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# William S. Burroughs: A Man Within

By Yony Leyser

[ William S. Burroughs ]

"Death smells."

I mean, death  
has a special smell...  
over and above the smell  
of cyanide, cordite, blood,  
carrion or burnt flesh.

It's a gray smell.

It stops the heart  
and cuts off the breath.  
Smell of the empty body.  
Smell of field hospitals  
and gangrene.

Now, folks, if you'll just  
care to step this way.

You are about to witness...

"the complete, all-American  
deanxietized man."

[ Man Narrating ]

William Seward Burroughs,  
heir to the Burroughs  
Adding Machine Company  
founded by his grandfather,  
was born in 1914  
in St. Louis, Missouri.  
After graduating  
from Harvard University  
and traveling Europe,  
he moved to New York City,  
where he met his future wife,  
Joan Vollmer,  
and fell in company with  
Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg.  
Experimenting with new forms  
of literature as well as drugs,  
the three friends  
formed the vanguard  
of a cultural phenomenon...  
that would come to be known  
as the Beat Generation.  
"Thanksgiving Day,  
November 28, 1986."  
Thanks for the wild turkey  
and passenger pigeons...

destined to be shit out  
through wholesome American guts.  
Thanks for a continent  
to despoil and poison.  
Thanks for Indians to provide  
a modicum of challenge...  
and danger.  
Thanks for vast herds of bison  
to kill and skin,  
leaving the carcasses to rot.  
Thanks for bounties  
on wolves and coyotes.  
Thanks for  
the American dream...  
to vulgarize and falsify...  
"until the bare lies  
shine through."  
[ John Waters ] In the '50s,  
anything opened up  
a good avenue to thinking  
because it was...  
People talk about the '50s,  
they see Happy Days  
and they think it was fun.  
It was horrible, the '50s.  
It was the most terrible time.  
It was the first memory I had,  
and it was of you had to be  
exactly like everybody else.  
The Beat Generation  
was crushing that.  
It was an attempt  
to bust out of that, man.  
All of this was a big  
rap on the knuckles...  
of mainstream, white, staid,  
pool-in-the-backyard America.  
[ Burroughs ] "Kid",  
what are you doing over there  
with the niggers and the apes?  
Why don't you straighten out  
and act like a white man?  
After all, they're  
only human cattle.

You know that yourself.  
"I hate to see a bright young man  
fuck up and get off  
on the wrong track."  
So what was the Beat Movement?  
It was real.  
The Beat Movement...  
Well, of course it was.  
It underwent many changes.  
In the '60s, it became  
quite political.  
Yeah.  
But as I've always said,  
it's more sociological  
than a literary phenomenon.  
It was a sociological movement  
of worldwide importance.  
Unprecedented  
worldwide importance.  
A cultural revolution,  
you might say.  
Yeah.  
So I would characterize it  
as a spiritual liberation  
movement actually...  
like women's lib, black lib,  
spirit lib or spiritual lib...  
that began in the '40s.  
First took shape  
as a literary movement...  
with a production of a number  
of notable utterances.  
Allen Ginsberg's  
first publication...  
was Howl.  
It was published in 1956.  
In 1957, Jack Kerouac's  
On The Road.  
And in 1959, Naked Lunch  
by William Burroughs.  
These three books came out.  
[ Waters ]  
Beatniks were big.  
Overnight, it was a huge...

Like a hula hoop.  
Much to their embarrassment,  
I think.  
Because it started out pretty  
much in North Beach and stuff,  
like poets and...

So once it became so big  
in the media, they were  
embarrassed by that term.

[ Amiri Baraka ]

All of those poets,  
they couldn't fit what  
the stereotype of Beat was.  
That was a media hype  
to sell papers.  
And they pimped that, boy.  
They pimped that bad boy,  
really.

[ V. Vale ] Burroughs himself  
never identified with  
the Beat Generation.

He was the godfather and mentor.  
He was a bit older.  
And since he was also  
Harvard educated,  
he just brought in  
a whole bunch of ideas...  
just from classical education  
that he had.

And invented a style of book  
almost.

I mean, it was so original.  
And anything that's  
so original like that,  
eventually lasts.

[ Burroughs ]

Cut... Angle... Word line...  
This matter... res... the...  
ripples... with cortex...  
In the vague description...  
which an area...  
evasion... experience...  
will project...  
further experience...

when accompanied... of mass...  
but limited...  
I think probably Freud  
would think him to be...  
deeply, deeply troubled.  
Profoundly mentally ill.  
Everybody was enamored  
by William because he was  
famous before anybody else.  
And he was also famous  
for all the wrong things.  
He was the first person  
that was famous for things  
you were supposed to hide.  
He was gay. He was a junkie.  
He didn't look handsome.  
He shot his wife.  
He wrote poetry about  
assholes and heroin.  
He was not easy to like.  
[ Ira Silverberg ]  
Class was an essential factor  
in the work and life.  
William came  
from a very traditional,  
upper-crust, American family.  
Though the fortune  
may have been lost,  
the breeding was deep  
and instilled.  
And thus the gentleman  
we know was bred.  
I could totally relate  
to the dry thing...  
salesman thing that  
he'd created. You know.  
And this very  
underplayed thing...  
just very, very removed...  
very removed.  
Also very, very interested  
in death.  
And I think that's  
what scared Americans...

more than his writing itself.  
If he'd had that worldview  
and he was writing in a more  
polite way...  
and if it didn't have to do  
with guns and junk.  
Usually the most radical work  
tends to come from  
the upper classes...  
because they're trying so hard  
to shock, so hard to get away  
from their roots.  
So he's a fascinating character,  
uniquely American  
in that regard.  
I don't think that work  
could have existed...  
had he not been breaking away  
from an incredibly patrician,  
Midwestern background.  
There was no rebellion  
in those days.  
Well, certainly not  
in our strata.  
Or very little that I saw.  
There might have been  
isolated cases.  
But by and large,  
they were in a good spot.  
Their families  
were in a good spot,  
and the sons wanted to just  
go along exactly the same way.  
"Thanks for the K.K.K."  
For nigger-killing lawmen  
feeding their notches.  
For decent, churchgoing women...  
with their mean, pinched,  
bitter, evil faces.  
Thanks for 'Kill a Queer  
for Christ' stickers.  
Thanks for laboratory AIDS.  
Thanks for Prohibition...  
and the war against drugs.

Thanks for a country  
where nobody is allowed  
to mind his own business.  
Thanks for a nation of finks.  
Yes, thanks for  
all the memories.  
All right, let's see your arms.  
You always were a headache  
and you always were a bore.  
Thanks for the last  
and greatest betrayal...  
of the last and greatest...  
"of human dreams."  
Burroughs achieved  
a great deal more...  
than being arguably the greatest  
writer in the world...  
in the second half  
of the 20th century,  
because he did break down  
so many barriers.  
And he did play into  
and influence...  
so many other fields,  
like rock and roll,  
like the movies.  
Well, William seemed to have  
a connection with anything  
and everything.  
You know, you see a movie  
like Blade Runner,  
and then you find the phrase  
"blade runner" came from him.  
The term "heavy metal"  
is attributed to him.  
"Soft machine."  
You know, there's so many  
phrases, names of groups that  
come from William's work.  
He's like another kind of Bible.  
[ Victor Bockris ]  
He's a great pioneer of  
the gay liberation movement,  
or the whole position,



standing of gay people  
around the world really now.  
Where'd you learn about sex  
originally, from friends?  
Books.

Books? Yes.

The book called The Plastic Age  
by Percy Marks was sort of  
a daring book for the '20s.  
Mm-hmm.

And The Green Hat  
and Coming of Age in Samoa.  
Mm-hmm.

This is the '20s  
I'm talking about,  
which is a very different era.

[ Bockris ]

Burroughs once said to me,  
"If one man stands up  
and, you know, rejects..."  
the bullshit of society,  
"it makes it possible for  
everyone else to follow on."

