

“IF YOU DON’T GAMBLE, YOU’LL NEVER WIN”:  
THE IMPORTANCE OF RISK  
IN CHARLES BUKOWSKI’S *HAM ON RYE*, *FACTOTUM*, *POST OFFICE*, *WOMEN*,  
AND *HOLLYWOOD*

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Dedicated to my father.

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## ABSTRACT

Charles Bukowski is well-known for his gritty portrayals of life as a barfly. Another common subject in his writings that deserves equal consideration is his love of gambling. The risk that gambling entails is a motif in his works, especially in the novels *Ham on Rye*, *Factotum*, *Post Office*, *Women*, and *Hollywood*. Henry Chinaski, the protagonist in these novels who functions as Bukowski's alter-ego, finds risk essential to surviving in a world ruled by chance. In the novels, Chinaski's risks include living on skid-row, quitting numerous jobs, participating in drunken brawls, and roaming the country. The self-destructive risks teach him the importance of caution, and his disciplined horse betting in *Hollywood* reflects his belief in financial stability and self-preservation. This concept of cautious risk proves that Bukowski did not glorify a reckless lifestyle. Risk is vital to gaining experience, but in the same way a gambler should avoid the chance of a crippling debt, one must avoid the danger of an irrecoverable loss.

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## CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION:

## “DIRTY OLD MAN,” OR PROFOUND SAGE?

Taylor Hackford’s documentary *Bukowski* reinforces both positive and negative popular opinions on American poet, short-story writer, and novelist Charles Bukowski. The film does not hold back, representing some of Bukowski’s less appealing characteristics. In one scene in which he is heavily drunk, he curses out a female fan for rejecting his sexual advances. The film, furthermore, includes confessions by his two current girlfriends on his insensitivity as a lover. Nonetheless, Bukowski’s more admirable traits are also on display, especially the live poetry readings that demonstrate his gift. Most of what viewers see of Bukowski is a colorful personality that reflects a passion for life, writing, and drinking.

Another passion that the film depicts is horse betting. The scene of Bukowski’s attendance at a racetrack stands out because his demeanor is different compared to the rest of the film. Although fans will know that the racetrack is a prominent subject in Bukowski’s writing, what is striking is how tempered he looks. Calculating his bets as he closely watches the races, he resembles a monk engaged in deep meditation. His quiet and methodical disposition indicates that he takes this hobby seriously. This lesser-known side of his personality demands investigation into what gambling actually meant to him.

An understanding of the relevancy of gambling to Bukowski's writing requires a brief overview of his life and work. Born in Andernach, Germany, on August 16, 1920, he emigrated during early childhood with his family to the United States, eventually settling in what would be his permanent home of Los Angeles (Sounes 8). Depression-era poverty and an abusive father contributed to his tumultuous upbringing. Attending Los Angeles City College for three years, he dropped out to live as a drifter. He also started submitting various short stories to magazines and literary journals. All but one publication rejected him. His life changed in the 1950s after he survived a "bleeding ulcer" caused by the hard drinking (Cherkovski 94). Lessening his drinking habits, he continued to write profusely.

In 1960, he published his first chapbook, *Flower, Fist and Bestial Wall* (Sounes 46). It was the latter part of the decade, though, that saw his rise to fame. Critic Abel Debritto argues: "Alternative presses played a critical role in both developing his talent and turning him into an international icon" ("A 'Dirty Old Man'" 321). Several underground newspapers such as *Open City* were publishing Bukowski's writings, notably the syndicated column "Notes of a Dirty Old Man." His poetry was also being published by the company Black Sparrow Press. John Martin, a fan and lifelong friend, had founded the company to help aspiring writers such as Bukowski gain recognition. In addition to his numerous short stories and poetry collections, Bukowski wrote a total of six novels: *Post Office* (1970), *Factotum* (1975), *Women* (1978), *Ham on Rye* (1982), *Hollywood* (1989), and the posthumously published *Pulp* (1994). The public's awareness of him expanded widely after the 1987 release of the film *Barfly*, based on his screenplay

about a period of his youth when he was either drinking, fighting, romancing, or writing. Suffering from leukemia, he passed away on March 9, 1994, survived by his wife Linda Lee (Sounes 241).

Bukowski has only grown in popularity since his death. In 2003, a feature-length documentary by John Dullaghan *Bukowski: Born Into This* was released. It contains interesting facts on the author's life and includes interviews with numerous friends and fans of his work. Also, a film adaptation of *Factotum*, directed by Bent Hamer and starring Matt Dillon, was released in 2005. Furthermore, two excellent books of criticism on Bukowski's work have been published: Russell Harrison's *Against the American Dream: Essays on Charles Bukowski* (1994) and Gay Brewer's *Charles Bukowski* (1997). Harrison analyzes Bukowski from a Marxist standpoint, showing the role that class identity played in Bukowski's life. Brewer provides a comprehensive study of Bukowski's novels, short stories, poetry and underground publications. He provides an in-depth analysis of each novel, illuminating the themes that are reverberated throughout.

Most of Bukowski's novels were semi-autobiographical, the only exception being *Pulp*. Henry Chinaski, a recurring protagonist in much of Bukowski's fiction, is a thinly disguised version of the author. The parallel between Bukowski and Chinaski becomes more apparent when considering that Bukowski was born Henry Bukowski. In fact, he was referred to as "Hank" by close friends and loved ones. As a series, the Chinaski novels cover the scope of the character's life from toddlerhood to his late sixties. They offer revelations about Bukowski's life, such as his upbringing, his life on skid-row, his



time served at the post office, his romantic life, and his experiences writing the film *Barfly*.

What this thesis will be examining is risk as a motif in the semi-autobiographical novels. From Chinaski's reflections on horse betting, one can infer that Bukowski himself found much value in gambling itself. The function of betting as a source of pleasure leads to one significant point. His character Chinaski advocates escapism and admits that the gambling, reading, writing, and drinking are ways of escaping reality. Chinaski's belief in escapism counters the "realist" label Bukowski has often been assigned by critics. Chinaski's justification for escape is that reality is full of absurdity and chaos. Without an outlet, the madness of the world will cause him to go mad himself.

One could argue that the racetrack in real life helped Bukowski attain emotional and mental stability, which is evidenced by his calmness in the racetrack scene in Hackford's documentary. A correlation, moreover, can be drawn between his development as a horse bettor and his maturity as a person. In *Hollywood*, the underlying philosophy of Chinaski's discourse on horse betting reflects Bukowski's accrued wisdom. Furthermore, Bukowski's infatuation with gambling relates to his approach to life. He had a fascination with risk that he indulged outside of the racetrack. Indeed, his life was riddled with numerous gambles. As a young man, he risked chances of financial security by quitting various jobs. His hard drinking during his youth also led to life-threatening situations many times, such as fistfights with bartenders. His most critical risk was his career path. He was unable to ascertain whether he would ever be rewarded for his

writing. In short, Bukowski frequently rejected the safer option. Such an engagement with risk is reflected in the Chinaski novels, which illustrate both its harmful and detrimental effects.

The joyful representations of the racetrack throughout the Chinaski novels suggest that risk is beneficial. On the other hand, his bad luck in other areas of his life besides gambling proves that risk has its consequences as well. *Factotum* and *Women* especially draw a line between self-destructive impulsiveness and a conscientious decision to take chances. *Ham on Rye* reinforces the positive effects of risk, going so far as to suggest that it is necessary for survival. An unhappy young man who feels that he is destined to be miserable, Chinaski in *Ham on Rye* has a clear rationale for choosing a life in which the outcome will be for better or for worse. Risk is his only alternative for an unsatisfactory life founded on a long-term career and a nuclear family unit. In short, he has nothing to lose. The world is heavily determined by chance, and just as betting is one's only way of winning at the track, risk is the only way of increasing one's chances for success in life.

This thesis will not support a conclusion often adopted by critics: the character Chinaski is aimless and carefree. *Hollywood* especially provides contrasting evidence to this fact, showing a thoughtful Chinaski who leads a life of purpose. In his own analysis of the novel, critic Andrew J. Madigan argues that "Bukowski-Chinaski, of course, has never had a strategy" (454). He means to say that Chinaski for much of his life made random decisions. In his article on *Factotum*, Tamas Dobozy also cancels out possibilities that Chinaski's risks in the workplace have a purpose: "We can glean no consistent model

of behavior, no rigorous ethical or political model” (“In the Country” 63). This thesis, however, will demonstrate that there is a method to whatever may be perceived as Chinaski’s madness. It was his love of gambling that drove him to take so many risks. It was also often a survival strategy. His will to live depends on his ability to be amazed by life. The dullness of a secure, predictable lifestyle, idealized by his parents, would be demoralizing.

Furthermore, this thesis will contend that Bukowski ultimately did not glorify a self-destructive, devil-may-care lifestyle. As a whole, the Chinaski novels portray a dynamic character capable of learning from mistakes and growing as a human being. *Women and Hollywood* especially reinforce the value of responsibility. On the other hand, the novels never invalidate the importance of risk, and the fact that Bukowski in real life was going to the racetrack well into old age verifies that he continued to find value in gambling. As friend Neeli Cherkovski observes in the 1990 biography *Hank: The Life of Charles Bukowski*, “The horses still hold him in thrall and the track still present enough mysteries to be interesting and exciting” (311). However, one must not be a reckless gambler. One must only take risks in which one is aware of the possible dangers. This thesis, all in all, will present Chinaski not as the crude barfly, but as a philosopher who was always testing the validity of his own propositions about the world.

## CHAPTER II

*HAM ON RYE: THE BEGINNING OF A PATH OF RISK*

*Ham on Rye* depicts a period of Henry Chinaski's life that spans early childhood to early adulthood. Unlike the skeptical Chinaski portrayed in the previously published novels *Post Office*, *Factotum*, and *Women*, the young Chinaski presented by Bukowski here believes in an order to the universe and free will. In particular, he subscribes to the assumption that an individual chooses to succeed or fail. His exposure to a chaotic reality during childhood and adolescence undermines his optimism and instills in him a philosophy that risk is a necessity in a world dominated by chance.

Young Chinaski's positive world-view parallels his zeal for sports. As a child, he is supportive of his elementary school's sports teams and as a second grader enthusiastically witnesses a game between the sixth-grade team and a seventh-grade rival school team. He refers to the team as "we" and "us." After the sixth-grade team wins the game, he says that "we ran [the losing team] off, up the street" (*Ham on Rye* 48-49). His participation in the celebration of this victory signifies a feeling of pride toward his school and suggests that his school is a part of his identity.

