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The Barfly and the Beatnik: the literary relationship of Charles Bukowski and Kay 'Kaja' Johnson

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Charles Bukowski and Kay 'Kaja' Johnson's literary relationship. Despite Bukowski's outsider status within the literary world, he corresponded widely with literary figures, including Johnson. Johnson was an early and active member of the Beat Generation who has largely been overlooked in literary histories. Recently scholarly interest in Johnson and her works , including her correspondence with Bukowski, has increased. However, due to the lack of primary sources and biographical information relating to Johnson, these scholarly works have understandably contained minor errors. This article aims to correct these errors, provide a fuller account of the Bukowski-Johnson relationship, and explore how it influenced, and was represented in, their respective literary productions.

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Introduction

Charles Bukowski occupies a distinct place within the history of twentieth Century American literature. Despite being 'a hugely popular figure in American letters', scholarly interest in Bukowski has been surprisingly low.[1] As Kirsch has argued, although Bukowski's works have been very commercially successful, 'selling millions of books' which have 'been translated into more than a dozen languages', his writings are, nevertheless, generally absent from canonical collections of literature, such as *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*.[2] This disconnect has led Bukowski to gain a reputation for being somewhat of a literary outsider. Bukowski's outsider status has been further cemented by the difficulty of neatly placing his work into any one particular literary movement. Moreover, Bukowski

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himself was keen to cultivate the view that he was the 'ultimate outsider', not least through portraying himself as anti-social and isolated from the rest of the literary world.[3] Indeed, he was the recipient of *The Outsider* magazine's first, and only, 'outsider-of-the-year award' for 1962.[4] In accepting the award, Bukowski stated, 'I feel pretty much OUTSIDE, as about as OUTSIDE as you can get.'[5] However, as Moore has argued, Bukowski's curated persona as an outsider masked a man who was not only 'better read and more cultured than most people realise' but also someone who was deeply engaged with the literary world he inhabited.[6] Although he was somewhat geographically removed from the literary hotspots of late twentieth Century America, he corresponded widely and frequently with influential literary figures. For instance, Bukowski corresponded with Douglas Blazek, John William Corrington, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Sheri Martinelli, Harold Norse, Jon and Lou Webb, and Carl Weissner, amongst many others. One of the lesser-known figures he communicated with was the writer and artist Kay 'Kaja' Johnson.

Johnson is a relatively obscure figure within the history of American literature. Even though she was an early and active member of the Beat Generation, she has largely 'slipped through the cracks of literary histories'.[7] For many years, the only work dedicated to Johnson was Weddle's article which provided a short overview of her life and work.[8] However, in the past few years scholarly interest in Johnson and her literary works, as well as her correspondence with Charles Bukowski, has increased. In 2020, Belletto dedicated a section of the chapter 'The Women Who Said Something' to exploring Johnson's life and writings.[9] This section represents the most sustained critical engagement with Johnson's work to this point. In 2021, Paylor published a research note which explored Johnson's correspondence with Charles Bukowski and the influence it had on their respective works.[10] In 2022, Hemmer examined Johnson's literary relationship with Charles Bukowski, the Loujon Press, and Harold Norse.[11] In 2023, Davidson also briefly examined Johnson's relationship with Bukowski as well as her conception of love.[12] So far, these are the only scholarly works which dedicate more than a cursory examination focus on Johnson's writings.[13] Due to the lack of access to primary sources and information relating to Johnson, these works contain errors. Whilst none of the errors contained in these works seriously undermine them, it is important to correct them before they permeate throughout the small but growing literature on Johnson. Accordingly, one of the aims of this article is to perform this task. This is achieved through giving a fuller account of Bukowski and Johnson's relationship and how it influenced their respective writings.

In so doing, this article aims to satisfy several additional aims. In respect of Bukowski, this article aims to support a more nuanced view of Bukowski's personality. As Charleson has claimed, Bukowski has a reputation for having

been a 'vulgar' and misogynistic 'dirty old man'.[14] Whilst not completely exonerating Bukowski of these charges, this article does present a more complex picture of him. It also helps to confirm the identity of the person who inspired a handful of his poems. In respect of Johnson, this article intends to recover the subterranean influence that a long-ignored woman beat poet had on what Debritto described as 'a hugely popular figure in American letters'.[15] It does so, by not simply portraying Johnson as a muse in the process of male literary production, but rather demonstrating that she was a literary influence on Bukowski. As Russ reminds us, the literary influence women have had on others, particularly men, has largely been downplayed, omitted, devalued, and/or ignored in contemporary literary criticism.[16] This article aims to go some small way to redressing this injustice.

The Bukowski-Johnson relationship: available texts

Unfortunately, although they corresponded for more than a decade, relatively few letters sent between Bukowski and Johnson are now accessible. Three brief letters from Johnson to Bukowski are included in the latter's papers held at the Department of Special Research Collections, University of California, Santa Barbara.[17] They were written between 1964 and 1967. Almost all known letters which survive sent from Bukowski directly to Johnson, which amounting to sixteen letters, are held in private collections. Fourteen of these letters were written between July and November 1961, and were recently auctioned.[18] The fifteenth was written in 1964 and is currently held within a private collection. An additional letter from 1964 written by Bukowski and intended for Johnson, but forwarded onto the Webbs first, can be found in Cooney's edited edition of Bukowski's letters, *Scream From the Balcony*.[19] It is unclear if Johnson ever received this letter. Fortunately, this article has been able to draw from all these sources. The rest of the pair's correspondence to one another is currently lost. Nevertheless, despite the available correspondence between the two being frustratingly scant, the pair also documented their epistolary relationship in their letters to other figures. For instance, they both mentioned one another to their mutual acquaintance, Jon Webb. From such mentions a more complete understanding of the Bukowski-Johnson relationship, and its dynamics, can be uncovered.

