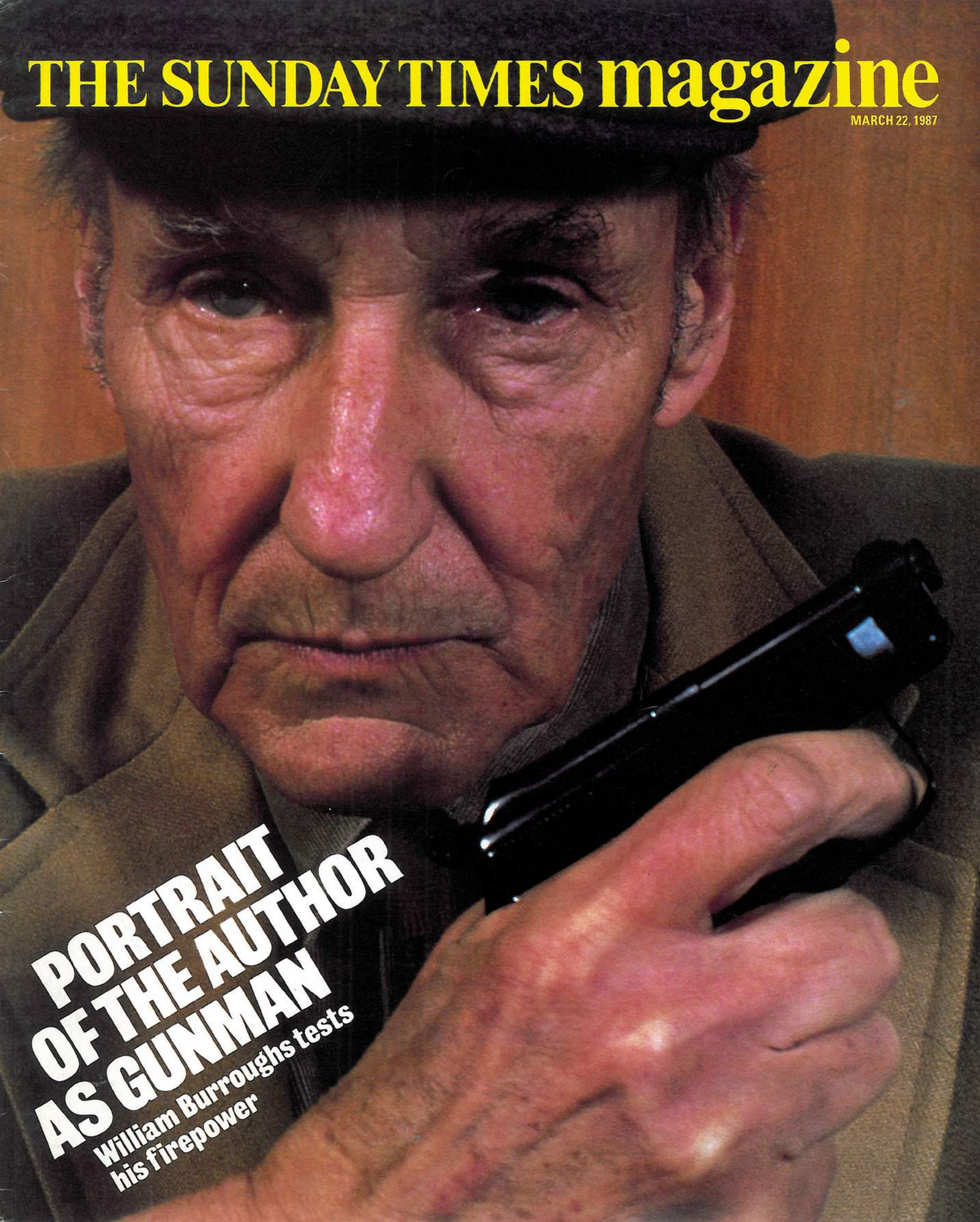
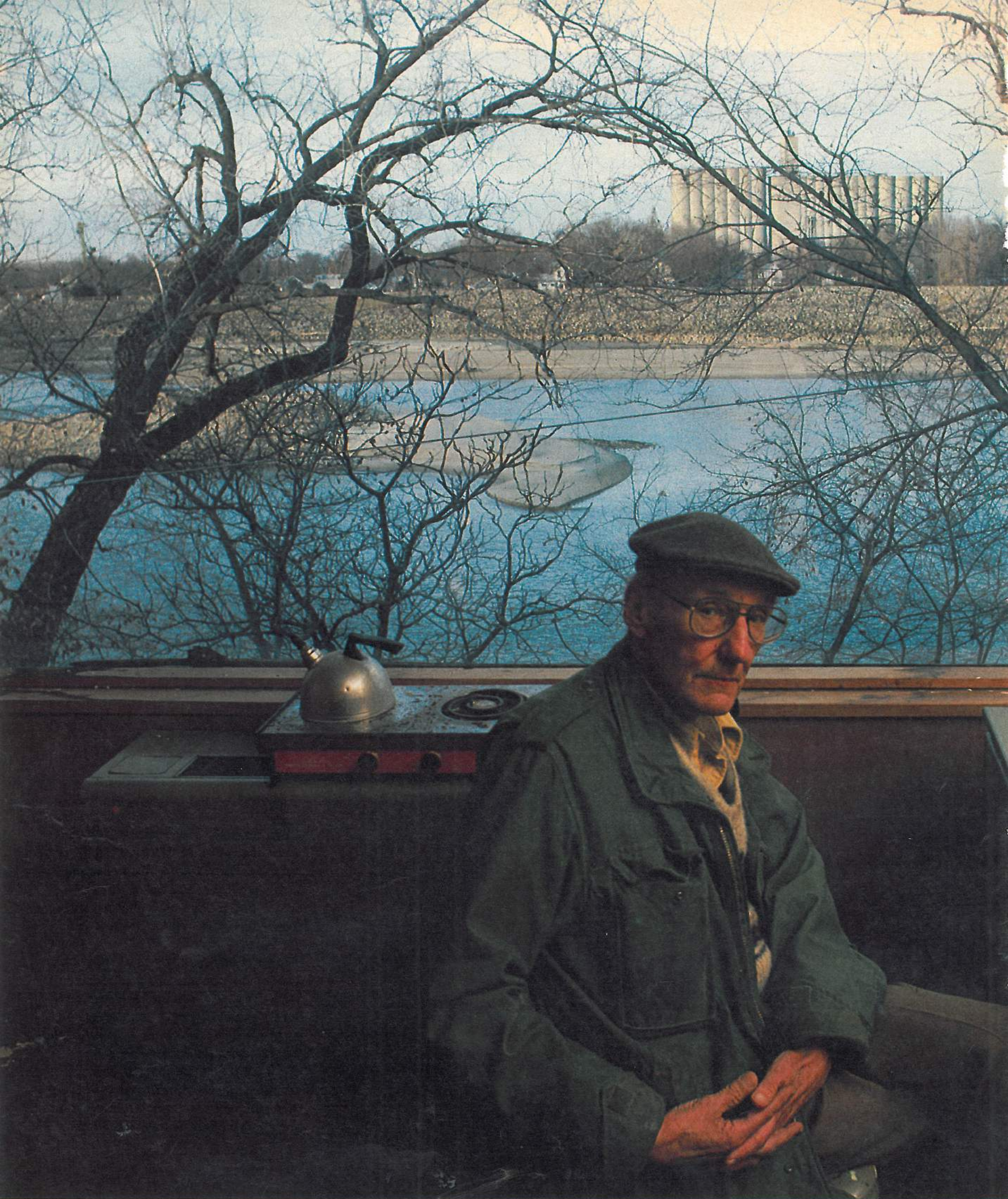


