

THE ART OF FICTION NO. 36
WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS

Firecrackers and whistles sounded the advent of the New Year of 1965 in St. Louis. Stripteasers ran from the bars in Gaslight Square to dance in the street when midnight came. Burroughs, who had watched television alone that night, was asleep in his room at the Chase Park Plaza Hotel, St. Louis's most elegant.

At noon the next day he was ready for the interview. He wore a gray lightweight Brooks Brothers suit with a vest, a blue-striped shirt from Gibraltar cut in the English style, and a deep-blue tie with small white polka dots. His manner was not so much pedagogic as didactic or forensic. He might have been a senior partner in a private bank, charting the course of huge but anonymous fortunes. A friend of the interviewer, spotting Burroughs across the lobby, thought he was a British diplomat. At the age of fifty, he is trim; he performs a complex abdominal exercise daily and walks a good deal. His face carries no excess flesh. His expression is taut, and his features are intense and chiseled. He did not smile during the interview and laughed only once, but he gives the impression of being capable of much dry laughter under other circumstances. His voice is sonorous, its tone reasonable and patient; his accent is mid-Atlantic, the kind of regionless inflection Americans acquire

after many years abroad. He speaks elliptically, in short, clear bursts.

On the dresser of his room sat a European transistor radio; several science fiction paperbacks; *Romance*, by Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford; *The Day Lincoln Was Shot*, by Jim Bishop; and *Ghosts in American Houses*, by James Reynolds. A Zeiss Ikon camera in a scuffed leather case lay on one of the twin beds beside a copy of *Field & Stream*. On the other bed were a pair of long shears, clippings from newspaper society pages, photographs, and a scrapbook. A Facit portable typewriter sat on the desk, and gradually one became aware that the room, although neat, contained a great deal of paper.

Burroughs smoked incessantly, alternating between a box of English Ovals and a box of Benson & Hedges. As the interview progressed, the room filled with smoke. He opened the window. The temperature outside was seventy degrees, the warmest New Year's Day in St. Louis's history; a yellow jacket flew in and settled on the pane. The bright afternoon deepened. The faint cries of children rose up from the broad brick alleys in which Burroughs had played as a boy.

— *Conrad Knickerbocker, 1965*

INTERVIEWER

You grew up here?

WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS

Yes. I went to John Burroughs School and the Taylor School, and was out West for a bit, and then went to Harvard.

INTERVIEWER

Any relation to the adding-machine firm?

BURROUGHS

My grandfather. You see, he didn't exactly invent the adding machine, but he invented the gimmick that made it work, namely, a cylinder full of oil and a perforated piston that will always move up and down at the same rate of speed. Very simple principle, like most inventions. And it gave me a little money, not much, but a little.

INTERVIEWER

What did you do at Harvard?

BURROUGHS

Studied English lit. John Livingston Lowes. Whiting. I sat in on Kittredge's course. Those are the main people I recall. I lived in Adams House and then I got fed up with the food and I moved to Claverly Hall, where I lived the last two years. I didn't do any writing in college.

INTERVIEWER

When and why did you start to write?

BURROUGHS

I started to write in about 1950; I was thirty-five at the time; there didn't seem to be any strong motivation. I simply was endeavoring to put down in a more or less straightforward journalistic style something about my experiences with addiction and addicts.

INTERVIEWER

Why did you feel compelled to record these experiences?

BURROUGHS

I didn't feel compelled. I had nothing else to do. Writing gave me something to do every day. I don't feel the results were at all spectacular. *Junky* is not much of a book, actually. I knew very little about writing at that time.

INTERVIEWER

Where was this?

BURROUGHS

In Mexico City. I was living near Sears, Roebuck, right around the corner from the University of Mexico. I had been in the army four or five months and I was there on the GI Bill, studying native dialects. I went to Mexico partly because things were becoming so difficult with the drug situation in America. Getting drugs in Mexico was quite easy, so I didn't have to rush around, and there wasn't any pressure from the law.

INTERVIEWER

Why did you start taking drugs?

BURROUGHS

Well, I was just bored. I didn't seem to have much interest in becoming a successful advertising executive or whatever, or living the kind of life Harvard designs for you. After I became addicted in New York in 1944, things began to happen. I got in some trouble with the law, got married, moved to New Orleans, and then went to Mexico.

INTERVIEWER

There seems to be a great deal of middle-class voyeurism in this country concerning addiction, and in the literary world, downright reverence for the addict. You apparently don't share these points of view.

BURROUGHS

No, most of it is nonsense. I think drugs are interesting principally as chemical means of altering metabolism and thereby altering what we call reality, which I would define as a more or less constant scanning pattern.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think of the hallucinogens and the new psychedelic drugs—LSD-25?

BURROUGHS

I think they're extremely dangerous, much more dangerous than heroin. They can produce overwhelming anxiety states. I've seen people try to throw themselves out of windows; whereas the heroin addict is mainly interested in staring at his own toe. Other than deprivation of the drug, the main threat to him is an overdose. I've tried most of the hallucinogens without an anxiety reaction, fortunately. LSD-25 produced results for me similar to mescaline. Like all hallucinogens, LSD gave me an increased awareness, more a hallucinated viewpoint than any actual hallucination. You might look at a doorknob and it will appear to revolve, although you are conscious that this is the result of the drug. Also, van Goghish colors, with all those swirls, and the crackle of the universe.

INTERVIEWER

Have you read Henri Michaux's book on mescaline?

BURROUGHS

His idea was to go into his room and close the door and hold in the experiences. I had my most interesting experiences with mescaline when I got outdoors and walked around—colors, sunsets, gardens. It produces a terrible hangover, though, nasty stuff. It makes one ill and interferes with coordination. I've had all the interesting effects I need, and I don't want any repetition of those extremely unpleasant physical reactions.

INTERVIEWER

The visions of drugs and the visions of art don't mix?

BURROUGHS

Never. The hallucinogens produce visionary states, sort of, but morphine and its derivatives decrease awareness of inner processes, thoughts, and feelings. They are painkillers, pure and simple. They are absolutely contraindicated for creative work, and I include in the lot alcohol, morphine, barbiturates, tranquilizers—the whole spectrum of sedative drugs. As for visions and heroin, I had a hallucinatory period at the very beginning of addiction, for instance, a sense of moving at high speed through space. But as soon as addiction was established, I had no visions—vision—at all and very few dreams.

INTERVIEWER

Why did you stop taking drugs?

