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THE NIGHT I LET BUKOWSKI LIVE

(for Neeli Cherry)

Tony Quagliano

I

Jackie Leonard
used to tell of the time
he was a lifeguard
"You were a lifeguard?"
"Sure, at Coney Island"
"Did you ever save anybody's life?"
"Sure, I remember one time
a man was flailing his arms
and yelling help! help!
his noggin bobbing there
in the waves
no one else saw him or heard him
the ocean was rough
I rushed in, cut through
the powerful riptide
and when I got close
I threw a hatchet at his head
and missed
it saved his life"

II

at the apartment of Linda King
that night of the party
of *Love Poems*
when I let two fools rush in
to save Buk's life
my car didn't start
but luckily, I had
my blue ox outside
saddled and tethered
to a Silverlake palm tree
and I rumbled home
in the cool L.A. dawn

Honolulu, Hawaii

Postscript:

I knew Bukowski very well, and we got along fine. He was mostly disdainful of the gaggle of third-rate and fourth-rate Buk-imitators in the L.A. area and elsewhere who tried to hang out. He used to say—this was the late 60s and early 70s—"I, Bukowski, am still the best Bukowski." I think one reason he and I got along so well was because he would call me and invite me to parties and literary gatherings, and usually I would decline. I think this surprised him.

I edited the special Bukowski issue of *Small Press Review*, which appeared in 1973. (I hear it's now a rare and valuable "underground" item.)

I always liked Neeli Cherkovski, who was then known as Neeli Cherry, partly because he was a serious hard-working writer and partly because of his obvious affection for and loyalty to Hank. Neeli was generally resented by the Buk-imitators, partly because of his closeness to Buk, but largely because he rejected their poems for Buk's magazine, *Laugh Literary and Man the Humping Guns*, which Neeli co-edited and for which he was the first filter of incoming manuscripts. (Later, poet Harold Norse also became a co-editor.) *Laugh Literary* was published by Hatchetman Press, hence one reference in my poem "The Night I Let Bukowski Live."

My poem derived from the story Neeli tells on pp. 239-241 of his biography of Hank, which I just came across a few months ago, though apparently it was originally published in 1991. The facts in his story are true (who knew Neeli was listening and observing everything so closely!). But Neeli misses the histrionics, the *play* in the thing. Buk usually got bored and liked to instigate some drama. He and I had similar routines before.

In Neeli's telling I come off as a cartoon, as does Bukowski come to think of it! So, my poem spoofs Neeli's depiction as a Bunyanesque tale.

Incidentally, and not unimportantly, Linda King was an extraordinarily beautiful, vivacious, desirable and flirtatious woman. A dangerous combo. And a fine sculptor. A photo of her sensitive bust of Bukowski became the cover of my *Small Press Review*.

Tony Quagliano, March 21, 1998.