THE SUNDAY TIMES magazine

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**PORTRAIT
OF THE AUTHOR
AS GUNMAN**
William Burroughs tests
his firepower





The return of the **INVISIBLE MAN**

*By James Fox
Photograph
by Bob Adelman*

Even as he lives, William Burroughs, author of *Naked Lunch*, has become a legend: the Beat generation's guru, and the man who shot his wife during a William Tell routine. So what's he doing now, living in a small town in Kansas with three cats and a cabinet full of guns?

"So you bought another piece, Mr B.?"
"Naaw," says Burroughs. He's loading the chamber of an old Colt .41 Peacemaker. "This is my brother's gun. He died. My nieces sent this to me. They sent me the ammo, too. That was *very* thoughtful."

It's a hot day in Kansas and very still. High green corn and bright sun. Just to move is to sweat. William S. Burroughs, his flat Midwestern drawl hanging in the heat, is talking to one of his new Kansas friends, Fred Aldrich. We're at Fred's place, a steel-and-concrete warehouse 15 miles outside Lawrence that is fenced off with high wire mesh. "A little like Rhodesia," says Burroughs. On the way over, Burroughs and I stopped off at Lawrence Pawn Shop and Shooters Supplies - where Burroughs's literary fame has not penetrated - to buy targets, which are now pinned against a board amid the Kansas foliage.

On a rotting wooden table under a tree, Burroughs has laid out a selection from his extensive arsenal, including a 1911 Colt .45 automatic ("the best handgun ever made") and his double-action "house gun", which he keeps under the coverlet of his bed.

Fred has countered with a few of his own favourites: a nickel-plated Smith & Wesson Model 29 .44 Magnum with an 8in barrel, the second-biggest mass-produced handgun you can buy in America; a Colt Python; and an Austrian

army-issue Glock. "Did you see *Firepower* this month, Mr B.?" Fred asks. He is walking in the yard in his Levis, stripped to the waist. He is tall, good-looking, around 35, with a freckled, ginger complexion. He goes over to the garage door of the warehouse and swings it up. You see, in linear progression, a 1972 Buick Centurion convertible, a speedboat that will do 75mph, a Honda 650cc turbocharged motorcycle and Fred's 20-year-old girlfriend, Tammy, in a bikini, vacuuming the carpet in the living area beyond, a cigarette dangling from her lips. On the left are shelves of Chinese antiques, samples from Fred's lucrative import business. Above a large bed are racks of loaded shotguns. And in the far right-hand corner is a door that conceals Burroughs's Nemesis - Fred's German-shepherd attack dog.

Burroughs, who has developed an obsession with animals - a major theme of his new fiction - hates dogs. And horses, too, with "their awful yellow teeth". He likes cats and lemurs. He had warned me about Fred's dog on the drive out from Lawrence. "That thing could kill you in seconds," he said. Once, when Fred left the door ajar, it flew at a fireman who had come to the wrong address and locked on to one of his testicles before Fred could shout. "Very lucky to get away with *that*," Burroughs growled. "Another time he tried to jump through a window when a plumber was >>> 29

working on the house. Another time he broke his chain and killed a possum. I never say anything to Fred. It's a sore point. He loves this beast. First thing I do when I get out there is get a gun on my hip. Fred would never forgive me, of course."

As we smoke and drink vodka and Coke in the cool warehouse, revving up for a second round of target practice, I ask Tammy if the dog can come and sit with us. "No way," she says, cheerily shaking her head. When Tammy first arrived in Fred's life, the dog had to be chained up in her presence for many days. As Fred goes into the dog's lair to get a new West German assault rifle for our inspection, Burroughs cranes his head backwards, fixes his gaunt expression on the door and mumbles to himself, "Holy shit".