BURROUGHS

I was living in Tangier in 1957, and I had spent a month in a tiny room in the Casbah staring at the toe of my foot. The room had filled up with empty Eukodol cartons; I suddenly realized I was not doing anything. I was dying. I was just apt to be finished. So I flew to London and turned myself over to Dr. John Yerbury Dent for treatment. I'd heard of his success with the apomorphine treatment. Apomorphine is simply morphine boiled in hydrochloric acid; it's nonaddictive. What the apomorphine did was to regulate my metabolism. It's a metabolic regulator. It cured me physiologically. I'd already taken the cure once at Lexington, and although I was off drugs when I got out, there was a physiological residue. Apomorphine eliminated that. I've been trying to get people in this country interested in it, but without much luck. The vast majority—social workers, doctors—have the cop's mentality toward addiction. A probation officer in California wrote me recently to inquire about the apomorphine treatment. I'll answer him at length. I always answer letters like that.

INTERVIEWER

Have you had any relapses?

BURROUGHS

Yes, a couple. Short. Both were straightened out with apomorphine, and now heroin is no temptation for me. I'm just not interested. I've seen a lot of it around. I know people who are addicts. I don't have to use any willpower. Dr. Dent always said there is no such thing as willpower. You've got to reach a state of mind in which you don't want it or need it.

INTERVIEWER

You regard addiction as an illness but also a central human fact, a drama?

BURROUGHS

Both, absolutely. It's as simple as the way in which anyone happens to become an alcoholic. They start drinking, that's all. They like it, and they drink, and then they become alcoholic. I was exposed to heroin in New York—that is, I was going around with people who were using it; I took it; the effects were pleasant. I went on using it and became addicted. Remember that if it can be readily obtained, you will have any number of addicts. The idea that addiction is somehow a psychological illness is, I think, totally ridiculous. It's as psychological as malaria. It's a matter of exposure. People, generally speaking, will take any intoxicant or any drug that gives them a pleasant effect if it is available to them. In Iran, for instance, opium was sold in shops until quite recently, and they had three million addicts in a population of twenty million. There are also all forms of spiritual addiction. Anything that can be done chemically can be done in other ways, that is, if we have sufficient knowledge of the processes involved. Many policemen and narcotics agents are precisely addicted to power, to exercising a certain nasty kind of power over people who are helpless. The nasty sort of power: white junk, I call it—rightness; they're right,

right, right—and if they lost that power, they would suffer excruciating withdrawal symptoms. The picture we get of the whole Russian bureaucracy, people who are exclusively preoccupied with power and advantage, this must be an addiction. Suppose they lose it? Well, it's been their whole life.

INTERVIEWER

Can you amplify your idea of junk as image?

BURROUGHS

It's only a theory and, I feel, an inadequate one. I don't think anyone really understands what a narcotic is or how it works, how it kills pain. My idea is sort of a stab in the dark. As I see it, what has been damaged in pain is, of course, the image, and morphine must in some sense replace this. We know it blankets the cells and that addicts are practically immune to certain viruses, to influenza and respiratory complaints. This is simple because the influenza virus has to make a hole in the cell receptors. When those are covered, as they are in morphine addiction, the virus can't get in. As soon as morphine is withdrawn, addicts will immediately come down with colds and often with influenza.

INTERVIEWER

Certain schizophrenics also resist respiratory disease.

BURROUGHS

A long time ago I suggested there were similarities in terminal addiction and terminal schizophrenia. That was why I made the suggestion that they addict these people to heroin, then withdraw it and see if they could be motivated; in other words, find out whether they'd walk across the room and pick up a syringe. Needless to say, I didn't get very far, but I think it would be interesting.

INTERVIEWER

Narcotics, then, disturb normal perception—

(ticket to St. Louis and return in a first-class room for two people who is the third that walks beside you?) After a parenthesis of more than 40 years I met my old neighbor, Rives Skinker Mathews, in Tangier. I was born 4664 Berlin Avenue changed it to Pershing during the war. The Mathews family lived next door at 4660--red brick three-story houses separated by a gangway large back yard where I could generally see a rat one time or another from my bed-room window on the top floor. Well we get to talking St. Louis and 'what happened to so and so' sets in and Rives Mathews really knows what happened to any so and so in St. Louis. His mother had been to dancing school with 'Tommy Eliot'--(His socks would stay up. His hands were ~~XXXX~~ clammy. I will show you fear in dancing school)--Allow me to open a parenthesis you see Rives Mathews had kept a scrap book of St. Louis ~~XXXX~~ years and his mother left a collection of visiting cards from the capitals of Europe. I was on my way back to St. Louis as I looked through Rive's scrap book dim flickering pieces of T.S. Eliot rising from the pages--(But what have I my friend to give you put aside on another tray? Those cards were burned in my winter house fire, October 27, 1961--Comte Wladimir Sollohub Bashis Ali Khan Bremond d'ars Marquis de Migre St. John's College 21 Quai Malaquais Principe de la Tour--Gentilhomme di Palazzo--you're a long way from St. Louis and visa versa.)

'I want to reserve a drawing-room for St. Louis.'

'A drawing room? Where have you been?'

'I have been abroad.'

'I can give you a bed-room or a roomette as in smaller.'

'I will take the bed-room.'

6.40 P.M. Loyal Socks ~~XXXX~~ Rapide out of New York for St. Louis-- Settled in my bed room surrounded by the luggage of ten years abroad I wondered how small a roomette could be. A space capsule is where you find it. December 23, 1964, enlisting the aid of my porter, a discreet Oriental personage and a far cry indeed from old 'Yassah Boss George' of my day, a table was installed in this bed-room where I could set up my Facit portable and type as I looked out the train window. Snapping an occasional picture with my Zeiss Ikon, I could not but lament the old brass spittoons, the smell of worn leather, stale cigar smoke, steam iron and soot. Looking out the train window--click click clack--back back back-- Pennsylvania Railroad en route four people in a drawing room::: One ~~XXXX~~ through an old joke magazine called LIFE:--(What we want to know is who put the sand in the spinach?)--A thin boy in prep school clothes thinks this is funny. Ash gathers on his father's ~~XXXX~~ Havana held in a delicate gray cone the way it holds on a really expensive cigar. Father is reading The Wall Street Journal . . . Mother is putting on the old pan cake, The Green Hat folded on her knee. Brother 'B.' they call him is looking out the train window. The time is 3 P.M. The train is one hour out of St. Louis Missouri. Sad toy train it's a long way to go see on back each time place what I mean dim jerky far away. /take/ Look out the window of the train. Look. Postulate an observer Mr. B. from Pitman's Common Sense Arithmetic at Point X one light hour away from the train. ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~ Postulate further that Mr. B. is able to observe and photograph the family with a telescopic camera. Since the family image moving at the speed of light will take an hour to reach Mr. B., when he takes the 3 P.M. set the train is pulling into St. Louis Union Station at 4 P.M. St. Louis time George the porter there waiting for his tip. (Are you a member of the Union? Film Union 4 P.M.?). The family will be met at the station by plain Mr. Jones or Mr. J. if you prefer. (It was called Lost Flight. Newspapers from vacant lots in a back alley print a shop lifted bodily out of a movie set the Editor Rives Mathews,