In addition to their letters, this article draws upon the handful of the pair's poems which were inspired by their correspondence. There is currently disagreement within the secondary literature over how many poems of Bukowski's were inspired by his epistolary relationship with Johnson. Davidson identified two of Bukowski's poems that were inspired by his relationship with Johnson. Paylor identified the same two poems plus an additional

third poem. However, at least four of Bukowski's poems were inspired by Johnson.

The earliest of the four Bukowski poems is 'For a Woman Who Might Some Day Become a Nun'. Although composed in 1963, it was only published after being discovered, along with other poems, in a gold-painted file box in a pile of rubbish on a Los Angeles street in the mid-1990s.[20] The poem was eventually published in *New Poems Book Four*[21] (alternatively titled *Slouching Toward Nirvana*) in 2005.[22] It is comprised of a 20 line heterometric stanza followed by a second tercet line heterometric stanza. The poem contains Bukowski's reflections on a female poet's rejection of a monastical lifestyle, his carnal desire for her, and their intellectual discourse.

The second poem is 'Letter From Too Far', which was originally published in *Crucifix in a Deathhand* in 1965.[23] It was later reprinted, under the same name, in *Burning in Water Drowning in Flame* (1974).[24] The free verse poem consists of 30 lines parsed into 6 heterometric stanzas of varying lines. It recounts a bricolage of late night, absent minded, thoughts Bukowski had about a woman with whom he was in correspondence.

The third poem, 'The End' was written in 1972.[25] It first appeared, in a slightly edited form, in 1999s *What Matters Most is How Well You Walk Through the Fire* with the title 'La Femme Finie'.[26] It was later republished, unedited, with its original title in volume one of the *Back To The Machinegun* series of unedited manuscripts.[27] The unedited version of the poem is made up of a single heterometric sestet written in free verse. The edited version includes an additional line of a single word: 'now'. The poem itself, is a lament on a correspondence which has seemingly come to an end.

The final of the four poems is entitled 'An Almost Made Up Poem About A Lady Who Has Vanished From My Mailbox', which was published in 1974 in the 'little magazine' *Aunt Harriet's Flair for Writing Review*.[28] It was later republished as 'An Almost Made Up Poem' in the Collection *Love Is A Dog From Hell* in 1977.[29] More recently, it was included in *Essential Bukowski: Poetry* (2016).[30] It is the longest of the four poems; being made up of a single heterometric stanza comprising 39 lines. In line with the other poems, it is also written in free verse. It contains some of Bukowski's most popular lines of poetry.[31] The poem is a rumination on the tragic life of a female poet with whom Bukowski once corresponded.

It should be noted that, although not directly inspired by Johnson, there is also a passing mention to 'kaja' in Bukowski's short story entitled 'The Day We Talked About James Thurber'. The story presents a semi-autobiographical account of Bukowski's time living with a French poet, Andre. The character of Andre appears to be based on émigré American writer Harold Norse, and the story is inspired by their friendship. The story was originally published in 1970 in the *Evergreen Review*.[32] It has subsequently been republished in the collections *Erections, Ejaculations and General Tales of*

Ordinary Madness (1972)[33] and *The Most Beautiful Woman in Town and Other Stories* (1983)[34]

This article also draws from the only poem of Johnson's which is known to have been directly inspired by Bukowski. The poem has been known by the title 'DEAD CAT*POEM FOR BUKOWSKI'. Although written in 1967, it was not published until 1998 when it appeared in Perdido Press's limited-edition pamphlet *Kaja*.[35] There is some uncertainty over this poem. As Davidson noted, it is claimed in the pamphlet that the poem was 'from the collection of Gypsy Lou Webb'.[36] However, the poem, written as a letter, is one of the three letters of Johnson's found in Bukowski's archival papers. Accordingly, it is uncertain whether Bukowski or Lou (and Jon) Webb were the original recipient of the poem. As will be explored later, who the intended recipient of the letter was has led to two competing interpretations of the poem. Additionally, the version of the poem published in *Kaja*, and quoted by Paylor and Davidson, has a very minor transcription error. In the version of the poem housed in the Bukowski archive, the title of the poem does not include an asterisk. Instead it includes two 'X's which have been used to cover up a typographical error. It seems Johnson typed 'DEAD CAT B' before obscuring the B with two Xs and going on to complete the title 'POEM FOR BUKOWSKI'.[37] Accordingly, the title of the poem is likely meant to be 'DEAD CAT POEM FOR BUKOWSKI'.

Becoming Buk and Kaja

Even though Bukowski and Johnson came from very different backgrounds, they shared many similar life experiences. Bukowski was born Heinrich Karl Bukowski in Andernach, Germany, on 16 August 1920. His father was an American soldier stationed in the area and his mother was a local woman.[38] Shortly after his birth the family moved to California. Bukowski had a difficult childhood. He was bullied by other children because of his German heritage.[39] At home he had a strict upbringing. His father was abusive and would inflict 'regular beatings for the slightest infractions'.[40] According to Moore, Bukowski's treatment by other children and this father meant he 'grew up a lonely and sullen boy'.[41]