His participation in sports events significantly represents his current philosophy that one determines one's future. The world simulated by sports has balance and predictability, and each athlete has a sense of control over the outcome of the game. When Chinaski hits a home run in the first grade, for example, he credits the victory to

his own performance, “[swinging] the bat wildly with force” (33). He surprises his peers, who have doubted his athletic potential. He never hits another home run, but he now is confident of his athletic abilities. His fantasies of stardom are further indications of his belief in agency:

[...] I imagined [...] that I was a great baseball player, so great that I could get a hit at bat, or a home run anytime I wanted to. But I would deliberately make outs just to trick the other team. I got my hits when I felt like it. One season, going into July, I was hitting only .19 with one home run. HENRY CHINASKI IS FINISHED, the newspaper said. Then I began to hit. And how I hit! At one time I allowed myself 16 home runs in a row. By the end of the season I was hitting .523. (43)

Chinaski is not simply dreaming of victory and fame; he is dreaming of having the power to influence his own victory or defeat. He desires the power to achieve a home run “anytime [he wants] to.” If he does make outs, they are deliberate. The sentence “I allowed 16 home runs in a row” suggests that, in this fantasy, he could have more hits but chooses not to. He also fantasizes about becoming a “great quarterback” (45). This fantasy similarly assumes that winning or losing is an option (45):

I could throw the ball 90 yards and kick it 80. But we seldom had to kick, not when I carried the ball....Sometimes, like in baseball, I felt sorry for everybody and I allowed myself to be tackled after only gaining 8 or 10 yards. Then I usually got injured, badly, and they had to carry me off the

field. My team would fall behind, say 40 to 17, and with 3 or 4 minutes left to play I'd return, angry that I had been injured. Every time I got the ball I ran all the way to a touchdown....I was everywhere. Chinaski, the Fury! (45)

The clause "I allowed myself" reappears, this time to indicate that he has the power to avoid being tackled. However, he would put himself in an undesirable position, anyway, to make the game fair, which reflects his ideal of a fair world. In such a world, one would possess agency. It is implied that he would be the best player on the field. Moreover, in his fantasy, he is skilled enough to take on the challenges he would create for himself.

Chinaski's boyhood fantasies of celebrity are quite common to American culture and indicate a genuine yearning to fulfill America's conception of a hero. It also hints at a faith in the American Dream, which Russell Harrison argues is rejected by adult Chinaski. Referencing Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, Harrison defines the American Dream as the following: "Economic success [...], the 'rise from impotence to importance, from dependence to independence, from helplessness to power' [...], and [...] 'the recognition of the free will of the individual as opposed to his determination by forces larger than himself'" (*Against the American* 14). Chinaski's idea of winning/losing as optional, which is reflected by his fantasies, is based on a cultural assumption that prosperity is attainable to anyone. For sure, he does believe that he has the potential to transform from a lower middle-class youth to a celebrity athlete: "I still didn't get a chance to play baseball but I knew somehow I was developing into a player. If I ever got

a bat in my hands again I knew I would hit it over the school building” (*Ham on Rye* 47). His faith in opportunities for success has been conditioned by American culture, and it is especially maintained by his father.

The father dreams of wealth, which he believes can be achieved by hard work. He also maintains the ideal of the nuclear family unit. The son “buy [his own house],” a symbol of economic independence, where his own wife and children will live (192): “The family structure. Victory over adversity through the family. [The father] believed in it” (192). The lower-class status of Chinaski’s family’s reveals that his father has failed to achieve his own aspirations for prosperity. Consequently, the father expects his son to succeed where he failed. In particular, he sends Chinaski to a prestigious high school with the hope that Chinaski will eventually join the social ranks of his upper-class peers. In short, the father attempts the American Dream, although Harrison clarifies that such hope for self-advancement “clearly hasn’t worked for him” (*Against the American* 172). His overenthusiastic dedication to his job illustrates the absurdity of his faith in the work ethic. The job is the only topic of family discussion, and he demands that all the lights in the house are off at eight o’ clock so that he can have enough sleep to be “fresh and effective on the job the next day” (152). He believes that a high performance will lead him to economic success.

In contrast to his father, Chinaski acknowledges the harsh reality of the lack of opportunity for those born in poverty. Generally, his positive worldview is dismantled by major conflicts he experiences in the home and at school, which are heightened by the

Great Depression. In the fifth grade, Chinaski experiences, with several of his classmates, the shame of having an unemployed father: “It was terrible. All the fathers in my immediate neighborhood had lost their jobs. My father had lost his job” (*Ham on Rye* 81). His father’s financial frustrations, which were apparent before the Depression, would explain the father’s belligerent personality and the physical abuse that the father inflicts on his wife and son. Chinaski before first grade learns that his “father didn’t like people. He didn’t like me” (16). Chinaski himself grows to “dislike” his father (26). The father feels emasculated as a result of failing to achieve his aspirations. He expresses his feelings of desperation in many ways. For example, on an outing with his family, he begins robbing from an orange grove (14). As Russell Harrison insightfully points out, the father is not “upset at the political system, only at his place in it” (*Against the American* 170). Years later, when Chinaski is in third grade, the father beats Chinaski’s mother when she confronts him about an adulterous affair. The father also begins to beat Chinaski regularly when Chinaski starts mowing the lawn. For any blade of grass Chinaski misses, he receives a beating. Such abusive behavior reflects an unfairness that Chinaski learns is not unique to his home.

Unfairness, Chinaski finds, is common to humanity---specifically in how humans treat one another. Brewer comments that humanity is “typically depicted as brutal, cowardly, and obsessed” (*Charles Bukowski* 39). In particular, victory is not always earned by merit. At school, for example, Chinaski observes that the “fights were never even; it was always a larger boy against a smaller boy and the larger boy would beat the



smaller boy with his fists....Finally the larger boy would back off and it would be over and all the boys would walk home with the winner” (*Ham on Rye* 28). Interestingly, Chinaski receives praise unfairly from a fifth-grade teacher. She has assigned her class to complete an observation report on a presidential visit. She announces Chinaski’s report as the best although she rightfully suspects that the report is fraudulent. Chinaski, in truth, never attended the event and fabricated an account. He learns that cheaters do win after all, looking at himself as an example.

Chinaski also witnesses and experiences traumatizing events that further reveal the dark side of humanity. For one, he is sexually molested by a grown woman in a swimming pool. He is also hit by a drunk driver although he does not receive any critical injuries. What illuminates the cruelty of humanity is a game of animal torture: three boys with whom he is well-acquainted pit a bulldog against a small cat. The cat leans against the wall defensively, facing the dog. Chinaski is merely a witness and feels horrified by what he sees. He feels hope when a man appears at the scene, assuming that he will interrupt the boy’s game. However, the man idly stands by as an observer, which means that he, like the boys, is curious to see what will happen to the cat. Chinaski feels helpless to stop what he believes to be an act of cruelty: “That cat was not only facing the bulldog, it was facing Humanity” (90). Moreover, if such lack of morality is an element of human nature, it is more generally an element of nature. Loss Glazier’s analysis of the philosophical premise of *Post Office* can be applied to *Ham on Rye*: “there is nothing to understand. There is no *reason* for it....The only way of beginning to understand our

predicament is to understand that there is *no asking why*” (“Mirror of Ourselves,” par. 5). *Ham on Rye*, like *Post Office*, depicts a world that does not adhere to a rational order and is full of absurdity.

As a result, Chinaski feels the need to escape this unfair world. Sports are one form of escape, with their foundation in rules that simulate a world of fairness. For example, during fourth grade, he starts to play football with his classmates every Saturday. The outdoor game provides an excuse for him to avoid “trouble at the house,” particularly “much fighting between my mother and my father” (*Ham on Rye* 66). Playing the game, Chinaski is able to take his attention off of familial conflicts. He even makes up his own games that he plays solitarily. For instance, he develops a game that he plays when he is alone in the house. He times how long he can “hold [his] breath” by looking at the family clock and setting records (113). He “liked being alone” (113). The solitude is partly what makes the game enjoyable and is a state that he will cherish throughout his life.

Nevertheless, Chinaski’s love of sports wears off during middle school. In eighth grade, for example, he disengages himself from sports games played during a P.E. class. When his coach asks him to explain himself, Chinaski replies that those games are “kid stuff” (117). When he starts attending high school, he takes a Reserves Officer Training Corp (R.O.T.C.) class instead of P.E. His excuse is understandable: his body has become stricken with boils, many of which would be on public display if he wore a P.E. uniform. He says that his R.O.T.C. class “kept me away from any sports” (174). He begins to

develop a distaste for any kind of competitive event. He even resents his required participation in a Manual of Arms competition held by R.O.T.C. class. He knows that he can win if he puts in any effort. Nevertheless, due to apathy and embarrassment for ever taking the class, he dreads the attention he would receive for winning. He changes his mind when he sees how much his fellow players take the competition seriously and ends up winning a medal, which he later drops down a sewer manhole.

His disposal of the medal reflects his mixed feelings over his identity as an outcast. While he identified himself with his elementary school, he feels like an outsider in high school. His case of boils is unusually extreme, to the point that he takes off one semester to receive extensive medical treatment. Social class is another factor that sets him apart, as most of the students come from upper-class backgrounds. Moreover, he has internalized his father's own ideals. He has retained the belief that popularity and material success define one's character. Like his father, Chinaski holds winners in a higher esteem than losers and concludes that a sports jockey is superior to an R.O.T.C. student. Moreover, he considers the students who want to be his friends "idiots":

Gathered around me were the weak instead of the strong, the ugly instead of the beautiful, the losers instead of the winners. It looked like it was my destiny to travel in their company through life. That didn't bother me so much as the fact that I seemed irresistible to these dull idiot fellows. I was like a turd that drew flies instead of a flower that butterflies and bees desired. (155)

He assumes that he must be a “weak,” “ugly” “loser” if he attracts individuals with one or more of those characteristics. His deprecating descriptions of those students are, in fact, self-deprecating and signifies his shame as an outsider. Therefore, an R.O.T.C. medal represents his failure to gain acceptance by the wealthier students. He cannot overcome the obstacles of his physical appearance and social status.

