

MAKING BIOCHEMICAL WEAPONS SEX AND THE BASEBALL SCOUT

# ICON

"It's not really  
that cool to  
be human,  
in my opinion."  
PAGE 75



AL SHARPTON  
TON OF A PREACHER MAN

THOUGHTSTYLE MAGAZIN

APRIL 1998

**SPECIAL  
FIRST  
ANNIVERSARY  
ISSUE:**

ICON'S YEAR IN PORTRAITS

**MICHAEL  
STIPE**

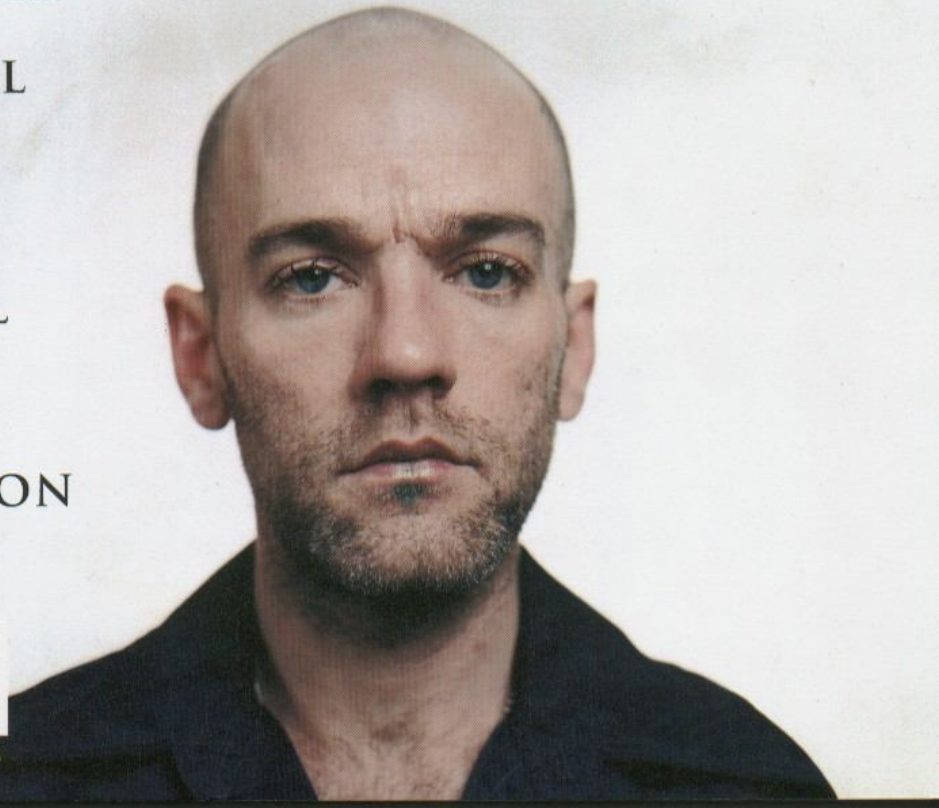
BEHIND THE FRONT  
OF R.E.M.

**EVEL  
KNIEVEL**

WHERE DO OLD  
DAREDEVILS GO?

**AL  
SHARPTON**

A BULL IN THE  
HOUSE OF JUSTICE



\$3.95 US \$4.95 CANADA

WHEN A PACKERS FAN ISN'T WORKING HIS DAY JOB AND TAKING CARE OF THE KIDS, HE CREATES RECIPES FOR BIOCHEMICAL WEAPONS, AND INSTRUCTIONS FOR REVENGE. *By Jim Hogshire*

"Uncle Fester is a very sick puppy," writes an outraged reviewer in the *Hartford Advocate*, offended by the clandestine chemist's latest book, *Vest-Busters*, a guide to making Teflon-coated bullets—the ones better known as "cop killers." In the closest thing to a review the book has ever gotten, the reviewer declares that it "grew from the same seed as *Mein Kampf*," and chooses Fester to head up a short list of Really Bad People—including the Unabomber, Tim McVeigh, Pat Robertson, and Louis Farrakhan.