And he was that man  
to some extent.

And here is Reverend Braswell  
in the Denver Post...

"Homosexuality is  
an abomination to God..."  
and should never  
be recognized...

as a legal human right any more  
than robbery or murder.

At the present time  
in Colorado where  
this was written,  
approximate

MOB conditions prevail.

And by MOB,

I mean 'My Own Business.'

No sex crimes on the book.

You can fuck a cow right  
in front of the sheriff,

and all he can say is 'Moo!'

But you can hardly expect  
to bring down the barn  
with an act like that.  
With the right virus offset,  
perhaps we can get this whole  
show out of the barnyard  
and into space.  
"This is the space age,  
and we are here to go."  
They asked him at a press  
conference what he thought  
of the gay rights movement.  
And his response was,  
"I have never been gay  
a day in my life,  
and I'm sure as hell  
not part of any movement."  
But Burroughs  
was a deconstructor of labels.  
You know,  
that was just another sort of  
amalgamized effort to, uh...  
to not be marginalized.  
And he was  
one of the very few...  
maybe Jean Genet  
and maybe Pier Paolo Pasolini...  
who had the balls...  
way before it was, like, vogue,  
and certainly  
when it was dangerous,  
to say "I'm queer."  
But he was way beyond that,  
because he didn't respect any  
of the rules of the gay world  
at all either.  
He was hardly  
a Boys in the Band.  
He would have hated that.  
That culture would have been  
very foreign to him because  
there were so many rules.  
There were so many rules  
in the straight world too.

And he violated the rules  
of even junkies' worlds.  
He opened up to me  
not gay culture.  
He opened up gay rebels that  
couldn't fit in gay culture.  
Very different.  
And I have to say that  
Burroughs to this day  
and his work...  
have an uneasy, uh,  
relationship with  
"queer culture in America."  
Or queer writing or whatever.  
Burroughs was never seen  
as part of that.  
He was still too transgressive.  
Even when it became  
sort of okay to be queer,  
he was beyond queer.  
[ Andy Warhol ]  
On this thing right here.  
Right here. Here. Go on...  
Oh, my God.  
[ Bockris ] And I have to take  
Burroughs and Warhol  
as parallel figures.  
Two people who,  
in the late '50s  
and early '60s,  
stood up for  
what they believed in.  
Made no pretense about it.  
Were totally out front about it.  
At that time, that was  
absolutely outrageous.  
I mean, it's hard for people  
who didn't live in those times  
to know.  
When I moved to America  
in 1965,  
you could not mention  
the word "homosexuality"...  
without everyone thinking

you were gay.  
And it was really  
just verboten.  
And it's because of Burroughs  
and Warhol and what followed  
in their wake...  
that the whole gay liberation  
movement sprung up.  
[ James Grauerholz ]  
William's boyfriends were  
a series of obsessions,  
usually more or less foredoomed.  
Well, first of all, his cousin,  
Prynne Hoxie in St. Louis,  
who went off to a different  
university, Princeton,  
and then died  
a year and a half later...  
in a drunken accident  
in New York.  
He was decapitated by...  
a tunnel.  
And then  
he fell in love with a boy  
at Los Alamos Ranch School.  
And there was a big disgrace,  
and little Billy ran away home  
to St. Louis...  
and couldn't go back  
Los Alamos at all.  
Sent off for his diaries.  
And as he wrote,  
when the box arrived with  
the fearful diaries in them,  
he couldn't wait to rip it open  
and make sure he could destroy  
the offending pages.  
Some of these things  
were examples of how  
he had tried to write...  
and why he had given up.  
He says, "Fact is,  
I had gotten a 'sickener.'"  
Meaning like a jail sentence.

I mean, his boyfriends  
like Jack Anderson,  
the one that he cut  
his finger off over...  
and who helped him wreck  
the family car.  
Lewis Marker, the American  
student at Mexico City College,  
who was probably pretty  
good intellectual company,  
but was not gonna commit  
his life to Bill Burroughs.  
So he very much was thinking  
of boyfriends as members of  
a class different from him.  
After I had lived with William  
for several weeks...  
and then began my relationship  
with Richard Elovich,  
my first lover,  
I remember William  
commenting once,  
"See, you and Richard,  
you have this idea  
about, uh,  
intellectual and social equals  
being a couple."  
He says, "In my day,  
that's just unheard of."  
I mean, you know,  
it was an interclass thing."  
[ Marcus Ewert ]  
In the fall of '89,  
I met him at his old place...  
his old stomping grounds  
in the Bowery... the Bunker.  
And at that time, I was 18.  
I was a freshman in college.  
I was already basically  
Allen Ginsberg's boyfriend.  
Um, but I always kind of planned  
out that I would still hook up  
with William...  
when and if the opportunity

presented itself.  
Were you sexually interested  
in me at that time?  
Uh, I don't...  
Not particularly.  
Because I don't  
remember any...  
I don't remember any, um...  
any such thing.  
Mm-hmm.  
How come?  
'Cause I was kind of cute.  
Looking back  
with hindsight.  
Well, I don't know.  
If it was  
like an ordinary  
relationship...  
in one of his novels,  
it was usually  
the theme  
of, um,  
chasing after somebody  
that didn't quite...  
want to have anything  
to do with...  
the author of  
what you were reading.  
Which was, I think in Queer,  
something that was shown  
like what his writings  
were for.  
They were love letters  
to make the person that  
he was interested in laugh.  
'Cause they were  
almost comedy routines.  
[ Genesis Breyer P-Orridge ]  
In a way, he was somebody who  
appeared to be incredibly sad...  
to me as time went by.  
Someone who'd been hurt.  
For example, you read...  
that William was crazy in love

with Allen Ginsberg...  
and that it was almost always  
an unrequited passion.  
And I think that that  
disappointment that he had...  
when he did fall in love,  
which was so rare for him,  
made him a lot  
more withdrawn...  
sexually and emotionally.  
A lot more afraid of being  
vulnerable and then being hurt.  
So he started to close down  
quite a lot, emotionally.  
Do you want to be loved?  
Mmm, not really.  
It depends...  
Mm-hmm.  
By who or what.  
Yeah. Mm-hmm.  
By my cat, certainly.  
Mm-hmm.  
There was something essentially  
alien about William,  
and I think when it  
came to his physicality  
and his romantic life,  
he was one of the most  
awkward people in the world.  
While there was this  
facade of a gentleman,  
there was a very  
lonely man underneath  
that three-piece suit.  
And it was only once that  
I really heard him speak  
of someone...  
he was genuinely interested  
and obsessed with, Mark Ewert,  
who he described as,  
"A young man having skin  
like alabaster."  
One night I was, like, you know,  
I should tell this guy