Until now, little has been known about Johnson's early life. It has been claimed that she was born somewhere in Missouri or in New Orleans, Louisiana.[42] These claims are incorrect. She was born Katherine May Johnson on 4 September 1924 in Des Moines, Iowa.[43] In contrast to Bukowski, Johnson was born into an affluent family. Her father was a doctor, and her mother was a concert violinist and violin teacher.[44] Nevertheless, Johnson's early life was also turbulent. Her father died from tuberculosis when she was just three years old.[45] Her mother died by suicide when Johnson was 11 years old.[46] After the death of her mother, Johnson lived with her maternal

grandmother before she too died, in somewhat mysterious circumstances. As Johnson would later write,

> My mother's mother was a grandmother
> when they found
> her body in a river.
> Did she fall, or did she jump?[47]

Johnson would spend the rest of her adolescence with her paternal grandparents. The tragedies Johnson experienced in early life, coupled with frequent moves across the US, meant she also grew up lonely. Her loneliness led her to find solace in literature. She alluded to this in a line from her work *The Emerald City*: 'There floats my childhood on a raft, there go the coffins of my orphanage, the orange creates of books I've read […]'.[48] The works of Walt Whitman particularly resonated with the young Johnson. As she later recalled in her self-published poem 'My Three Christs',

> What I am, when I am a poem,
> is because of my lovers.
> Because of Walt Whitman who waited
> to talk to me after supper
> when the dishes were finished.
> Because of the poems he wrote
> personally for me.
> Because he believed that I would come.
> Because he said, 'I will not tell
> everyone
> but I will tell you … .'
> Because he told me.
> Because he loved me.
> Because I listened, at the time of my
> life
> when I was just seventeen
> and nobody else
> would wait for me after supper
> to walk with me in fragrant dark,
> and nobody else
> would love me in my passionate
> adolescent virginity.[49]

Bukowski's childhood loneliness also led him to develop a passion for literature. In Junior High, he began to read authors such as Sinclair Lewis, Upton Sinclair, D. H. Lawrence, and Sherwood Anderson to name but a few.[50] Bukowski also began writing around this time. He would begin to write in earnest upon his enrolment at Los Angeles City College in 1939 where he took art, journalism, and literature courses. By early 1941, however, he had left without attaining a degree. It would be in university at Johnson also began to take writing seriously. In 1944, during her

freshman year at Cornell College, she would publish one of her first pieces of writing entitled 'You Don't Know' in the student literary journal *The Husk*.[51] Bukowski's first published work appeared just a few months earlier.[52] He would publish regularly from then onwards. Initially, his published work garnered little attention. To support himself at the time, Bukowski worked as series of manual jobs. As the brief 'about the author' which accompanied his first work notes, he had worked as 'a clerk in the post office, a stockroom boy for Sears Roebuck, a truck-loader in a bakery' and 'as a package-wrapper and box-filler in the cellar of a ladies' sportswear shop.'[53]

Johnson appears to have left Cornell College at the end of her freshman year and moved to New Orleans where she became a copyrighter.[54] In New Orleans, she came to be known by the moniker 'Kaja' and gradually became a notable figure within the city's artistic and literary scene. During this time, she become acquainted with people such as Jon and Lou Webb, owners of the Loujon Press; the restaurateur and art collector, JoAnn Clevenger; and the activist and editor, Jeanne Bagby, amongst many others. Whilst in New Orleans, Johnson was known more for her painting than her writing. She did not publish again until 1950.[55] From then on, she continued to publish prose and poems in 'little magazines' throughout the next two decades.

Growing bored in New Orleans, Johnson would move to New York City in the mid-1950s. As Gitin claimed, there she became 'one of the first active women in the "[Beat] movement"'.[56] Nonetheless, Johnson's time in New York was short lived. She moved back to New Orleans at the end of the decade and rekindled her old acquaintances, not least with Jon and Lou Webb. Towards the end of the 1950s, Bukowski's literary output and reputation steadily increased. At the turn of the next decade, he published his first chapbook *Flower, Fist and Bestial Wail* (1960). Around this time, Bukowski began to correspond with Jon and Lou Webb. The Webb's Loujon Press would later publish two collections of his poetry; *It Catches My Heart In Its Hands* (1963) and *Crucifix in a Deathhand* (1965). Before that, however, Bukowski published in issue one the Loujon Press's poetry journal *The Outsider* in January 1960. He contributed eleven poems to the issue. The issue also featured an excerpt from Johnson's epic poem *The Emerald City* (published under her moniker 'Kaja'). Within this issue, Bukowski and Johnson's poetry were accompanied by works from notable literary figures such as, Gregory Corso, Diane di Prima, Allen Ginsberg, Peter Orlovsky, Walter Lowenfels, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Henry Miller, and William Burroughs. Indeed, Bukowski and Johnson were two of only a handful of authors to publish in every issue of *The Outsider*. As Weddle notes, the Webbs seem to have taken on Bukowski and Johnson as special literary projects.[57] Given this, it is perhaps surprising that the pair never

met; especially given the fact that Bukowski visited the Webbs in New Orleans on two separate occasions.[58] He would later reflect on not meeting Johnson in the poem 'An Almost Made Up Poem About A Lady Who Has Vanished from My Mailbox', in which he lamented that they had once been just one half block apart from each other.[59]

Nevertheless, it is likely through the Webb's that Bukowski and Johnson began to correspond with one another. Their correspondence appears to have begun in early 1961 and lasted less than a decade.