BURROUGHS

And set up instead a random craving for images. If drugs weren't forbidden in America, they would be the perfect middle-class vice. Addicts would do their work and come home to consume the huge dose of images awaiting them in the mass media. Junkies love to look at television. Billie Holiday said she knew she was going off drugs when she didn't like to watch TV. Or they'll sit and read a newspaper or magazine, and by God, read it all. I knew this old junkie in New York, and he'd go out and get a lot of newspapers and magazines and some candy bars and several packages of cigarettes and then he'd sit in his room and he'd read those newspapers and magazines right straight through. Indiscriminately. Every word.

INTERVIEWER

You seem primarily interested in bypassing the conscious rational apparatus to which most writers direct their efforts.

BURROUGHS

I don't know about where fiction ordinarily directs itself, but I am quite deliberately addressing myself to the whole area of what we call dreams. Precisely what is a dream? A certain juxtaposition of word and image. I've recently done a lot of experiments with scrapbooks. I'll read in the newspaper something that reminds me of or has relation to something I've written. I'll cut out the picture or article and paste it in a scrapbook beside the words from my book. Or, I'll be walking down the street and I'll suddenly see a scene from my book and I'll photograph it and put it in a scrapbook. I'll show you some of those. I've found that when preparing a page, I'll almost invariably dream that night something relating to this juxtaposition of word and image. In other words, I've been interested in precisely how word and image get around on very, very complex association lines. I do a lot of exercises in what I call time travel, in taking coordinates, such as what I photographed on the train, what I was thinking about at the time,

what I was reading, and what I wrote; all of this to see how completely I can project myself back to that one point in time.

INTERVIEWER

In *Nova Express*, you indicate that silence is a desirable state.

BURROUGHS

The *most* desirable state. In one sense a special use of words and pictures can conduce silence. The scrapbooks and time travel are exercises to expand consciousness, to teach me to think in association blocks rather than words. I've recently spent a little time studying hieroglyph systems, both the Egyptian and the Mayan. A whole block of associations—*boonf!*—like that! Words, at least the way we use them, can stand in the way of what I call nonbody experience. It's time we thought about leaving the body behind.

INTERVIEWER

Marshall McLuhan said that you believed heroin was needed to turn the human body into an environment that includes the universe. But from what you've told me, you're not at all interested in turning the body into an environment.

BURROUGHS

No, junk narrows consciousness. The only benefit to me as a writer (aside from putting me into contact with the whole carny world) came to me after I went off it. What I want to do is to learn to see more of what's out there, to look outside, to achieve as far as possible a complete awareness of surroundings. Beckett wants to go inward. First he was in a bottle and now he is in the mud. I am aimed in the other direction—outward.

INTERVIEWER

Have you been able to think for any length of time in images, with the inner voice silent?

BURROUGHS

I'm becoming more proficient at it, partly through my work with scrapbooks and translating the connections between words and images. Try this. Carefully memorize the meaning of a passage, then read it; you'll find you can actually read it without the words making any sound whatever in the mind's ear. Extraordinary experience, and one that will carry over into dreams. When you start thinking in images, without words, you're well on the way.

INTERVIEWER

Why is the wordless state so desirable?

BURROUGHS

I think it's the evolutionary trend. I think that words are an around-the-world, oxcart way of doing things, awkward instruments, and they will be laid aside eventually, probably sooner than we think. This is something that will happen in the space age. Most serious writers refuse to make themselves available to the things that technology is doing. I've never been able to understand this sort of fear. Many of them are afraid of tape recorders and the idea of using any mechanical means for literary purposes seems to them some sort of a sacrilege. This is one objection to the cut-ups. There's been a lot of that, a sort of a superstitious reverence for the word. My God, they say, you can't cut up these words. Why *can't* I? I find it much easier to get interest in the cut-ups from people who are not writers—doctors, lawyers, or engineers, any open-minded, fairly intelligent person—than from those who are.

INTERVIEWER

How did you become interested in the cut-up technique?

BURROUGHS

A friend, Brion Gysin, an American poet and painter, who has

lived in Europe for thirty years, was, as far as I know, the first to create cut-ups. His cut-up poem, “Minutes to Go,” was broadcast by the BBC and later published in a pamphlet. I was in Paris in the summer of 1960; this was after the publication there of *Naked Lunch*. I became interested in the possibilities of this technique, and I began experimenting myself. Of course, when you think of it, *The Waste Land* was the first great cut-up collage, and Tristan Tzara had done a bit along the same lines. Dos Passos used the same idea in “The Camera Eye” sequences in *U.S.A.* I felt I had been working toward the same goal; thus it was a major revelation to me when I actually saw it being done.

INTERVIEWER

What do cut-ups offer the reader that conventional narrative doesn't?

BURROUGHS

Any narrative passage or any passage, say, of poetic images is subject to any number of variations, all of which may be interesting and valid in their own right. A page of Rimbaud cut up and rearranged will give you quite new images. Rimbaud images—real Rimbaud images—but new ones.

INTERVIEWER

You deplore the accumulation of images and at the same time you seem to be looking for new ones.

BURROUGHS

Yes, it's part of the paradox of anyone who is working with word and image, and after all, that is what a writer is still doing. Painter too. Cut-ups establish new connections between images, and one's range of vision consequently expands.

INTERVIEWER

Instead of going to the trouble of working with scissors and all

those pieces of paper, couldn't you obtain the same effect by simply free-associating at the typewriter?

BURROUGHS

One's mind can't cover it that way. Now, for example, if I wanted to make a cut-up of this [*picking up a copy of The Nation*], there are many ways I could do it. I could read cross-column; I could say, "Today's men's nerves surround us. Each technological extension gone outside is electrical involves an act of collective environment. The human nervous environment system itself can be reprogrammed with all its private and social values because it is content. He programs logically as readily as any radio net is swallowed by the new environment. The sensory order." You find it often makes quite as much sense as the original. You learn to leave out words and to make connections. [*Gesturing*] Suppose I should cut this down the middle here, and put this up here. Your mind simply could not manage it. It's like trying to keep so many chess moves in mind, you just couldn't do it. The mental mechanisms of repression and selection are also operating against you.