I love him, right?  
It was late at night,  
and I wasn't quite sure if  
he'd already fallen asleep  
for the night or not.  
So I kind of nudged him,  
and said, "William. William."  
[ Mutters ]  
- "William. William."  
- "Yeah?"  
I said, "William, I love you.  
I love you, William."  
He said, "Huh?  
You love women?"  
I said, "No, no.  
I love you, William."  
And what did he say back?  
He was like,  
"Oh. That's okay."  
Or something like that.  
And kind of patted me.  
But then the question is,  
what did he feel towards me,  
or what did he feel towards  
other human beings in general?  
I remember reading  
this interview with him.  
He was talking about  
nuclear war.  
And he said that,  
all of a sudden,  
he just starting sobbing.  
Which, first of all,  
it was really hard for me  
to picture him sobbing, period.  
What he was sobbing about is,  
he said he'd all of a sudden  
been thinking about nuclear war,  
and then he was struck with  
this horrific thought of,  
"What would happen to my cats,  
my six cats, if I died?"  
And that just wrecked him.  
You can just see the cats



were kind of these pure,  
spirit beings for him.  
And I remember some of  
our very first conversations...  
the first night  
I met him were about  
endangered species,  
and about lemurs  
that he was really into.  
And I think it was... That  
was just a really safe place  
for his love to flow.  
And I don't think that meant...  
I don't think that...  
So like his animals  
and his cats and these lemurs.  
I don't think that means  
that that love was false,  
but I definitely  
had the sense...  
that it was all  
kind of flowing in this  
fairly narrow channel...  
that would probably  
have been too hard for him,  
in this lifetime,  
to show for other people.  
And I hope in whatever his  
next lifetime is nowadays...  
that it's easier for him,  
and it's not so threatening.  
All right.  
All right, you two.  
I'll get you some food.  
[ Continues, Indistinct ]  
[ Meows ]  
[ Dennis Dailey ]  
On one side, he's  
this kind of...  
loosey-goosey liberal  
of his time,  
where sexuality is free-spirited  
and all that sort of thing.  
I don't think he engaged

in that all that comfortably.  
I think he had conflict around  
his sexual orientation.  
I don't think that  
was always clear to him.  
I think he struggled  
with homophobia, like  
lots of people his age.  
There are areas of his life that  
he himself never understood.  
Quite clearly a number  
of things happened to him  
when he was very little.  
He was possibly abused  
by his nanny's boyfriend,  
and things like this.  
And he spent a lot of time  
in psychoanalysis trying to  
find out about these things.  
But, um...  
And he has talked about it,  
but it's just too deeply buried.  
He was never really able  
to find out.  
[ P-Orridge ]  
We first met him  
in the '70s.  
He was living in London,  
and it was an Irish hustler  
called John...  
who was sharing  
the apartment with him,  
who used to hang out  
in Piccadilly, you know, um,  
doing something or other  
sexually to get money.  
And William always  
seemed to prefer...  
young hustlers,  
because there was no need  
for an emotional attachment.  
There was no danger  
of being embroiled...  
beyond a controllable point.

So I think that was one of  
the reasons that he began to,  
almost exclusively,  
look for sexual pleasure  
amongst professional,  
young hustlers.  
There was too much  
fear of pain...  
to go into a relationship  
form of love.

[ Woman ]

William had a very uneasy  
relationship with women...  
in the sense that there  
weren't too many women around.  
But I felt that I had a very  
nice relationship with him,  
and maybe it was because  
we really weren't  
gender identified...  
when we were together.  
Uh, we traded recipes.  
But I would say that  
in that world,  
particularly if you're,  
you know, at the Bunker...  
and you're going  
into the bathroom...  
and you're looking at  
Keith Haring's drawing  
of the penis...  
It's not the world  
that you would expect.  
I had the biggest crush  
on William.  
Really a big one.  
And I used to even daydream  
about, you know,  
he would fall in love with me  
and we would get married.  
I mean, I had a huge crush  
on William, so...  
And he knew it too,  
and it didn't bother him at all.

When the two of us  
were alone, he'd say,  
"Well, my dear,  
it's the end of the night.  
Let's hear a little  
'Bobby Shafto, '"  
And I would sing him  
the little song.  
Bobby Shafto's gone to sea  
Silver buckles on his knee  
One fine day he'll marry me  
Pretty Bobby Shafto  
Ah, there was another one.  
Oh, dear,  
what can the matter be?  
Dear, dear,  
what can the matter be?  
Oh, dear,  
what can the matter be?  
Johnny's so long  
at the fair  
And he encouraged me to sing  
before I sang publicly.  
[ Voices, Indistinct ]  
I think, actually,  
William loved Brion Gysin...  
more than anybody.  
[ Burroughs ]  
"He was my friend  
of many years...  
painter, writer, musician  
and raconteur extraordinaire.  
Boy, could he tell a story.  
His studies of North African  
music and magic,  
of Japanese  
and Arabic calligraphy,  
and well as his own  
painting and writing,  
were influential  
upon a whole generation  
of creative individuals...  
who went on to launch  
the cultural revolution

of the '60s and '70s.  
He was at ease  
with the Rolling Stones,  
the musicians  
of ancient Jajouka,  
with the princesses  
and duchesses of Europe,  
and the young migrs...  
who flocked to the Beat Hotel  
in Paris in the 1950s...  
when we lived there  
and began our collaboration.  
Brion invented the Dream Machine  
and the cut-up method,  
"and his ideas were crucial  
to my own development  
as a writer."  
The cut-up was invented by  
Brion Gysin in the Beat Hotel.  
He wanted to set up  
a board for his artwork,  
and he had some  
newspapers on a table.  
And he cut through the board  
using this Stanley blade,  
and he cut through  
the newspapers.  
And when  
he looked at the newspapers,  
he realigned the pages of type,  
and he could see that words  
made a particular kind of sense,  
almost like a telepathic sense.  
And he felt that he had  
discovered something  
truly fantastic...  
and showed it  
to William Burroughs.  
And he was just so inspired...  
and was able to really do  
terrific cut-ups.  
In fact, William produced  
three cut-up novels.  
You know, William

had read a lot in philosophy,  
the nature of consciousness  
and science and mind travel.  
You know, magic,  
tantrism, genetics,  
the cloning worlds,  
looking at semantics,  
looking at intrinsic nature,  
looking at impermanence,  
looking at how  
we name and qualify,  
and where does that come from.

[ Burroughs ]

That is all, all, all  
gossip. Stop it.  
His dedication to altered  
states and knowledge...  
and tinkering  
with consciousness,  
that, as well, always  
leads one into conflict  
with the powers that be,  
because that, too,  
is an illegal activity.

[ Burroughs ]

"Flicker administered  
under large dosage...  
and repeated later,  
could well lead to...  
overflow of the brain areas...  
sounds and even odors,  
that is a categorical  
characteristic of  
the consciousness-expanding...  
Grey Walters produced  
many of the phenomena...  
Anything that  
can be done chemically  
can be done in other ways"...

[ P-Orridge ]

The first things that William  
was investigating...  
as a personal crusade  
or as a personal philosophy...

all of those things made him  
an outcast, an outsider...  
and an outlaw, quite literally.  
When you have someone  
who's knowingly choosing  
to be outside the law...  
or to refuse to accept  
the template of legality...  
that some society  
has imposed upon them,  
then you have the potential  
for some degree of chaos...  
or destruction  
of that status quo,  
that nonsense that's reality.  
So William chose a path  
that he knew would  
bring him into conflict...  
with the powers that be,  
with social norms...  
and with the legal system.  
And he chose it because it  
would be intolerable to him...  
to be a hypocrite  
and hide away  
his real sense of being.  
I bring not peace, but a sword!  
It's no mistake that the main  
obsession of Burroughs  
was control.  
The first time we met in 1971,  
just before we left  
his apartment, he said to me,  
"How do you short-circuit  
control?  
That's what I want you to spend  
your time thinking about."  
Meaning my life.  
And that's basically  
what we've done.  
As long as you don't decide  
not to either react or say,  
but just sort of hide  
and be a hypocrite,

then you're doing their job.  
People do it different ways.  
But no, I think that William  
was a very, very political,  
radical, anarchist man.

[ Gunshot ]

[ Gunshot ]

[ Regina Weinreich ]

His upbringing was middle-class,  
but he had a housekeeper  
who introduced him to opium.  
So it's not surprising that  
he went in the direction  
that he went.

Well, if you've got  
the Yage Papers...

And he's the only guy  
I've ever known to take yage,  
which is the absolute  
sine qua non of  
hallucinogenic drugs.

He's also the guy  
that Timothy Leary  
and Baba Ram Dass...  
came over to Morocco  
and had him try psilocybin.

He's the only guy  
I've ever heard of or known...  
to take the original  
C.I.A.'s version of L.S.D.,  
L.S.D.-6,  
which is like  
a horse-pill of insanity.

I mean, the stuff  
that I did as a hippie  
in the '60s was like bubble gum.  
It was fool's gold compared  
to the extensive experiences  
that guy had.