His lack of interest in sports, overall, can be tied to his apathy about his own future. He does not believe that he has any power to influence his circumstances. He is inflicted with terrible acne, over which he has little control. Moving out of the lower-class, furthermore, seems unattainable: “I could see the road ahead of me. I was poor and I was going to stay poor” (192). While he once dreamt of becoming a star athlete, he now aspires to be a dishwasher: “I had no interest in anything. I had no idea how I was going to escape” (174). Overall, he feels that he will be a loser for the rest of his life. His feelings of hopelessness are remedied by his escapes. Brewer states that “alcohol and literature are the two methods that Chinaski discovers for escaping the arbitrary restrictions and limited possibilities his society offers” (*Charles Bukowski* 41). One place to which he escapes is the library where he becomes an avid reader. Soon he grows into a writer, producing a series of short stories on a devil-may-care hero who functions as his wish-fulfillment. As a victim of a cruel fate, Chinaski learns the necessity of escapism. It offers emotional and mental stability and helps one cope with life’s struggles.

Games continue to be a third form of escape, specifically games of risk. He is bored by games that are easily winnable and instead seeks games in which victory is

difficult to achieve. Such games mirror the unpredictability of the real world, and as a player, he acknowledges the probability of defeat. For one, during high school, he boxes a young man named Harry Gibson, who is larger and older and has fought at least one professional match. Gibson, furthermore, has defeated Chinaski's friend Gene, who himself won a fight against Chinaski. Clearly, Chinaski is the disadvantaged player due to lack of experience and size. However, he is motivated to demonstrate his ability to himself and others during this fight:

Instead of circling to my right like he expected, I circled to my left. He looked surprised and as we came together I looped a wild left which caught him high and hard on the head.... Gibson got me with the jab but as it hit me I ducked my head down and to one side as quickly as I could....I moved into him and clinched, giving him a rabbit punch. We broke and I felt like a pro. (*Ham on Rye* 158)

Chinaski proves to be a tactical player and resists being beaten down although he is bloodied up badly by the end of the fight. He learns that he possesses the capacity to rise above adversity. Gay Brewer points out that, in Chinaski's mind, such "endurance [is] for survival. The fights represent a test and a purgation....Toughness is presented as his greatest ability" (*Charles Bukowski* 38). Although he did not actually win the fight, Chinaski fights back and is able to stand tall in spite of the beatings. Afterwards, he looks at a mirror reflection of his bloodied self and proudly thinks, "Pretty damn good. I was coming along" (*Ham on Rye* 159). It is one of the few instances during his adolescence

that he refers to himself in a positive light. The fight, while potentially destructive, has increased his self-esteem.

Meanwhile, he slowly strays away from the expectations of his father for him to climb the social ladder. He does not give any effort in his high school classes. Neither does he make any attempt to intermingle with his privileged peers. He does not even attend his school's Senior Prom, although he does arrive at the site of the event and watches as a detached observer. While such an act reveals that he is fascinated by beauty and wealth, he also experiences a revelation: "I hated [the prom attendants]. I hated their beauty, their untroubled youth....I hated them because they had not something I had not yet had, and I said to myself [...], *someday I will be as happy as any of you, you will see*" (194). At first, it seems that Chinaski feels envy for the prom attendants' privileges, which to him entail happiness. His final thought, though, that he will achieve their level of happiness refutes that assumption. He has realized that it is possible to achieve happiness without wealth or looks.

Nevertheless, after his high school graduation, he succumbs to his father's expectations for him to pursue a financially successful future. Chinaski's two endeavors include holding a job at a department store and attending college, both of which are temporary. He is fired from his job and drops out of college after three years. During those years, he distinguishes himself from the other students as a nonconformist. The few students with whom he socializes are criminals and fascists; he also voices pro-Nazi sentiments in class discussions, which is especially controversial as World War II is the

historical backdrop. Chinaski clarifies what his actual feelings are about these political matters: “Out of sheer alienation and a natural contrariness I decided to align myself against [the anti-German sentiments of his professors]. I had never read *Mein Kampf* and had no desire to do so” (236). Chinaski essentially is refusing to conform to his culture by negating the popular consensus, which consequently sabotages social relations with most of his classmates.

As a dropout, Chinaski decides that he is not suited for a life of conformity. Critic Jimmie Cain observes that Chinaski “finds all of life blighted with a malaise peculiar to his America: a thoroughgoing boredom” (par. 2). A normative lifestyle is not suitable for one who wishes to maintain individual freedom. Chinaski explains:

The life of the sane, average man was dull, worse than death....Education also seemed to be a trap. The little education I allowed myself had made me more suspicious. What were doctors, lawyers, scientists? They were just men who allowed themselves to be deprived of their freedom to think and act as individuals. (*Ham on Rye* 274)

Like an unchallenging game, the predictable life of a career, a permanent home, and family are incredibly confining. His alternative will be to live as a bum on skid-row.

On the other hand, he is not completely infatuated with this option, as the skid-row inhabitants he observes “had no special daring or brilliance. They wanted what everybody else wanted” (274). He is somewhat reluctant to take this path of risk because he does not completely accept the possibility of failure. He tells Becker, a friend who is

also an aspiring writer, that he refuses to take the risk of submitting his short stories to literary magazines because he cannot bear the rejection. Ultimately, he faces a dilemma: he cannot see how a life of risk nor a life of security will lead to happiness. He questions the value of life itself: “I considered suicide, but I felt a strange fondness for my body, my life” (274). The “fondness” he experiences is pure joy, which he soon learns can be achieved through risk. Because there is no “possible alternative” to the skid row lifestyle, it is necessary to compromise the safety of social conformity (274).

Risk, Chinaski comes to find, is essential to changing one’s circumstances. Games of risk, in particular, function as an opportunity to demonstrate his power. In the fight with Gibson during high school, for instance, he proves that he could endure several beatings without falling. Another example is a football game that Chinaski plays before he leaves his college campus permanently. He is able to overpower a college football player nicknamed Kong, who is notorious for tackling other players:

[...] I dove and clipped [Kong] at the ankles. He went down hard, his face hitting the ground. He was stunned, he stayed there, his arms spread out. I ran up and kneeled down. I grabbed him by the back of the neck, hard. I squeezed his neck and rammed my knee into his backbone and dug it in.  
(271)

Chinaski is not equal to Kong in strength or size, yet he has the advantage of strategy. His experiences of competing with those who appear more powerful develop his self-confidence. He is not a passive participant in the fistfight or the football game and



performs to his fullest capacity. Such an insight invalidates his feelings that one is helpless to change one's circumstances. Generally, he finds that one's actions can influence the outcome of a situation.

This viewpoint is specifically illustrated by a two-person arcade game that he plays near the end of the novel. A simulation of boxing, the game is not a game of risk for Chinaski, as his younger opponent is at a major disadvantage: "The left arm of his [playing-piece] was broken and only reached up halfway" (282). However, Chinaski notes his opponent's exceptional playing:

[The] kid was great, he kept trying. He gave up on the left arm and just squeezed the trigger for the right arm. I rushed [my piece] in for the kill, squeezing both triggers. The kid kept pumping the right arm of [his piece]. Suddenly [Chinaski's piece] dropped. [It] went down hard, making a clanking sound. (282)

Chinaski has lost this particular game. He and his opponent agree to play a second game, which Chinaski also loses. Although he is the loser in this instance, the games' outcomes provide a lesson that is applicable to his own life. He has believed that he will never win due to obstacles reminiscent of his opponent's playing-piece; appearance and lower-class status will prevent him from achieving material success. However, his opponent's performance demonstrates that one does possess the power to overcome such obstacles. Chinaski also learns that the outcome is not important, but rather the playing itself. He even tried to win during the second game: "I felt I had to win. It seemed very important. I

didn't know why it was so important, and I kept thinking, why do I think this is so important?" (283). The question is pointless because winning is not important. To play any game, one must be able to accept defeat. Moreover, a will to endure is essential. In short, it is the act of playing itself that provides joy, not the victory.

Moreover, the game reinforces Chinaski's philosophy that risk is an opportunity to succeed. Without risk, he would never have achieved the triumphs of the fistfight or the football game. He even finds success at gambling. He plays a game of poker in spite of what little money he has, and both of his opponents end up losing to him. In all three examples, there is a high probability that he would lose and even worse, receive a major physical or financial injury. However, such risk is necessary for improving one's outlook on life.

As a coming-of-age account on Chinaski, *Ham on Rye* is notable in that it illuminates the determining factors for his avoidance of a comfortable lifestyle as a young man. Chinaski sees a steady job and a permanent home as illusions that detach one from the impermanent nature of reality. As Brewer notes, "Bukowski meticulously fashions his fictional self to respond to an absurd and dangerous world" (*Charles Bukowski* 44). Chinaski sees that the universe is full of chaos, and the future is ultimately impossible to predict. Games of risk affirm the belief that, in the long run, one's success or failure is ultimately determined by chance. Although one mostly has little control over one's fate, one can influence the outcomes by taking risk. More importantly, in games of risk, one must have the will to endure the losses and keep playing. The path of risk chosen by

Chinaski is mostly foreshadowed in *Ham on Rye*, and the ramifications of such a path are explored more deeply in *Post Office*, *Women*, and *Hollywood*.

## CHAPTER III

“LET ’EM LEARN OR LET ’EM DIE”:

THE BENEFITS AND DANGERS OF RISK

IN *FACTOTUM*, *POST OFFICE*, AND *WOMEN*

*Factotum*, *Post Office* and *Women* explore the varying effects of risk. All the novels imply that Chinaski’s interest in risk is based on a desire to maintain his individuality. Risk is also a solution to what Jimmie Cain calls “boredom in a life replete with meaningful trivialities” (“*Women*,” par. 5). This would explain why Chinaski would stray from the financial security of a permanent job, for which he expresses disdain in *Ham on Rye*. Both *Post Office* and *Factotum* deal with the theme of the employee’s powerlessness in the workplace. In *Factotum*, Chinaski roams the country working short-term odd jobs and learns that it is impossible to thrive in such a lifestyle. Such a hard lesson motivates him to become a long-term postal worker in *Post Office* where he relearns that his freedom is only attainable through risk. In *Women*, his new game of risk involves casual sex, which, like the drifting of *Factotum*, is ultimately unfulfilling. At the end of the novel, he questions whether a meaningful relationship would be more empowering than sexual conquests. All of these novels reinforce the importance of cautious risk.

The lifestyle of a drifter is one risk that he takes in *Factotum*, which follows the events of *Ham on Rye*. When he arrives in New Orleans at the beginning of the novel

during the early 1940s, his first action is to wander the poor areas of town. Since he can never be certain whether the locals will accept him, his role as a visitor is perilous. His end objective is solely food and shelter, not necessarily work. He thinks, “Maybe I’d get lucky” (*Factotum* 11). In other words, he is not going to make any effort to change his squalid circumstances, but leave everything to chance. Critic Tamas Dobozy notes, “In Henry Chinaski, Bukowski crafts a mythic hero: a man without true material aspirations, a man who enjoys luxury but not enough to sell his soul for it” (“In the Country” 37). He never makes any well-defined plans on how he will support himself and will only work if there is no other option for meeting his necessities. He is playing a game in which he gambles with his chances of survival.