INTERVIEWER

You believe that an audience can be eventually trained to respond to cut-ups?

BURROUGHS

Of course, because cut-ups make explicit a psychosensory process that is going on all the time anyway. Somebody is reading a newspaper, and his eye follows the column in the proper Aristotelian manner, one idea and sentence at a time. But subliminally he is reading the columns on either side and is aware of the person sitting next to him. That's a cut-up. I was sitting in a lunchroom in New York having my doughnuts and coffee. I was thinking that one *does* feel a little boxed in New York, like living in a series of boxes. I looked out the window and there was a great big Yale truck. That's cut-up—a juxtaposition of what's happening

outside and what you're thinking of. I make this a practice when I walk down the street. I'll say, when I got to here I saw that sign; I was thinking this, and when I return to the house I'll type these up. Some of this material I use and some I don't. I have literally thousands of pages of notes here, raw, and I keep a diary as well. In a sense it's traveling in time.

Most people don't see what's going on around them. That's my principal message to writers: for God's sake, keep your *eyes* open. Notice what's going on around you. I mean, I walk down the street with friends. I ask, "Did you see him, that person who just walked by?" No, they didn't notice him. I had a very pleasant time on the train coming out here. I haven't traveled on trains in years. I found there were no drawing rooms. I got a bedroom so I could set up my typewriter and look out the window. I was taking photos, too. I also noticed all the signs and what I was thinking at the time, you see. And I got some extraordinary juxtapositions. For example, a friend of mine has a loft apartment in New York. He said, "Every time we go out of the house and come back, if we leave the bathroom door open, there's a rat in the house." I look out the window, there's Able Pest Control.

INTERVIEWER

The one flaw in the cut-up argument seems to lie in the linguistic base on which we operate, the straight declarative sentence. It's going to take a great deal to change that.

BURROUGHS

Yes, it is unfortunately one of the great errors of Western thought, the whole either/or proposition. You remember Korzybski and his idea of non-Aristotelian logic. Either/or thinking just is not accurate thinking. That's not the way things occur, and I feel the Aristotelian construct is one of the great shackles of Western civilization. Cut-ups are a movement toward breaking this down. I should imagine it would be much easier to find acceptance of the cut-ups from, possibly, the Chinese, because you see already

there are many ways that they can read any given ideograph. It's already cut up.

INTERVIEWER

What will happen to the straight plot in fiction?

BURROUGHS

Plot has always had the definite function of stage direction, of getting the characters from here to there, and that will continue, but the new techniques such as cut-up will involve much more of the total capacity of the observer. It enriches the whole aesthetic experience, extends it.

INTERVIEWER

Nova Express is a cut-up of many writers?

BURROUGHS

Joyce is in there. Shakespeare, Rimbaud, some writers that people haven't heard about, someone named Jack Stern. There's Kerouac. I don't know, when you start making these fold-ins (instead of cutting, you fold) and cut-ups you lose track. Genet, of course, is someone I admire very much. But what he's doing is classical French prose. He's not a verbal innovator. Also Kafka, Eliot, and one of my favorites is Joseph Conrad. My story, "They Just Fade Away," is a fold-in from *Lord Jim*. In fact, it's almost a retelling of the *Lord Jim* story. My Stein is the same Stein as in *Lord Jim*. Richard Hughes is another favorite of mine. And Graham Greene. For exercise, when I make a trip, such as from Tangier to Gibraltar, I will record this in three columns in a notebook I always take with me. One column will contain simply an account of the trip, what happened. I arrived at the air terminal, what was said by the clerks, what I overheard on the plane, what hotel I checked into. The next column presents my memories; that is, what I was thinking of at the time, the memories that were activated by my encounters; and the third column, which I call my

reading column, gives quotations from any book that I take with me. I have practically a whole novel alone on my trips to Gibraltar. Besides Graham Greene, I've used other books. I used *The Wonderful Country* by Tom Lea on one trip. Let's see, and Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*; *In Hazard* by Richard Hughes. For example, I'm reading *The Wonderful Country* and the hero is just crossing the frontier into Mexico. Well, just at this point I come to the Spanish frontier, so I note that down in the margin. Or I'm on a boat or a train, and I'm reading *The Quiet American*. I look around and see if there's a quiet American aboard. Sure enough, there's a quiet sort of young American with a crew cut drinking a bottle of beer. It's extraordinary, if you really keep your eyes open. I was reading Raymond Chandler, and one of his characters was an albino gunman. My God, if there wasn't an albino in the room. He wasn't a gunman.

Who else? Wait a minute, I'll just check my coordinate books to see if there's anyone I've forgotten—Conrad, Richard Hughes, science fiction, quite a bit of science fiction. Eric Frank Russell has written some very, very interesting books. Here's one, *The Star Virus*; I doubt if you've heard of it. He develops a concept here of what he calls "Deadliners," who have this strange sort of seedy look. I read this when I was in Gibraltar, and I began to find Deadliners all over the place. The story has a fishpond in it, and quite a flower garden. My father was always very interested in gardening.

INTERVIEWER

In view of all this, what will happen to fiction in the next twenty-five years?

BURROUGHS

In the first place, I think there's going to be more and more merging of art and science. Scientists are already studying the creative process, and I think the whole line between art and science will break down and that scientists, I hope, will become more creative and writers more scientific. And I see no reason why the

artistic world can't absolutely merge with Madison Avenue. Pop art is a move in that direction. Why can't we have advertisements with beautiful words and beautiful images? Already some of the very beautiful color photography appears in whiskey ads, I notice. Science will also discover for us how association blocks actually form.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think this will destroy the magic?

BURROUGHS

Not at all. I would say it would enhance it.

INTERVIEWER

Have you done anything with computers?

BURROUGHS

I've not done anything, but I've seen some of the computer poetry. I can take one of those computer poems and then try to find correlatives of it, that is, pictures to go with it. It's quite possible.

INTERVIEWER

Does the fact that it comes from a machine diminish its value to you?

BURROUGHS

I think that any artistic product must stand or fall on what's there.

INTERVIEWER

Therefore, you're not upset by the fact that a chimpanzee can do an abstract painting?

BURROUGHS

If he does a good one, no. People say to me, "Oh, this is all very good, but you got it by cutting up." I say that has nothing to do with it, how I got it. What is any writing but a cut-up?

Somebody has to program the machine; somebody has to *do* the cutting up. Remember that I first made selections. Out of hundreds of possible sentences that I might have used, I chose one.

INTERVIEWER

Incidentally, one image in *Nova Express* keeps coming back to me and I don't quite understand it: the gray room, "breaking through to the gray room."