Buk and Kaja: an epistolary relationship

Johnson described their early letters to one another as 'poetic'.[60] In them they discussed a wide range of topics. Many were prosaic. They often discussed their daily lives, music, and where they had submitted their work for publication. One of the trivialities was Johnson's bad tooth.[61] Johnson also mentioned her bad tooth in one of her 'Poems from Paris', remarking: 'I have to have a tooth pulled'.[62] However, they often wrote to one another about more contemplative topics. For instance, they frequently discussed their mental health. Johnson described herself as an 'ecstatic-depressive' and claimed she was 'not always available, nor able to cope with everything'. [63] 'Ecstatic depression' is an antiquated name for bipolar disorder.[64] Although Johnson's letters from this period are currently lost, from Bukowski's responses it is clear she was struggling with her mental health. In a letter from July 1961, Bukowski sought to console Johnson and suggest ways to improve her state of mind. He wrote,

> 'You k. must not have tears at night. When you are feeling bad, keep beer around. Get up in the middle of the night and read something dull. What else is there? And drink your beer. Wait. Bunch up your pillow and listen to the night sounds. Rats in the garbage. Trains. Fish eating fish. Late loves rattling around. New Orleans is better for this than Los Angeles because New Orleans goes further back. Night is the best time of all for it is the only time they don't have hold of you, and they only way they have hold of you is when you think it, and you will think about it enough in the daylight to do the duty of perspective.'[65]

Bukowski was also open about his own mental health struggles to Johnson. They appeared to stem from his fear that he would not succeed as a writer and would lose his passion for writing. At the time, Bukowski was in his early forties and, although his reputation as a writer was growing, he was still working at the Post Office. As he confessed to Johnson, 'I am not mad for print, I am not that way, only sometimes I feel I am rotting inside and that is the worst, of course; I mean the fight going out, and the lights.'[66] Indeed, Bukowski wrote to Johnson about his suicidal ideations. In the same letter in which he sought to console Johnson he noted,

> 'I will not jump off any tall buildings. I will not go that way. I don't think I will, right now. I turned on the gas one time without lighting it and I fell asleep but woke up with a headache and turned it off. This was about 3 years ago.'[67]

The pair also debated topics such as the nature of poetry. Johnson seems to have held a fairly broad conception of what constituted a poem. For instance, it seems that she proposed a letter could be a poem. Bukowski disagreed. He argued, that 'a poem is a poem and letter is a letter'.[68] For Bukowski,

> 'Each poem, I think, should be as close to a suicide note as possible, saying what the mind must say and why, and this doesn't mean you can't laugh or relax and that it must be right ON POINT, but, god damn it, why are we wasting so much time saying nothing?'[69]

Despite Johnson's letters to Bukowski from this time being currently lost, from her surviving letters to others from the period, it's likely that she wrote in her typical open, energetic, and sporadically bombastic style. In return, Bukowski was generally candid, compassionate, and reflective in his letters. Occasionally he was condescending, often calling Johnson 'gal' and 'babyee' and correcting her spelling.[70] Yet when writing to Sheri Martinelli, he was belittling of Johnson. For instance, despite being just four years older than Johnson, Bukowski described Johnson as 'just a child'.[71] Whilst unkind, such disparaging remarks may have been an attempt by Bukowski to curry favour with Martinelli, who at the time was a much more established literary figure than him and who was caustic, if incoherent, in her criticism of Johnson. For example, as she wrote in one letter to Bukowski in response to the sample of Johnson's work he had sent her,

> 'I needed something new to chew on & writ th' gal letter to straighten her exposed cunt that she taketh for a mind … she has an undressed & pissyassed mind … poor infant sittin' on the front steps playing with herself … '[72]

Bukowski questioned whether, in part, Martinelli's utter distain for Johnson was due to a fear of competition from another woman writer. As he mused to Jon Webb about her criticism of Johnson, 'I don't know if its another woman on the scene that bothers her or wot'.[73] Nevertheless, although he mostly acquiesced to Martinelli over her criticism of Johnson, he did keep subtly promoting Johnson's work to her.[74] Moreover, he did urge Martinelli to go 'easy on' [75] Johnson claiming that she 'can't be all bad'[76] and insisted that she was a 'good woman'.[77] Regardless of Bukowski's condescension of Johnson, through their letters the pair built up an affectionate and intimate relationship. In fact, Johnson quickly came to depend on her correspondence with Bukowski to provide an escape from her increasing loneliness and disillusion with New Orleans. She would later describe her correspondence with Bukowski (and Corso) from this period as 'my lifeline love letters.'[78] In addition to their letters, Bukowski and Johnson exchanged writings,

artworks, and photographs during the early phase of their correspondence. Bukowski praised the paintings Johnson sent and, according to his poem 'Letter From Too Far', kept a photograph of her by his radio. [79]

Through their early correspondence, the pair became strong advocates for one another's work. Writing to Jon Webb after the publication of issue one of *The Outsider,* Johnson asked

> 'how you pull the guts out of Bukowski, i mean how do you do it? you are really an editor. how did you get it out of him so whole? So perfect? Cesarean operations? […] anyhow you can sure pull the poems outa him. and this sick leave is right from the the guts. i think try to make him too lyrical like me. he is really like you a very gutty guy.'[80]

Johnson went so far as to list Bukowski amongst her favourite poets, stating that she was 'in love with rilke, & bukowski. & walt whitman.'[81] Indeed, she was so enamoured with Bukowski's work, she attempted to publish some of his poems under her own New School of the Spirit Child Press.[82] Bukowski was lukewarm to the idea, seemingly preferring to publish with more established publishers.[83] As a result, Johnson's efforts were ultimately unsuccessful. The poems which she intended to publish would eventually appear in *It Catches My Heart In Its Hands* (1963) and *Crucifix in a Deathhand* (1965), published by the Loujon Press. Yet, if she had convinced him, she would have been only the second person to publish a collected work by Bukowski. Despite seemingly being reluctant to publish with Johnson, Bukowski was similarly enthusiastic to Jon Webb about Johnson's work in *The Outsider*. He stated, 'I though[t] kaja one of the best, but then it is always the unknowns who come on while the others grow fat under their names'.[84] Bukowski also promoted Johnson's work to other editors.[85] He would later record the high regard in which he held Johnson as a writer, as well as his promotion of his literary output in the lines in the poem 'An Almost Made Up Poem About A Lady Who Has Vanished From My Mailbox'.[86]