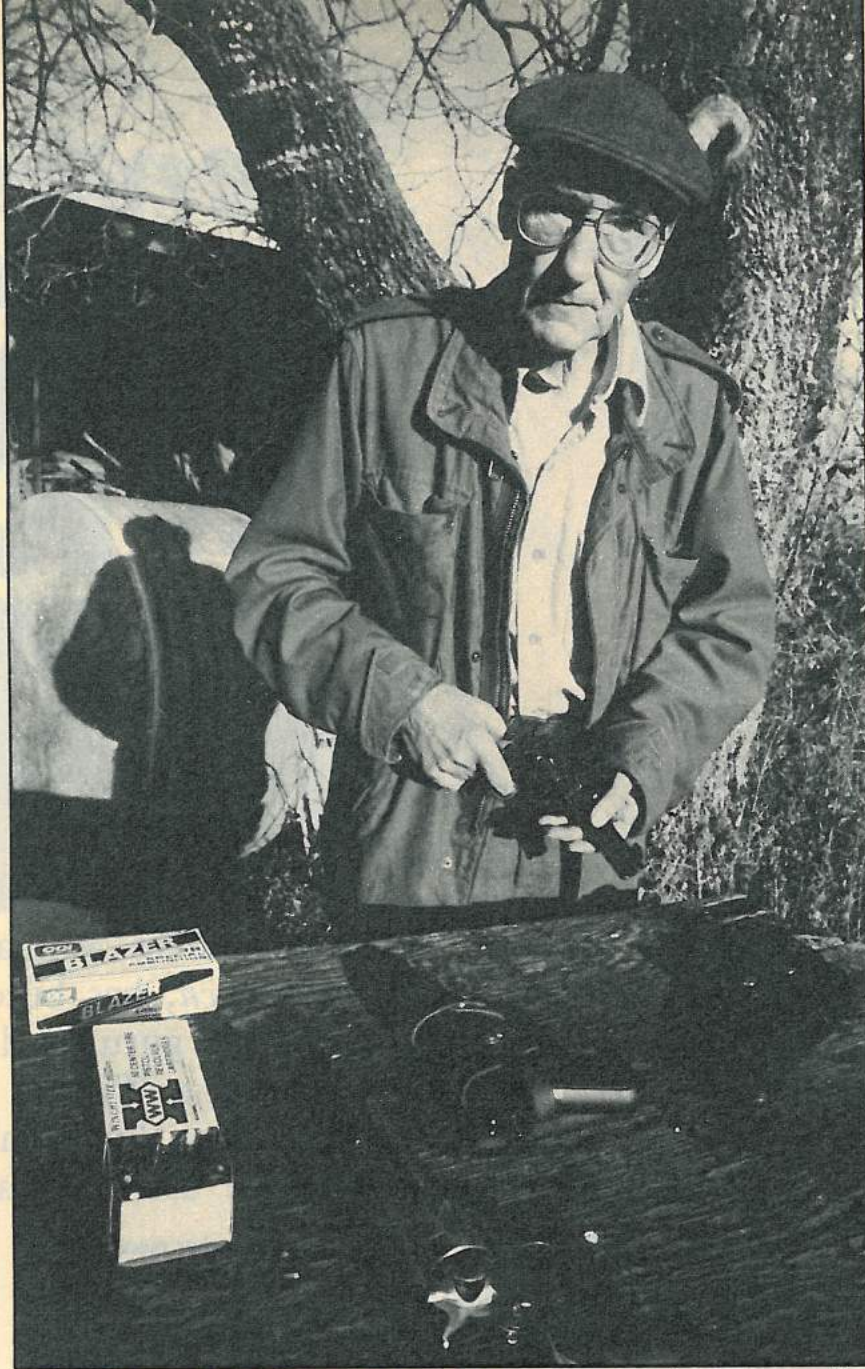
For the rest of our stay at Fred's, the insect drone of the afternoon is split by the blast of gunfire. Burroughs is a pretty fair shot, his bullets often nicking the 10-point bull's-eye. His arms are stretched rigidly in front of him, bulbous sound mufflers covering his ears. But Fred's .44 Magnum is almost too much for the frail, 72-year-old figure, and his feet shuffle backwards for balance as the huge charge explodes in the chamber.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

If you know only two things about William Burroughs, one is that he shot and killed his wife, Joan, with a handgun on a gloomy day in Mexico City in 1951 as they acted out a William Tell routine in front of friends, a cocktail glass replacing the apple on her head.

The other is that he wrote *Naked Lunch*, published in America in 1962, a semi-autobiographical portrayal of the horrors of heroin addiction and withdrawal turned into a metaphor for humanity victimised by addiction to money, power and sex. It was a black satire, full of brilliant, comic routines using pulp-fiction characters and pop images and deliberately without plot and structure. Mary McCarthy wrote a famous review in which she compared Burroughs to Jonathan Swift ("There are many points of comparison, not only the obsession with excrement and the horror of female genitals but a disgust with politics and the whole body politic"). Norman Mailer said that it was conceivable Burroughs was possessed by genius and that he was possibly the most talented writer in America - comments his publishers use to the point of embarrassment in promoting his books.

All of Burroughs's later work develops from the themes of *Naked Lunch*. Two years ago, the critic Luke Sante wrote in *The New York Review of Books*, "*Naked Lunch* is still his best. None of his later writings can match its imaginative power, its acute observations or its astringent humour. It remains a milestone of a kind, going further than any book in plumbing the untouchable aspects of American life at a time when defiance had become a kind of competition among writers."



William Burroughs with his collection of handguns: a major preoccupation

The work that Mailer praised for its "exquisite poetic sense" and its Bosch-like portrayals of the destruction of the soul was both repellent and inaccessible to many readers. On top of the repetition and lack of structure were the relentless and extreme pornographic images, which led to landmark obscenity trials in the mid-Sixties. Since then no literary work has been found obscene in an American court of law.

Yet the longevity of Burroughs's influence is unrivalled among living American writers. As the father of hipsterism and the Beats - the teacher of Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac - he has remained an icon of alienated youth and social rebellion, from the hippies in the Sixties (which he described to me as "a cultural revolution such as has never been seen before in history") to the punks. Generations of poets, musicians and novelists acknowledge the influence of Burroughs; at least four pop groups have taken their names from his words (Steely Dan, Soft Machine, Naked Lunch and Dead Fingers Talk). And many artists, like David Bowie, adopted the Cut-Up Method, the random cutting and pasting of prose, which Burroughs

in Lawrence, Kansas? Is there some Burroughsian significance to this provincial town? And how is he getting on?

He moved here from New York in late 1981, from the Bunker, an abandoned YMCA gymnasium locker room on the Bowery, with its white walls and row of urinals, where Burroughs lived and held court. There he was interviewed, filmed, observed, visited by celebrities. The place was "acoustically alive", as a friend described it, with the humming of the fridge and the air-conditioners, and depressing to everyone except Burroughs.

His surroundings in Lawrence could hardly be more different. He lives with his three cats in a small white clapboard house on one of the identical avenues that criss-cross the town. He shares, with his gardener, the fruit and vegetables that grow in the back lot. He carries a cane, walks with a slight stoop and wears a fedora with a feather like a salmon fly in the hatband, which gives him a slightly Alpine appearance. Visitors, outside his close circle, are not encouraged.

For company, he has his young assistant and friend, James Grauerholz, who lives nearby. Grauerholz met Burroughs in 1974, took his affairs in hand, and when the tide of the Seventies had crested, and Grauerholz had given up ideas of becoming a rock singer, the two of them moved to Lawrence, where Grauerholz had gone to school. Life had been getting somewhat hectic in the Bunker. There was the expense and the fact that Burroughs had become briefly re-addicted in 1980. As one friend put it, melodramatically, "For Burroughs, it was either move or die."

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Much of Burroughs's work is a fictionalisation of his life, and Lawrence is probably the end of the myth-making odyssey that provided the material. Much of his later work contains references to St Louis, where he grew up and where a seemingly lifelong adolescent rage and sense of alienation was stoked by the hostility of the Protestant elite his parents belonged to. (His father was not connected with the Burroughs company; his parents ran a gift and arts shop, first in St Louis, then in Palm Beach, Florida.) Burroughs often refers to Colonel Greenfield, a character from his childhood, whom he will apparently never forget or forgive for saying, "I don't want that boy in the house again. He looks like a sheep-killing dog."

"There was something hideously wrong about the way the people around me thought and felt," he says of that time. "'Course they always try to make you feel there's something wrong with you. Sooner or later you'll find out that you're just like everybody else." It is the adolescent's epitaph. He dreamed of being an outlaw writer, like Wilde or Baudelaire. The outlaws he finally joined up with when he moved to New York after studying ethnology and archaeology at Harvard and medicine at the >>>>

developed with his friend Brion Gysin in an attempt to destroy what Burroughs has called "word and image locks".