BURROUGHS

I see that as very much like the photographic darkroom where the reality photographs are actually produced. Implicit in *Nova Express* is a theory that what we call reality is actually a movie. It's a film, what I call a biologic film. What has happened is that the underground and also the nova police have made a breakthrough past the guards and gotten into the darkroom where the films are processed, where they're in a position to expose negatives and prevent events from occurring. They're like police anywhere. All right, you've got a bad situation here in which the nova mob is about to blow up the planet. So The Heavy Metal Kid calls in the nova police. Once you get them in there, by God, they begin acting like any police. They're always an ambivalent agency. I recall once in South America that I complained to the police that a camera had been stolen and they ended up arresting me. I hadn't registered or something. In other words, once you get them on the scene they really start nosing around. Once the law starts asking questions, there's no end to it. For nova police, read technology, if you wish.

INTERVIEWER

Mary McCarthy has commented on the carnival origins of your characters in *Naked Lunch*. What are their other derivations?

BURROUGHS

The carny world was the one I exactly intended to create—a kind of midwestern, small-town, cracker-barrel, pratfall type of

folklore, very much my own background. That world was an integral part of America and existed nowhere else, at least not in the same form. My family was southern on my mother's side. My grandfather was a circuit-riding Methodist minister with thirteen children. Most of them went up to New York and became quite successful in advertising and public relations. One of them, an uncle, was a master image maker, Ivy Lee, Rockefeller's publicity manager.

INTERVIEWER

Is it true that you did a great deal of acting out to create your characters when you were finishing *Naked Lunch*?

BURROUGHS

Excuse me, there is no accurate description of the creation of a book, or an event. Read Durrell's Alexandria novels for four different ways of looking at the same thing. Gysin saw me pasting pictures on the wall of a Paris hotel room and using a tape recorder to act out several voices. Actually, it was written mainly in Tangier, after I had taken the cure with Dr. Dent in London in 1957. I came back to Tangier and I started working on a lot of notes that I had made over a period of years. Most of the book was written at that time. I went to Paris about 1959, and I had a great pile of manuscripts. Girodias was interested and he asked if I could get the book ready in two weeks. This is the period that Brion is referring to when, from manuscripts collected over a period of years, I assembled what became the book from some thousand pages, something like that.

INTERVIEWER

But did you actually leap up and act out, say, Dr. Benway?

BURROUGHS

Yes, I have. Dr. Benway dates back to a story I wrote in 1938 with a friend of mine, Kells Elvins, who is now dead. That's about the only piece of writing I did prior to *Junky*. And we did definitely

act the thing out. We decided that was the way to write. Now here's this guy, what does he say, what does he do? Dr. Benway sort of emerged quite spontaneously while we were composing this piece. Something I've been meaning to do with my scrapbooks is to have files on every character, almost like police files: habits, idiosyncrasies, where born, pictures. That is, if I ever see anyone in a magazine or newspaper who looks like Dr. Benway (and several people have played Dr. Benway, sort of amateur actors), I take their photographs. Many of my characters first come through strongly to me as voices. That's why I use a tape recorder. They also carry over from one book to another.

INTERVIEWER

Do any have their origins in actual persons?

BURROUGHS

Hamburger Mary is one. There was a place in New York called Hamburger Mary's. I was in Hamburger Mary's when a friend gave me a batch of morphine syrettes. That was my first experience with morphine and then I built up a whole picture of Hamburger Mary. She is also an actual person. I don't like to give her name for fear of being sued for libel, but she was a Scientologist who started out in a hamburger joint in Portland, Oregon, and now has eleven million dollars.

INTERVIEWER

What about The Heavy Metal Kid?

BURROUGHS

There again, quite complicated origins, partly based on my own experience. I felt that heavy metal was sort of the ultimate expression of addiction, that there's something actually metallic in addiction, that the final stage reached is not so much vegetable as mineral. It's increasingly inanimate, in any case. You see, as Dr. Benway said, I've now decided that junk is not green, but blue.

Some of my characters come to me in dreams, Daddy Long Legs, for instance. Once, in a clinic, I had a dream in which I saw a man in this rundown clinic and his name in the dream was Daddy Long Legs. Many characters have come to me like that in a dream, and then I'll elaborate from there. I always write down all my dreams. That's why I've got that notebook beside the bed there.

INTERVIEWER

Earlier you mentioned that if junk had done nothing else, it at least put you in contact with the carny world.

BURROUGHS

Yes, the underworld, the old-time thieves, pickpockets, and people like that. They're a dying race; very few of those old-timers left. Yeah, well, they were show business.

INTERVIEWER

What's the difference between the modern junkie versus the 1944 junkie?

BURROUGHS

For one thing, all these young addicts; that was quite unknown in 1944. Most of the ones I knew were middle-aged men or old. I knew some of the old-time pickpockets and sneak thieves and shortchange artists. They had something called The Bill, a shortchange deal. I've never been able to figure out how it works. One man I knew beat all the cashiers in Grand Central with this thing. It starts with a twenty-dollar bill. You give them a twenty-dollar bill and then when you get the change you say, "Well, wait a minute, I must have been dreaming, I've got the change after all." First thing you know, the cashier's short ten dollars. One day this shortchange artist went to Grand Central, even though he knew it was burned down, but he wanted to change twenty dollars. Well, a guy got on the buzzer and they arrested him. When they got up in court and tried to explain what

had happened, none of them could do it. I keep stories like this in my files.

INTERVIEWER

In your apartment in Tangier?

BURROUGHS

No, all of it is right here in this room.

INTERVIEWER

In case Tangier is blown up, it's all safe?

BURROUGHS

Well, more than that. *I need it all*. I brought everything. That's why I have to travel by boat and by train, because, well, just to give you an idea, that's a photographic file [*tbud*]. Those are all photographs and photographs. When I sit down to write, I may suddenly think of something I wrote three years ago which should be in this file over here. It may not be. I'm always looking through these files. That's why I need a place where I can really spread them out, to see what's what. I'm looking for one particular paper, it often takes me a long time and sometimes I don't find it. Those dresser drawers are full of files. All those drawers in the closets are full of files. It's pretty well organized. Here's a file, "The 1920 Movie," which partly contains some motion picture ideas. Here's "All the Sad Old Showmen"; has some business about bank robbers in it. Here's "The Nova Police Gazette." This is "Analog," which contains science fiction material. This is "The Captain's Logbook." I've been interested in sea stories, but I know so little about the sea, I hesitate to do much. I collect sea disasters such as the *Mary Celeste*. Here's a file on Mr. Luce.

INTERVIEWER

Do you admire Mr. Luce?

