The Death of Joan Vollmer Burroughs: What Really Happened?

James W. Grauerholz

American Studies Dept.,
University of Kansas.

January 7, 2002

Prepared for the Fifth Congress of the Americas
at Universidad de las Americas / Puebla (Oct. 18, 2001).

Dec. 5, 2003

This article was presented at a scholarly conference in Mexico in October 2001, and last revised in January 2002. In the past two years additional evidence has come to light, and although the author has not revised the essay again, he wishes to point out briefly some changes that should be made:

About the fatal shooting on Sept. 6, 1951, the essay says: "Lewis Marker and Eddie Woods were present with Burroughs and Vollmer at the moment of the shooting. No one else can be shown to have been there at the time, but others who were reportedly in the apartment within a few hours before, or just after, the shooting include Betty Jones, John Healy, Juana Peñaloza, and John Herrmann."

Subsequent oral-history research now indicates that the four shooting witness/participants were in an alcove area of the large apartment, and that there was -- in fact -- a party going on in another, larger room nearby. Kells Elvins' friend, Ted Marak, states that he had just walked into the party, probably with Kells, when the shot was heard; he remembers there were "seven or eight" persons in the party room, which was about twenty feet from the alcove where the shooting occurred.

This, and other details of Marak's recent testimony (to Prof. Rob Johnson of the University of Texas/Pan American), do not directly conflict with the eyewitness accounts of participants Marker and Woods, or the accounts of others who were in the apartment building at some point that afternoon (Healy, Mejía, Peñaloza, and reporters for at least five Mexico City newspapers). The four persons in the alcove were preoccupied only with events occurring in front of them, and any persons in another room were ignoring, or unaware of, those events.

As to whether Burroughs said to Vollmer something like "It's about time for our William Tell act," with its implication that they had done something like this before 1951, the essay presents conflicting evidence: Eyewitness Lewis Marker told biographer Ted Morgan that Burroughs did say it, and he added: "there was no suggestion, that I recall, that it had been done in the past, you know, but clearly, the implications are obvious, you know. Probably even mentioned the glass on the head or something like that, since [they] didn't have an apple ...."

Eyewitness Eddie Woods told Ted Morgan that he did not recall Burroughs saying anything about "William Tell," and did not think that he did.

Burroughs' own "version #1" of the event, as told to El Nacional on Sept. 7, 1951, appears to confess that he did say it.

Interviewed by Conrad Knickerbocker in 1965, Burroughs flatly denied that he mentioned William Tell, or even aimed the gun toward Vollmer.

To filmmaker Howard Brookner in 1980, Burroughs stated that he did make the remark to Vollmer, but when Brookner asked, "Had you done the William Tell thing before?" Burroughs replied: "Never. Never. Never. Just an absolute piece of insanity."

To biographer Ted Morgan in the mid-1980s, Burroughs admitted that he did say it; as to whether it was the first time they did a "William Tell act," there is no clear statement in the Burroughs-Morgan interviews.

But Ted Marak, who knew Burroughs, Vollmer, and Kells Elvins when all of them lived in Pharr, Texas, just before Burroughs moved to Mexico in late 1949, told Prof. Rob Johnson and documentary filmmaker Matt McClung on Sept. 27, 2002, that he personally witnessed Burroughs and Vollmer doing something like this in Texas in the 1940s. Johnson described Marak's filmed interview to me this way:

"[Marak said he] did not actually SEE the [1951] accident, he HEARD it, and he remembered being told Billy had shot a piece of fruit off her head, but he has since learned that it was a drinking glass.

"He told me the reason he thought it was a piece of fruit was that he had seen Billy shoot a grapefruit, or an orange, off of Joan's head when he knew them in South Texas. He might have seen this trick more than once, at Kells' orchard. So when he heard the report of the gun that night, it flashed to him that perhaps Billy was performing this trick for the people at the party.

"He then added another reminiscence. Billy was an expert shot, he said. Ted and Kells would throw grapefruit into the air and Billy would hit them on the fly, using a pistol. The grapefruit would explode. Ted was in the army and earned the 'expert' classification as a marksman, so he was a good judge of Billy's talents."

I believe Marak is a credible witness, and if what he says is true, it certainly puts that famous comment in a new light.