It was also part of the Burroughs mystique that he was never seen. He had a dislike of self-righteous public intellectualising; causes had the whiff of dogma about them. He was called *El Hombre Invisible* by the Spanish boys in the Native Quarter of Tangier, where Burroughs lived in one room in a state of junk disintegration. When the ageless warrior and scourge of the bourgeoisie did appear - the representative of nihilism, of sensation seeking and drug taking, of decadence itself - he was dressed in a dark suit and tie, with polished black shoes. Indeed, this is what he wore, as old Tangier hands remember, to sit alone at the Parade Bar. Gysin said of him at the time, "An odd blue light often flashed around under the brim of his hat." He was formidably remote and uncompromising, with the manners and speech of a dry St Louis aristocrat, much like his grandfather William Seward Burroughs, who invented the adding machine. The contrast has much to do with the mythology.

But what is William Burroughs doing

University of Vienna were the addict hipsters of Times Square.

Burroughs's outlaw odyssey began in New York in 1944 (addicted to morphine, busted for possession) and continued in Texas, 1947 (drunken driving, public indecency); Louisiana, 1949 (illegal firearms, narcotics); Mexico City, 1951 (the shooting of Joan); South America, 1952 (searching for the hallucinogenic yage plant). The lowest point was probably Tangier in the mid-Fifties, when his junk habit almost destroyed him, when he sat for hours contemplating his foot in his room in the Native Quarter, the pages of the future *Naked Lunch* stuck to the floor. Kerouac arrived to re-type it and was awakened by terrible nightmares - he saw himself pulling endless strings of bologna sausages from his mouth. He shouted, "Bill!" Burroughs said, "Just keep typing." From Tangier, Burroughs went to Paris and the Beat Hotel on rue Git le Coeur and then to London for the apomorphine cure and nine "dead end" years. He was rescued and brought to New York by Allen Ginsberg in 1974.

Two years ago Burroughs, represented by his new literary agent, Andrew Wylie, signed a seven-book contract worth more than \$200,000 with Viking Penguin in the United States and Pan Books in the United Kingdom. The deal includes a work in progress and two volumes of letters from Burroughs to Ginsberg and Kerouac and others to be published in 1988. The letters are the plum; samples give fascinating descriptions of Mexico City and Tangier and chart Burroughs's faltering beginnings as a writer.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Ironically, the Invisible Man's survival over the last decade - it was widely assumed he was dead before his return to New York in 1974 - has had much to do with his public appearances. Burroughs is a brilliant performer. His powerful satirical sketches, extracts from his work, are delivered in a flat, elongated drawl, with the weary irony of W. C. Fields and the unsmiling seriousness of Buster Keaton. He loves to turn his characters into vaudeville, which he does to sharp dramatic effect. The greatest hit is always Dr Benway, the viciously irresponsible coked-up surgeon who forces his way into the Titanic lifeboat with the women and children and says, "Are you all right? I'm the doctor." Benway is one of Burroughs's earliest creations. "Oh, we've known each other for centuries."

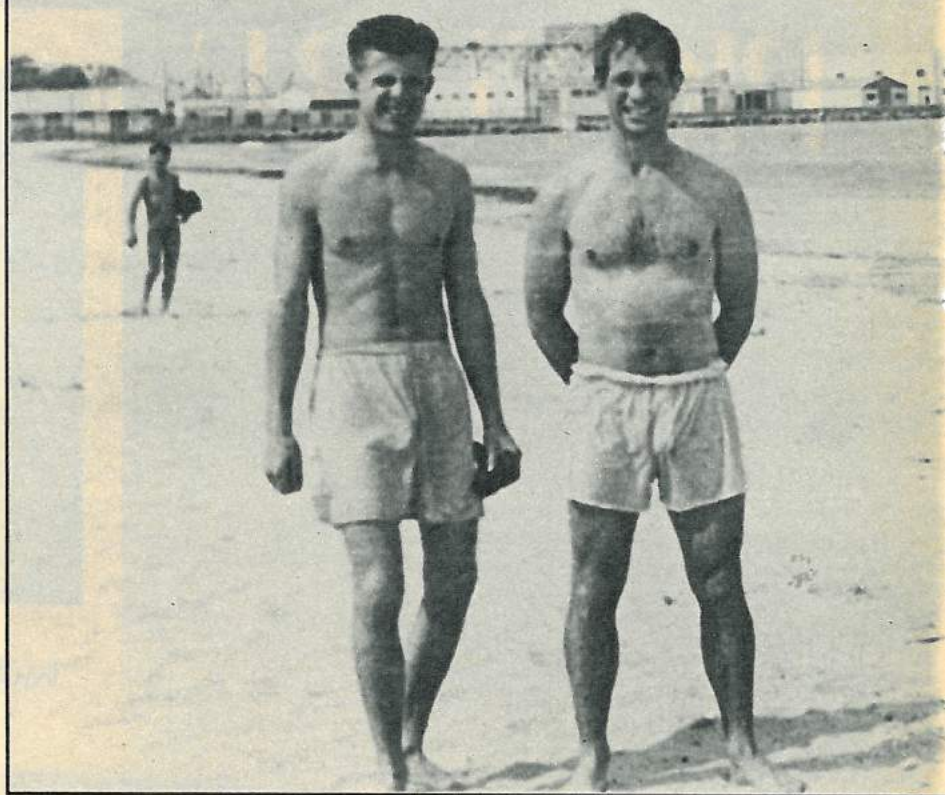
Burroughs, the consummate comedian - it is not something you would expect, meeting him for the first time. But, in fact, his characters and his work were born of mimicry. He and his friends were always acting out the "routines" that he later used in print. In the Forties, Burroughs, Kerouac and Ginsberg would perform charades to uncover different levels in their personalities. Ginsberg played the well-groomed Hungarian selling art fakes; Kerouac the innocent

American in Paris in a straw hat. Burroughs was a shy Gainsborough Blue Boy or, in drag, the Hungarian Countess (Ginsberg's partner in crime) and the licentious, giggling English Nurse. He was also the stoical, speechless Chinese sitting by the banks of the Yangtze. While working on *Naked Lunch* in Tangier, Kerouac found Burroughs's impersonations hilarious but also terrifying, and at moments he felt exceedingly lonely; he was not with a friend but with a possessed actor.