BURROUGHS

I don't admire him at all. He has set up one of the greatest word and image banks in the world. I mean, there are thousands of photos, thousands of words about anything and everything, all in his files. All the best pictures go into the files. Of course, they're reduced to microphotos now. I've been interested in the Mayan system, which was a control calendar. You see, their calendar postulated really how everyone should feel at a given time, with lucky days, unlucky days, et cetera. And I feel that Luce's system is comparable to that. It is a control system. It has nothing to do with reporting. *Time, Life, Fortune* is some sort of a police organization.

INTERVIEWER

You've said your next book will be about the American West and a gunfighter.

BURROUGHS

Yes, I've thought about this for years and I have hundreds of pages of notes on the whole concept of the gunfighter. The gun duel was a sort of Zen contest, a real spiritual contest like Zen swordsmanship.

INTERVIEWER

Would this be cut-up, or more a conventional narrative?

BURROUGHS

I'd use cut-ups extensively in the preparation, because they would give me all sorts of facets of character and place, but the final version would be straight narrative. I wouldn't want to get bogged down in too much factual detail, but I'd like to do research in New Mexico or Arizona, even though the actual towns out there have become synthetic tourist attractions. Occasionally I have the sensation that I'm repeating myself in my work, and I would like to do something different—almost a deliberate change of style. I'm not sure if it's possible, but I want to try. I've been thinking about

the Western for years. As a boy I was sent to school in New Mexico, and during the war I was stationed in Coldspring, Texas, near Conroe. That's genuine backwoods country, and I picked up some real characters there. For instance, a fellow who actually lived in East Texas. He was always having trouble with his neighbors, who suspected him of rustling their cattle, I think with good reason. But he was competent with a gun and there wasn't anyone who would go up against him. He finally was killed. He got drunk and went to sleep under a tree by a campfire. The fire set fire to the tree, and it fell on him. I'm interested in extending newspaper and magazine formats to so-called literary materials. Here, this is one of my attempts. This is going to be published in a little magazine, *The Sparrow*.

INTERVIEWER

[Reading] "The Coldspring News, All the News That Fits We Print, Sunday, September 17, 1899, William Burroughs, Editor." Here's Bradly Martin again.

BURROUGHS

Yes, he's the gunfighter. I'm not sure yet what's going to happen after Clem accuses him of rustling cattle. I guess Clem goes into Coldspring and there's gunplay between him and the gunfighter. He's going to kill Clem, obviously. Clem is practically a dead man. Clem is going to get likkered up and think he can tangle with Bradly Martin, and Bradly Martin is going to kill him, that's for sure.

INTERVIEWER

Will your other characters reappear? Dr. Benway?

BURROUGHS

He'd be the local doctor. That's what I'd like to do, you see, use all these characters in a straight Western story. There would be Mr. Bradly, Mr. Martin, whose name is Bradly Martin; there would be Dr. Benway; and we'd have the various traveling carny and

medicine shows that come through with the Subliminal Kid and all of the con men. That was the heyday for those old joes.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think of the artist at all as being a con man?

BURROUGHS

In a sense. You see, a real con man is a creator. He creates a set. No, a con man is more a movie director than a writer. The Yellow Kid created a whole set, a whole cast of characters, a whole brokerage house, a whole bank. It was just like a movie studio.

INTERVIEWER

What about addicts?

BURROUGHS

Well, there will be a lot of morphine addiction. Remember that there were a great many addicts at that time. Jesse James was an addict. He started using morphine for a wound in his lung, and I don't know whether he was permanently addicted, but he tried to kill himself. He took sixteen grains of morphine and it didn't kill him, which indicates a terrific tolerance. So he must have been fairly heavily addicted. A dumb, brutal hick; that's what he was, like Dillinger. And there were so many genteel old ladies who didn't feel right unless they had their Dr. Jones mixture every day.

INTERVIEWER

What about the Green Boy, Izzy the Push, Green Tony, Sammy the Butcher, and Willy the Fink?

BURROUGHS

See, all of them could be Western characters except Izzy the Push. The buildings weren't high enough in those days. Defenestration, incidentally, is a very interesting phenomenon. Some people who are prone to it will not live in high buildings. They get

near a window, someone in the next room hears a cry, and they're gone. "Fell or jumped" is the phrase. I would add, "or was pushed."

INTERVIEWER

What other character types interest you?

BURROUGHS

Not the people in advertising and television, nor the American postman or middle-class housewife; not the young man setting forth. The whole world of high finance interests me, the men such as Rockefeller who were specialized types of organisms that could exist in a certain environment. He was really a moneymaking machine, but I doubt that he could have made a dime today because he required the old laissez-faire capitalism. He was a specialized monopolistic organism. My uncle Ivy created images for him. I fail to understand why people like J. Paul Getty have to come on with such a stuffy, uninteresting image. He decides to write his life history. I've never read anything so dull, so absolutely devoid of any spark. Well, after all, he was quite a playboy in his youth. There must have been something going on. None of it's in the book. Here he is, the only man of enormous wealth who operates alone, but there's nobody to present the image. Well, yes, I wouldn't mind doing that sort of job myself. I'd like to take somebody like Getty and try to find an image for him that would be of some interest. If Getty wants to build an image, why doesn't he hire a first-class writer to write his story? For that matter, advertising has a long way to go. I'd like to see a story by Norman Mailer or John O'Hara which just makes some mention of a product, say, Southern Comfort. I can see the O'Hara story. It would be about someone who went into a bar and asked for Southern Comfort; they didn't have it, and he gets into a long, stupid argument with the bartender. It shouldn't be obtrusive; the story must be interesting in itself so that people read this just as they read any story in *Playboy*, and Southern Comfort would be guaranteed that people will look at that advertisement for a certain

number of minutes. You see what I mean? They'll read the story. Now, there are many other ideas; you could have serialized comic strips, serial stories. Well, all we have to do is have James Bond smoking a certain brand of cigarettes.

INTERVIEWER

Didn't you once work for an advertising agency?

BURROUGHS

Yes, after I got out of Harvard in 1936. I had done some graduate work in anthropology. I got a glimpse of academic life and I didn't like it at all. It looked like there was too much faculty intrigue, faculty teas, cultivating the head of the department, so on and so forth. Then I spent a year as a copywriter in this small advertising agency, since defunct, in New York. We had a lot of rather weird accounts. There was some device called the Cascade for giving high colonics, and something called Endocreme. It was supposed to make women look younger, because it contained some female sex hormones. The Interstate Commerce Commission was never far behind. As you can see, I've recently thought a great deal about advertising. After all, they're doing the same sort of thing. They are concerned with the precise manipulation of word and image. Anyway, after the ad game I was in the army for a bit. Honorably discharged and then the usual strange wartime jobs—bartender, exterminator, reporter, and factory and office jobs. Then Mexico, a sinister place.