"Oh, a lotta people hate me," says Fester (whose real name is Steve Preisler), laughing as he drains his umpteenth beer, surrounded by fellow Packers fans watching the National Football Conference championship game against San Francisco from his home in Green Bay, Wisconsin. "Mostly it's cops ('narcoswine' to Preisler) that hate me," he says, "because of the meth book." Preisler's *Secrets of Methamphetamine Manufacture* (written under the name of Uncle Fester and now in its fourth edition) is studiously read by both drug cops and speed cooks around the world. The book got an inadvertent plug on *60 Minutes* when police raiding a drug lab indignantly thrust the book's cover toward the camera. Having been convicted twice already (one more and he gets life), Preisler, who just turned 40 and has two young children, keeps the location and methodology of his experiments a mystery.

But ever since a group of maniacs loosed homemade nerve gas in the Tokyo subway system in March 1995 (making them the first terrorist group to use biochemical weapons against civilian targets), it's Preisler's book on poisons, *Silent Death*, that has gotten him the most attention. Japanese officials suspected that the apocalyptic, religious "cult" known as Aum Shinrikyo used the book as its guide for the production of sarin gas. Besides patents and obscure technical papers on the subject, *Silent Death* is the only place where the synthesis of nerve gas is so thoroughly covered. Sarin is but one of many nerve gases Preisler obsessively researched before devising and publishing simpler, more accessible ways to manufacture and deliver the heinous poisons.

"It's like bug spray for people," he says. "It kills people the same way Raid kills flies—you even see the same symptoms." First the person starts to twitch and jerk, as messages

sent through the nervous system are disrupted. Then death ultimately comes when the signals fail altogether. For the victim, the first and last hint of what's about to happen is blackening vision.

In the summer of 1994, Aum Shinrikyo carried out a practice attack in a city that killed seven people and injured 200. An unknown source tipped off Japan's TV Asahi to Preisler, and a crew was sent to Green Bay to debrief him.

At the time, investigators were stumped. They knew it was some sort of nerve agent, but which one? After a good 12 hours of poring over lab results and other reports, Preisler was able to identify the chemical agent and the methods used to make it. He figured out that the attackers used about a pint of sarin to create the cloud of deadly vapors that wafted across a parking lot toward an apartment building. Tell-tale impurities even revealed slight errors made during manufacture. TV newscasters in Japan held up Preisler's book and showed footage of him in a protective suit demonstrating how to make nerve gas in his kitchen at home.

"Yep, it looks like they used my book," says Preisler proudly. "They had used the rapid heating dispersal plan I described to deploy the stuff. That wasn't such a great plan because you're gonna char half the material when you bring it up to the boiling point, but at least you'll get a good portion of it airborne, which they certainly did."

Preisler's analysis helped prepare Japanese authorities and medical teams for the next, much larger sarin attack, on the Tokyo subway. Even though the underground assault killed 12 people, hospitalized more than 5,000, and caused panic around the world, the results could have been, well, more impressive, in Preisler's opinion.

"They should have made it into an aerosol," he says, "but that wasn't covered in the edition they had back then." Preisler seems put off by their lack of planning: "I think they just followed the book too closely and didn't use any creativity," he explains. "They also don't seem to have taken into account the fact that people run away." Sarin, like other nerve gases, is a liquid, and in order to be effective on a large scale,

*"Some of my friends wanted to start calling me 'Devastator of Tokyo,' and I think it's got a ring to it—that would make me more dangerous than Godzilla."*

## BIOCHEMICAL WARFARE



## FORM & FUNCTION: *Biochemical Warfare*

it must be volatilized into little droplets, like the mist from a spray bottle, where they can then be swirled around by air currents. The book's latest edition specifically addresses the technique of deploying nerve gas from a pressurized spray can you can make at home.

