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An Uneven Fight Between Charles Bukowski And Richard Brautigan In

Zurich, The Unforgettable

by Georg Aeberhard

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From among the three favorite Californian writers of mine, I have met in person only Richard Brautigan (the other two are William Saroyan and Jack London). It was a short but hectic and intensive encounter in Zurich in November 1983. We became friends only for a few months - not even a year later, in September of the following year I was shocked to read in the magazine TIME that Richard Brautigan was found dead in his house in Bolinas. It said: "DIED. Richard Brautigan, 49, gentle, low-key novelist and poet of the California underground, whose offbeat books, including *A Confederate General from Big Sur* (1965), *The Pill versus the Springhill Mine Disaster* (1968) and the bestselling *Trout Fishing in America* (1967), offered countercultural youth of the hippies era kind of "natural high" with intense evocations of humor, romance and love of nature; of apparently self-inflicted gunshot wound; in Bolinas, Calif. A badly decomposed body, identified at week's end as Brautigan's, was found in his home by two friends who had become worried about not hearing from for several weeks." (November 5, 1984)

I have read so far all his novels and when I found out that he is on the list of the visiting writers at the literature festival in Zurich, I could not but to go to his particular reading. I ran into him in the spacious corridor of the Mädchen Gymnasium after the rather dull session and while he was surrounded by other people I have managed somehow to slip to him my visiting card, murmuring: "Just in case you should need something while you are in Zurich."

The next day the phone rang about 11 AM. "Do you have some Vodka there?" Immediately I have recognized Richard's husky, slightly lisping voice and I have assured him that indeed I have.

"Well, get it over here, I am at the hotel Florhof, or something or other."

"I will be there, Richard. In about a half an hour, OK."

"And do you have some ice?"

"Well, this we can get at your hotel, I guess," I told the admired writer.

The round of Vodka lasted three days and three nights before he had to continue his cultural tour paid for by "The Agency" as he used to call the US government program he was on. We were walking the streets of Zurich from a pub to a bar, from a bar to a restaurant, visiting places like the "Copi", the Italian restaurant where Carlo Marx was still hanging on the wall, the Spanish Bodega in the Old Town, The James Joyce Club or the Helvetia Bar. Richard liked to drink but somehow he was very conscious about spending money. Apparently, his

stinginess was legendary, not only that his divorce hit him hard on that side. And he loved to comment on things around us, he loved to comment on himself also. I remember one clear cut statement: "I'm an American, an animal, a thinking meat, a machine, a human being, a professional. You got to fuck and fight."

To get to my place we had to cross the river Sihl or rather its channel and Richard loved to pronounce its name, for him it was the "Zeal River". He knew about the river thanks to the writings of James Joyce. One evening we crossed the Sihl River and went to my place to recover. Richard made himself comfortable on the spot, falling asleep on the couch, his feet - forever in boots - high on the side board. Close to the evening he woke up and started to look at things. Outdoors the street light had been just switched on, it started to rain. Suddenly, Richard was in rage. He pulled a paper back out of a bookcase, opened the door to the balcony and threw the book out to the street. Barely I have managed to glimpse at the title: "The Post Office" by Charles Bukowski. I have liked that book actually but I was speechless, had no arguments ready. Richard hissed at me: "You don't need that trash here," and closed the balcony door. I went up to him, being curious where the book has landed. It made it all across the street, ending up in the gutter in a puddle next to the sidewalk. It got gradually soaked by the rain and still days afterwards I was looking at it while it was disintegrating slowly, even being flattened by a horse wagon that used to bring beer barrels to the pub on the corner. I wonder if Bukowski would have minded an end like this to a book of his. Probably, he wouldn't care a damn thing and he certainly outlived his literaterary competitor by 10 years...

Richard went back to the book rack and I have pointed out his books to him. He picked one of them: "Loading Mercury with a Pitch Fork". He sat down with it and asked me for a pen.

"I love it, you got this one here..." he said and started to write a dedication for me, the writing being distorted by his dyslectic handicap. He put down: "This is for J. ... Richard Brautigan, Zurich, the unforgettable, November 30,1983".

Afterwards we have watched some of my films on VHS-tapes. Richard was deeply moved by the film about the girl by the name of Vilma which I have done in Lima, Peru, two years ago. It was a Unicef project called "I've got a name" in which the everyday life of this 11 years old girl was depicted. It showed the poverty in the Villa El Salvador, a shanty town in the South of the Peruvian capital. Richard started to cry, whispering: "I'm coming from there, I made it... I am a rich man."

Richard Brautigan was conceited as man, I must admit, considering his animosity towards Bukowski and also taking in account his spleen to be depicted

on the covers of all his books. He was a tall man of Buffalo Bill appearance, with shoulder long blonde hair, thick mustache, and an air of old times around him. Probably thank to his personality cult on the book covers, I have witnessed the following scene when I brought him to the airport. While we were approaching the check-in counters at Zurich Kloten, a woman came towards us, arms open to embrace Richard as if he would be an old, intimate friend of hers. She was of an extremely feminine appearance, with long bushy hair around a clear cut face, loving eyes, sensuous lips and quite a voluptuous breast, dressed in a short blazer over a half open blouse and skirt, her long legs in boots. The woman might be the woman Richard has described in his novel "The Abortion: An Historical Romance 1966", a woman men fell literally over for: "Vida's body, perfect face and long lightning hair performed their customary deeds among the men ... causing a thing that was short of panic."

Now, this situation was reversed. This beautiful woman fell over for Richard, literally. As if I did not exist next to him, she came up to Richard, embraced him really and kissed him. It was like as if he would have just arrived and was met by a long time waiting love. She whispered: "Richard, I am so happy to see you. Thank you so much." Richard did not have any time to respond since she loosened her embrace, turned around and with a smile on her lips she has disappeared among the passers by. "The only good show for Zurich," Richard has commented this unexpected but bashfully appreciated meeting with a lovely female admirer.

From the Pacific Coast, from Bolinas, where Richard Brautigan shot himself with his 44 Magnum to make sure, came a letter, which - when I'm reading now - is like a premonition of this last thing to come; in the end it said:

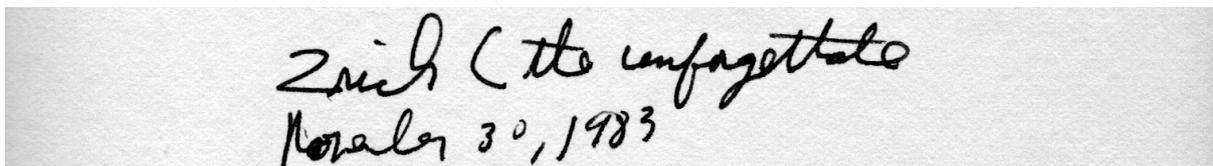
... wherever we meet next in the world.

Either here or there or there or there...

Thank you.

Yours,

Richard



Zurich (the unforgotten)
November 30, 1983