He was a walking pharmacologist,  
an encyclopedia of it.

[ Burroughs ]

"There's a junk gesture  
that marks the junkie..."



like the limp wrist  
marks the fag.  
"The hand swings out  
from the elbow,  
stiff-fingered, palm up."  
[ Waters ]  
William Burroughs,  
sure he romanticized drug use,  
but not in the way that usually  
people think romantic.  
I think no one  
had written about it.  
Nobody had read about it.  
It was a hidden,  
terrible thing.  
So that someone wrote about it  
in any kind of joyous way,  
which he did...  
joyous and terrible  
and wonderful...  
sure, he did romanticize it.  
Did anybody read Naked Lunch  
and try heroin? Probably.  
So what? That doesn't mean  
that book shouldn't be read.  
I'm for anybody that shows...  
writes about their obsession  
and shows...  
A murderer can write a book  
about how great it is to murder.  
Doesn't mean  
it's not a good book.  
What the breakthrough  
of the late '50s was,  
after Howl,  
was a breakthrough  
to those people who lived  
in America and were American...  
but were never focused on.  
And so the whole question  
of narcotics, to kind of...  
I mean, even with  
the fantastic thing  
that Burroughs conceived of...

The idea that there  
were junkies in America...  
[ Chuckles ]  
you know, was somewhat  
of a social breakthrough.  
[ Grauerholz ]  
Burroughs was cool,  
particularly in his persona.  
Usually when we think of cool  
in the context of the hip world,  
the Beat world,  
we're thinking of the difference  
between alcohol and heroin.  
Hip people  
who liked to take dope,  
or who were addicted to it,  
they thought it was  
the pinnacle of coolness  
to go score a bag,  
maybe of Dr. Nova.  
They even had, like,  
William's own brand,  
in a way, or many brands.  
Score a glassine bag of this  
and take it to the Bunker...  
to share it  
with the Pope of Dope.  
[ John Giorno ] On the street  
outside... Rivington and Bowery...  
was a big pick-up place.  
Junkies for five blocks  
going east.  
Howard was coming to visit.  
He said, "John,  
I scored for William."  
And they shot up together.  
Howard, at that point,  
had to be H.I.V.-positive.  
But William, having seniority,  
shot up first.  
William shot up many times.  
People came and visited,  
and, uh...  
But he always

got the first shot,  
so he never got AIDS.  
I thought that  
was pretty great.  
I mean, everyone died!  
Sadly so.

[ Bockris ] There's always  
the question with someone  
who has the glamour image...  
that, say, Burroughs had  
or Keith Richards has  
or Lou Reed has,  
where they're seen to kind  
of glamorize using heroin.  
Seems like a very cool  
sort of thing, you know.  
But if you read everything  
William wrote about heroin,  
it was to warn people  
to not take it.  
And he was using it  
as a sort of image  
or symbol of control.  
This is the ultimate control.  
You have to buy the product  
or else you're sick.

[ Peter Weller ]  
I'm doing this press  
conference with Bill.  
I said, Bill, you know,  
I had this migraine last night.  
I came by these pills  
in my medicine cabinet,  
two Percodans.  
And his eyes went, "What?"  
I said, "Well, what are they?"  
And he said, "What do you mean  
what are they?"  
I said, "Well,  
what is Percodan?"  
And he put his face about  
an inch from mine and said,  
"It's junk!"  
And walked away.

And I sat there with my...  
metaphorical ass spanked.  
And immediately...  
saw the distinction  
between this actor...  
who was acting Bill Lee  
and his addictions...  
and a guy who, like,  
roamed the world in a sewer...  
hooked on this shit.  
That said,  
that whole incident  
with him, man,  
with him leveling me  
with "It's junk,"  
was like a laser through me  
about everything else  
in my life...  
that I'm doing or taking  
on a whim...  
not just pills...  
you know,  
sex or careerism or cigars...  
or whatever that I think  
I can get by through,  
I can wing this today,  
I can hold my breath  
through this now,  
because it's not the real deal.  
And then all of a sudden you  
wake up and it is the real deal.  
It is life handed to you  
on a toilet seat,  
you know, rather than  
a silver platter.  
He opened the tunnel  
to a way out.  
'Cause if you're doing something  
and you want to stop,  
you're not going to stop  
until you figure out what  
it is you're actually doing.  
[ Burroughs ]  
It's like ultra...

subject... regulator...  
There's a unique...  
after morphine...  
the metabolic...  
dramatic relief from anxiety.  
N-ethyltriptamine... alarming  
and disagreeable symptoms.  
The use of opium  
and/or derivatives...

[ Grauerholz ]

The legend is that he went  
to London and kicked it...  
with the apomorphine cure  
in 1956.

The reality is that he was  
chipping around, off and on,  
uh, to one extent or another,  
his whole life.

I mean, when I met him in '74,  
he was not taking it,  
except just, you know,  
gobble a pill of whatever,  
but within two years,  
he was again.

And that time,  
it got such a grip on him...  
that the breakthrough there  
was to, uh,  
enroll in the methadone  
maintenance program under...

His physician was named  
Dr. Harvey Carcass.

Give me something to shoot!

[ Man Chuckles ]

[ Man 2 ]

It kicks like a mule, babe.

I want something to shoot!

[ Man 1 Chuckling ]

Yaa!

[ Woman, Indistinct ]

This great big mamba-jamba...  
was a gift from Hunter Thompson.

[ Clears Throat ]

It's a .454 Casull.

It was the biggest handgun  
manufactured at the time.  
The gun that he carried  
the most, when I was around him,  
was a .38 Smith & Wesson snubby.  
And he just carried it on  
his belt with him at all times.  
Although there was a couple  
of times when he was going to  
the barbershop or the doctor,  
and it would make people  
uncomfortable to look down  
and see this old man...  
with a big piece on his belt.  
So Michael didn't want him  
to wear the big gun.  
So I think the compromise  
they worked out was that  
he'd carry, uh, derringers,  
rather than a big pistol  
on his belt.  
But when he was at home,  
he always had a gun on.  
He slept with a gun  
under his pillow.  
[ Ewert ]  
When we slept together in bed,  
was there a loaded gun...  
in a holster in the bed with us?  
Why, yes, there was a loaded gun  
in a holster in bed with us.  
There were guns everywhere  
in his house. Everywhere.  
I remember one of the first  
nights we were sleeping together  
in his place in Kansas,  
and I'm sticking my feet  
down in the covers  
and my foot hits some bump,  
some really hard bump.  
And I'm like, um,  
"William, what is that?"  
And he's like,  
"Oh, it's a gun."

And I'm like, um,  
"Oh, is that gun loaded?"  
And he goes, "Oh, yeah,  
always... always keep it loaded."  
That way, you never  
have to worry about  
whether it's loaded or not."

[ Wayne Propst ]

This is a silencer.  
This was in William's basement.  
Take a .38 and shoot it  
in the basement.  
There was a target  
across the basement.  
Upstairs...  
this is about what you'd hear.

[ Soft Tap ]

No, a little louder  
than that.

[ Louder Tapping ]

That's a gun going off  
down in...  
And you wouldn't even...  
Barely...

People would be sitting  
at the dining table,  
and we'd come up  
from the basement and say,  
"Did you hear that?"  
And they'd say, "What?"  
And it was shooting  
six rounds of .38's.

I would imagine  
he got a feedback, uh,  
high out of it, in the sense  
that this is better than  
shooting heroin.

I mean,  
you shot something else,  
and it went bang.

[ Fred Aldrich ]

He had a fascination with guns  
that was all his own.  
I've often wondered

what it sprung from.  
Whether it was,  
you know, being gay...  
and being subjected to the kind  
of abuse that gay people  
sometimes find themselves.  
And he was a slight man.  
He was never a big guy.  
And whether that made him feel  
more secure, because I know  
he always had a gun at home.  
And he talked about  
defending himself.