It has been suggested that Bukowski's passion for Johnson's literary output quickly waned.[87] However, this does not appear to be the case. Unlike Bukowski, Johnson did not have a fixed literary style. Instead, she often experimented. According to Bukowski, Johnson was at her best when she 'keeps it simple'.[88] Insight into what Bukowski meant by this can be found in his comments regarding Johnson's contributions to issue two of *The Outsider*. He declared, 'I liked: Kaja, eyow yes. This girl burning something good, she so admires Corso but she far outdoing Corso. But don't tell her, for Christ's sake.'[89] Although issue two of *The Outsider* contained five poems by Johnson, Bukowski was specifically referring to her 'Poems from Paris'. As he wrote to Johnson, 'I think your poem IN HEAVEN THEY HAVE ROOMS is one of your very best and I have written to Jon [Webb] to tell him so.'[90] Bukowski praised the poem

because it was written from Johnson's own point of view and in her own, distinctive, voice. It did not seek to imitate the style of other writers. As he stated 'I like it more when you get away from Whitman and into kaja. We have had Whitman.'[91]

Bukowski was much less keen on Johnson's more experimental work. Indeed, he was extremely critical of the exerpts from Johnson's 'novel-length experimental poem called Outlines' which he read.[92] As he confessed to Jon Webb

> 'ah, well, I have gazed lightly upon the enclosed kaja and found its temper did not bid me to cast coins upon the air. I will give it a fuller reading now, try again. This girl lives in a walkup room in paris, 6 up, and she watches wharves and tugboats or what on the Seine and she quit working to become a saint, and all this breathes good intent, but sometimes intent is disinfected by lack of proper talent.'[93]

It should be noted, however, that Jon Webb had solicited Bukowski's feedback on Johnson's writing. Indeed, Bukowski cautioned Webb not to put too much stock into his opinions of Johnson's work. As he wrote, 'I hope you understand, and hell you must, if I think it's a bad poem, that doesn't make it a bad poem, or the other way around.'[94] Nevertheless, he provided an extensive critique of the work Webb sent. His main criticism was that Johnson had adopted a writing style which attempted to blend biblical imagery and Whitman's phraseology. As he contended,

> 'I get the feeling that I am reading something that has been written by somebody who has just finished reading:
>
> 1: the bibele, or et. ergo, the bible, an'
> 2: finished it off with a quick reading of LEAVES OF GRASS'[95]

The problem Bukowski had with such a style was that it felt forced. He also believed it veered too close to mimicking Whitman and, thereby, was unoriginal. Moreover, he contended that the style felt antiquated and, as a result, failed to resonate with contemporary readers. He admitted to Webb,

> 'I don't know how it was in the old days, but I have a funny idea that now saints don't try too hard to be saints […] Whitman as a good boy, although a homo, and I guess the bible will outlive us all. But somehow this kaja thing is full of past shadows and words that do not somehow fit. Ya, I know about the Eternal Truths, but I also know that some truths change, the words changes and our ways of using them […]'[96]

Such criticism of Johnson's work was painful for Bukowski to deliver. As he confessed to Jon Webb,

> 'It is a hard thing to say because I know kaja from her letters, but she would say the same of me if I failed her. And so we keep going, and are able to drink our

> beer and smoke, and it is hot, even the spiders sleep in their webs, but really, there's nothing unusual in not liking a poem, or dying.'[97]

It is not clear if Bukowski shared his critques with Johnson herself.

In the year the pair began writing to each other, Johnson had grown increasingly lonely and disillusioned with living in New Orleans. One of the contributing reasons was her arrest at Mardi Gras, for participating in the then segragated Zulu Parade. As she recounted to the Webbs,

> 'Soon you'll be having Mardi Gras there … in a few months February … it seems just a few months ago i suffered thru a lonely Xmas shivering there and a lonelier Mardi Gras, only to be put in Jail all Mardi Gras day for being in the Zulu Parade … no i am mad at New Orleans since then; and before i was in love with her for 15 years or so … but I'd never been put in jail by her!'[98]

In August 1961, it appears that Johnson told Bukowski of her intention to move away from New Orleans. Yet, she did not immediately tell him of her intended destination. This led Bukowski to speculate: 'Are you going to France or New York? or Los Angeles? or where? you very mysterious, buddy'[99] A month later, Johnson moved from New Orleans to Paris and took up residence at the so-called Beat Hotel. Although the pair's correspondence continued, Johnson's letters were sporadic. As Bukowski complained to Jon Webb, 'Your kaja runs hot and cold, periods of excitement and letters and then months of nothing.'[100] Nevertheless, Bukowski was encouraging of Johnson's move. He believed it would give her a new perspective which would develop her as a writer. As he told Johnson shortly after her move, 'PARIS WILL GIVE YOU ANOTHER EYE'.[101] Bukowski seems to have been proven right, at least for a time. In Paris, Johnson would wake up early to write and paint, often shunning social events to do so. Johnson appears to have taken inspiration from her own life when she included the line, 'who waken in the gloom of a 5:00 AM', in her poem 'The Emerald City'.[102] Bukowski also included this detail in his poem, 'Letter From Too Far'.[103]