It was Grauerholz who put Burroughs on the road, hoping to introduce him to a new, young audience. The shows have clearly revitalised Burroughs. "I love performing," he told me. "I suddenly realised it was something I could do and do well." For the last 10 years or so, he's performed up to 18 times a year, travelling the world in the grey suit that once gave him anonymity ("I always see people before they see me") but that has now become his theatrical wardrobe, his gimmick. He is also extending his activities into the movies. He and Grauerholz have revisited Tangier with David Cronenberg, the director of *The Fly*, and the English producer Jeremy Thomas to look for locations for the filming of *Naked Lunch*. Burroughs has also declared himself available for cameo parts in the movies, specialising, he says, in presidents and CIA men.

On the way to Lawrence, I met Burroughs in Boulder, Colorado, where

ALLEN GINSBERG



Poet Peter Orlovsky, novelist Jack Kerouac (Proux foreground), Tangier

ALLEN GINSBERG



New York, 1953 (above): Burroughs at work on the 'Yage letters'; and, above centre, Morocco, where the seeds of 'Naked Lunch' were sown

he was performing at the Jack Kerouac School for Disembodied Poetics at the Naropa Institute. The poet Anne Waldman, an old friend of Burroughs's, told me that at a reading she gave at Boulder High School, the students had turned up in black berets and black turtlenecks; that candles were guttering in Chianti bottles on madras tablecloths; that the day before, two students had hopped a freight for San Francisco, promising to be back for the Burroughs reading. The Beats have come to life again.

Burroughs stood alone against a large

white wall in an auditorium filled with students, the cane on his arm, a brown fedora on his head. On the lapels of his suit were the rosettes of the American Academy and Institute of Letters and the French Order of Arts and Letters, of which he is a commander. (What would Colonel Greenfield have said about that?) He looked like a neat, frail waxwork of himself as he waited for Ginsberg to introduce him from the podium.

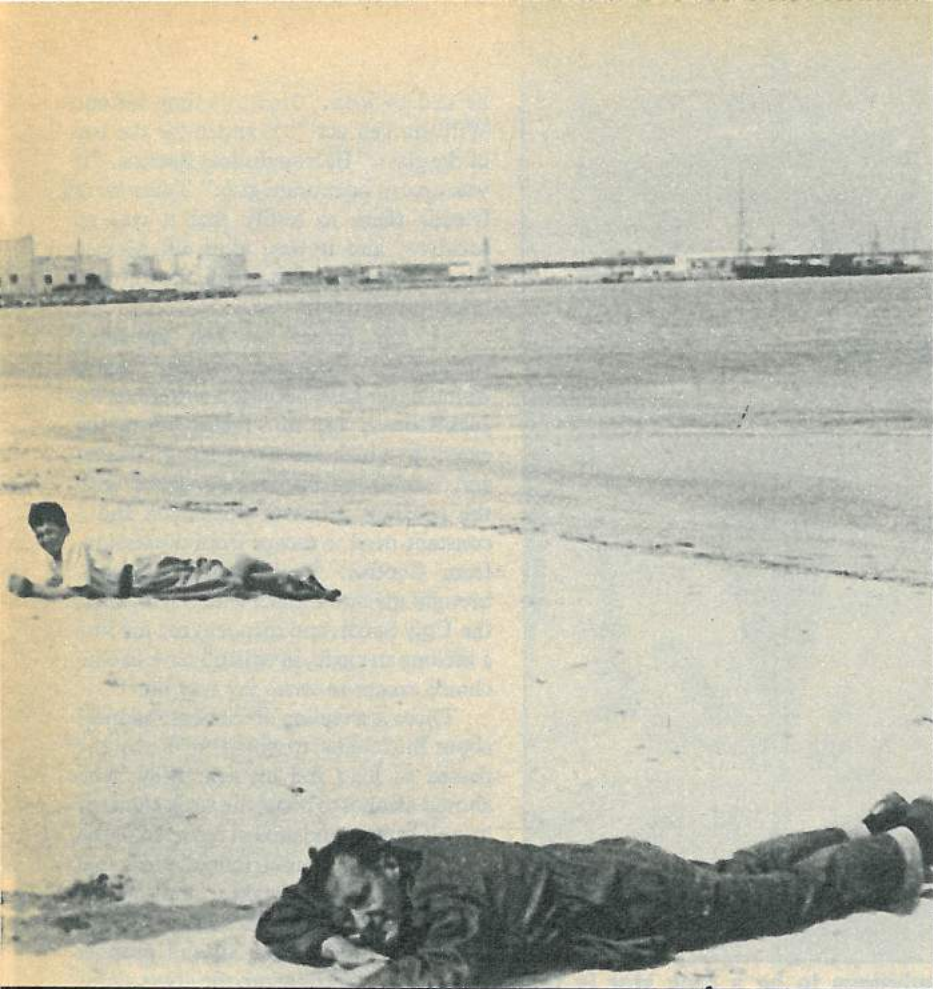
As the applause broke, he slowly, humbly took off the fedora and bowed, his timing perfect. He sat down, shuffled

the pages and twitched his mouth.

"The date," he drawled, "was December, AD 25. Miracles have to be paid for. Paid for in life, in beauty, youth, innocence, joy and hope . . . How much of this precious coinage did Christ borrow on human futures to heal one lousy idiot leper, one stinking, drooling, cross-eyed, hare-lipped beggar?" By now Burroughs was snarling. "Did Christ ever seek out a man who deserved to be healed because he had a special gift, a one-in-a-million talent? Uh-uh, Christ was concerned with quantity, not quality . . . The point is to establish a monopoly so no more miracles can ever occur."

The students, to whom Burroughs had given a great deal of benevolent attention in informal tutorials, seemed to like the performance. They queued up reverently to have books signed, but later with Ginsberg and a glass of vodka, Burroughs worried that he might have offended their Christian sensibilities. It returned him to his theme.

"It's so basically unspiritual, Allen," he said. "He [Jesus] seemed to be a perfectly healthy boy. Suddenly, at the age of 30, he breaks out in this rash of miracles, performing the most irresponsible acts. He started by bringing back the dead! Whatever for? What a dreary and materialistic concept. Curing lepers, walking on the water, for chrissakes." A voice asked about the Burroughs assertion of artificial insemination as the secret of the virgin birth. Who would have performed it? "Oh, John, of course,"



Kerouac, & writer William Burroughs
Beach Morocco, 1957. Allen Ginsberg

Burroughs answers. "He was a *vet.* He knew how to do it. He had his orders. He had somebody behind him, and the whole thing was a put-up job – the whole part of being crucified. Who wants *that* job?"

Ginsberg had brought researchers from British television, who were preparing a cultural documentary on the year 1967, but Burroughs ignored them. He was preoccupied with his Wishing Machine – an electronic box that harnesses the collective will. He found the specifications in a psychic book and had one made in Lawrence. Two days earlier he had offered the plans for the machine to some students and was saddened and hurt by their lack of enthusiasm. "I said," he complained to Ginsberg, "I would love you all to experiment with this thing, and I asked what would happen if a thousand people concentrated on one wish. I've tried it, and I've had some dramatic successes." Burroughs stood up to walk about, his ever-present blackjack swinging from his belt. "I think the younger generation is stilted. Here I am offering them a *wishing machine.* No one person came up and wanted the Wishing Machine. So I give up on teaching. I will never teach again."