The essay addresses the possible role of bribery in Burroughs' release on bail after two weeks in jail (under weekly supervision, for a year, until he fled Mexico), and his eventual judgment and sentence (found guilty of the equivalent of negligent homicide, two years' imprisonment, suspended). The strongest essay statement on this: "Burroughs believed that the Mexican justice system was infinitely corrupt, or corruptible. While it is certain that, during the administration of President Miguel Alemán, 1946–1952, the mordida (bribery system) reached new heights of prevalence, there is no evidence that either of the two presiding judges was swayed by any such bribes." [I.e., no definite, documentary evidence.]

New oral-history evidence and scholarly responses to the 2002 essay draft now point to the likelihood that as much as $20,000 may have been paid by Burroughs' family to his Mexican defense attorney, Bernabé Jurado, who probably did dispense much of that money in bribes to judges, ballistics experts, and others. But the following essay statement can still stand unchanged: "Despite his privileged status as a U.S. citizen and the relative wealth and power of his St. Louis family, Burroughs might have remained in limbo—and in prison—far longer than two weeks [if no bribes had been paid]. But eventually it should have been possible to demonstrate that his crime lacked the essential element of homicidal intent, and he would have been freed within a few years."

Finally, the new essay draft will present the informed opinion of contemporary legal scholars, as to what might have been the charges and the sentence if the crime had occurred in the United States. Preliminary indications are that Burroughs would have drawn a sentence of two to five years (depending on the State where the negligent homicide was committed), and would have been eligible for probation or suspension of sentence.

...

Jan. 2002

This essay is an informal summary of my research on this period of William S. Burroughs' life for an in-depth biography on which I am still at work, for Grove Atlantic Press. It is presumed that the reader already has some familiarity with the lives and times of the founding members of "the Beat generation"—a subject that has accumulated an imposing bibliography. William Burroughs' life-story has been told, at length or briefly, in literally dozens of books, but there are only two published authors who have made major original-research contributions: Ted Morgan's indispensable 1988 biography, *Literary Outlaw: The Life and Times of William S. Burroughs*; and Barry Miles' shorter but very insightful 1993 book, *William S. Burroughs, El Hombre Invisible: A Portrait*.

A book published in Mexico in 1995—*La Bala Perdida: William S. Burroughs en México* (The Wild Shot: Burroughs in Mexico), by Jorge García-Robles—adds many new primary-research findings; I worked closely with García-Robles on that book. Dr. Edward Simmen, Professor Emeritus of English at the Universidad de las Americas / Puebla (the institutional successor to Mexico City College) has contributed important new primary-source discoveries in his recent paper, "William Burroughs: New Light on the Mexican Years." A valuable recent contribution is Michael Spann's *William S. Burroughs' Most Unforgettable Characters: Lola "La Chata" and Bernabé Jurado*, published earlier this year by Xochi Publications in Brisbane, Australia. Prof. Rob Johnson's essay, "William S. Burroughs: South Texas Farmer, Junky and Queer" (*Journal of Southwestern American Literature*, Summer 2001), contains much new primary research and provides critical links between the Texas and Mexico period of Burroughs' life.

I am grateful to Timothy Moran for sharing Joan Vollmer's letters from the estate of Edith Kerouac Parker. Peter Swales' unpublished paper, "Burroughs in the Bewilderness: The Haunted Mind and Psychoanalyses of William S. Burroughs," laid the foundation for my understanding of Burroughs' relationship to Freudian psychoanalysis. I am also indebted to my friend and associate, Jim McCrary, for his editorial comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Marilyn Wurzberger at Arizona State University's special collections has been extremely helpful with the *Literary Outlaw* research archive that Ted Morgan sold to ASU in 1989, and the Robert H. Jackson Burroughs Collection there; Geoff Smith, John Bennett, and others at Ohio State University's special collections were, as always, enormously helpful with materials from their pre-eminent public Burroughs collections.

I have been investigating the death of Joan Burroughs, and William Burroughs' whole life, for many years. In this paper I draw on the work of those scholars and writers, and many other sources mentioned below, as well as my own Mexico-period research efforts since the mid-1980s. In these I have been greatly assisted by my longtime friend and colleague, José Férez, and by my good friend, Ed Simmen; Rob Johnson's help and encouragement have also been crucial.

As this version of the paper is informal, there are no footnotes, endnotes, or formal bibliography; but I believe the sources of all citations are well enough indicated. For various reasons there are doubtless a number of errors in what follows, and for those I alone am responsible. Scholars wishing to point them out to me are invited to write to me at P.O. Box 147, Lawrence KS 66044, or email to <Seward23@aol.com>.

1) The marriage of William Burroughs and Joan Vollmer, 1946–1951.