INTERVIEWER

Why sinister?

BURROUGHS

I was there during the Alemán regime. If you walked into a bar, there would be at least fifteen people in there who were carrying guns. Everybody was carrying guns. They got drunk and they were a menace to any living creature. I mean, sitting in a cocktail

lounge, you always had to be ready to hit the deck. I had a friend who was shot, killed. But he asked for it. He was waving his little .25 automatic around in a bar and some Mexican blasted him with a .45. They listed the death as natural causes, because the killer was a political big shot. There was no scandal, but it was really as much as your life was worth to go into a cocktail lounge. And I had that terrible accident with Joan Vollmer, my wife. I had a revolver that I was planning to sell to a friend. I was checking it over and it went off—killed her. A rumor started that I was trying to shoot a glass of champagne from her head William Tell-style. Absurd and false. Then they had a big depistolization. Mexico City had one of the highest per capita homicide rates in the world. Another thing, every time you turned around there was some Mexican cop with his hand out, finding some fault with your papers or something, just anything he could latch on to. “Papers very bad, señor.” It really was a bit much, the Alemán regime.

INTERVIEWER

From Mexico?

BURROUGHS

I went to Colombia, Peru, and Ecuador, just looking around. I was particularly interested in the Amazon region of Peru, where I took a drug called *yage*, *Bannisteria caapi*, a hallucinogen as powerful as mescaline, I believe. The whole trip gave me an awful lot of copy. A lot of these experiences went into *The Ticket That Exploded*, which is sort of midway between *Naked Lunch* and *The Soft Machine*. It's not a book I'm satisfied with in its present form. If it's published in the United States, I would have to rewrite it. *The Soft Machine*, which will come out here in due time, is an expansion of my South American experiences, with surreal extensions. When I rewrote it recently, I included about sixty-five pages of straight narrative concerning Dr. Benway, and the Sailor, and various characters from *Naked Lunch*. These people pop up everywhere.

INTERVIEWER

Then from South America you went to Europe. Is the geographic switch as important as it once was to American writing?

BURROUGHS

Well, if I hadn't covered a lot of ground, I wouldn't have encountered the extra dimensions of character and extremity that make the difference. But I think the day of the expatriate is definitely over. It's becoming more and more uncomfortable, more and more expensive, and less and less rewarding to live abroad, as far as I'm concerned. Now I'm particularly concerned with quiet writing conditions—being able to concentrate—and not so much interested in the place where I am. To me, Paris is now one of the most disagreeable cities in the world. I just hate it. The food is uneatable. It's either very expensive, or you just can't eat it. In order to get a good sandwich at three o'clock in the afternoon, I have to get into a taxi and go all the way over to the Right Bank. Here all I have to do is pick up the phone. They send me up a club sandwich and a glass of buttermilk, which is all I want for lunch anyway. The French have gotten so nasty and they're getting nastier and nastier. The Algerian war and then all those millions of people dumped back into France and all of them thoroughly dissatisfied. I don't know, I think the atmosphere there is unpleasant and not conducive to anything. You can't get an apartment. You can't get a quiet place to work. Best you can do is a dinky hotel room somewhere. If I want to get something like this, it costs me thirty dollars a day. The main thing I've found after twenty years away from St. Louis is that the standard of service is much better than New York. These are Claridge's or Ritz accommodations. If I could afford it, keep it, this would be an ideal place for me. There's not a sound in here. It's been very conducive to work. I've got a lot of room here to spread out all my papers in all these drawers and shelves. It's quiet. When I want something to eat, I pick up the phone. I can work right straight through. Get up in the morning, pick up the phone about two o'clock and have a

sandwich, and work through till dinnertime. Also, it's interesting to turn on the TV set every now and then.

INTERVIEWER

What do you find on it?

BURROUGHS

That's a *real* cut-up. It flickers, just like the old movies used to. When talkies came in and they perfected the image, the movies became as dull as looking out the window. A bunch of Italians in Rabat have a television station and we could get the signal in Tangier. I just sat there open mouthed looking at it. What with blurring and contractions and visual static, some of their Westerns became very, very odd. Gysin has been experimenting with the flicker principle in a gadget he calls a "Dream Machine." There used to be one in the window of The English Bookshop on the rue de Seine. Helena Rubenstein was so fascinated she bought a couple, and Harold Matson, the agent, thinks it's a million-dollar idea.

INTERVIEWER

Describe a typical day's work.

BURROUGHS

I get up about nine o'clock and order breakfast; I hate to go out for breakfast. I work usually until about two o'clock or two-thirty, when I like to have a sandwich and a glass of milk, which takes about ten minutes. I'll work through until six or seven o'clock. Then if I'm seeing people or going out, I'll go out, have a few drinks, come back, and maybe do a little reading and go to bed. I go to bed pretty early. I don't make myself work. It's just the thing I want to do. To be completely alone in a room, to know that there'll be no interruptions and I've got eight hours is just exactly what I want—yeah, just paradise.

INTERVIEWER

Do you compose on the typewriter?

BURROUGHS

I use the typewriter and I use scissors. I can sit down with scissors and old manuscripts and paste in photographs for hours; I have hundreds of photographs. I usually take a walk every day. Here in St. Louis I've been trying to take 1920s photographs, alleys and whatnot. This [*pointing*] is a ghostly photograph of the house in which I grew up, seen back through forty-five years. Here's a photo of an old ash pit. It was great fun for children to get out there in the alley after Christmas and build a fire in the ash pit with all the excelsior and wrappings. Here, these are stories and pictures from the society columns. I've been doing a cut-up of society coverage. I had a lot of fun piling up these names; you get some improbable names in the society columns.

INTERVIEWER

You recently said you would like to settle in the Ozarks. Were you serious?

BURROUGHS

I would like to have a place there. It's a very beautiful area in the fall, and I'd like to spend periods of time, say every month or every two months, in complete solitude, just working, which requires an isolated situation. Of course, I'd have to buy a car, for one thing, and you run into considerable expense. I just have to think in terms of an apartment. I thought possibly an apartment here, but most likely I'll get one in New York. I'm not returning to Tangier. I just don't like it anymore. It's become just a small town. There's no life there, and the place has no novelty for me at all. I was sitting there, and I thought, my God, I might as well be in Columbus, Ohio, as here, for all the interest that the town has for me. I was just sitting in my apartment working. I could have a better apartment and better working conditions somewhere else. After

ten o'clock at night, there's no one on the streets. The old settlers like Paul Bowles and those people who have been there for years and years are sort of hanging on desperately, asking, "Where could we go if we left Tangier?" I don't know, it just depresses me now. It's not even cheap there. If I travel anywhere, it will be to the Far East, but only for a visit. I've never been east of Athens.