During her time in Paris, Johnson would continue to experiment with her writing style. Bukowski would reference her tendency, during the period, to write out her poems in uppercase and include references to angels and God.[104] In many ways, Johnson's time in France represented the high watermark of her writing career. She published in literary journals such as *The Journal for the Protection of All Beings* and *Chicago Choice*. She also wrote many of the poems that would comprise her first and only book of poetry, *Human Songs* (1964).[105]

Even though Bukowski thought moving to Paris would be the making of her as a writer, he was nevertheless concerned about its potential impact on

her wellbeing and cautioned her, 'take care of yourself'.[106] Throughout her time in Paris, Bukowski seems to have paid closed attention to Johnson's wellbeing and noticed its gradual deterioration. He expressed his concern for Johnson in letters to their mutual acquaintances. For example, in a letter to Martinelli, he remarked,

> 'Kaja in Paris. […] Gal bit depressed, walkup to room 6 floors, no window, just room, but still Paris and this keeps her going. Paris is still the magic word in cities, but not for me. I know cities are people and I know people in a way so that cities are the same. But there is a light in Kaja, I say. A good woman. She makes the mistakes we all do, we who explore beyond ordinary edges. […] Now here she is, upset and poor, lost in a tiny room, a gamble of some sort, all melancholy, the thrill of buying a cigarette package in French about gone, […]. A good child-woman.'[107]

Bukowski's appraisal of Johnson's emotional state was accurate. Johnson disclosed to Bukowski that she regularly went to sit on a particular bench on a bridge over the river Seine to cry. Although concerned with Johnson's mental state, Bukowski was captivated by this idea. He wrote back to Johnson: 'I like your Cry Place on the Bridge. I bet even I could cry there. I give you 3–1 I could … .'.[108] Bukowski would later reference Johnson's crying bench in two of his poems. In 'A Letter Too Far', Bukowski writes that when Johnson felt like crying whilst living in Paris she had a particular bench she went to that was located by a river.[109] Reference to it can also found in 'An Almost Made Up Poem About A Lady Who Has Vanished From My Mailbox' in which it is claimed Johnson visited a bench on a bridge that spanned a river every night to cry over former lovers who had hurt or forgotten her.[110]

Even though Johnson's half of the pair's correspondence is currently missing from this period, it seems likely she was frank with Bukowski about her love life. In a letter to the Webbs from the time, for example, she was very open about her sexual relationship with a 'Holland boy'.[111] In fact, whilst writing to Johnson in Paris, Bukowski came to love Johnson. As he later reflected in the poem inspired by Johnson, he loved her despite the pair never meeting and kept mementos of her around.[112]

Indeed, at the time Bukowski appears to have longed for physical contact with Johnson and imagined visiting her in Paris. He craved a physical and emotion intimacy with Johnson.[113] In the poem 'An Almost Made Up Poem About A Lady Who Has Vanished From My Mailbox', Bukowski alludes to Johnson's room in Paris. For most of her stay at the Beat Hotel, Johnson resided in room 41. It was the hotel's small garret room. On the floor below the room was a communal W.C., which Chapman described as 'a filthy stinking Turkish toilet'.[114] Given the 'very thin' walls, its likely Johnson could hear many things emanating from in the W.C. from her

room.[115] Johnson likely wrote to Bukowski about the W.C. situation, as she was extremely open about it to others she corresponded with, such as the Webbs. She even referenced it in one of her 'Poems from Paris',

> In the Water Closets you have to stand up
> on corrugated islands.
> A Niagara rushes about your feet.
> Funny, the feet never get wet.[116]

In part, Bukowski's love for Johnson was based on a sexual attraction. In a reference to her in his 1963 poem 'For a Woman Who Might Some Day Become a Nun' he wrote in graphic terms his desire to have sex with Johnson.[117]

Bukowski recognised the vulgarity of his sexual objectification of Johnson in this poem but claimed it was in his nature to be crude. In a letter to John William Corrington, dated 1 May 1963, Bukowski wrote,

> 'The next night I got drunk (again) and wrote 8 or ten new ones, I think not too bad, since they were written in one night, but one there might have pissed him [Jon Webb], it's called TO A LADY WHO MIGHT SOMEDAY BECOME A NUN, and it's about Kaja and they might have a crush on Kaja, but they gotta realize I am crude.'[118]

Yet Bukowski's love for Johnson was not purely sexual. He also had an artistic and intellectual attraction to her. He makes this explicit at the end of the above poem, stating that after intercourse they would likely discuss Rimbaud.[119] It is not clear, though appears unlikely, that Bukowski directly expressed his feelings towards Johnson.

Johnson remained at the Beat Hotel until its closure in 1963. Afterwards she travelled around Europe before eventually settling in Greece; first in Athens and then later in Hydra. Whilst in France, her and Bukowski's correspondence began to peter out. There are only two available letters from Bukowski to Johnson from this period. In contrast, all three letters written by Johnson to Bukowski which are known to survive come from this time. In a relatively short letter, written in late August 1964, Bukowski declines Johnson's request for contributions to her poetry journal '333', which seemingly never saw publication.[120] He also updates her on his life. In a letter dated 22 August 1964, which may be a response to Bukowski's letter, Johnson seems to reflect on why the frequency of their correspondence, and perhaps the quality of it, had declined. She wrote, 'just wrote a letter to [Lawrence] Ferlinghetti (a poetic letter) saying why don't i write poetic letters to Poetic Bukowski anymore? so i thought i would write and ask you? WHY?'[121] It is possible that Johnson stopped writing such letters to Bukowski because she didn't think she was interesting to him. This is what she may have meant when she asked, 'IS IT MY FAULT I AM NOT A RACE HORSE? OR A BEER BOTTLE?'[122] All of