Once he runs out of money, he finally applies for a packing job at a “publishers distributing house” (16). He continues to take risks, specifically a game in which he bets on what level of deviance is acceptable in a job. During his interview for the packing job, he is asked, “Why haven’t you shaved your face? Did you lose a bet?” (15). Chinaski answers, “Not yet....I bet my landlord that I could land a job in one day even with this beard” (15). He receives the job, which means he has won at this particular game of testing the interviewer’s acceptance. Critic Carl Rhodes points out, “Chinaski has his own insight into the mentality of ‘those in control’ and the way this control is organized” (“All I Want” 394). Chinaski’s beard and articulated justification of it is definitely a power play: by giving him the job, his employers are giving Chinaski power by compromising their preferences for employees’ appearances. However, after a few days into Chinaski’s

employment, they deny his request for a two-dollar raise. To maintain his own sense of dignity, Chinaski quits.

It is the first of many jobs that he rejects. His pattern to quit secure jobs reflects his willingness to take the risk of avoiding a steady income. Harrison emphasizes the statement that Chinaski is making with his resistance to the workplace: “*Factotum* [...] is the clearest statement of what might be called the refusal-to-work ethic, as well as its justification” (*Against* 140). Chinaski rejects the belief that he must indenture himself to a single job, reacting against his own father’s belief in the work ethic. For his father, “there was no other subject except the job” (*Factotum* 13). Boring predictability is not Chinaski’s only reason for his avoidance of a permanent job. His intentions are explained in the following sentence: “I always started a job with the feeling that I’d soon quit or be fired, and this gave me a relaxed manner that was mistaken for intelligence or some secret power” (130). The secret power is a confidence that he can survive without the job; he is a gambler prepared for the loss. If he were to keep the job, however, he would lose that “secret power.”

After years of roving, he eventually resettles in L.A. and falls in love with a woman named Jan, who shares his love of risk and is similarly bored by a normative lifestyle. Also, like Chinaski, she is a drinker full of “meanness” and “hostility” (90). More significantly, she is the person with whom Chinaski discovers his love of horse betting, a game fueled on risk. After losing a job, Chinaski begins going to the racetrack with Jan on selective days. Although the two have little knowledge of the sport, they have

beginner's luck and make heavy earnings each time they go. At this moment, the winnings are their primary source of income.

Chinaski's main interest in horse betting is the reward, and the amount of money he and Jan make per day is clearly greater than the daily wages of a regular job. However, one could also argue that the racetrack provides the thrill that does not exist in the workplace. Their winnings consequently build their self-confidence. The money is earned through their financial risk-taking and the clever tactics employed in their playing. They employ one effective routine called "Harmatz in the eighth" (95). Chinaski explains that the racetrack at the time "carded eight races instead of nine" (95). They bet on a jockey named Willie Harmatz, who "usually" has success in the eighth race and earns plenty of money for those betting on him (95). Chinaski's and Jan's success at horse betting is one example of how one's future is not completely determined by chance. Overall, the racetrack empowers them. They can win in life without playing by any employer's rules. In the job of horse betting, they are self-employed. After a day at the racetrack, they continue to engage in risk by driving at night with faulty headlights. Chinaski, who is driving, is usually intoxicated, even though he has already received one DUI.

However, they begin losing at their own game when their success at the racetrack falters, and Chinaski must find work again. He lands a job at an auto parts warehouse. In a bit of fortune, he meets a coworker who also bets on horses. Together during work hours they go to the racetrack and share bets. Chinaski's constant winnings at the racetrack soon exceed his salary, especially once he becomes a bookie for other

coworkers who wish to partake in the betting. If they lose their bets, he is able to keep that money for himself. He talks about buying nicer clothing to wear to work. His new suit makes his employer not “look so powerful, anymore” (107). In violating the requirement that he stay onsite during work hours, he again is testing how much deviance will be tolerated by an institution. His boss learns about his gambling activities and fires him, correctly assuming that Chinaski will be apathetic. Chinaski has power over him because he does not need his job at the warehouse while he is successful at the track.

In spite of his low work ethic, Chinaski is extremely professional as a horse better. Jan notes the demeanor that he exudes whenever he is leaving or returning from the track: ““You [now] act like a dental student or a plumber”” (108). She also accuses him of being a sexless bore who has “not made love to [her] in two weeks” (108). Her observations hint that horse betting has made him less impulsive, an early example that the racetrack is a place where he learns how to discipline himself. His methodical approach to horse betting entails a cautious risk, a theme later addressed in *Hollywood*. For example, as a bookie for his coworkers at the auto parts warehouse, he notes that every bookmaking client loses for the same reason: “They bet too short or too long and the price kept getting in the middle” (107). Overall, Chinaski is pragmatic as a horse better who emphasizes the most effective strategies for winning. Specifically, he finds that a balanced amount of betting money is essential. One must never risk an irrevocable loss.

In his work life, however, he is less self-preserving, continuing to test the degree to which employers will accept his antiauthoritarian behavior. When he receives a



janitorial job, he falls asleep in a restroom during his shift. He is awakened by two employees who enter the restroom. He pretends to be asleep, not caring that they notice his inactivity. He falsely believes that this indiscretion will not effect his employment status. However, he is fired promptly. It is one of the many times he loses at his own gamble as an employer---betting on the chance that he will not lose for breaking the rules.

Near the end of the novel, which is set during the early 1950s, he almost lands an actual career at the Hotel Sans, the “best in the city of Los Angeles” (191). He is quickly promoted from a loader to the manager of the loading dock. He enjoys the power of his managerial position although he gets too comfortable by drinking on the job.

Unconsciously, he is betting that alcohol consumption will not interfere with his work duties. Instead, he has a long drunken episode during one shift that ends in a blackout.

The next day, he learns that he has been fired, and the person in charge of the employment office recounts his hostile behavior. The night before, he had “held” an assistant manager “captive” and would not “relent” until the hotel “called the [...] police” (195). Jan meanwhile now desires financial security, dumping Chinaski for a real estate operator. Chinaski applies for a tomato picking job, which he sabotages when he is caught drinking during the interview process. At the end of the novel, he is where he started---single, homeless, and unemployed. He attends a burlesque show to find that he is impotent, which symbolizes his feeling of powerlessness. While he is prepared to endure the joblessness and aloneness, he could not foresee the lack of sexual potency. It brings into question whether a life of risk is rewarding at all.

The novel is essentially a tragicomedy, full of heart-shattering moments that are comically timed. His state of impotence is styled as an unexpected punchline to an endless cruel joke. Before the discovery of impotence, it seems that things cannot get any worse for him. There is definitely black humor in the absurdity of his perpetual bad luck. Of course, chance is not only the factor in his misfortunes, but his own poor choices play a part as well. The self-control he employs as a horse bettor is not applied to other areas of his life. In refusing to commit to one job, he believes that he will be able to maintain his identity as an outsider. While horse betting has improved his circumstances, his constant avoidance of permanent jobs worsens his circumstances. Not only does it cost him financial stability, but also his relationship with his girlfriend. The novel interestingly challenges the philosophy that one's station in life is a matter of luck. One could argue that his status at the end is mostly a result of his own doing. It would have been easy for him to avoid this lowly position if he had not quit or failed at so many jobs. The novel implies that excessive risk can lead to misfortune. He learns that, to survive, he must keep whatever job he can receive.

The emotionally crippling effects of joblessness are reasons for his desperation at the beginning of *Post Office*, which chronologically succeeds *Factotum*. The novel spans his three years as a mail carrier and his eleven years as a mail clerk. He gives his summation of his post office experience in the novel's opening sentence: "It all began as a mistake" (*Post Office* 13). Such a sentence points to a belief in agency: the misery he experienced at the post office was his own fault, a mistake he made himself. However,

when he becomes a substitute mail-carrier at the beginning of the novel, he clearly has a need to make money, and the post office's low hiring standards are evidence that the job is not highly desirable for most people.

On the other hand, he does not mind the work until he is assigned to a tyrannical supervisor named Jonstone, who has been nicknamed "The Stone" (29). The analogy to a stone highlights Jonstone's inflexibility, as he has no tolerance for human error. He expects his employees to unquestioningly "obey" what Chinaski believes to be "impossible orders" (15). Jonstone wishes to be worshipped as a god, a characterization that Chinaski mocks a few times. Chinaski's assignment under Jonstone is a misfortune that proves one has little control over one's fate. There is no way that Chinaski could have foreseen the suffering that he would have experienced working for Jonstone. The novel, in truth, reinforces the philosophy that chance largely influences one's fate. Still, risk gives one the possibility to influence one's circumstances, a point that *Post Office* also reinforces. Chinaski relearns the benefit of risk in witnessing the consequences of a safe approach, which in the case of the post office would mean subservience.

One employee who reveals the consequences of blind submission is George Greene, who has worked at the post office for over forty years and is now in his late sixties. Greene's nickname is "G.G.," an acronym for both his name and "good guy," which is what his younger coworkers believe him to be (45). However, Greene is "neither liked nor disliked," which suggests that he is not considered a "good guy" for his moral character but for his loyalty to the job (42, 45). Greene is notified of his termination after

accusations of pedophilia. His guilt, however, is never proven. The “fondness” that Chinaski’s coworkers express for Greene turns out to be shallow, as none of them but Chinaski notices Greene’s loss of morale when he learns that he is fired (47). Living up to his nickname, “The Stone” is unmoved by Greene’s feebleness. After Greene barely completes a mailing route, Jonstone then nonchalantly gives him more work (45). Greene’s subservience to the post office is futile, as he is not held in any higher esteem than his coworkers or his superiors.

Chinaski meanwhile plays his game to challenge authority, such as when the post office prescribes a new regulation against employees leaving their caps on their cases. Jonstone penalizes Chinaski two times for violating this regulation, each time issuing “write-ups” (22). The second write-up infuriates Chinaski, who then deliberately places his cap on the case to spite Jonstone. Jonstone starts another write-up. Chinaski then says that the write-ups will not change his behavior as he will continue to place his cap on his case. Essentially, Chinaski is victorious in his battle. Jonstone’s authority is revealed to be illusionary. The penalties Chinaski receives for his insubordination are merely pieces of paper that lack any significance. By taking the risk of disobeying Jonstone, Chinaski gains power by proving he will not heed to Jonstone’s will.