"I guess I was a big hit over there," recalls Preisler. "TV Tokyo sent another crew to talk to old 'Fester-san!'" It was at that point that Preisler's employer, a metal-plating shop, told him to knock it off. "They run a respectable business, y'know," Preisler laughs.

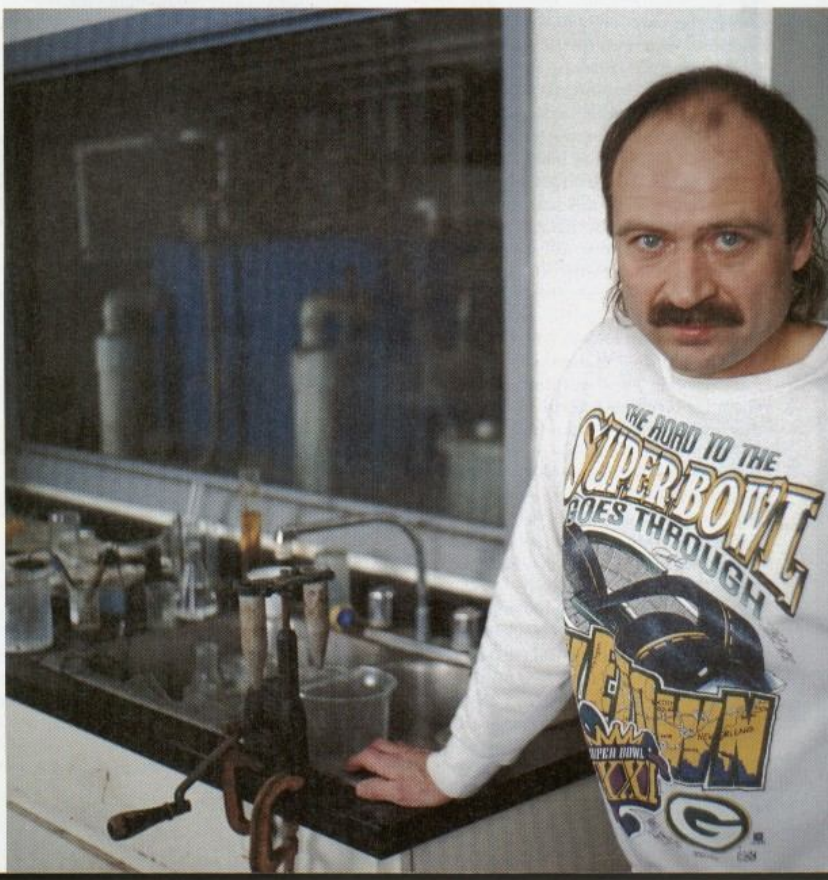
**M**ost of the horrific and lethal biochemical agents (defined as any chemical or biological weapon) have been around for at least 50 years, many for much longer. There's strychnine, heavy metals, and even venom that's collected from snakes and reptiles—and strictly biological "weapons" like viruses and diseases. But the history of biochemical warfare originates with the first king who drank surreptitiously poisoned wine. The Romans used dead animals to foul the enemies' water supply. The Tartars in Russia attempted to destroy their enemies by catapulting bodies infected with bubonic plague over the walls of the city of Kaffa in 1475. And during the French-Indian War (1756-63), the British gave blankets that were tainted with small pox to the Indians.

There are "choking" gases like the notorious chlorine gas used in World War I, nerve agents like the sarin used in Japan, and toxins—the middle ground between chemical and biological weapons—that are usually inorganic substances created by biological entities, such as the plant-toxin ricin [see box].

For this reason, toxins are often classified as biological weapons, even though they aren't living. Some toxins can also be created artificially in the lab, blurring the distinction further.

Antidotes, or at least effective treatments, exist for nearly all these agents. The Plague bacteria that killed three-quarters of Europe's population in the Middle Ages would be child's play for common antibiotics. Even nerve gas can be treated, especially if the medication comes quickly. And not everyone is equally susceptible. Fat people, for instance, seem more resistant to nerve agents, judging by the results of accidents at chemical factories that have been compiled by Preisler.