[ Patricia Elliot Marvin ]

He had all these...  
I think half his fantasy life...  
was what he would do  
if somebody did something.  
Like, when there was a dog  
attacking us on the way  
to Dylan's.

Man, he had 14 different plans  
on how to take care of that.

[ Chuckles ]

[ Vale ] Burroughs himself...

He said you always have  
to have three lines of defense.  
He had the sword cane that,  
if you pressed a button,  
it became a spear really.  
He had a cane, but he knew  
the art of cane fighting.  
He'd studied it.  
He had a book on it.  
And then he had the cobra.  
And then he also had  
a sharp knife that he  
could flick out real fast.  
He studied all these arts  
of self-defense.

This is a...

[ Dean Ripa ]

In his writing, you see,  
he's always pushing himself



to the limits of...  
psychic limits.  
And the feeling of danger  
that is evoked by that...  
was something that  
intrigued him about snakes.  
Snakes represented,  
among other things,  
a form of weaponry  
to William Burroughs.  
And the injection process  
of snake venom...  
is very, very similar  
to the projectile  
firing ability of a gun.  
He was also very fascinated  
with the addictive properties  
of snake venom.  
" 'Kim, if you had your choice,"  
would you rather be  
a poisonous snake...  
or a nonpoisonous snake? '  
'Poisonous, sir,  
like a green mamba  
or a spitting cobra. '  
'Why? '  
'I'd feel safer, sir. '  
'Safer? '  
'Yes, sir. Dead people  
are less frightening  
than live ones.  
It's a step  
in the right direction. '  
" 'Young man, I think  
you're an assassin. ' "  
[ Ripa ]  
I wrote him a letter...  
where I offered to send him  
a Gaboon viper.  
And I did this  
ending my letter...  
with something almost  
like a threat.  
"If I do not hear

from you..."

uh, a positive  
or negative reply...

"you may consider  
the snake in transit."

So...

[ Chuckles ]

So he rapidly responded.  
In fact, I had two or three  
quick letters...

please begging me not  
to send the Gaboon viper.  
But I did also get  
an invitation to his house.  
And in those days, I often  
carried snakes around  
in suitcases.

So he wanted to see  
the snakes feed,  
and I think I had  
a rattler in there  
and a couple copperheads.  
And I put a mouse  
or a small rat in there  
for them to eat it.  
The rat had jumped  
out of the way.  
Evidently it was not  
going to get bitten.  
So William just blindly,  
thoughtlessly reached in  
with this hand,  
grabbed the mouse, or rat,  
to move it into position  
that the snake could bite it.  
And when he did that,  
at that moment,  
the snake struck, and I think  
it just grazed his hand.  
It just brushed his hand,  
you know.

So I was very nearly  
responsible...

for killing William Burroughs

on that trip...

[ Chuckling ]

when he... when he reached in.

Very brave guy, you know,

but not, you know,

I don't think so cautious

as he should have been.

- It's a magnum?

- [ Man ] Yeah.

[ Man ]

He'd go have some cocktails

with Fred and then come out...

and say, "See? My hand

is really steady now."

[ Man 2 ] Yeah.

Well, a few vodka Cokes

will do that for you.

The thing about William...

and Tom does this as well

as I do...

is that he'd be...

"Now, did I tell you

about the"...

And he'd have a drink and be...

And you think

it's gonna go over.

And then he...

He's gotta fall down.

[ Muttering ]

[ Laughter ]

[ Man, Indistinct ]

Now, William, for a while,

rented this cottage.

And one time, I'm told...

I was out of town...

that he put some bales of hay

up against that stone wall

over there.

I heard about it.

I thought, "Oh, my God.

It's a wonder he's still alive."

The bullets went through

the bales of hay

and came right back.

So Patricia tells the story  
that, one time, he was  
out here doing that.  
And he had some bottles  
of black ink apparently  
dangling from strings.  
So the old man's standing here,  
blasting away.  
And suddenly he goes back,  
and there's this great big  
spot on his forehead.  
And of course, the first impulse  
of whoever was with him...  
thought he'd shot himself.  
But then they noticed  
it wasn't red.  
It was black.  
Apparently, a piece  
of the glass from the bottle  
had ricocheted back and hit him.  
It's a miracle that he lived  
as long as he did...  
with all of the things  
that he did.  
Joan Vollmer was  
Edie Kerouac's...  
Parker's roommate.  
Everybody thought that she was  
this incredible, charming,  
intelligent woman...  
and she should meet  
William Burroughs.  
So they started  
to hang out together.  
They did drugs together.  
William was also seeing men,  
and Joan suffered from that.  
And by the time they got  
to Mexico City,  
Joan was doing a lot  
of Benzedrine inhalers...  
and drinking a lot and so on.  
[ Narrator ]  
William Burroughs had just

returned to Mexico City...  
from a long trip  
with Lewis Marker,  
his young boyfriend.  
At a small homecoming party  
thrown by his wife,  
Burroughs drunkenly proposed  
the idea of moving  
to South America...  
where he could hunt wild boar.  
Joan joked that if Bill  
were their hunter,  
they'd starve to death.  
Burroughs, taking the bait,  
dared Joan...  
to show the boys what kind  
of a shot old Bill is,  
la William Tell.  
Putting a gin glass  
on her head,  
she turned sideways,  
giggled and said,  
"I can't look.  
You know I can't stand  
the sight of blood."  
William Burroughs fired  
and missed the glass,  
landing a fatal shot  
through Joan's forehead.  
For somebody like Burroughs  
who began also...  
It's a toy.  
He's playing William Tell  
with a .45, for God's sakes.  
I think they were probably  
drunk or stoned,  
and they were playing around,  
like playing Russian roulette.  
Same kind of thing.  
Put the apple on your head.  
He tried to shoot it off  
and missed.  
I mean, it's hideous.  
It's like a comedy sketch

almost though.  
Allen Ginsberg thought that  
that might have been...  
some kind of a death wish  
on her part.  
I think Allen was very  
emotionally invested...  
in saving William,  
helping William,  
healing William...  
and understanding it himself...  
and not seeing it as,  
you know, an act of...  
complete carelessness  
and violence...  
or that there was some  
strange, dark underpinning.  
But clearly, some energy  
was out of control.

[ Narrator ]

The accident left their  
two children without a mother.  
Julie... Joan's daughter  
from her previous marriage...  
was taken by her grandparents.  
William never saw her again.  
Their son, Billy Burroughs Jr.,  
went on to live a short  
and troubled life.  
Despite William's conflicting  
stories about the incident,  
he managed to leave Mexico  
and never went to prison.  
Of Joan,  
Burroughs later commented,  
"I am forced  
to the appalling conclusion..."  
that I would have never  
become a writer...  
"but for Joan's death."  
[ Burroughs ]  
"There are mistakes  
too monstrous for remorse...  
to tamper or to dally with.