In a Mexico City apartment, on the evening of September 6, 1951, a 37-year-old American man fatally shot his ten-years-younger American wife in the forehead with a .38-caliber automatic pistol, while aiming at a drinking glass balanced on top of her head. This tragedy caused great immediate shock and dismay for the protagonists' families and friends, and it grew exponentially in notoriety through the next four decades as the killer's career as a writer was established by a series of influential books.

William Seward Burroughs II was the grandson of his namesake, the St. Louis inventor of an adding machine that was famous and successful since the late 19th century, but in 1951 Burroughs was still two years away from the publication of his first book, *Junkie*, and eight years from completing his breakthrough novel, *Naked Lunch*.

Joan Vollmer was an unconventional and adventurous young lady who met Burroughs in New York in 1944 and became his lover early the next year, at about the same time that he first took morphine and began to develop the first of a lifelong series of narcotics addictions—an underworld career that he later chronicled in *Junkie*, written during 1950–52 in Mexico City.

The two Upper West Side apartments that Vollmer shared in the mid-1940s with Edie Parker—and a changing cast of characters that included Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Hal Chase, William Burroughs and others—were the central "salons" for the early formation of the "Beat" group. Although Burroughs was well aware that he was homosexual, his relationship with Vollmer began with an eerie, almost-telepathic mental intimacy, and was encouraged by their friends, Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac.

Joan had an infant daughter from a brief previous marriage (which was her second, or so Burroughs told Ted Morgan), Julie Adams, born in August 1944—according to Edie Parker, Joan's best friend and longtime roommate, who married Kerouac that same month. By summer 1945 Joan had asked her husband, a serviceman named Paul Adams, for a divorce.

Hal Chase was an anthropology student at Columbia University who shared the apartment from summer 1945 to spring 1946; he was from Denver, Colorado, and was the first to connect the New York circle to people from Denver like Neal Cassady, who became Kerouac's tragic hero in his novel, *On the Road* (1957). Chase was blond, and—from the snapshots of him that Ginsberg took—very attractive.

There are many available observations of the early days of the Burroughs-Vollmer affair in 1945–1946, usually emphasizing their intellectual communion, but these remarks by Hal Chase (to Ted Morgan) reveal another viewpoint:

> Life in the apartment was a psychodrama. No one went to class. Jack didn't want to be married [to Edie Parker, whom he had married in mid-August 1944] and didn't want a job.
>
> And Joan was after Bill. There was a power struggle. Was she gonna get him? He had one room and she had another, and pretty soon she started going to his room. [...]
>
> The struggle between Joan and Bill seemed to be life-and-death. Joan was scornful of Bill. She'd describe in detail how he'd be all set to make love, and then he'd get a cramp in his foot.

Burroughs' narcotics use may have begun in early 1945 as a sort of objective experiment (as he claimed), but within a year his addiction was nagging him with a very subjective urgency. He fell in with a new crowd of junkies and hustlers and criminals—a longtime fascination of

his—such as Herbert Huncke, Bob Brandenburg, Phil White and Vickie Russell, who showed Burroughs how to take benzedrine nasal inhalers with coffee to produce a powerful "buzz."

All through 1945 Burroughs and Vollmer had taken "benny strips" together, and with their friends, indulging in all-night talkathons—oddly, because Burroughs was a real junkie, and he generally disliked amphetamines or cocaine. He often said the only way he could enjoy cocaine was in a double shot with heroin, to smooth off the jagged high and ease the coast-down. One can easily see this early benzedrine abuse contributing to his first serious morphine habit.

Beginning in spring 1940 in New York, when he cut off the tip of his left little finger in a fit of anguish over an unsuccessful love affair with an 18-year-old hustler, Burroughs had been in a series of psychoanalytic relationships. After a month in the Payne Whitney Psychiatric Clinic, he was released to St. Louis in June 1940. In the next three years he was analyzed by psychiatrists in St. Louis, New York and Chicago. When Burroughs moved to New York in late 1943 he entered analysis with Paul Federn, who referred him the following year to Lewis Wolberg, a specialist in hypnoanalysis and narcoanalysis; the Wolberg analysis continued until late 1946.

Burroughs' parents, Mortimer and Laura Burroughs, were evidently paying for these sessions, as well as sending him a monthly allowance of $200. It is very likely that his parents required him to see a psychiatrist, as a condition of his allowance. But he was not a reluctant patient; he had studied some psychology independently and at Harvard and Columbia, and he brought Dr. Wolberg many poems, drawings and dreams. He also undertook "lay analyses" of his younger friends, Kerouac and Ginsberg, during most of 1945; they would meet with him and free-associate, and he would offer them his insights.