INTERVIEWER

That reminds me, I meant to ask you what's behind your interest in the more exotic systems such as Zen, or Dr. Reich's orgone theories?

BURROUGHS

Well, these nonconventional theories frequently touch on something going on that Harvard and MIT can't explain. I don't mean that I endorse them wholeheartedly, but I am interested in any attempt along those lines. I've used these orgone accumulators and I'm convinced that something occurs there, I don't know quite what. Of course, Reich himself went around the bend, no question of that.

INTERVIEWER

You mentioned Scientology earlier. Do you have a system for getting on, or are you looking for one?

BURROUGHS

I'm not very interested in such a crudely three-dimensional manipulative schema as L. Ron Hubbard's, although it's got its points. I've studied it and I've seen how it works. It's a series of manipulative gimmicks. They tell you to look around and see what you would have. The results are much more subtle and more successful than Dale Carnegie's. But as far as my living by a system, no. At the same time, I don't think anything happens in this universe except by some power—or individual—making it happen. Nothing happens of itself. I believe all events are produced by will.

INTERVIEWER

Then do you believe in the existence of God?

BURROUGHS

God? I wouldn't say. I think there are innumerable gods. What we on Earth call God is a little tribal god who has made an awful mess. Certainly forces operating through human consciousness control events. A Luce writer may be an agent of God-knows-what power, a force with an insatiable appetite for word and image. What does this force propose to do with such a tremendous mound of image garbage? They've got a regular casting office. To interview Mary McCarthy, they'll send a shy Vassar girl who's just trying to get along. They had several carny people for me. "Shucks, Bill, you got a reefer?" *Reefer?* My God! "Certainly not," I told them. "I don't know what you're talking about." Then they go back and write a nasty article for the files.

INTERVIEWER

In some respects, *Nova Express* seems to be a prescription for social ailments. Do you see the need, for instance, of biologic courts in the future?

BURROUGHS

Certainly. Science eventually will be forced to establish courts of biologic mediation, because life-forms are going to become more incompatible with the conditions of existence as man penetrates further into space. Mankind will have to undergo biologic alterations ultimately, if we are to survive at all. This will require biologic law to decide what changes to make. We will simply have to use our intelligence to plan mutations, rather than letting them occur at random. Because many such mutations—look at the saber-toothed tiger—are bound to be very poor engineering designs. The future, decidedly, yes. I think there are innumerable possibilities, literally innumerable. The hope lies in the development

of nonbody experience and eventually getting away from the body itself, away from three-dimensional coordinates and concomitant animal reactions of fear and flight, which lead inevitably to tribal feuds and dissension.

INTERVIEWER

Why did you choose an interplanetary war as the conflict in *Nova Express*, rather than discord between nations? You seem fascinated with the idea that a superterrestrial power is exercising an apparatus of control, such as the death dwarfs—

BURROUGHS

They're parasitic organisms occupying a human host, rather like a radio transmitter, which direct and control it. The people who work with encephalograms and brain waves point out that technically it will someday be possible to install at birth a radio antenna in the brain which will control thought, feeling, and sensory perceptions, actually not only control thought, but make certain thoughts impossible. The death dwarfs are weapons of the nova mob, which in turn is calling the shots in the cold war. The nova mob is using that conflict in an attempt to blow up the planet, because when you get right down to it, what are America and Russia really arguing about? The Soviet Union and the United States will eventually consist of interchangeable social parts and neither nation is morally "right." The idea that anyone can run his own factory in America is ridiculous. The government and the unions—which both amount to the same thing: control systems—tell him who he can hire, how much he can pay them, and how he can sell his goods. What difference does it make if the state owns the plant and retains him as manager? Regardless of how it's done, the same kind of people will be in charge. One's ally today is an enemy tomorrow. I have postulated this power—the nova mob—which forces us to play musical chairs.

INTERVIEWER

You see hope for the human race, but at the same time you are alarmed as the instruments of control become more sophisticated.

BURROUGHS

Well, whereas they become more sophisticated they also become more vulnerable. *Time, Life, Fortune* applies a more complex, effective control system than the Mayan calendar, but it also is much more vulnerable because it is so vast and mechanized. Not even Henry Luce understands what's going on in the system now. Well, a machine can be redirected. One technical sergeant can fuck up the whole works. Nobody can control the whole operation. It's too complex. The captain comes in and says, "All right, boys, we're moving up." Now, who knows what buttons to push? Who knows how to get the cases of Spam up to where they're going, and how to fill out the forms? The sergeant does. The captain doesn't know. As long as there're sergeants around, the machine can be dismantled, and we may get out of all this alive yet.

INTERVIEWER

Sex seems equated with death frequently in your work.

BURROUGHS

That is an extension of the idea of sex as a biologic weapon. I feel that sex, like practically every other human manifestation, has been degraded for control purposes, or really for antihuman purposes. This whole Puritanism. How are we ever going to find out anything about sex scientifically, when a priori the subject cannot even be investigated? It can't even be thought about or written about. That was one of the interesting things about Reich. He was one of the few people who ever tried to investigate sex—sexual phenomena, from a scientific point of view. There's this prurience and this fear of sex. We know nothing about sex. What is it? Why is it pleasurable? What is pleasure? Relief from tension? Well, possibly.

INTERVIEWER

Are you irreconcilably hostile to the twentieth century?

BURROUGHS

Not at all, although I can imagine myself as having been born under many different circumstances. For example, I had a dream recently in which I returned to the family home and I found a different father and a different house from any I'd ever seen before. Yet in a dream sense, the father and the house were quite familiar.

INTERVIEWER

Mary McCarthy has characterized you as a soured utopian. Is that accurate?

BURROUGHS

I do definitely mean what I say to be taken literally, yes, to make people aware of the true criminality of our times, to wise up the marks. All of my work is directed against those who are bent, through stupidity or design, on blowing up the planet or rendering it uninhabitable. Like the advertising people we talked about, I'm concerned with the precise manipulation of word and image to create an action, not to go out and buy a Coca-Cola, but to create an alteration in the reader's consciousness. You know, they ask me if I were on a desert island and knew nobody would ever see what I wrote, would I go on writing. My answer is most emphatically yes. I would go on writing for company. Because I'm creating an imaginary—it's always imaginary—world in which I would like to live.