Edward Arlington Robinson.  
Anyone who's never  
made mistakes like that...  
and paid for his mistakes,  
"I trust him little  
in the commerce of the soul."  
The best he could've meant that  
would have been...  
remorse was hubristic.  
To even entertain remorse  
was-was...  
prideful and...  
predicated on the idea  
that you could fix it,  
that you had the power  
to fix it.  
One of his most  
extraordinary pieces...  
is that introduction to Queer.  
Because he said those things  
often here,  
like, in the passing  
of the decades,  
sort of drunk and alone.  
And he'd talk about it  
in terms of something  
that had happened...  
at the moment  
of synchronicity...  
something happening...  
and causing you to have  
a reaction and you don't  
know what it is.  
And he often talked about  
how, in Mexico City,  
he was walking down the street  
and he started crying.  
You know, William  
was very tough.  
He'd cry for 10 seconds.  
And then continued walking  
along those winding streets  
in old Mexico.  
And it happened

three or four times.  
He was walking to meet Joan

**at 5:**

and he didn't know  
why he was crying.  
And only after,  
when she was dead,  
he remembers this.  
And the idea is that  
you put your mind...  
It's a synchronicity  
or whatever that your mind...  
foresees or sees this thing  
that's happening  
in the immediate future...  
and you're reacting to it,  
you're weeping for  
the horror of it.  
[ Man Vocalizing ]  
I have constrained myself...  
I have constrained myself...  
to the realization that...  
[ Patti Smith ]  
Toward the end of his life,  
we all gathered and we all  
performed for him.  
And I decided to read from  
the introduction to *Queer*.  
And I was reading it,  
very concentrative.  
And I tend to improvise  
when I read.  
So in reading something  
so intimate of his,  
I was also aware that he  
would be fully concentrating...  
on how I would read it...  
and what I might  
discover within it.  
And all of a sudden,  
I just went off.  
It's like my tongue was tied,  
and I just started



babbling a bit.  
I miscalculated.  
It was just a few minutes  
or a few...  
just microseconds...  
just...  
And when I finished,  
everybody was...  
You know, it was mo...  
just a split second  
of total silence...  
'cause it was sort of  
a heavy moment.  
And then I finished.  
[ Applause,  
Cheering ]  
And afterwards,  
I went up to William.  
I didn't know whether  
to apologize or...  
I didn't know what to say.  
And he just took my hand,  
and his eyes looked  
almost teary,  
and he just said, "Thank you."  
So I would...  
You know, it's like  
hypnotizing someone.  
I just feel that  
if William had any  
question in his mind...  
whether it was an accident,  
that whatever I channeled...  
whether it be from the air...  
or be from William himself...  
um, helped to set that at rest.  
The negativity of that karma  
propelled him to be a writer.  
He had to, you know,  
fight his way out of  
a black paper bag...  
It was becoming a writer...  
Of the negative karma  
that he...

'Cause he loved Joan.

He's a gay man,

but he had a wife

and he loved her.

They had many... a great...

a great life together.

And it was

a great tragedy for him.

[ Laurie Anderson ]

I don't think that you have

an accident like that...

that doesn't mark you

for life...

mark what it means

to hold a gun,

mark what it means

to play around with it...

when you've done that.

Now, I'm sure that

that accident...

haunted him, for sure.

Yeah.

[ Narrator ]

After killing his wife,

William Burroughs moved

to Tangier, Morocco,

where he struggled

with his heroin addiction.

There, in the form of notes,

journal entries...

and letters to Allen Ginsberg

and Jack Kerouac,

he excavated the literature

that would become the novel

Naked Lunch.

You know, Burroughs is a fairly

foreboding character

in his novels.

It's like, um...

I find Burroughs to be

hilariously funny.

Some people are like,

"Oh, God. Naked Lunch.

It's obscene.

All these guys getting hung.  
All this jissom.  
All this disgusting"...  
You know.  
What's missing from  
that reading of Burroughs...  
is it's totally funny.  
It's like this burlesque,  
but the material  
he's using is, um,  
the raw images  
of the unconscious.  
William Burroughs was alien  
to many people.  
And definitely to mainstream  
Western culture, he was alien.  
And it's only an alien that  
would have the circumspection...  
to write about Western culture  
like he did in Naked Lunch.  
[ Weinreich ]  
Naked Lunch stood out  
because it was so different.  
It was a novel that  
knocked people out  
or repulsed them.  
It also inaugurated  
the whole era of "hip"...  
because it was so subversive  
that it had its own cachet.  
[ Narrator ] In 1962,  
the novel was tried in  
Boston, Massachusetts,  
for obscenity.  
The courts charged  
that it contained  
child murder and pedophilia.  
Burroughs's  
supporting witnesses...  
included Allen Ginsberg  
and Norman Mailer.  
It would be the last major  
literary censorship hearing  
in the United States.

Eventually, in 1966,  
the Massachusetts Supreme Court  
overturned the ban,  
ruling that the book had indeed  
redeeming social value.  
And it was henceforth  
widely published  
in the United States.  
It won all the censorship stuff  
because there were no laws  
against that yet.  
They didn't know gay people  
that did heroin...  
that bragged about it  
and talked about it  
and made it seem appealing.  
That was not on the law books.  
It was thinking up something  
that wasn't even illegal yet.  
And that book  
was so passionate.  
And in the beginning,  
you can't have a better  
press agent than a censor,  
especially in the '50s and '60s.  
This is William speaking  
and under attack...  
for Naked Lunch  
being pornographic.  
So he says, "Certain passages  
in the book that have been  
called pornographic..."  
were written as a tract  
against capital punishment...  
in the manner  
of Jonathan Swift's  
Modest Proposal.  
These sections are intended  
to reveal capital punishment...  
as the obscene, barbaric  
and disgusting anachronism  
that it is.  
As always, the lunch is naked.  
If civilized societies

want to return...  
to the druid hanging rites  
in the sacred grove...  
or to drink blood  
with the Aztecs...  
or feed the gods  
with blood of human sacrifice,  
let them see what they  
actually eat and drink.  
"Let them see what is on the end  
of that long newspaper spoon."  
"A man is carried in naked  
by two Negro bearers..."  
who dropped him  
on the platform...  
with bestial,  
sneering brutality.  
The man wriggles.  
His flesh turns to viscid,  
transparent jelly...  
that drips away  
in green mist"...

[ David Cronenberg ]

I think Burroughs's writings,  
particularly Naked Lunch,  
were quite revolutionary.  
They talked about things  
that nobody talked about,  
especially in America,  
which was very...

I'd say rather more  
sexually repressed than...  
Because of the Puritan  
traditions of America  
and so on.

He really... It wasn't  
just homosexuality.  
I mean, it was just  
his alien sexuality.

[ Burroughs ]

In the '60s,  
it became quite political,  
with the yippies.  
They had a very

definite program.

And most of those objectives  
were realized.

Mm-hmm.

End the Vietnam war.

Uh, legalization of pot.

Uh, end of censorship.

Uh, recognition  
of minority rights.

Mm-hmm.

Most of those objectives,  
as least to some extent.

[ Chanting, Shouting ]

[ Bockris ]

When Bill witnessed an event  
such as that, he wrote about it.

And what you get in the writing  
is what he saw.

He said all the obvious things,  
you know.

It was a fascist state.

It was, uh...

It was frightening.

In Grant Park, when  
the police were approaching,  
he wondered if he'd be able  
to withstand it...

of if he would break and run.

He was worried about that,  
and also he was worried...

about his ability to move  
fast enough to get away.

After all, most people  
were kids,

and he was, like,

in his late 50s

at that point.

[ People Chattering ]

[ Man ]

I gotta go be with them  
on Saturday night...

for a family party on Sunday.

[ Man ]

I think of changing things.

Hare Krishna.

[ Waters ]

Alan Ginsberg

was more of a hippie.

Hippies always got on my nerves.

We were punks without

knowing we were punks.

We looked like hippies,

but we had punk values.

William was much more

up our alley... my friends.

Because he was angry

and caused trouble...

and was not politically correct.

Where Allen was

politically correct

within the hippie movement.

Burroughs was not even

politically correct

in the hippie movement.

[ Bockris ]

There's a real connection

between the Beats and the punks.

The punks really are neo-Beats.

Much of the punk philosophy

or lifestyle or attitude,

"punk" was a very good

word to use.

[ Grunts ]

[ Raucous ]

[ Van Sant ]

Right in that period of time

that I met him, in '75,

his works were influencing

punk rock.

And, I guess,

early queer culture...

was kind of born in punk rock,

I always thought.

[ Bockris ]

Don't forget, he had that

column, "Time of the Assassins",

in Crawdadd magazine

back in those days.