After three and a half years, Chinaski quits his job as a mail-carrier. He sees the short-term benefits of unemployment, as he has luck at the racetrack in the days following his departure. However, in the late 1950s, he reapplies as a postal clerk. He cites a common justification for acquiring this job: “you had to work somewhere” (189).

In particular, it is the financial security of a permanent job that is so appealing. One can see how much Chinaski has changed his attitude toward work since *Factotum*. He now has faith in security, as he dreads the dangers of the lack of an income. Nevertheless, after eleven years in his second job, he realizes that using security as a reason for staying in a miserable occupation is “the wisdom of the slave” (189). He may be alluding to mental slavery in which unhappy postal clerks do not quit because of the money it provides.

Brewer writes that “*Post Office* presents an American class system in which the ethical base, the god, is unmistakably money” (*Charles Bukowski* 14). The following passage debunks security as the justification for working in the post office is debunked:

“Security? You could get security in jail. Three squares and no rent to pay, no utilities, no income tax, no child. No license plate fees. No traffic tickets. No drunk driving raps. [...] Free medical attention. Comradeship with those with similar interests. Church. Roundeye. Free burial” (*Post Office* 66). Chinaski is suggesting that he would have had more freedom serving a prison term than serving twelve years as a postal clerk.

In particular, his own eleven years as a clerk do not earn him any more appreciation from his supervisors. For instance, one of them harasses him for taking five minutes too long to place letters into a two-foot tray in the time limit set by the post office. He trivializes his supervisor’s accusation and is consequently recommended for counseling (179). He makes a case to the counselor, saying that the quantities of letters differ for each tray and that certain quantities require more time than others to sort. The counselor echoes the supervisor in saying that the time limit must always be followed. It

has been “time-tested” and therefore is a reasonable policy (180). In spite of Chinaski’s direct experiences with the trays, his voice remains ignored by his superiors.

To work as a postal clerk, furthermore, is more damaging than beneficial.

Whereas Chinaski only saw Greene in the final days of a postal career, eleven years as a clerk have allowed him to trace the detrimental effects of working as a clerk. “I had seen the job eat men up. They seemed to melt,” he points out (179). He references one co-worker who is starting to resemble Greene: Jimmy Potts. He says that, when he first saw him, Potts “had been a well-built guy in a white T-shirt” (179). Eleven years later, Potts is barely able to sit up in his seat: “He put his seat as close to the floor as possible and braced himself from falling over with his feet. He was too tired to get a haircut and had worn the same pair of pants for three years. He changed shirts twice a week and he walked very slow....He was 55” (180). As Chinaski is nearing fifty himself, Potts is not that much older than he. Chinaski reveals that Pott is more senile than his age would suggest.

If clerks did not become feeble like Potts, they would gain a considerable amount of weight. Chinaski himself has gained forty-eight pounds in eleven years. Not only are clerks sitting for large amounts of time, but they are also “moving” only one arm (179). Additionally, he is plagued by “dizzy spells” and “pains in the arms, neck, chest, everywhere” (179). In general, the conditions for postal clerks are damaging to one’s health, which reinforces his point that, in a lifelong postal career, there is more to lose than to gain. Even worse, the money has not been compensatory in the least: “Eleven

years! I didn't have a dime more in my pocket than when I had first walked in" (178-79).

He has not seen any visible reward for his time at the post office.

An earlier instance in the novel teaches him the benefit of risk. Joyce, a woman to whom he is married at the time, has bought two parakeets. The imprisoning aspects of the post office allows him to identify with the caged birds. The post office, like the parakeets' cage, offers security at the cost of one's freedom. The parakeets annoy Chinaski to the point that he decides to release the birds without Joyce's consent (82). When Joyce discovers what he has done, she berates him and says that the birds will not be able to survive on their own. Chinaski replies, "Let 'em learn or let 'em die" (83). Critic Loss Glazier writes that "Chinaski does not simply *express* this philosophy: his life embodies it. Taking your fate into your own hands, despite the outcome, initiates the process of restoring man's humanity" ("Mirrors," par. 6). One should clarify that it is a process of leaving everything to chance. The parakeets, once free, do not have the security of caretakers. Their survival now depends on their luck for finding food and shelter. Chinaski, after twelve years, learns that he must take a similar risk for his own happiness and resigns his position.

His resignation is only one of the many risks for the sake of his wellbeing. Brewer argues that "despite the fact that the post office is a permeating presence in his life for more than 11 years, he never fully submits and never relinquishes" (*Charles Bukowski* 16). Chinaski proves risk is a practical solution. For instance, during his stint as a postal clerk, Chinaski finds that sitting in the same seat literally for eleven hours and forty

minutes a day causes his dizzy spells. He decides that a cure would be to “get up and take a walk now and then” (*Post Office* 187). A supervisor soon notices Chinaski’s short walks and comments, “[...] every time I see you, you’re walking!” (187). Chinaski defends himself, saying that he will go insane if he does not do this every once in a while. The supervisor relents and leaves Chinaski alone.

After Chinaski makes the ultimate risk of quitting, he is afflicted with ambivalence about his new freedom: “I knew that soon, like a man lifted quickly out of the deep sea, I would be afflicted—with a particular type of bends. I was like Joyce’s damned parakeets. After living in the cage I had taken the opening and flown out—like a shot into the heavens. Heavens?” (192). He has no way of ascertaining whether his life will improve with his newfound freedom. Such uncertainty leads to depression. He starts to binge heavily and contemplates suicide until he remembers that he has a daughter to raise. He wakes up one morning after a night of heavy drinking and considers the fact that he is “still alive” (196). It is a revelation that he will not be defeated in this familiar game of uncertainty. To win, he will “write a novel” (196). Brewer points out that, according to Bukowski, “the ‘gambling man and the artist’ are the same (17). Writing is reinforced as another game of risk, an endeavor in which success is indeterminable.

*Women* starts at a moment in Chinaski’s life when he has gained recognition as a writer. It is the mid-1970s, and he is well into his fifties. He is no longer playing the game of empowering himself by avoiding submission to an institution. His new game of risk is to refrain from committing himself to one romantic relationship. He has numerous sexual



escapades, many of which are with fans of his work. The motivation for sexual conquests is the same for his gambling, his drinking, his drifting, and his resistance to bosses. He wants to maintain an identity based on power, specifically his virility. Brewer notes that “the preoccupation with his advanced age becomes important,” which is evident in the passage below (*Charles Bukowski* 29):

I was old and I was ugly. Maybe that’s why it felt so good to stick it into young girls. I was King Kong and they were lithe and tender. Was I trying to screw my way past death? By being with young girls did I hope I wouldn’t grow old, feel old? I just didn’t want to age badly, simply quit, be dead before death itself arrived. (*Women* 74-75)

As Chinaski is nearing sixty, he realizes that he dreads the possibility that he will die impotent. A part of him hopes that he can avoid such a fate through perpetual sexual conquests.

What he does not immediately take into account is the loneliness that results from merely connecting with others through casual sex. After he starts dating a woman named Sara, whom he finds to be highly compatible, he realizes his desire for long-term companionship and the necessity for fidelity. Interestingly, he realizes that casual sex is no a longer game of risk for him:

I detested that type of swinging, the Los Angeles, Hollywood, Bel Air, Malibu, Laguna Beach kind of sex. Strangers when you meet, strangers when you part—a gymnasium of bodies namelessly masturbating each

other. People with no morals often considered themselves more free, but mostly they lacked the ability to feel or to love. So they became swingers. The dead fucking the dead. There was no gamble or humor in their game —it was corpse fucking corpse. (250)

He finds that numerous sexual affairs with strangers can cause “a man [to] lose his identity” (290). He finds that he must not define himself by his sexual conquests, but by the relationships he forms. What foreshadows that he will become a loser at his game of casual sex is an ill-fated date with a woman named Tanya. Meanwhile, he has been toying with Sara’s hopes for a relationship while he continues to have affairs with other women. For the date, he takes Tanya to the racetrack and loses a bet on a horse named Zag-Zig, a phrase that sums up Chinaski’s commitment to Sara. At the end of the novel, he makes the choice of a monogamous relationship with Sara, rejecting the advances of a female fan.

*Women*, as with *Factotum*, shows that the ultimate danger of careless risk is a loss of identity. Chinaski learns that instability in his life can be disempowering. Moreover, his perpetual avoidance of romantic or job commitments will result in an impending loneliness. *Post Office*, on the other hand, shows that risk is sometimes the only solution to improving one’s circumstances. Naturally, one can see that a balance between risk and caution is essential, a theme that is addressed in *Hollywood*. Chinaski will face new risks with a calculating demeanor that attests to an astounding maturity and wisdom.

## CHAPTER IV

“WHY NOT PLAY AROUND WITH THIS THING FOR LAUGHS?”:

CAUTIOUS RISK IN *HOLLYWOOD*

Bukowski's first four novels deal with the struggles that Chinaski faces in the first sixty years of his life. While *Ham on Rye* and *Post Office* are matters of bad luck, one could argue that Chinaski plays a significant role in his own suffering in *Factotum* and *Women*. In *Women*, there is especially an ironic distance between Chinaski and the reader. Bukowski is presenting a man in the process of learning about the ramifications of risk. Chinaski's perpetual adulterous affairs make it apparent why he has difficulty with romantic relationships. However, in *Hollywood*, he is, for once, a consistent voice of reason. The novel documents his brief immersion into the Hollywood film industry in the 1980s, an account of Bukowski's own experiences with the production of his screenplay *Barfly*. Bukowski may have drawn a contrast between eccentric filmmakers and Chinaski's calm demeanor for the following reason: to illustrate the chaotic nature of Hollywood and more generally the world. As Brewer declares, “against the raucous backdrop of Hollywood money, celebrity, and artificiality, he now represents stability” (*Charles Bukowski* 176). On the other hand, Chinaski's reserved disposition signifies his dynamic characterization. Indeed, now in his sixties, he has matured as a human being and is full of wisdom. The new game of risk that he plays is the Hollywood game, in which he challenges his image as an outsider by working as a screenwriter. One

of the novel's motifs is the conflict between public and private life. Chinaski's success to maintain his integrity throughout his Hollywood experience reveals his ability to take cautious risk.