The two veteran Beats mulled over these dark days. The aid for the Contras had just been voted through. "Will they never learn common sense?" said Burroughs. "It's awful, unyielding and stupid. I get a sinking feeling in my stomach." The Meese commission on pornography was threatening a period of

censorship not seen since the early days of *Naked Lunch*, although the commission had generally excluded the printed word. "That was clever, not to take too big a bite," said Burroughs. "But it could spread. I occupy a position rather like a Joyce, however. I'm rather untouchable at this point."

But Burroughs had recently been touched by one reviewer, a writer who had for years been down on the beats and who had written a dismissive review of Burroughs's latest novel, a surreal 19th-century Western, *The Place of Dead Roads*. "He said it was a bad novel," Burroughs said. "But he didn't say *why.*" In revenge, Burroughs had turned the critic into a fictional character in his next book and has put a curse on him. It is in the form of a "door dog", a creature borrowed from Saki's novel *The Unbearable Bassington* – an invisible animal that comes through the door, slithering in without a sound, bringing evil.

"Follows him inna the Four Seasons," said Burroughs, slipping into character. "'I'm sorry, sir, we don't allow any pets in here!'"

"'Pets? Pets?'"

"'Well, I distinctly saw a creature following you in here, sir. A small black dog.' Just a slight emphasis on *small* and *black.* They look under the tables, nothing there. But they don't like the guy, see. Even though they can't find the dog, he's not completely *exonnnnerrated.*" Burroughs was hugely entertained by his invention.

Before leaving for Lawrence, we were walking in a cemetery in Boulder, the setting for the opening scene in *The Place of Dead Roads*, in which his autobiographical protagonist, the gunslinger and St. Louis native Kim Carsons, has a classic shoot-out among the tombstones. Carsons, Burroughs writes, is "a slimy, morbid youth of unwholesome proclivities with an insatiable appetite for the extreme and the sensational . . . but he was also given to the subversive practice of *thinking.* He was in fact incurably intelligent." Burroughs reached the exact spot of the gunfight, put down his hat and cane against a tombstone and took up a slow, grim gunfighter's gait, his arms poised for a quick draw, his legs swinging out ahead of him, a wary and watchful look in his eye.

"Drawing your gun," he wrote in *The Place of Dead Roads*, "should be an easy-flowing, casual movement, like handing someone a pen, passing the salt, conveying a benediction . . ."

"Wild Bill Hickok was a phenomenal shot," said Burroughs, "there's no doubt about it. Doc Holliday was one of the worst. I wouldn't hesitate to have a fight with Doc Holliday. He wouldn't stand a *bloody chance.*"

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Back in Lawrence, after several days away, Burroughs is eager to see his cats. He fiddles with the key and the door creaks open. "Hello, my little Calico Beast," he says. "Where is my Brat Cat?" He goes to a small kitchen at the back of the bungalow and opens tins of Buffet: Prime Entrée for Cats.

The main room is small and modestly furnished, as if from a single trip to a yard sale: a plain round table with three chairs in a corner, a Forties sofa, a small portable bookcase filled with hospital-type thrillers – Burroughs's main reading material, apart from animal books, particularly anything he can find on lemurs. The colouring in the room is brown and cream. The one picture on the wall is a

grimly erotic surrealist oil by his friend Dean Ripa, a snake dealer and zoologist. "He brought eight snakes back from Africa," says Burroughs. "I put them up for a while." The painting depicts a young Indian boy in the last convulsions of black-mamba poisoning, phantom hands clutching at his stomach, his right arm blackened by venom.

Barely visible in the burnt-sienna background are the words *Quién es?* This is homage to Burroughs and a phrase he repeats often in *The Place of Dead Roads* – they were the last words of Billy the Kid as he walked into the dark room where Pat Garrett shot him. Always obsessed with death, Burroughs is fond of repeating last words, like those of Ulysses S. Grant to his nurse: "It is raining, Anita Huffington."

There are two small rooms to the side of the living-room. One is Burroughs's spartan bedroom: a low bed with a blue cotton cover, a small wooden desk with an old electric typewriter and a filing cabinet. The other is the office where Grauerholz is running Burroughs Communications. Here the deep drawer of a filing cabinet is filled to the brim with handguns. Soon after we arrive, Burroughs brings them out, one by one, to show me. He brings out a knife disguised as a credit card, with a small, squat, double-edged blade. "Waiter brings you the bill," he says, lunging and cutting at the air, "*and you whip his head off.*"

We talk at the small round table in the living-room, where Burroughs takes up an angular, cross-legged perch, smoking endless Player's Navy Cut cigarettes like a nonchalant schoolboy, his arm swinging around jerkily to the ashtray or the vodka and Coke, which he sips and bangs back emphatically on the table. Occasionally, an arm shoots out in a lightning scratch of the opposite shoulder or pectoral: memories of crawling junk flesh. Eye contact is very rare, but he is a tireless, patient interlocutor.

He is also extraordinarily $\ggg\rightarrow$



Paris, 1962: Burroughs moved from Tangier to France, while in America 'Naked Lunch' was published, a portrayal of the horrors of heroin addiction