The most worrisome biological weapon today is anthrax (a cattle disease that can also kill humans), but this also is nothing new. The real problem with anthrax is its ability to lie dormant in the soil for years and still remain lethal. Britain's Gruinard Island, off the coast of Scotland, was the test site for anthrax bombs during World War II. In 1943, the wind, against all predictions, carried some of the stuff over to the Scottish coast. Britain's plan to douse Germany with





anthrax was then scrapped, and Gruinard is sealed off to this very day.

Britain may have also abstained from using biochemical weapons for fear Germany might retaliate with one of its latest chemical inventions of that time: nerve gas. These deadly gases were developed during the 1930s as pesticides, but some were found to be too toxic for that. Furthermore, many military leaders still had memories from their infantry days during World War I's poison-gas attacks. Hitler himself had experienced assaults by the infamous "mustard gas"—green clouds of lung-searing chlorine gas settling over men crouched in trenches, choking to death as their eyeballs blistered and peeled. At least its distinctive smell gave some warning to put on a gas mask—and possibly survive.

But another choking gas, phosgene, first used by Germany at that time, was more insidious. Phosgene's faint, hay-like odor is rarely noticed by the victim who breathes it. And its action is delayed. For perhaps a day or so, the doomed soldier feels just fine. In fact, euphoria is one of the signs of phosgene poisoning. Then, his lungs fill with so much fluid that, gasping and hacking, he drowns.

**B**iochemical weapons occupy a peculiar place in the western psyche. They are considered worse than other weapons. Our culture accepts death by a rusty bayonet through the ribs, roasting with napalm, or being blown into a chunky red spray by metal fragments from a bomb explosion. Mass starvation, as in Pol Pot's Cambodia, is a technique still used to commit genocide, but even that is not considered as heinous as biochemical weapons. Even nuclear bombs, regarded as the ultimate in death-dealing technology, are somehow more acceptable—even respectable.

In November, President Clinton declared the existence of "chemical and biological" weapons to be a national emergency, and indicated that the U.S. government will consider using nuclear weapons to retaliate against attacks of biochemical agents. As for its own work on biochemical weapons, reports vary. Officially, the United States does not develop or maintain chemical weapons except to destroy existing stockpiles. This is probably true. For one thing, many of them have reached the limits of their shelf life and need to be destroyed anyway. As for biological weapons, no nation admits to having them anymore, including the United States.

Despite plans to deploy sensors at vulnerable targets, the government's only response so far to the threat of domestically held biochemical weapons has been to enact laws mandating lifetime sentences for possession of—with intent to use as a weapon—a slew of chemicals, biological organisms, and even some plant materials.

In December 1995, a 54-year-old Arkansas farmer, Thomas Lavy, was charged with violating the "Biological

Weapons Antiterrorism Act of 1989" after a bag of ricin was confiscated at the Canadian border two and a half years earlier as he drove home from a trip to Alaska. Lavy claimed that he intended to use the poison in a legal manner: to combat the coyotes that were raiding his chickens. (Ricin has historically been used for varmint control.) At Lavy's hearing, the magistrate told prosecutors they had failed to show evidence that Lavy had meant harm to anyone. But he was denied bail all the same because of other suspicious facts: In addition to the 130 grams of ricin, customs agents found four guns, 20,000 rounds of ammunition, and \$89,000 in cash. That was on a Friday. On Saturday, Lavy hanged himself. Later, at Lavy's farm, investigators found a copy of *Silent Death*.

A few months earlier, two Minnesota men—members of an antitax group—became the first to be convicted under the same Antiterrorism Act that Lavy was accused of violating. For the possession of 0.7 grams of homemade ricin mixed with hand lotion, the men received 33 month sentences. The two had harvested castor beans, produced the poison, and, according to an informant, had vocalized plans to kill an I.R.S. agent and a sheriff's deputy by wiping the concoction on a doorknob.