As always, he maintains his individuality through escapism, which allows one the privilege of self-reflection. He recalls a moment when he was accused of being an escapist: "One of my past ladies had screamed at me, 'You drink to escape!'" (*Hollywood* 88). He responded, "'Of course, my dear'" (88). In her review of *Hollywood*, Molly Haskell notes, "A haze of alcohol [...] is [...], one comes to realize, a protection from his own acute vision. Anyone who sees life this clearly needs something to cloud his lens" ("So Much Genius," par. 5). Drinking is what makes life more bearable. Chinaski discusses how writing has a similar function:

The whole process allowed me to continue when life itself offered very little, when life itself was a horror show. There was always the typer to soothe me, to talk to me, to entertain me, to save my ass. Basically, that's why I wrote: to save my ass, to save my ass from the madhouse, from the streets, from myself. (*Hollywood* 88)

In general, escape is necessary for maintaining emotional and mental stability. The world is maddening in its horrors and dullness, which motivates Chinaski to go to the racetrack: "The racetrack [...] is a substitute for something else that should be faced. Yet, we all need to escape. The hours are long and must be filled somehow until our death. And there's just not enough glory and excitement to go around. Things quickly get drab and

deadly” (202-03). The racetrack allows him escape from the tedious mundaneness of everyday life.

One cannot say that the Hollywood film industry is completely at odds with Chinaski’s own values. Those who condemn mainstream films address a lack of realism. Such films only function to delight, not to inform. Meanwhile, Chinaski is suggesting that pleasure is what gives meaning to our existence. Escapes, such as drinking, sex, writing, reading, and games, make life worth living. Escapes provide a sense of order and agency unattainable in reality. Chinaski’s need to escape increases once he enters the film business and is surrounded by the madness of hyperactive film producers, a self-sacrificial film director, and a reckless movie star. He also finds the public’s growing interest in him to be absurd. Even in his sixties, he still does not enjoy other people’s company and prefers to be alone. During the production of his screenplay *The Dance of Jim Beam*, he evades contact with the film press daily by going to the racetrack. Brewer articulates the significance of the racetrack in *Hollywood*: “The racetrack also persists, its daily characters and systems a trusted index of spiritual health. The precision and meticulousness of Bukowski’s several betting theories are an antidote to the corrupting influence of fame” (*Charles Bukowski* 175). *Hollywood* reveals that the racetrack offers Chinaski the following rewards: an enhanced understanding of the world, a sense of control, and a sanctuary to practice discipline.

It is important to note that, in spite of Chinaski’s apparent need for solitude, the crowded racetrack is not an ideal place to hide. He has more difficulty avoiding contact

after his film is released. He encounters numerous people who recognize him. To avoid parasitic onlookers, he will “duck down some side aisle, make a quick turn” (*Hollywood* 235). In truth, he is not overly attached to his privacy. His attendance at the racetrack entails a subtler game of risk: betting on his ability to evade onlookers. It is likely that he goes to the racetrack for the thrill of the possibility that he will be recognized. Overall, the dullness and madness he finds in the outside world exist at the racetrack, too. For one, there is the tortuous “30 minute wait between races” (178):

It was too long. You can feel your life being pounded to a pulp by the useless waste of time. I mean, you just sit in your chair and hear all the voices talking about who should win and why. It’s really sickening.

Sometimes you think that you’re in a madhouse. And in a way, you are. Each of those jerk-offs thinks he knows more than the other jerk-offs and there they were all together in one place. And there I was, sitting there with them....the wait between the races was a real horror: sitting with a mumbling, bumbling humanity that would never learn or get better, but would only get worse with time. (178)

He disdains his fellow horseplayers, yet the thirty-minute lapses force him to reflect that he is one of them. Because he wishes to maintain his separation from his peers, he refrains from socialization: “I don’t care to hold counsel with the other players. I don’t view the other players with any kind of camaraderie at all” (202). Nevertheless, the madness of the racetrack that he seems to despise so much also fascinates him: “At times

I wondered what I was doing going to the racetrack. And at times I knew. For one, it allowed me to view large numbers of people at their worst, and this kept me in touch with the reality of what humanity consisted of. The greed, the fear, and the anger” (202). The racetrack, then, is not merely an escape, but also a reflection of the chaotic world that requires escape. Because madness is a component of human nature, he has no chance of avoiding madness in a crowded area. One could infer that Chinaski attends the racetrack to observe other horse betters and gain a deeper understanding of human nature.

His entry into the film industry similarly gives him a glimpse into the madness of humanity. As critic Andrew J. Madigan notes, “*Hollywood* illustrates Bukowski’s amazement at the crazed, compromising nature of filmmaking” (“What Fame Is” 453). For one, Chinaski has an otherworldly experience in his meeting with a French film producer named Jean-Paul Sanrah. Chinaski and his friend Jon Pichot, who wants to direct Chinaski’s screenplay, meet with Sanrah at his hotel suite in Beverly Hills. Pichot and Chinaski hope to obtain financial support from Sanrah for their film project. At first, Sanrah does not leave his bedroom to greet Chinaski and Pichot. For a while, Chinaski and Pichot sit at a table, talking to the French film director Modard. Sanrah appears once to introduce himself and then quickly retreats back into his bedroom. He then abruptly rushes out of his room and “began circling the table at a quick and even pace” (*Hollywood* 31). He goes into a misanthropic tirade about how defecation is a disgusting aspect of human beings. Sanrah’s rage is absurd, as he is complaining about an aspect of biology over which humans have no control. On the other hand, Sanrah’s mad

rant seems to support Chinaski's view that nature itself is absurd, evidenced in ugly bodily functions.

Pichot himself is mad in his impulsiveness, yet also embodies Chinaski's belief in risk. Even before Chinaski has officially completed his screenplay, Pichot attempts to find funding for the film by writing a woman in Russia believed to have a Swiss bank account. They begin to fall in love through their correspondence, and he eventually meets the woman in person in Russia. He finds that he is not physically attracted to her, although he pretends to be in love in hopes that she will give him her agreed eighty million dollars. After a few bizarre encounters with her, he learns that the woman is, in fact, a fraud. His friend François Racine, a French actor, is even more eccentric. Racine plays poker and like Chinaski enjoys gambling and heavy drinking. When Pichot begins seeking financial backers in Hollywood, Racine and Pichot both take the gamble of buying a house in a crime-ridden area of Venice Beach. Racine has also brought a stock of live chickens with him to raise there. During their residence, Racine and Pichot are regularly the victims of petty crimes. Pichot leaves the house when he is given an apartment by a production company that has agreed to make Chinaski's film. However, Racine decides to remain because he "cannot leave [his] chickens" (150). He is willing to risk his life by staying in an area where murder and thievery are frequent---all for the sake of livestock. Chinaski, at this point in his life, is much more cautious in his risk-taking.



Although Pichot's risks can be self-destructive, some of them are necessary for carrying out his mission to make Chinaski's screenplay into a film. When a production company, Firepower, sues him, Pichot goes on a hunger strike. Chinaski is taken aback by Pichot's extremism and begs him to drop the film project. Pichot then gives Chinaski a letter he has written to Firepower that outlines "Solution #2," which Pichot will pursue if the company does not relent: "I will start cutting off parts of my body and sending them to you in envelopes every day. I am serious. You cannot afford to wait. *It Is a Matter of Life or Death for the Movie*" (124). When the company continues with the lawsuit, Pichot proceeds to "Solution #2." Chinaski begs him not to do it, but Pichot buys a chainsaw and approaches the executive of Firepower directly, threatening to amputate his pinkie finger if the company does not relent. Pichot's scheme works, and in a conversation afterwards, Chinaski asks Pichot if he was "really going to do [Solution #2]" (132). Pichot responds, "Of course..." (132). Chinaski continues:

"But the other parts to follow? The other pieces. Were you going to do that?"

"Of course. Once you begin such a thing there is no stopping."

"You've got guts, my man." (132)

Such an incident shows that Pichot's willingness to sacrifice himself helped him succeed in his battle with Firepower.

Pichot's act of risk validates one insight that Chinaski has gained at the racetrack: a certain level of risk is necessary for winning. Brewer clarifies: "At the track, Chinaski

is dogmatic, empirical, and private, and his rules are consistently presented as philosophical profundities” (*Charles Bukowski* 175). One such rule that Chinaski advocates is to bet an amount that exceeds two dollars, in contrast to celebrity horse better Cary Grant: “He was a two dollar bettor. And when he lost he would run out toward the track screaming, waving his arms and yelling, ‘YOU CAN’T DO THIS TO ME!’ If you’re only going to bet two dollars you might as well stay home and take your money and move it from one pocket to the other” (*Hollywood* 177). Chinaski implies that one is more likely to win when betting a higher amount. As a horse better, he has honed the pragmatism that was evident as early as *Factotum*. The essence of horse betting, he argues, is the money that one wins: “There is only one bet, and that bet is to *win*. It takes the pressure off. Simplicity is always the secret, to a profound truth, to doing things, to writing, to painting. Life is profound in its simplicity. I think that the racetrack keeps me aware of this” (202). Habitually playing various bets, numerous horseplayers lose sense of the game’s actual purpose. This would explain why Chinaski dislikes hearing his fellow horseplayers discuss the game. At the racetrack, one must focus on the goal of winning, not on the various possibilities for how one could play. Chinaski’s strategy of taking action, rather than thinking, can be applied to life itself.

To talk or think about the process only takes time away from advancing towards the end objective. He elaborates on this idea when discussing an efficient chauffeur he has hired: “I loved professionals who could do what they were supposed to do. They were rare. There were so many inefficient professionals: doctors, lawyers, presidents,

plumbers, quarterbacks, dentists, policemen, airline pilots and etc.” (219). What creates inefficiency are the complications, which Chinaski must confront as a professional writer:

What was hard sometimes was finding that chair and sitting in it. Sometimes you couldn't sit in it. Like everybody else in the world, for you, things got in the way: small troubles, big troubles, continuous slammings and bangings. You had to be in the condition to endure what was trying to kill you. That's the message I got from [...] watching the horses run, or the way the jocks kept overcoming bad luck, spills on the track and personal little horrors off the track. I wrote about life, haha. But what really astonished me was the immense courage of some of the people *living* that life. That kept me going. (217)

Chinaski is arguing that simplicity is a spiritual state that can only be achieved by overcoming obstacles. To tackle problems head-on requires the strength to endure.

The value Chinaski places on endurance is reflected in Bukowski's actual screenplay for *Barfly*. In the opening sentence, the protagonist, a young Chinaski, loses a fistfight with the bartender. *Hollywood* reveals that such a scenario was common for Chinaski as a youth and his intoxicated state was what prevented him from being beaten to death: “the body had turned to rubber and the head to cement” (82). The Chinaski of *Barfly*, in fact, declares, “Anybody can be a non-drunk. It takes a special talent to be a drunk. It takes endurance. Endurance is more important than truth” (*The Movie* 96). Chinaski believes that endurance is what builds character and gives life meaning.