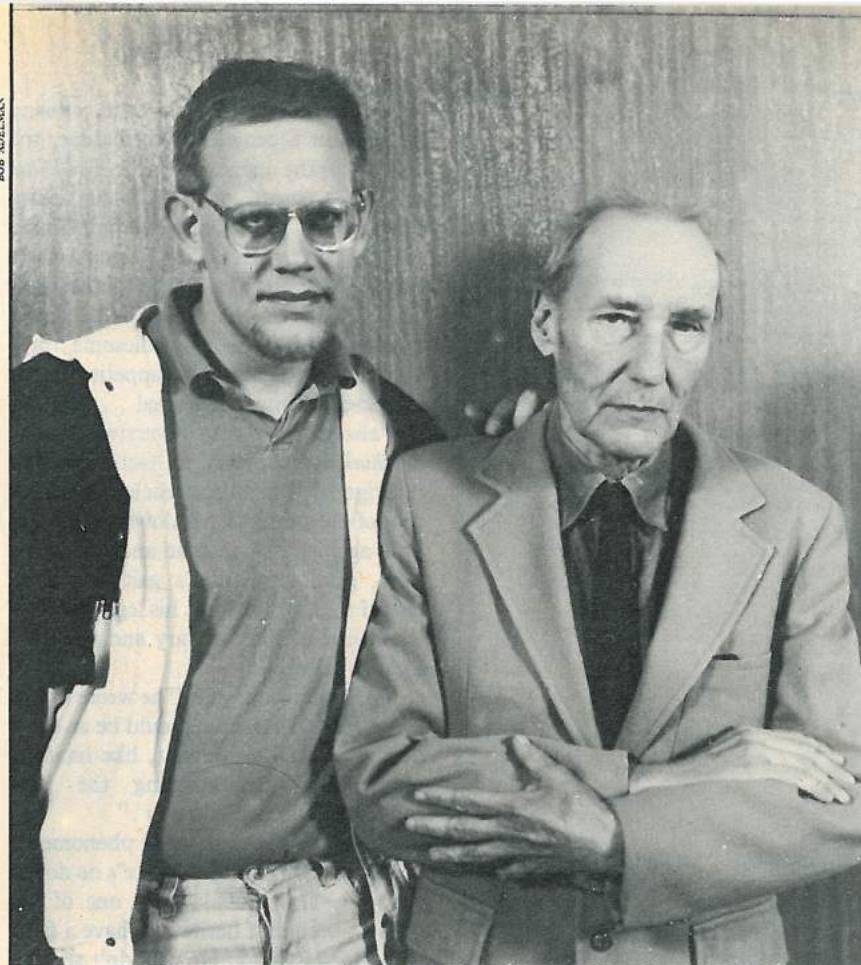
funny, with his sharply original angle of vision and the great scope of his obsessively collected information. Fictionalised versions of real events are slipped into the conversation.

Burroughs tells me that many years ago he ran for political office, the post of commissioner of sewers for St Louis County. Suddenly, he becomes a snarling, redneck officeholder: "You know, so I relieve the sheriff of some marijuana he has confiscated, and then I go across the street to the courthouse café for a coffee with some other lazy worthless bastards in the same line of business, and we wallow in corruption like contented alligators. I never wanted to be a front man like Nixon, takin' the rap, shakin' hands all day. As commissioner of sewers, the fewer people that knew of your existence, the better."

Burroughs takes a pull on his Player's Navy Cut. "This is all true," he says. "I did try to become commissioner of sewers. That was way back when, and it all worked on favours. You'd meet everybody out there at this softball game. They play softball, and they get drunk, and they decide who's going to get what. Everybody I met said, 'I'm old so-and-so running for this and that. Anything you'll do for me, I'll appreciate.' The fact is, I wasn't in a position to do a thing for any of them." Burroughs laughs, a rare occurrence. "So I was out. It was a token job where you got \$300 a month for doing nothing, just signing a few letters. I would never become commissioner of sewers. But I began to get an idea of what politics was all about. As commissioner of sewers, you could get your hand deep into a slush fund."

He is eager to show me his vegetable garden. He takes a throwing knife outside and slams it several times into a plank with great force and accuracy to demonstrate, partly, how much deeper in the stomach it would penetrate with a throw than a stab. We tour the blackberries, the beans, the gooseberries and the squash, with Burroughs proudly waving his cane over his estate. Tending vegetables is not something one normally associates with Burroughs, nor is a cosy relationship with his neighbours. In Tangier, in fact, he remembers their stones thudding against his door. Now the woman next door brings him cookies. "I must do something about the weeds over there," he says. "My neighbour is allergic to ragweed."

The only minor neighbourhood crisis in recent times was dispatched with Burroughsian deftness, and Burroughs emerged the hero. The antagonist, of course, was a dog. (All the worst dog incidents in Kansas, and they are pretty terrible, have been included in *The Place of Dead Roads*.) "Well, I was having – still got – a beef with this neighbour. He had an Airedale, pretty big one, that he let free on the lawn, and it would come down every day yapping and snapping at my heels, and I was put in the position, the ridiculous position, of standing it off



James Grauerholz, left, gave up his ambitions to be a rock star in the Seventies to put Burroughs's affairs in order. They are now neighbours

with my cane. Well, finally, I gave it a good whiff of tear gas, and that held it for a while, but meanwhile I ordered this thing I'd read about. I don't know why they don't push this thing, because I've seen letters asking, 'What is the answer for a meter reader or a postman with these fuckin' dogs?'" Burroughs gives me a millisecond of stone-grey eye contact.

"So I ordered this thing. Sixty-three dollars delivered. Little box that weighs about five ounces, and you just hold it up and press this thing and it makes this sound. I can't hear it, but a lot of people can. *Agaçant*, as the French say, like a finger on a blackboard. Dog would come rushing toward me, and I'd do that, and he stopped about 25 feet and veered off. And the neighbours all thought I was a magician. You just hold up your hand and the dog stops.

"To this day, this neighbour has a bitter enmity against me. He had to dispose of the dog as a public nuisance. He thinks I was the organiser of it, which I was. I carefully orchestrated it. I wrote letters."

Burroughs works all day, his imagination slipping along like a movie, until the cocktail hour at five in the afternoon. "When I'm working," he says, "I have the experiences, the visions with all the vividness of a dream, although I'm completely awake. I must say pot does help, because it stimulates the visual centres of the brain, and you see images more vividly and hear sounds as well. No question of it."

He is usually joined for dinner by James Grauerholz and his friend Michael Emerton, or the three of them go out to dine with their coterie of friends – many

of them members of the counter-culture that flourished in Lawrence during the late Sixties and early Seventies. The only good restaurant in town, to which the food-loving Burroughs occasionally repairs, is in the local Holiday Inn.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

The most vivid and revealing piece of Burroughs's writing is the introduction to his novel *Queer*. The book was written in 1952, just after he shot Joan, and was considered lost until a researcher discovered the manuscript in 1974. In the introduction, Burroughs describes his sense of horror at reading the book again. It gave him a palpable sense of the premonition of doom he had felt before Joan's death, and it leads him to a moving and candid recollection of the circumstances surrounding the shooting. "I glance at the manuscript of *Queer*," he writes, "and feel I simply can't read it. My past was a poisoned river from which one was fortunate to escape, and by which one feels immediately threatened, years after the events recorded."

When the shooting happened, Burroughs – he does not mention this in the introduction – had been away with his first steady boyfriend and had met up with Joan a few days earlier, for the first time in months. Joan had been suffering from amphetamine psychosis, was drinking a bottle of tequila a day and, according to Ginsberg, had been demonstrating a strong death wish.

Burroughs writes of walking the streets that day, tears streaming down his face from an "overwhelming feeling of doom and loss". Later, he slammed back drink after drink. Then, according to an interview with the writer Victor Bockris,

he said to Joan, "Now it's time for our William Tell act." "I aimed for the top of the glass," Burroughs told Bockris. "It was a very inaccurate gun." There were friends there to testify that it was an accident, and it was, after all, Mexico City, from which Burroughs fled after a brief incarceration.