Burroughs was living with Joan in spring 1946 when he was arrested in early April for forging narcotics prescriptions. Joan Vollmer wrote a newsy, year-end letter to Edie Kerouac in Detroit, on Dec. 29, 1946, from her parents' home in Albany, and this is worth quoting at length, because it sums up the April–December period, and shows Joan's perspective:

> I've really had a mad year, although now perhaps I've come to a resting-point—maybe. Was it after you left (I think so) that Bill (Burroughs, of course) finally got nailed for a couple of forged prescriptions? [...]
>
> The only way I could get him out on bail, unfortunately, was to call his psychiatrist [Dr. Wolberg], and *he* promptly informed Bill's family, which led to a good deal of unpleasantness.
>
> Finally, though, in June, the damn thing came to trial, and he was lucky enough that he got a suspended sentence on condition that he go home to St. Louis for three months. That was pretty good, of course, but it left me in rather a spot, emotionally as well as financially.
>
> Huncke stayed around and raised some money making parked cars for the luggage, and after a while we began taking in a few desperate characters as boarders, until before long I was running quite a pad. Everything in the damn place was hot, as were, of course, a couple of cars out front. Inevitably, people kept going to jail, until finally, due to that and also the ever-present back rent, we got tossed out.
>
> There simply wasn't an empty apartment in the city, so we bounced around from one hotel to another until Whitey, a sweet but stupid character with whom I was having a light affair at the time, blew his top and tried to lift a Howard Johnson's safe. He was picked up immediately, so there I was looking for a job, an apartment, a lawyer for Whitey, and money for the lawyer.

I was completely broke, so I left Julie with my aunts on Long Island and stayed with a nice kid named McCarthy. I finally got the lawyer, who was obviously no good, but Whitey insisted on having him. In the meantime, however, I'd been taking so much benzedrine that I got way off the beam, with the result that I finally landed in Bellevue Psycho Ward.

Dad came down and got Julie. Anyway, I was all clear again in a couple of days, but it took me a week and a half to convince those stupid doctors that I wasn't completely mad.

Everything was timed nicely, though, because just before I got out at last, Bill got back in town. His family agreed to set him up in a small way, provided he'd live away from New York, so we had planned to go to Texas, where he'd spent part of the summer.

As soon as I got out of the nut-house, we drove down to the Rio Grande Valley, stayed a while with some friends of Bill's, and finally bought a nice broken-down 99-acre farm a little north of Houston. We stayed down there for awhile, starting repairs on the house, and then headed north ten days before Christmas.

We drove to N.Y., where we stayed a few days, and then Bill went to St. Louis and I came up here to get Julie. She and I are going back to Texas by train on January 2nd, and Bill will be back down there by then.

This is all very vague and sketchy, but do write me back and let me have your news. Although we're not married (Bill got a divorce, but I haven't yet), make it Mrs. W. S. Burroughs, New Waverly, Texas.

Joan was released from Bellevue on or about Oct. 31, 1946. With Burroughs she conceived her second child, in "a cheap Times Square hotel" as Burroughs later recalled. The couple proceeded to south Texas, where Burroughs had gone into citrus and vegetable farming with his St. Louis childhood friend, Kells Elvins, that summer.

Burroughs and Vollmer, East Texas, August 1947. Photos: Allen Ginsberg.

Burroughs also intended to grow marijuana in some remote area of Texas, and on November 23, 1946, only three weeks after collecting Joan in New York, he purchased 99 acres near New Waverly in east Texas, about forty miles northeast of Houston, with a run-down farm house where he lived with Vollmer during most of 1947.

Joan would not have known she was pregnant when she left New York with Burroughs in November, and she does not mention it in her Dec. 29 letter to Edie; but she must have known by January. In the 1980s Burroughs told Morgan: "I wasn't thinking about a child one way or the other, but I certainly would never have consented to an abortion. I'm against abortion, absolutely. I think it's murder. She asked me, and I said I wouldn't consider it under any circumstances, absolutely not."

With Burroughs and Vollmer in east Texas from January to October was Herbert Huncke, a drug addict and Times Square hustler well known to their New York circle and personally close to Vollmer. She apparently urged Burroughs to send for Huncke to come down and be their "farm hand"—a line of work in which the urban hipster had as little experience as Burroughs himself.