On the other hand, one must avoid unendurable losses: “Excessive greed can create errors because very heavy outlays affect your thinking processes” (*Hollywood* 177). As a gambler, one must stay wary of the dangers of a crippling debt and bet cautiously. Chinaski admits that, as a horse better, his “biggest bet was \$20 win” (177). One must practice cautious risk, particularly by developing a routine. He believes that it is possible to make a living as a horse better by developing one effective strategy. At the racetrack, “all results have a pattern” (177). If one learns all the patterns, Chinaski argues, then one has a higher chance of winning. In researching index numbers, he has found that a “high percentage winner” is a result of “certain numbers that the public is reluctant to call” (177). He says that these findings have provided the foundation for his own strategy. Each time his strategy wins him money, he feels empowered: “I liked the actual action, that time when all your calculations came out correctly at the wire and life had some sense, some rhythm and meaning” (178). He has more agency at the racetrack than in life, and winning is especially exhilarating.

However, he has learned the hard lesson of overestimating one’s ability to win. He says that his winnings at the racetrack led him to quit several jobs, “only to find new ones. Mostly because I altered or cheated on my own systems” (177). His overconfidence, not horse betting, caused him to lose money. Furthermore, greed, a human flaw elaborated on in the following quote, will fuel his arrogance: “The weakness of human nature is one more thing you must defeat at the racetrack” (177). The racetrack

is an opportunity to become aware of one's id and in the process to transcend it, becoming more a disciplined human being.

Chinaski says that deviance from his own patterns usually resulted in bad luck. Because horse betting is a game of risk heavily determined by chance, strict adherence to routine is all the more important: "I had about two dozen systems. They all worked only you couldn't apply them all at one time because they were based on varying factors" (177). The varying factors would explain why he would advise against betting on racehorses that win on flukes. One must never bet a horse that has recently won or a horse that usually finishes well. Chinaski enunciates his principle thusly: "The Public must always lose. You had to determine what the Public play was and then try to do the opposite" (177). This maxim connotes that one does not win by recycling the tactics of other players. One must be willing to experiment with unattempted strategies to discover which ones are effective.

Chinaski's strategy to experiment continually could be tied to how he has lived his life. In *Ham on Rye*, Chinaski learns that the standard way of living, articulated by his father, involves a career, a family, and a house. Chinaski decides to live differently and for much of *Factotum* leads the life of a drifter. In *Post Office*, Chinaski finds that a long-term commitment to one's job is standard practice yet musters the courage to quit his postal job and pursue his writing career. In *Women*, Chinaski plays against the societal norm to maintain a monogamous relationship. However, once he finds casual sex to be routine, he decides that a long-term relationship is a new game of risk worth playing.

In *Hollywood*, Chinaski attempts his hand at a screenplay. A conversation he has with Pichot stresses how the subject matter is atypical for film. When Pichot asks him what the screenplay will be about, Chinaski explains, “‘It’s about a drunk. He just sits on his barstool night and day’” (36). Pichot asks, “‘Do you think the people would care about such a man?’” (36). Chinaski responds, “‘Listen, Jon, if I worried about what the people cared about I’d never write anything’” (36). Chinaski realizes that a barfly indeed is an unusual film hero. He confesses that the character is a fictionalized version of his younger self: “I was writing about a young man who wanted to write and drink but most of his success was with the bottle” (82). He further notes that the subculture of barflies is not a widely explored subject in film or even literature: “And I knew that there was a whole civilization of lost souls that lived in and off bars, almost daily, nightly and forever, until they died. I had never read about this civilization so I decided to write about it” (82-83). Like playing against the Public at the racetrack, Chinaski tells a story that makes for an atypical 1980s film. The actual film *Barfly* is not a moral indictment of barflies, in contrast to other mainstream films on the subject, but a celebration. The film begins with Chinaski as a barfly and happily ends with Chinaski as a barfly.

Other experiments in *Hollywood* include the purchase of a BMW and a house, financial moves recommended by his tax consultant. He is reluctant to engage in all three endeavors. He especially believes that a house had imprisoned his own father for life: “My father had virtually mortgaged his whole life to buy a house” (46). Chinaski in his youth was unwilling to make such a commitment. Furthermore, while his father views the

house as a testament to familial succession, Chinaski has always seen the house as a possession of no permanent value: “Then it would take just one person to gamble all those houses away, or burn them down with a match” (46). Purchasing a house is indeed a financial risk, but Chinaski is not sure if it is a sensible risk since he cannot determine any long-term benefits of home ownership.

However, because Chinaski has spent much of his life making choices that have indeterminate outcomes, he decides to take the financial risk of buying a home, asking himself, “Why not play around with this thing for laughs?” (45). The benefit of such an endeavor is the experience itself. On the other hand, Chinaski is also risking his self-identity. Madigan points out that “too much good fortune is perceived as possibly destructive to soul, character, and creativity” (“What Fame Is” 455). When Chinaski begins house hunting, he reflects: “I was beginning to lose control and I realized it but I was unable to reverse the process” (*Hollywood* 46). He lacks the power to completely preserve his way of life. When he finally buys a house in an affluent neighborhood, he feels discomfort in his gradual absorption into the upper-classes: “I felt the fear, the fear of becoming like *them*” (63). Chinaski fears that such a change will effect his creativity. However, after settling into his new home, Chinaski begins writing immediately and is relieved that he has not lost the power to create.

This conflict between identity and role-playing is another important theme in the novel. Because Chinaski is juggling the multiple roles of husband, home owner, author, screenwriter, and celebrity, he feels as if he is an actor. However, his tendency to role-

play is not new. In his youth, he explains that he played the role of a fighter in his brawls with bartenders: “My main problem during a fight was that I couldn’t truly get angry, even when it seemed my life was at stake. It was playing-acting with me. It mattered and it didn’t. Fighting the bartender was something to do and it pleased the patrons who were a clubby little group” (82). For Chinaski, the fight was merely a performance for the crowd and not something he could take seriously. Chinaski later articulates what he lacked as a fighter during his reflection on a televised fighting match:

Condition was the key. Talents and guts were a must but without condition they were negated.

I liked to watch fights. Somehow it reminded me of writing. You needed the same thing, talent, guts and condition. Only the condition was mental, spiritual. You had to *become* a writer each time you sat down in front of the machine. (217)

The condition for fighting would refer to one’s stamina. In writing, however, the condition for writing involves one’s self-identification as a writer. In declaring that one “must become a writer,” he implies that such an identity is nothing more than an acting role. One is only a writer when one actually writes, similar to how an actor is only a character during a performance. Chinaski’s perception of writing as performance is one example of the parallel he sees between writing and acting.



Chinaski finds that acting, generally, is a component of humanity: every human is forced to play multiple roles. He finds that social etiquette requires acting when meeting with the French filmmakers Modard and Sanrah:

I lapsed into my cut-off period. Often with humans, both good and bad, my senses simply shut off, they get tired, I give up. I am polite. I nod. I pretend to understand because I don't want anybody to be hurt. That is the one weakness that has lead me into the most trouble. Trying to be kind to others I often get my soul shredded into a kind of spiritual pasta.

No matter. My brain shuts off. I listen. I respond. And they are too dumb to know that I am not there. (34)

Chinaski sees that public roles generally restrict him from expressing his true feelings. He finds that he must even perform in the company of fans who falsely assume that he is the same person as his literary alter-ego, who in the novel is also named Chinaski. However, although many of his works are based on real-life experiences, the parallels between Chinaski and the fictional Chinaski have lessened in the past decade. In short, Chinaski has grown up. In one interaction, bikers who are fans of his work insult him, expecting him to give a biting retort. Chinaski, however, responds neutrally and reveals his thoughts to the reader:

Again I noticed the leather jackets and the *blandness* of the faces and the feeling that there wasn't much joy or daring in them. There was something totally missing in the poor fellows and something in me wrenched, just for

a moment, and I felt like throwing my arms around them, consoling and embracing them like some Dostoyevsky, but I knew that would finally lead nowhere except to ridicule and humiliation, for myself and them. (48)

The role of the “Dirty Old Man” is limiting, and while Chinaski does not indulge his fans by playing it, neither can he dismantle it. He finds that his fans likewise have been misguided in their idolization of Chinaski’s authorial persona. Madigan poignantly relates the passage to Bukowski’s own life: “Bukowski realizes that he has helped create a persona which determines the way people relate to him. His readers want him to perform like the characters he creates, regardless of his true identity. He is frustrated by the inability of readers to separate fact from fiction....” (“What Is Life” 458). To apply Madigan’s point to the *Hollywood* passage, Chinaski has been misidentified with his fictive alter-ego by the fans, and he cannot present his actual self without disappointing them. Later in the novel, Chinaski faces a similar obligation to play the new role of screenwriter after the film’s release. At an after-party, Harry Friedman, one of the film’s producers, tells Chinaski that he “wants” another screenplay (*Hollywood* 209). Chinaski reflects: “I was a part of Hollywood, if only for a small moment. I was guilty” (200). He now faces the obligations to continue writing in a medium that he loathes.

Because there is the threat to one’s self-image, Chinaski finds that role-playing is another form of risk. Role-playing involves the danger of losing one’s identity. Chinaski is sympathetic when hears that Jack Bledsoe, the actor playing his alter ego in the film,

does not give photojournalists permission to release pictures of himself posing with costar Francine Bowers and Chinaski:

You know, when you spend many hours, pretending to be a person who you aren't, well, that can do something to you. It's hard just being yourself. Think of trying very hard to be somebody that you're not. And then being somebody *else* that you're not. And then somebody else. At first, you know, it could be exciting. But after a while, after being dozens of other people, maybe it would be hard to remember who you were yourself, especially if you had to make up your own lines.

I figured that Jack Bledsoe had somehow gotten lost and decided that they were photographing someone else and not him so that all that was left for him to do was to refuse to sign the release. It made sense to me.

(192-93)

As acting is a gamble on one's identity, betting too high for an actor would be overly absorbing a role and losing a connection to one's self. It is important for actors to maintain an aesthetic distance between themselves and their roles. Bledsoe actually is able to avoid the trap of becoming a clone of Chinaski, telling Chinaski in person, "I didn't want to get too much of your voice in there or too much of your slouch" (232). Ultimately, Bledsoe does not let himself get lost in the role.