"I am forced to the appalling conclusion," Burroughs writes, "that I would never have become a writer but for Joan's death and to a realisation of the extent to which this event has motivated and formulated my writing. I live with the constant threat of possession and a constant need to escape from possession, from Control. So the death of Joan brought me into contact with the invader, the Ugly Spirit, and manoeuvred me into a lifelong struggle, in which I have had no choice except to write my way out."

There is a feeling of immense sadness about Burroughs, to which, no doubt, the deaths of Joan and his son, Billy, who abused alcohol to boost the weak signal of his self-esteem and died of cirrhosis of the liver in 1981, have contributed. He is said to brood over mistakes and wrong turnings. There is the sadness of the romantic anti-authoritarian and prophet who has been staring into the abyss all his life. Part of the blackness may also come from the "raw and insatiable emotional need" that has plagued his relationships and threatened to consume the objects of his affections. The isolation of addiction and the emotional craving during withdrawal are his metaphors for the wall that has divided him from other people. "The face of 'evil'," he has written, "is always the face of total need."

When I asked Burroughs about all this, he said, "Good heavens, yes. One of the most insightful things John Updike said in his review [of Burroughs's novel *Port of Saints* in *The New Yorker*] was the final impression you get is that William Burroughs has experienced things sad beyond belief." At a colloquium called "The Practicalities of Living from a Writer's Point of View", during our Boulder trip, the subject of despair came up. The guest writers, including Allen Ginsberg, talked fluently about it. Burroughs lapsed into poker-faced silence and finally said, "I might write about it. I won't talk about it."

Later, he told me, "I've had occasions when I wondered seriously how anyone could feel as bad as this and live. The answer came back that I was still alive, that's all. All my life I've never considered committing suicide; I'd rather make a list of people to kill than go out and shoot myself."

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

These days Burroughs has sublimated his tragic sense of existence into a compassion for dying species. And he writes no longer about the dystopias of *Junky* or *Naked Lunch* but about Utopias, imaginary visions of worlds of harmony guided by such characters as Captain Mission, a real historical character, adopted and fictionalised by ►►►►► 37

WILLIAM BURROUGHS continued

Burroughs, who established a commune called Libertatia in Madagascar 100 years before the French Revolution.

Burroughs writes about travel from time into space and about cats as Rousseau-like symbols of innocence. His obsession with cats, his friends say, has opened up in Burroughs a tender, affectionate and even sentimental side, something that was always utterly repugnant to him. At a party in New York recently, he disappeared and was found in another room talking to a cat. Last winter he published in a limited edition *The Cat Inside* – a meditation on his conversion to cat lover – illustrated by his old Cut-Up friend, the late Brion Gysin.

"I became concerned with animals when I came to Lawrence," Burroughs says, "and started having this terrific rapport with cats. My dreams were full of animals, many other hybrids, animals that don't exist or did exist. The theme I'm developing now is the zoological garden of extinct species, a zoo that Captain Mission finds in Madagascar with all the extinct species, like a sort of Library of Congress of animals, plants, reptiles, insects and also diseases. I hypothesise on a number of these diseases, like when the hairs all over your body start growing, growing down into the flesh, until they grow into the vital organs. The end result is a skeleton covered with fur."

Burroughs has become something of an animal activist. He's given up on

Homo sap, as he calls him, who, he believes, is clearly planning to reduce the planet to cinders. "This particular strain," he says, "can be counted on to do the nastiest things, the ugliest things. People say other animals kill for pleasure or kill to eat, but only Homo sap kills for the sheer ugliness of it, just to roll around in ugliness." When he thinks about the nuclear holocaust, which he often does, he worries first about his cats. When the bands of irradiated marauders take to the streets, Burroughs says, he will go heavily armed to the supermarket and shoot his way to the cat-food counter.

As far as Burroughs can see, Homo sap has reached a biological dead end. There is no hope except through mutation or miracle – or transition from time into space, the new frontier. "Very few will make it," he says. "Certainly no politicians, thank God." He is working on a novel called *The Western Lands*, in which Chauceresque pilgrims – adolescents almost to a man – travel through the Land of the Dead, the frontier beyond time, learning how to deal with space conditions. "Always great difficulty getting breakfast," says Burroughs. "I compare this to the transition from water to land of the various transitional species. The astronauts haven't gone into space – that is, they've gone to space in an Aqualung. There has to be a link; there had to be an air-breathing potential among these creatures before they made the transition.

If there wasn't, it was simply suicide. I see that dreams are the lifeline to our possible biological and spiritual destiny. Dreams sometimes approximate space conditions. That's what *The Western Lands* is about."

It is not enough to write about it. Burroughs applied to fly on the space shuttle, and it is his great regret – apart from never having been a Vietnam war correspondent – that he'll probably never go. "Oh, there was something called Artists in Orbit," he says. "I said, 'Yes, I would be delighted to make this space trip as a writer in orbit and to report what I had seen and experienced.' Well, the next thing is they have this disaster, so the whole thing is put back indefinitely. The possibility now of my ever making such a trip is remote, although I would not be deterred by the Challenger disaster. I would make one tomorrow.

"But they don't want any artists up there seeing what they don't want seen. There's never been a dream by an astronaut recorded. Do you realise that? Not one. This, to me, is absolutely appalling. I would say they have been told you don't talk about your dreams; they get very definite instructions. When you consider that dreams are also something that is a biological necessity, like food and water, you would think there's something wrong. We're not getting the full account at all. The whole space programme reeks of lies, cover-up, things they're not saying. My feeling is

that man must now move from time into space, and the authorities, being firmly based in time, do not want to know about that, and therefore any indications of such a shift in consciousness must not be reported. And the people themselves have been chosen carefully for their lack of imagination."

Luke Sante, in his review, noticed that Burroughs seemed to be preparing for Valhalla in his latest works, through his obsession with last words and his lingering descriptions of the physical decay of Beau Brummell and Somerset Maugham. "It would seem," Sante wrote, "that he is seriously preparing for the big sleep." Burroughs has cut down on his performances and gave me the impression that he is writing furiously to a deadline, applying what Ginsberg calls "his fantastic and deep writing habit." The writing itself has the resonance and wit of his earliest work.

He clearly yearns for his words to make an indelible impact on our consciousness, as if he were making a last plea and serving a last warning to a dying species. The basic Burroughs concept is his belief in the magic of the universe, "unpredictable, spontaneous, alive." He has already written an epitaph for himself, which he put into the mouth of the shootist Kim Carsons in *The Place of Dead Roads*: "And my saga will shine in the eyes of adolescents squinting through gunsmoke.

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