Crawdaddy was a fairly  
widely read rock magazine.  
So, putting himself  
into that context,  
he was opening up the door  
to these younger kids...  
who probably only read  
one of his books,  
like probably Junkie,  
if anything,  
but really kind of adored him  
as the godfather of punk,  
which is what he became.  
And also you have to remember  
that Bill lived on the Bowery,  
five blocks down from CBGB's,  
in an area where many  
of the punk-rock stars lived.  
So he really was kind of  
in that world.

I remember Patti Smith  
at St. Mark's Poetry Project...  
in '74, after a reading,  
ended it by telling everyone...  
that William Burroughs  
was back in town.

"Isn't that great?  
Welcome to New York,  
William Burroughs!"

[ Chattering ]  
William, I was just  
in Amsterdam,  
and I haven't  
played in Amsterdam  
since we were there.  
[ Chattering ]

**[ Strumming:**

He would read in Max's,  
and Patti Smith would  
read or else sing.  
And it was like  
the early punk movement,  
and he was connected to that.



[ Smith ]

He came to CBGB's  
all the time...  
when we were developing  
our work.  
And through the '70s,  
he could be seen sitting there  
like the royalty that he was.  
There are many passages  
in William's books,  
particularly in Naked Lunch  
and The Wild Boys,  
in which he prophesied  
punk rock.

[ Smith ]

William had a vision  
of the future...  
that was parallel  
to punk rock...  
this idea of a pack of boys,  
or a pack of androgynous souls,  
scooting into the future,  
you know, with sores...  
and scarlet fever, visions.  
And just the whole  
movement of Johnny,  
you know, in the Wild Boys.  
And my first album, Horses,  
is littered with  
Burroughs-type references.

[ Vale ] Punk rock was

influenced by Burroughs.  
Because I looked upon punk rock  
as this huge...  
international,  
anti-authoritarian,  
cultural rediscovery  
and re-creation revolution.  
I mean, you were trying  
to up-end all the categories  
and hierarchies.  
You were totally  
anti-authoritarian,  
and you were after these voices

that had been neglected,  
because they weren't  
giving you the values...  
of the middle-class,  
bourgeois society.  
In the sense that punk  
was all about trying  
to tell the truth...  
and be anti-authoritarian  
and be black humor,  
I think Burroughs  
is totally punk rock...  
and a role model.  
It's funny. The punk-rock thing  
was really exciting for him,  
more so than, say,  
counter-culture,  
'60s kind of music.  
I remember, in '77,  
seeing Burroughs.  
He read that piece  
"Bugger the Queen."  
It was so hip that he did that.  
The audience was just  
completely amazed  
that he did that.  
He said, "The English rock group  
the Sex Pistols..."  
wrote a song called  
'God Save the Queen.'"  
I think he commended it.  
He says, "I'd like  
to further the sentiment..."  
with a piece I wrote called  
'Bugger the Queen.'"  
And he would read these verses,  
and then he would, like,  
exclaim each one with  
"Bugger the Queen!"  
The whole audience  
was starting to join in.  
Every time he said it,  
they were, "Bugger the Queen!"  
We went to his house

a couple times and hung out,  
shot Super 8 film  
and photos and whatnot...  
and just kind of hung out  
with William a little bit.  
[ Thurston Moore ]  
He showed us around  
his backyard.  
We saw the different things  
he had going on out there.  
And he built this box  
called the orgone box.  
It was like an outhouse almost  
or something like that  
was what it looked like.  
It was a bunch of plywood  
sheets put together...  
with a little hole  
cut in the door.  
And you would  
sit in there and...  
I think Reich's theory  
was that sitting in there  
would allow you...  
to gather certain accumulations  
of orgone energy,  
as he called it.  
They're kind of hard to explain,  
but I gather they have...  
something to do with him feeling  
like any lacks in one's life  
had something to do...  
with not being able to achieve  
a true and pure orgasm.  
I think he thought  
rock and roll was bullshit.  
It mostly is, you know.  
But then, so are most novels.  
So, you know...  
So, you know...  
But yeah, I don't think he felt  
any great affinity for all that.  
A lot of the pioneers of punk  
had read Burroughs extensively,

like Iggy Pop, Lou Reed...  
and Will Shatter  
from Negative Trend.  
Some of the ideas kind of  
trickled into people's work,  
and then other people  
absorbed that work...  
not knowing how much of it  
had come from Burroughs.  
"Lust for Life" by Iggy Pop  
has Johnny Yen,  
and hypnotizing chickens and...  
I just thought  
it was really cool.  
I wrote a song called  
"Gimme Some Skin,"  
which is one of my most  
depraved-sounding numbers,  
apparently, people say.  
I love it,  
and I talk about him in it.  
I was 23 when I wrote it.  
And there's one  
of his characters,  
in a reference to him.  
And the lyric is,  
Typhoid Mary, she got soul.  
Sucks all night  
on an old asshole.  
Whip it on out, whip it on in.  
Give it to me, honey.  
You gotta gimme some skin.  
And then the second verse is,  
Billy, Billy Lee ain't no fool.  
All the junkies  
think he's cool.  
Typhoid Mary, she got soul  
Sucks all night  
on an old asshole  
She shoots speed  
right up her ass  
She shoots speed  
and she smokes grass  
It's a good vocal.

You should hear it some time.  
[ Mock Screeching ]  
It's particularly...  
I can't even get the words out.  
[ Lee Ranaldo ]  
Certainly someone like Dylan  
took a lot of inspiration,  
as a wordsmith, from stuff that  
Allen and William were doing,  
in the way they were  
approaching language  
and what they were writing...  
you know, a very sort of modern  
approach to just language...  
and using it to uncover  
a different truth.  
And I think that's why people  
in the music community...  
have responded  
to William's work,  
because there were  
a lot of ideas that  
he could take off from.  
One of the early  
Dead Kennedys songs...  
The B-side of our first single  
was "The Man with the Dogs."  
The song itself, the lyrics  
were just not coming together.  
I couldn't figure out how  
I wanted to tell the story...  
or what belonged where, and it  
was just kind of a big mess.  
And so I finally threw up  
my hands and figured,  
what have I got to lose?  
I'm going to try  
the Burroughs method.  
I'm going to cut up every  
single line of this song...  
and move it around  
until I get something I like.  
And sure enough, it worked.  
I am no one

but I'm well known  
For I am the man  
with the dogs  
I stare at you shopping,  
watch while you're walking  
Two dogs run around  
your toes  
You turn around  
Two eyes break you down  
Now, who does that guy  
think he's starin' at?  
Stop in your tracks  
You're bein' laughed at  
Your armored ego is nude  
And I do, and I do  
Crack up 'cause  
I'm gettin' to you...  
Some of the examples of this...  
Sometimes when I realize I'm  
going to do this in advance,  
the rough drafts sometimes have  
to be kept in plastic bags...  
and come out more like this.  
This is "Vulcanus 2000"  
from a later Lard project.  
[ Burroughs ]  
"Fight tuberculosis, folks."  
Christmas eve, an old junkie  
selling Christmas Seals  
on North Park Street.  
'The Priest, ' they called him.  
"Fight tuberculosis, folks."  
[ Bockris ] The medium  
of the counter-culture  
was collaboration,  
beginning with the obvious  
example of a rock group.  
We were having a good old time  
in the Bunker there.  
And in the midst  
of the conversation,  
we got to Marlene Dietrich.  
[ Murmurs, Chuckles ]  
Uh, well...