Huncke was also their new procurer of drugs, going to Houston to buy benzedrine inhalers by the gross for Joan. He bought weed in Houston, and was able to score a quantity of marijuana seeds for Burroughs' cultivation project—in fact, he was supposed to have brought seeds from New York, but "forgot." It seems Vollmer did not allow her pregnancy to interfere with her renewed use of benzedrine, marijuana and alcohol. Meanwhile, Burroughs was receiving powdered pantopon (a narcotic) through the mail, from Bill Garver in New York.

In his memoir, *Guilty of Everything*, Huncke wrote about life with Joan and Bill on the farm:

> I could not understand that relationship. I believe he did respect her, as she was very intelligent and could match him wit for wit. But as far as love—in the accepted sense of the word—I'm sure he had little or no deep affection for her. She was interesting to him in some way, that was all. He did not like to be annoyed by her too much, though she demanded he give her a little attention each night. Just before we'd all go to sleep she would spend maybe an hour with him in his room, and they'd talk. She'd leave and go into the front of the cabin, which she used as her room.

Morgan, who interviewed Huncke in the 1980s, wrote:

> They slept in separate rooms, and there seemed to be no physical contact between them. One night when [Huncke] was trying to sleep he heard Joan knock on Burroughs' door. When the door opened, Huncke heard her say, "All I want is to lie in your arms a little while." [...]
>
> Once they were walking in the woods and Joan was tiring from carrying Julie and Huncke said "Why don't you fuckin' help her," and Burroughs responded that the Spartans knew how to deal with the excess baggage of female infants by throwing them off cliffs. [...]
>
> [Huncke felt] that kind of sardonic humor was Burroughs' way of coping with emotions, but [he] never got used to it.
>
> On the other hand, if anyone criticized Joan, Burroughs came to her defense. When Huncke said that she was a little extravagant in her shopping, Burroughs said, "Well, after all, she wants to see that we're fed properly." He never said

> anything about her benzedrine habit, which was worse despite her pregnancy. [...]
>
> Joan did not breast-feed the baby, because her system was loaded with amphetamines.

Joan Vollmer gave birth to William S. Burroughs, Jr., at 4:10 A.M. on July 21, 1947, at the hospital in Conroe, Texas, after an eighteen-mile emergency midnight drive with Burroughs from their east Texas farm.

It has been suggested by some that Billy was conceived, not with Burroughs, but with the "Whitey" referred to in Joan's letter. But the duration of human gestation is 266 days (sometimes less, but rarely much more), and Joan's Bellevue release and reunion with Burroughs occurred approximately 264 days before Billy's birth.

When Joan Vollmer was interviewed less than two years later at the New Orleans sanatorium where her husband was then detoxing, she described Burroughs' relations with his children thus:

> The patient is stated to be a good father, and absolutely devoted to his young son. He is good to his stepchild, also, but "adores" his own son, and seems almost as if he is seeking to be both mother and father to the child—has assumed most of the responsibility for feeding, washing, and walking baby. [...]
>
> Informant states that the patient "wasn't aware" that he wanted the child until it arrived, and now devotes himself to it almost completely.

If Burroughs had not anticipated having a child, his parents were probably much more enthusiastic to hear that his wife was pregnant. Within two weeks after Billy's birth on July 21, Mortimer and Laura came down from St. Louis, to see their son's little rural-Texas family for themselves.

Ted Morgan reports Huncke's impressions of Mortimer as "distinguished" and Laura as "the gushing grandmother," bearing "boxes of clothing for Joan and the new arrival." (Mortimer's and Laura's impressions of the skinny, sallow, hip-talking New Yorker who was their son's "farm hand" are, unfortunately, unrecorded.) As Burroughs wrote to Ginsberg on August 8: "No complications arose from the parental visitation, on the contrary a shower of benefits."

Since July 1947 Allen Ginsberg had been in Denver with Neal Cassady, Neal's young wife LuAnne Henderson, and Carolyn Robinson, Neal's new primary girlfriend (there were others). Ginsberg's sexual and romantic obsession with Cassady was then at its height, and Cassady was not altogether finicky about enjoying male-male sex. Now and again he granted Allen an encounter, which only encouraged his ardent suitor.

Amidst all the women surrounding Neal, Allen somehow convinced him the two of them should go to Texas to visit Bill and Joan. Carolyn's response was to pack up at once and move out, to stay with some friends in California—a move that, incidentally, set the original precedent for Kerouac's and Ginsberg's first explorations of the Bay Area and their energizing participation in the subsequent "San Francisco poetry renaissance" during the 1950s.