Johnson's letters from this time have a stream of consciousness quality to them. As the start of one letter began,

> "BOWOSKI.
> GIT DRINK & HAE A VISI ON READING
> ONE MORE SAY OF AIR
> IT IS OK NEVER MIND. sorry i donit make sense. am too 2 drunk on beer.
> I am aged 40 too didn you know that?
> 333 goes on from copenhagen & london maybe
> if I ever get sober
> but i had drunk 7& get a vision.
> BEER.
> MAN.
> WOW.
> Death?
> War? maybe.
> love. sure.
> copen hagen. later. cat in window.
> A god you can grab.
> Yea hman.
> Will mail this. Anyhow. ½ of 33 to london, ½ to copenhagen.
> Later man
> THANK YOU FOR FUCKING LIVING YOU HELPED ME DIE
> OR LIVE IT IS THE SAME ISN'T IT
> EVERYTHING IS THE SAME. THEN BEERAZIE (GREEK [text indecipherable])"[123]

Despite the increased disjointedness of Johnson's letters, Bukowski responded to such letters in good grace. For instance, to the letter quoted above, he responded: 'All right, I know it was a drunken letter and you've got to stop stealing my stuff!'[124] It should be noted that, whilst in Greece, Johnson experimented heavily with drugs. In addition to drinking heavily, she also smoked 'airplane glue' and took LSD.[125] According to Horowitz and Palmer, Johnson's experimentations with high doses of LSD led her to experience an 'ego-shattering LSD trip'.[126] One of the results of Johnson's LSD usage was the epic poem 'LSD-748'.[127] The poem has been described as 'a psychedelic visionary poem on the scale of George Andrews's "Burning Illumination" and Allen Ginsberg's "Lysergic Acid"'.[128] Although the majority of the poem is lost, large excerpts were published in issue one of *Residu* in 1965. The first section of the poem, entitled 'The Luminous Numinous', begins on a hallucinatory note,

> 'who is he that sends dreams, i should like knowing;
> oh one, not more beautiful than another;
> oh green with the violet in it, all things luminous being;
> but things not being things, things, being

the transfer of energy
in nature is no negation: which
is to say: violet becomes greening; no;
which is to say, calmness becomes morning; no; not
quite,
which is to say morning greens calming
which is more like it.
which is to say it
without copula is impossible; i mean, look at us;
what do you see? who is he who sends dreams, i see
i like knowing, which has not said it.
Two phosphorescent globes,
on in each hand, water pouring into water, pouring
water
onto a silver mirror, from hand to hand, from mouth
to hand; and the big mouth has a small mouth in it;
a word man-like stands besides another man;
Person and his Incarnate Impossibility; the final friend;
Eve's rib, a man, walking through his garden;
of necessity, invisible to everyone;
the luminous numinous;
in short, in long, what sustains us; the dream;
the ways of attaining it; and also of not liking it;
which is odd as liking it;
through the mince meat machine:
the hallucinations of light:
seen through the whirling spokes; is not whole.
Light revisited is like an old friend.[129]

It was in Greece that Johnson and Bukowski's correspondence stopped. The last known letter between the pair was one from Johnson to Bukowski on 12 March 1967. The reason for the breakdown in communication is not clear. However, the last letter may shed some light on the reason. Johnson's last known letter to Bukowski was written as a poem. It was entitled 'DEAD CAT POEM FOR BUKOWSKI'. It begins,

HEY BUKOWSKI …
YEA, KAJA
STOPPED WRITING TO YOU IN PARIS,
BECAUSE ALL THAT CRUXIFIXION,
THAT SELF-CRUXIFIXION OF YOURS,
WAS TOO MUCH SUFFERING FOR ONE PERSON ALONE TO BEAR:
HOWEVER IT NEVER STOPPED.
IT GOES ON.
NOW ITS IS DEAD CATS.
I CRY ALL NIGHT.'[130]

In the secondary literature, there has been some dispute about the implications of the first few lines of this poem. It has been argued by Paylor that Johnson, writing in the third person, explains that she brought the

pair's correspondence to an end because she tired of, amongst other things, Bukowski's self-martyrdom which peppered his letters.[131] In contrast, Davidson has argued that,

> 'after an initial invocation of "HEY BUKOWSKI", it is addressed to "Kaja". Apparently in the voice of Bukowski, it explains that he "STOPPED WRITING TO YOU IN PARIS" because "THAT SELF*CRUCIFIXION OF YOURS/ WAS TOO MUCH SUFFERING FOR ONE PERSON ALONE TO BEAR". Having freed himself from the suffering of Johnson, Bukowski, the poem goes on to explain, now suffers for his dead cats.'[132]

In other words, within the secondary literature, there are two conflicting accounts of who the poem implies ended the pair's correspondence. There are several issues which undermine Davidson's reading. Firstly, as seen above, in the letter dated 22 August 1964, Johnson stated she had stopped writing 'poetic letters' to Bukowski, implying a lack of enthusiasm for the endeavour on her part. Secondly, one of the poems Bukowski wrote that was inspired by his relationship with Johnson was entitled 'AN ALMOST MADE UP POEM ABOUT A LADY WHO HAS VANISHED FROM MY MAILBOX'.[133] It seems unlikely Bukowski would have chosen such a title if he was responsible for the breakdown in their correspondence. Thirdly, as other letter quoted from Johnson attests, she also had cats, or was at least around them.[134] Accordingly, the poem could refer to her cats and not those of Bukowski. Fourthly, in a 1969 letter to Jon Webb, Bukowski asked for Johnson's address.[135] Such a request seems unlikely to come from the party which ended the correspondence. Fifthly, Bukowski had a track record for exhausting and alienating those with which he corresponded.[136] Furthermore, Johnson seemingly had a habit of ending her personal relationship with someone by suddenly withdrawing from all communication. Perhaps, they simply could no longer handle the other's suffering on top of their own.