And he started singing  
"Falling in Love Again"  
in German.  
And to me, that signaled  
the beginning of the record.  
Well, here's another William.  
[ Burroughs Singing In German ]  
[ Rifle Cocks ]  
[ Gunshot ]  
[ John Giorno ]  
It's not so easy just to...  
if you're a really great writer  
like William...  
to go over  
and work with visuals,  
and he succeeded.  
Somehow it flowered  
at the end of his life,  
and he was able to do all of  
these great visual works.  
William always claimed that  
it was Brion's death in '86...  
that liberated him  
to become an artist.  
[ Aldrich ]  
We had been shooting out here  
for several years.  
And one day, William  
and the people that would  
drive him out there showed up.  
And they had some cans  
of spray paint.  
So they took the cans  
of spray paint...  
and they suspended them  
in front of the plywood.  
And William started  
blasting the spray paint  
over the plywood.  
And that was the start,  
at least to my knowledge,  
of the shotgun art.  
[ Gunshot ]  
[ Anderson ]

In my own feelings about guns...  
over-the-top,  
fake macho stuff.  
It didn't have, for me,  
richness as a work of art  
that his writing did.  
Fake macho is funny to me.  
Part of art is all irony.  
It's making fun of everything.  
Contemporary art  
is about ruining things.  
So if he's ruining what  
masculinity and guns are, good.  
[ Man ] You mentioned your art.  
Is it still the shotgun art,  
or is it...  
[ Burroughs ]  
[ Man ]  
Perfect.  
That was a good one.  
[ Aldrich ]  
I went to the L.A. County Museum  
where he had an art show.  
And in the courtyard  
of the museum, there were  
all these glitterati.  
And ABSOLUT had a booth and  
they were serving "Burroughs,"  
'cause, you know, his drink  
is vodka and Coke.  
And so, after we had  
the little soiree,  
they took us up  
for a tour of the show.  
So we started  
going down the line  
of all of the paintings,  
and we got to one which  
was this piece of plywood  
that had this angle on it.  
Well, I remember the guy's roof  
that the plywood came off.  
And I had to chuckle  
because here it was,



this scrap of plywood that had  
been sitting over there,  
and now it's got a price tag  
of, like, \$7,000 on it...  
and it's sitting in  
the L.A. County Museum of Art.

"John Wheeler  
of 'recognition physics' says,"  
'Nothing exists  
until it is observed.'

The artist observes something  
invisible to others...  
and puts on paper or canvas...  
"something that did not exist  
until he observed it."

[ Waters ]

Obviously he had some  
"shorthoods" as a father.  
Even though his son's books,  
I think, were really,  
really good.

He was very, very talented.  
But you read that biography,  
it was a terrible, terrible,  
wounded life.

So was William  
a good father? No.

[ Narrator ] Billy Burroughs Jr.  
had little contact  
with his father,  
whom he tried to emulate.

His father continued  
to neglect him,  
so Allen Ginsberg  
often came to Billy's rescue.  
Billy wrote two books about his  
struggle with alcohol and drugs.  
He was one of the first people  
in the United States  
to get a liver transplant.  
But by 1981, at the age of 33,  
Billy was dead  
of acute alcoholism.

[ Giorno ] He was here,

and James was here,  
and I was upstairs...  
when Billy died,

**10:**

James comes upstairs and knocks  
on my door and says, "John,  
I have to talk to you."  
Something very serious happened.  
Billy has died."

So we go downstairs and I come  
in here, and I hugged William.  
And it's the only  
time in my life  
I ever saw William crying.  
I hugged him, and as I'm hugging  
him, there are these things,  
these great tears coming...

Not for very long.  
I mean, William is William.  
But he cried for a few minutes,  
and we talked a little,  
and then he went into  
the bedroom and closed his door.  
It was deep grief.  
He was devastated.  
And he felt incredibly guilty  
about that...

that he knew he hadn't  
been present enough  
in William Jr.'s life,  
had ignored him  
for years on end...  
and was finally  
becoming his friend,  
and it was too late.  
And William Jr. was trying  
to emulate his father  
for approval...  
in the most destructive  
possible ways,  
in the most simplistic ways.

If I become a junkie and write  
a book about a drug,

then I'll be like Dad,  
and Dad will love me.  
And it was a tragic situation...  
to see the youngest William  
destroying himself,  
very publicly,  
in front of William Sr...  
to try and be accepted  
as an equal,  
as a part of the beatnik family  
rather than the blood family.  
And William just didn't know  
how to deal with that,  
how to express himself.

[ Narrator ]

After Billy's death,  
Burroughs adopted his companion  
and secretary, James Grauerholz.  
Together, the two left New York  
and moved to Lawrence, Kansas,  
where William spent  
the remainder of his life.  
Which way do you want  
to go back?

[ Indistinct ]

[ Grauerholz ]

I came to Lawrence  
with the intention...  
of luring Burroughs  
to Lawrence.

Because he was reaching an age  
where it was kind of time  
to retire.

Oh, this layout...

Expensive layout.

Look at that place.

A pig.

[ Grant Hart ]

It was an alternative to  
the heroin scene of the Bowery.  
And I think James undoubtedly  
saved William,  
if not from drugs,  
from some other misadventure.

William and Bockris  
might fantasize...  
about being these impenetrable,  
gray men with canes,  
fighting off  
young would-be attackers,  
But he was vulnerable, and...  
An old man with a cane is...  
just as weak as an old man  
without a cane.

I'm on the way  
to the cemetery myself.

[ Man, Chuckles ]

I bought a plot  
yesterday, man.

[ Woman On Microphone ]

What's your personal belief  
on death?

Personal belief on death.

- [ Burroughs ] Well, um, hmm.

- [ Audience Chuckles ]

[ Woman ] I was just going  
to say, those monsters are  
projections of your own mind.  
Exactly. Exactly, yes.

Not external.

He certainly became  
much more...

explicitly lovable, you know,  
in his final year.

Gentle and sweet tempered.

Not that he was so cantankerous  
and difficult before, but he...

There was a transformation.

- [ Acoustic Guitar ]

- [ Patti Smith Singing,  
Indistinct ]

[ Waldman ] I talked to William  
when Allen died,  
and it was incredibly hard.  
And he, you know, died  
just months later.

It was as if there was some...

Well, with both of them,

these sparks went out  
of the world.  
[ Patti Smith ] Not here  
But near  
When we saw James Grauerholz  
just after William had passed,  
we met in Ginsberg's apartment  
in the East Village,  
and he showed me...  
a picture of William  
just after he'd died...  
that someone had taken.  
And... it really upset me.  
It surprised me.  
I started crying.  
And we said to James,  
"What sort of frame of mind  
was he in when he died?"  
And James said,  
"Well, look what he wrote,  
the last thing he wrote  
in his journal."  
And we said, "Oh, thank God."  
He managed to get there  
before he passed away."  
He finally managed to say that.  
But it took him a lifetime...  
before he could say out loud...  
that love was part  
of an equation of existence.  
I do believe in kind of saints  
that you can look up to...  
when you're young  
and you're starting out...  
and you don't fit in anywhere  
and you want to do something  
in the arts.  
And you know really early  
you want to do it,  
and you know that  
you're gonna cause trouble  
with what you want to do.  
And you don't care really.  
You don't want to fit in.

People don't like you in school,  
but you don't care.  
You don't want  
to be those people,  
and you don't want  
to hang out with them  
in the first place.  
So William, for those people,  
will always be almost  
a religious figure.  
And I think that's wonderful,  
and I think he would like that.

[ Acoustic Guitar ]

[ Patti Smith ]

Ours is just another skin  
Simply slips away  
You can rise above it  
It will shed easily  
It all will come out fine  
I've learned it  
line by line  
One common wire  
One silver thread  
All that you desire  
Rolls on ahead  
Like a ship in a bottle  
Held up to the sun  
Sails ain't goin' nowhere  
You can count every one  
Until it crashes  
unto the earth  
Simply slips away  
You can hide in the open  
Or just disappear  
It all will come out fine  
I've learned it  
line by line  
One common wire  
One silver thread  
All that you desire  
Rolls on ahead  
Ours is just a craving  
And a twist of the wrist  
Will undo the stopper

With abrupt tenderness  
Die, little sparrow  
And awake singin'  
It all will come out fine  
I've learned it  
line by line  
One common wire  
One silver thread  
All that you desire  
Rolls on ahead  
Ooh, ooh, ooh  
[ Ends ]  
Closed-Captioned by