Meanwhile, the media presents vague but ominous threats of biochemical Armageddon. Images of gas masks and Saddam Hussein are the standard backgrounds for talk of "anthrax" and "nerve agents." A reporter describes how deadly sarin is, for example, and gravely notes that just 10 grams of anthrax can kill as many people as a ton of sarin. And 100 kilos of anthrax could kill between one and three million people. The TV reporter declares Iraq "could" have enough of this anthrax stuff to kill "every man, woman, and child on Earth." And anthrax, he says, works by "turning their insides into bloody garbage."

**B**ecause of the simplicity with which chemical weapons can be manufactured, they have been dubbed "the poor man's nuke." The same chemicals that make up nerve agents

**"IT'S LIKE BUG SPRAY FOR PEOPLE  
IT KILLS PEOPLE THE SAME WAY RAID KILLS FLIES  
YOU EVEN SEE THE SAME SYMPTOMS."**

like sarin and other similar weapons are the common ingredients in readily available products such as pesticides, fertilizers, cancer-fighting drugs, medicines, and vaccines. Even the ink in ballpoint pens can be modified to produce deadly mustard gas—one of the chemical weapons used during the Iraq/Iran war of the 1980s. Because chemical-weapons complexes can masquerade as industrial plants, their existence is hard to detect.

Biological killers are likewise readily available—botulin toxin, for example, is present in soil nearly everywhere in the



## RICIN

Of all the biochemical agents readily available to civilians, ricin is perhaps the scariest. It is 1,000 times more toxic than cyanide and twice as poisonous as cobra venom (and not nearly so difficult to get a hold of). It's extractable from the common castor bean, and there's no antidote for it. Castor beans themselves are poisonous, but it can take as many as 20 of the hard-shelled, unpalatable beans to form a lethal dose. And even then, ricin has a fatality rate of only five to six percent when taken in this manner.

Ricin is composed of two proteins, only one of which is lethal. The pair act together:

one binds to a cell while the other invades it, going from ribosome to ribosome, deactivating them and halting protein synthesis. Ricin's ability to attack and destroy cells is so powerful, it's used as an anti-tumor agent by cancer researchers. And some scientists are even tinkering with ricin's genetic code in an effort to manufacture a substance that will seek out and destroy abnormal cells—and leave the rest alone.

As a weapon of mass destruction, ricin is less dangerous to produce than nerve gas. And even a poorly done extraction can be lethal. When purified, a speck of it in the eye

can be absorbed into the body and is enough to kill someone. And once ricin has begun its attack, there's little hope of survival, let alone recovery. The destruction is irreversible.

Ricin affects each organ in the body, halting normal cell functions of all kind and impairing every bodily function. Glands shut down, even metabolism grinds to a halt. It can take a few days to die, but the victim's nervous system eventually begins to disintegrate, and the toxin paralyzes vasomotor muscles. Once that happens, not even artificial respiration and a heart-lung machine can keep the victim alive.

world—and can be manufactured with the same equipment used to brew beer. Sitting at the bar of a local micro-brewery, Preisler points at gleaming tanks that, with approximately a 500-gallon capacity, could be used as giant petri dishes to manufacture massive amounts of a variety of god-awful things. Once all the necessary materials are in hand, a final batch of botulin toxin large enough to wipe out a small American town could be whipped up in only a week or so. Of course, just as with beer-making, the operation could be scaled down to a smaller level, or even a bathroom. "The playing field has changed," notes Preisler. "Now it's dawning on people that they can do it in their garage."

For a poisoner who doesn't care if his method is discovered at an autopsy, the marketplace is full of possibilities. Phosgene is still produced today for a number of industrial uses, such as plastics and dyes. It can be purchased, ready-made and pure, in handy steel canisters. Cyanide, too, is for sale in drums weighing 100 pounds. (It's used by the ton in the mining industry to separate precious metals from ore.)

