

**WAR ALL THE TIME: Poems 1981-1984 by
Charles Bukowski**

No American writer of our generation has challenged the American dream as consistently as Charles Bukowski. In some 40 books of prose and poetry he has pilloried such commonly accepted values as love, community, the Protestant Ethic, even life itself. The racetrack, any saloon (the more disreputable the better), a cheap motel room strewn with empty liquor bottles and fully dissipated women—these constitute the essential Bukowski habitat.

Yet, despite the gloom-and-doom ambience of his work, Bukowski is a popular writer, not only in this country where his first editions are sought by collectors, but in Germany and Japan where his books are best sellers.

“War All the Time” confirms this reader's feeling that a significant change has been taking place in Bukowski's last several books. The wildness is receding, the anger dying down. Charles Bukowski of all people is becoming respectable with age. No longer a morose loner, the narrator of these poems seeks an accommodation with the rest of the world. The awesome rage of earlier books has turned into reflection, acts of self-destruction to an urge for survival.

*I no longer hold the paring knife
near the jugular vein--
the end is getting
close enough
all by
itself.*

In this volume some 20 of the book's 100 poems refer directly to the poet's own impending death. Recognition of this most final of facts has produced changes in Bukowski.

When one out of five of a writer's formal efforts turn morbid, you can be certain that the changes will not be insignificant ones. The new Bukowski persona no longer gets into fights; he breaks them up. These days his women give him vitamins instead of black eyes. A poem titled “Eating My Senior Citizen's Dinner at the Sizzler” has lines like this:

*It's 20% off for
us old dogs approaching the sunset.
Its strange to be old and not feel*

*old
but I glance in the mirror
see some silver hair
concede that I'd look misplaced at a
rock concert.*

There is even a poem about nursing a sick cat back to life. Bukowski making nice to a kitty? What would the earlier, macho Buk have had to say about this, well, pussycat of a man?

The poems that comprise “War All the Time” are more richly textured than their predecessors. Less jazzy, more thoughtful, they have—like their celebrated author—a lived-in look about them. Not all of the changes, however are necessarily for the better. A good deal of the humor has been replaced by stoic rumination and even an occasional dose of bathos. Almost gone are the exuberant descriptions of drunken sexual gropings and scatological disasters. As was the case with Bukowski's autobiographical novel, “Ham on Rye,” which told the story of his unhappy childhood, the elusive, surreal images sometimes harden into uncharacteristic philosophical verities.

This hardly implies that Bukowski's poetry is not as good as it once was. There is far more moral substance here than in previous work. And one shining constant endures—the spare Bukowski line that is his own and no one else's: a string of simple declarative sentences free of general modifiers, highlighted by a well-chosen action verb or colloquial phrase, headed toward an all-encompassing punch line, as in “Nice Try,” an idyllic poem of being able to fly:

*When I awakened
I was on the
drunktank floor
of the old
Lincoln Heights jail
at North Avenue 21
and not only
didn't I have any wings
all I had was my property slip
and somebody was puking into the toilet.*

*Maybe I'd be an angel
some other time.*

At times, though Charles Bukowski sure writes like one.

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