- NO PETALS

Blue, murderer -- he'd got excited in his first holdup and pulled the trigger -- was sitting on the toilet bowl darning socks. There had been another "outside" show in Chapel and in one of the acts two rope-legged Akron blondes had put on a dance with few clothes on. After the show we had gone straight to the dining room and from there to the cells.

Blue's needle went in, came out, and Blue's lips opened, shut. In ... opened ... out ... shut.... Bite, and another knot.

"Ungth," he grunted, and I got up and stood in front of the cell door. It was still light out, and I stood and looked out at the rock garden five tier-stories down. I felt no bodily hurt -- the legs, you know -- no empty nausea of loneliness, just a curious, half-hearted resentment. I was too much the old-timer to fill up at the throat any more.