One "worst-case scenario" that Preisler thinks a lone nut or a small group could accomplish is a simple mixture of sulfuric acid and potassium cyanide to form hydrogen cyanide gas—the same thing used in gas chambers. With one ton of each ingredient, according to calculations Preisler worked out using specialized computer software, the wind could be expected to create a plume-shaped "kill zone" a half-mile long. The resulting weapon would be a nondescript tanker-trailer parked on a street upwind of, say, a joint session of Congress.

Another of Preisler's nightmare scenarios involves very pure ricin that's prepared according to his latest instructions. This ricin, a bottle of vinegar, some improvised garden-hose attachments, and a warm spring day on an apartment building's rooftop is all that's needed to set aloft an invisible shroud of grisly death settling over a few square

miles of territory.

Then again, talk is cheap. As Preisler points out, "You don't get up in the morning and have this kind of thing done by evening. It requires a high level of motivation, and it takes a lot to inspire that kind of motivation." To illustrate his point, Preisler compares making nerve gas with retiling the bathroom. Reading about laying tile is a far cry from obtaining the tools and materials to do the job. It's further still from doing it well the first time out.

Preisler estimates a lead time of six months to make nerve gas covertly, and a year to produce enough ricin (and construct the dispersal device) for his nightmare scenario. His microbrewed botulin would first need to be isolated, cultivated, and tested—work would have to continue around the clock. And, as the Tokyo subway bombers proved, even years of hard work, lots of money, and fanatical dedication are no insurance against failure. For Preisler, the Tokyo attack is an example of the difference between "paper chemistry" and real life. "Happens all the time," he says. "What is supposed to happen in theory ain't what happens in the lab." It's more likely that the aspiring creator of nerve gas would fail—or die himself—than injure others.

"In a good terrorist chemical attack, you might kill a couple of hundred to at most a couple of thousand people," says Bob Newman, an arms control expert in Washington D. C. "With an effective biological attack, tens of thousands could die." But Newman concedes that both "worst cases" aren't likely, noting that "these weapons get unwieldy for practical attacks." Jessica Stern, a chemical-weapons expert whose book, *Risk and Dread: Pre-empting the New Terrorists*, is scheduled to be published later this year by Harvard University Press, agrees: "These kinds of large-scale terrorist attacks aren't so easy." She's not at all convinced of an impending attack on Wall Street or an anthrax bomb taking out 200,000 people.

And as for Iraq exterminating the planet's population with a ton of anthrax, we may just as well speculate [►159]



rum with all the leading democratic candidates for this fall's senate and gubernatorial races. It was a sign that democrats running for state or citywide office believe they need either Sharpton's support or the access he can provide them to New York's black electorate. But can he broaden his appeal across races without losing the support of those who've been with him all along?

"He's not Martin Luther King. He's not Louis Farrakhan either," says Scott-McLaughlin. "I'd almost say he's like a local Jesse Jackson. But Jesse has moved into the mainstream, and now the president appoints him to do things. I can't imagine Al Sharpton being appointed by any president to do anything. I think, clearly, he has a vision of himself as a great civil-rights leader, and there's no question he has that potential. But to a certain extent, he's a prisoner of his own past. I'm not sure that he can make that leap. Because to the extent he moves to that level of mainstreamness, he'll lose his base. That's a tension he has, between trying to be a 'legitimate spokesperson' and being a community activist. It's hard to walk that path."

"Sometimes, particularly in my younger times," says Sharpton, "I would shoot from the hip too much. Emotion, instinct, street smarts—I would get in the give-and-take too much. I think the vanity, letting people photograph you under the hair dryer, that was really silly. Now, I try not to come on in a way that's so abrasive that I won't be heard. But I also try not to be so conscious of it that I'm not authentic. That's the balance I'm trying to get: How do you get across the same message, but get it across on a stage where it can be heard by the most people?"