Regardless of who ultimately decided to stop writing, there was likely a facilitating factor. Given that Johnson travelled extensively, it was not always clear to her correspondents where exactly they should send their letters. Accordingly, Johnson may simply not have received some of the letters Bukowski sent her, leading to their correspondence becoming even more sporadic. In addition, in Greece, Johnson used the *poste restante* service. As a result, her post was not delivered directly to her residence. Instead, she had to pick it up from various post offices and locations. This likely increased the possibility of missing letters sent to her. In fact, at least one letter was actually returned to Bukowski. As he complained to Jon Webb, 'Letter I wrote to Kaja some time back. Forwarded all over Europe, then came back to me.'[137] Moreover, given the distance their pair's letters had to travel, it is possible that letters simply got lost.

The end

After the breakdown of their correspondence, the pair's fortunes differed radically. Bukowski continued to work at the Post Office until 1969, his reputation as a writer rapidly growing. In 1969, he became a full-time writer. Thereafter, Bukowski continued to write and publish, becoming one of the most commercially successful American poets of the second half of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, his relationship with Johnson had a lasting impact on him. He continued to hold her in high regard, including her in a list of notable figures at the Beat Hotel, along with Ginsberg, Burroughs, and Corso.[138] Indeed, he attempted to reconnect with Johnson after their correspondence had broken down, though it appears to have been unsuccessful.[139] Moreover, as this article has shown, she inspired at least four of his poems. The three written after the demise of their relationship are all verging on laments. In 1994, he would die of leukaemia in Los Angeles. Today, he is remembered as a 'legendary' writer.[140] In contrast, today Johnson has largely faded into obscurity. There was a rumour that she had died by suicide. As Paylor and Davidson have both argued, this was mostly likely the result of Bukowski, in a rare move, taking poetic liberties with the truth in one of his poems.[141] Johnson lived in Greece until 1967. On 21 April 1967, a group of army colonels perpetrated a military coup in Greece. Over the coming months, the new military junta sought to suppress dissenting voices, particularly writers, both domestic and foreign. According to Rudie, Johnson was arrested by the junta.[142] It has been claimed that after her arrest she was tortured.[143] Around October of 1967 she was repatriated back to the United States. She described the time after her repatriation to Ferlinghetti as '4 agonozing Homeless Months, wandering … from commune to commune … .!'.[144] She eventually settled in Berkeley, California. It is perhaps strange that, despite living closer than they ever had done at this point, the pair still never met. Especially given Bukowski's early comment in a letter to Johnson, 'I hope you settle in Frisco because I can leap from my window and meet you there on the way to the ground.'[145] The reason, of course, may have been that Bukowski did not know how relatively close Johnson lived. Johnson, for her part, may have simply not wished to meet Bukowski. Many scholars have claimed Johnson 'disappeared' after returning from Greece.[146] However, she continued writing and painting. For instance, in 1968 she claimed to Jon Webb that she was in discussions with the San Francisco based publisher Cranium Press about possibly publishing some of her work.[147] However, this never came to fruition. In addition, Johnson was performing her poetry in the Bay Area well into the 1970s. As Tom Plante recorded, at an open mic night in November 1975, at the Sacred Grounds Café in San Francisco, 'Kay Johnson finished off the set, reading part of a long poem about hitch hiking to Crete. I could still hear rows of black waves pounding as we regrouped out on the sidewalk'.[148] To

make ends meet, Johnson engaged in a series of small enterprises. Whilst living in the Bay Area, Johnson experienced periods of homelessness.[149] Anne Rice, who had known Johnson in the 1950s in New Orleans, recalled a surprising reunion with Johnson in Berkeley in the 1970s, in which she remarked on Johnson's decline. As Rice recollected,

> 'I did see Kay Johnson one time, an amazing time, in Berkeley in the 1970s. Right after I wrote Interview with the Vampire but before it was published. My husband and I were in a bar and we were drinking beer together and we met this strange woman. We did something we never do. We offered to take her home and let her sleep at our place. On the way home, she said something that made me realize in a flash that she was Kaja, Kay Johnson. It was an incredible moment. I told her who I was. She remembered my mother. She was at that time very what I would call strung out. Not drugged; but almost a street person I would say. Drifting perhaps. Not sure. Very very different from the young woman who lived in the Quarter and who painted. My husband took her back the next day to where she lived; he said it was a room with stuff all over the floor, as I recall. We never saw her again. I do not know what happened to her. It was very upsetting and saddening to me, this brief encounter and losing track of her, wondering what happened to her.'[150]

In the late 1980s, Johnson still had and prized Bukowski's letters. In the early 1990s, Cordley Coit, who had known Johnson from her time in New Orleans, reconnected with her in Berkeley. At the time she was living in the University Hotel. He found her 'to be stuck in the fifties' but, despite experiencing such her hardships, to be 'amazingly physically well.'[151] Coit's statement is the last reliable piece of information on Johnson. Although there have been claims regarding her death, and the details surrounding it, these have yet to be verified.

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