Chinaski, meanwhile, sees that the only way he can exit his role as a Hollywood artist is to embrace it completely. On hearing that there will be no premiere for the film,

he requests Pichot to stage one. When Pichot asks him why, Chinaski responds, ““For laughs. For bullshit. I want a white stretch limo with a chauffeur, a stock of the best wine, color tv, car phone, cigars”” (215). Brewer points out that “Chinaski’s request for a white stretch limousine ride to the film’s premiere is not a compromise, but a celebration, a climax of his absurd and improbable success” (*Charles Bukowski* 176). Because he has already been playing the Hollywood game, Chinaski might as well derive as much enjoyment from it as he can. He has overindulged the expectations to continue working in the Hollywood film industry by planning a self-mockingly ostentatious film premiere. Significantly, he has taken control of his Hollywood persona and can now obliterate it. When his wife Sarah asks him if he will “write another screenplay,” he responds, “I hope not” (*Hollywood* 210). Otherwise, the obligation for him to play the Hollywood role will live on. To write another screenplay would perpetuate the expectations for him to be a screenwriter.

Nevertheless, one cannot say that he is embittered about his Hollywood experience. In his biography *Charles Bukowski: Locked in the Arms of a Crazy Life*, Howard Sounes addresses one of the novel’s least predictable qualities: “It is perhaps surprising what a funny and upbeat book it is, describing a domesticated and financially secure Henry Chinaski laughing at a world crazier than anything he had experienced in the factories, bars and apartment courts of *Post Office*, *Factotum* and *Women*” (218). Chinaski’s lighthearted behavior and tone also attest to his growth, and the ugliness he sees in Hollywood does not dismay him because he has endured the ugliness of reality for

much of his life. His moment in Hollywood, furthermore, has no consequence for his literary career. Madigan argues that this was Bukowski's experience in the aftermath of *Barfly*: "Bukowski's retirement from screenwriting after *Barfly* suggests that the mark upon his creative soul was perhaps not indelible" ("What Fame Is" 459). Chinaski always knows that he can return to poetry and fiction. He never feels regret for writing the screenplay itself, even in moments when Pichot tells him that production has been canceled. Chinaski thinks highly of the screenplay yet can accept the possibility that it will never be produced. The contrast between Pichot's and Chinaski's developments as artists is evident. Pichot is still in the process of proving himself as a filmmaker, which is why he must invest his life into one project. For Chinaski, on the other hand, failure to produce the screenplay does not entail his own failure as a writer. He already knows that he can write, a fact that he never forgets. The Hollywood game, in short, was a cautious risk in which loss of identity was never an actual threat.

## CHAPTER V

## CONCLUSION:

“THE MORE OFTEN YOU LEARN TO DO IT,  
THE MORE LIGHT THERE WILL BE”

Bukowski's five semi-autobiographical novels simulate a universe full of disorder, and one can even find the same case in his last novel *Pulp*. Chinaski is often unable to influence his circumstances in this chaotic world, and his successes and failures are typically matters of luck. Although the absurdism and surrealism of *Pulp* are atypical for Bukowski, the novels' nonsensical plot represents Bukowski's viewpoint that life itself is nonsensical. The message of all his novels is not simply that one must take chances, but that one's life is determined primarily by chance. The only way to survive then is to take risk, a theme upon which the semi-autobiographical novels expand.

It is important to note that the timeline of the Chinaski novels is incongruous with the order of their actual composition and publication. The first installment in the series is *Post Office*, which starts in the middle of Chinaski's life: his early thirties up to late forties. The historical explanation is that Bukowski's memories of the post office are fresh, and a novel based on those experiences would have a cathartic function for him. He completed the novel in a fairly short amount of time, "less than three weeks," according to Cherkovski (*Hank* 208). In writing *Post Office*, Bukowski was still developing his viewpoints on risk and gamble. These themes are not as developed as they are in the

subsequent novels. The references to the racetrack are brief, although positive. Risk, for the most part, is depicted as Chinaski's saving grace. The only way to not let the post office consume him entirely is to quit to write full-time.

Of course, his resignation from the post office is not Chinaski's first significant risk. In the second installment *Factotum*, which portrays the early years of Chinaski's adulthood, the effect of risk on Chinaski's life is much more complicated. The novel's complexity is clearly a testament to the longer amount of time that Bukowski spent on its composition. According to Cherkovski, it took him at least two years to write (*Hank* 245). In this novel, Bukowski hones his theory that risk can be as damaging as it can be rewarding, and he takes the effort to draw a distinction between careless risk and cautious risk. The horse betting and the writing are positive representations of risk for Chinaski, who values both activities highly because they are invigorating. The enjoyment he derives motivates him to strive for efficiency. In contrast, he has little value for most of his jobs and, of course, is often an inefficient employee. His main motivation to work is to support his drinking. The careless risk, Bukowski reveals, is his decision to be consistently unemployed. Chinaski learns the hard way that the job, as with his winnings at the track, is not something to be taken for granted. The time may come when it is impossible to be rehired, and at the end, Chinaski fails at several desperate attempts to find a new job. *Women*, like *Factotum*, not only addresses the consequences of careless risk, but also introduces newer forms of risk. The obvious risk is Chinaski's affairs with strangers, yet he soon learns that his inability to commit is based on a fear that he will

lose his individuality. However, because he longs for companionship, he finds that a relationship is a worthwhile risk that requires real courage.

Not until Bukowski writes his fourth novel, *Ham on Rye*, does he possess the maturity to contemplate the catalyst for his obsession with risk and gambling. The novel examines the upbringing that fostered the more familiar Chinaski. It deconstructs the American Dream and shows that a normative lifestyle, which is epitomized by Chinaski's father, provides limited satisfaction. Chinaski's father tormented by his life as a home owner and workaholic. Chinaski and his mother become victims of the father's outbursts. Chinaski specifically receives beatings by his father on a regular basis. The excuses for this physical punishment are petty. Observing his father's unhappiness for much of his life, Chinaski decides at the end of the novel to counter his father's values by living as a bum on skid-row. He understands that the nuclear family unit only seems safe because it is familiar. On the other hand, he cannot ascertain whether his alternative path will be any more beneficial. All he knows is that the risk of venturing into the unknown is worthwhile because there is the possibility of spiritual fulfillment.

Such spiritual fulfillment is actually why he frequents the racetrack in *Hollywood*. In this novel, in which he is now in his sixties, he shares the insights on risk he has gained from decades of experience. Horse betting has especially taught him that there is an order to how much money one bets. It is possible to bet too little or too high, a view that he applies to other areas of his life. His composition of a screenplay is a smart bet because there is the chance that he can prove himself in a new medium. On the other



hand, if it is not produced, he will be able to move on. He is confident enough as a writer to not let the poor reception of one work hinder his creativity. Similarly, at the racetrack, he has learned to avoid bets that carry the danger of crippling debt. Losing a bet will not mean loss of power, or that he will be unable to survive. Although he describes a few heavily detailed strategies, he declares that success as a horse bettor is achieved by simplicity---the action of betting, not spending time figuring out the best play. The importance of simplicity is echoed throughout Bukowski's other works. For example, in the book anthology of his *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* column, there is a one-sentence entry: "If you don't gamble, you'll never win" (165). Simply, one must be willing to lose in order to win. All in all, one cannot excel without taking action.

What illustrates this concept is the emblem on Bukowski's gravestone: "Don't Try" (Christy 89). Trying entails that one is giving a limited effort, as opposed to total commitment. Bukowski's distinction between trying and doing is well-expressed in the poem "Roll the Dice": "if you're going to try, go all the / way. / otherwise don't even start" (*What Matters* 408). In other words, don't start if you're only going to try in a game of risk. Do not do it unless you immerse yourself completely in the game.

Bukowski catalogues the losses that one must endure in playing a life of risk:

go all the way.

it could mean not eating for 3 or

4 days.

it could mean freezing on a park bench.

it could mean jail,  
it could mean derision,  
mockery,  
isolation.  
isolation is the gift,  
all the others are a test of your  
endurance, of  
how much you really want to  
do it.  
and you'll do it  
despite rejection and the  
worst odds  
and it will be better than  
anything else  
you can imagine....  
  
you will ride life straight to  
laughter, it's  
the only good fight  
there is. (*What Matters* 408-9)

Like his character Chinaski, Bukowski experienced the harshness of a life of risk. The win of such a gamble for Bukowski is “isolation,” which is an escape from the crowded world. Only in an isolated setting is one able to learn about one’s self and the world around. Of course, the gambles that one loses, Bukowski maintains, are not necessarily wastes of time. How does one learn except by one’s own mistakes? Failure, in fact, is an opportunity to prove’s one ability to “endure,” to go on playing the game in spite of losses such as “rejection.” Chinaski clarifies the value of endurance in another wonderful poem, “The Laughing Heart”: “you can’t beat death but / you can beat death / in life, sometimes. / and the more often you learn to do it, the more light there will be” (*Betting on the Muse* 400). Chinaski often has to endure his own feelings of depression, and in *Ham on Rye* and *Post Office*, he considers suicide. His ability to endure is reflected by his will to live in moments of hopelessness. He will not lose in this boxing match with life and will remain standing tall.

Sounes addresses how Bukowski both reinforced the pleasurable and painful aspects of life: “There is an uncompromising personal philosophy [...] that lives are often wretched and that people are frequently cruel to one another, but that life can also be beautiful, sexy, and funny” (243). Bukowski finds that such appealing aspects of life are provided by escapes: alcohol, writing, sex, and of course, the racetrack. Another escape is “laughter,” which is in the title of the above-mentioned poem and is also emphasized in “Roll the Dice.” The tragedies become bearable once one sees the comedy in them. The ability to keep a sense of humor amidst turmoil reflects strength and maturity.

Humor, in short, is what has contributed to Bukowski's power as a writer---coaxing his readers to laugh at what are otherwise painful moments.

It is important to note again that Bukowski's philosophy on risk and gamble does not presume a devil-may-care attitude toward life. He stresses that one must be thoughtful and responsible enough to consider the consequences of every risk. He does not revere the mere act of risk, but the courage that it requires. Courage entails awareness of the potential dangers. Bukowski has taken many ill-fated risks, partly because he is unaware of the impending perils. For example, in *Factotum*, he does not know that his unemployment status will cause him to lose confidence. In *Women*, he does not consider how strange sexual encounters will result in loneliness. However, the risks he makes in *Hollywood* and *Post Office* are wise because he knows and can accept the possibilities of defeat. In *Post Office*, he quits with the knowledge that it will be difficult to find another way to make money. In *Hollywood*, he writes a screenplay knowing the high chances that it will be rejected. Both of these risks are worthwhile. How else will one know the chances of winning if one never plays?

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