Koch, for one, is taking a wait-and-see approach on whether or not Sharpton has learned anything: "If Al Sharpton becomes a responsible leader, he's going to have a lot more friends than he currently has. What's helped him is that he's still there after all these years, and when he calls for people to come out for him, whether it's in the street or in the election booth, they come out. But you can't just say, 'I'm a responsible leader.' You can't just say you had an epiphany. You have to convey it through deed." ✎

ICON THOUGHTSTYLE MAGAZINE

**BIOCHEMICAL WARFARE** (continued from page 65) that Belgium has enough baseball bats to do the same job. The anthrax scenario is possible only if every person in the world were to obediently line up for his dose and then refuse to seek medical treatment. (Like plague, anthrax is treatable with antibiotics.)

**F**or Stern, a certain barrier was broken by the Tokyo nerve-gas attack. It shows how even an "unsuccessful" attempt at mass murder can get a lot of people watching, the goal of terrorists who have a message they want to publicize. She fears groups like the Aryan Nations, National Patriots, and neo-Nazis, and in particular, Messianic groups who believe they can contribute to the coming of the messiah and assist God by creating Armageddon.

For Preisler, the Tokyo attack (which the group claimed was revenge against the U.S. government for threatening them with biochemical weapons) should be a lesson. "If the government didn't go stickin' their nose into every goddamn rat-hole country in the world, and pickin' fights with people, they wouldn't have this problem," says Preisler. "It's not like the old days, when the British could just park a gunboat offshore and lob shells into villages and not suffer any retaliation. What's new is the target populations now have the ability to strike back."

Preisler says he's glad to see people defend themselves against such a "haughty and arrogant" government that "tries to control everyone's behavior to an unbearable degree, and uses raw force to do it."

Uncle Fester is Preisler's own revenge. He got the inspiration one day while watching Barbara Walters on television from his jail cell (as he served time for methamphetamine manufacture). She was insisting that "something should be done about the terrible books" that explain how to make explosives, while showing footage of cars and trailer homes blowing up. "I had no sooner heard that than I yelled down the old cell block there at a guy I knew who had a typewriter. I said, 'Pass me down that typewriter. I got a book to write!'" ✎

**MACHINE GUNS** (continued from page 149)

Some sample Bukowski: "The whiskey and beer run out of me, fountained from the armpits, and I drove along with the load on my back like a cross, pulling out magazines, delivering thousands of letters, staggering, welded to the side of the sun." Bukowski on the postman's rounds: "Here was a German shepherd, full-grown, with his nose halfway up my ass.... I put the mail back into the leather pouch, and then very slowly, very, I took a half step forward. The nose followed. I took another half step with the other foot. The nose followed."

Despite his reputation, Bukowski, for most of his life, was not a lecherous drunk. He was an ordinary American working-class guy (described in *Post Office*) who had a bad childhood (in *Ham on Rye*) and impoverished wandering years as a young man (in *Factotum*). The boozy days for which he is famous occurred mostly in the *Barfly* years with Baker before he rededicated himself to writing in the mid-'50s. And womanizing came largely after he reached near rock-star fame in the '70s.

Though the image still exists of early and mid-period Bukowski typing out "pomes" in a fleabag room on an ancient manual Underwood "typer," in his later years, truth be told, he used an Apple computer. "He had a Mac, and he called me up one day and said, 'You know what?'" recalls Cherkovski. "The words sit up there like a throne." He loved it.

But even with the Mac, plenty of the old Bukowski remained. Rourke recalls that when he first visited Bukowski in San Pedro, California, he was struck by the size and splendor of the writer's hillside home, with its harbor view and hot tub. "The motherfucker was living like a king," recalls Rourke. "Then I went upstairs to the second floor, and he had this one room that looked like a shit-hole hotel room, and he said it was where he did his writing. It was strange, the nice big house, but this one room upstairs looked like a flophouse."

"He was sort of a contradiction—it was strange," Rourke continues. "He looked like a hobo, down and out, fucked up. But when you talked to him, he was much more aware and alert than his appearance would lead you to believe. He was real laid back, you couldn't tell if he was being condescending or what. You couldn't read the motherfucker." ✎