Cassady and Ginsberg hitchhiked from Colorado, arriving at the New Waverly farm on August 29 or 30. But Neal's noble experiment, his homosexual love affair with Ginsberg, quickly fizzled—he couldn't go through with it, not all the way. After only a few days at the farm and one disastrous night in Houston, a devastated Ginsberg gave up on the affair and shipped out from Houston on a coal ship bound for Dakar, Africa.

In October—i.e., at harvest time, when the marijuana crop was ready—Burroughs broke up the household and decided they were all going back to New York. Joan and little Julie and Billy traveled by train, while Cassady drove Burroughs and Huncke in Burroughs' Jeep, with its cargo of marijuana in duffel bags filled with Mason jars of weed. They drove straight through, and dropped Huncke at Vickie Russell's apartment.

At Grand Central Station Burroughs discovered that Joan and the kids had arrived some hours before him, and that the cops had picked her up—fearing she was about to abandon the two children with her—and sent her to Bellevue for observation. Burroughs told the doctors there that he was a member of Harvard's University Club, and they released Vollmer to him at once.

They spent three months in the New York area, making unsuccessful efforts to sell the pot. But the marijuana was uncured, or improperly cured, and no one wanted it; eventually Burroughs "was glad to find someone to take the tea off my hands at any cost." (*Junkie*)

That winter in New York, Burroughs got a new drug habit. Ted Morgan writes: "One night in Yonkers he had too much and passed out [...] Joan made coffee and walked him around the room to revive him. His parents, unaware that he was back on drugs, came to New York and set them up in a resort hotel in Atlantic Beach, where the off-season rates were reasonable. Joan stayed in her room with the children while Burroughs was out scoring with [Bill] Garver." All this is from Burroughs' recollections, taped by Morgan.

We have little direct evidence of Joan's attitude about Burroughs' worsening drug habits and near-overdoses; but perhaps, between Joan's concern and exasperation and Burroughs' own self-disgust, the extreme scenes of this period led him to make a new resolve, and perhaps a promise to Joan, to clean up.

According to *Junkie*, Burroughs was driving back to Texas from New York, attempting unsuccessfully to self-administer a "Chinese [reduction] cure," but by the time he reached Cincinnati his junk supply ran out, so he "left the car in storage and took a train to Lexington" for a cure at the hospital there.

Judging from Burroughs' late-life diary entry of July 27, 1997, he must have first reached St. Louis, with Joan along, because he there found "the St. Louis croakers too chicken to give me even a lousy quarter g." Against his mother's wishes that he go to "a private nut house," and supported by Joan, he went instead to Lexington for a simple withdrawal cure. His parents may have been "unaware that he was back on drugs" when they visited him in New York a few weeks earlier, but they were now surely aware of his true situation.

The "federal narcotics farm" at Lexington, Kentucky was known to junkies as the place to go for a reduction-cure and detox. The Clinical Research Center of the U.S. Public Health Service Hospital in Lexington was opened in 1935, and began accepting neuropsychiatric patients in 1942. As Martin A. Lee and Bruce Shlain wrote in *Acid Dreams: The Complete Social History of LSD: The CIA, the Sixties and Beyond* (1985):

> It became an open secret among street junkies that if the supply got tight, you could always commit yourself to Lexington, where heroin and morphine were doled out as payment if you volunteered for [Dr. Harris] Isbell's wacky drug experiments [with psychoactive drugs such as LSD]. [...]
>
> The patients at Lexington had no way of knowing that it was one of fifteen penal and mental institutions utilized by the CIA in its super-secret drug development program during the 1950s.

In *Junkie* Burroughs colorfully describes his experiences with the other "patients" during his ten days at Lexington, but he did not become aware of Isbell's weird secret experiments until many years later.

On February 20, 1948, he wrote to Ginsberg from east Texas: "Back here for several weeks and feeling O.K. at last. I had to go to Lexington for the cure. Stayed 2 weeks and was sick 3 weeks more after I got out."

"Eventually, I got to Texas and stayed off junk for about four months," Burroughs wrote in *Junkie*, referring to the spring of 1948. He often noted that in the months after every time he got off junk, his libido returned, along with a weakness for alcohol. In May, he and Joan were driving with the children to south Texas and passing through Beeville, Texas, when they were arrested for driving under the influence and public indecency—they were drunk and copulating on the roadside, their two children waiting in the car. All four of them were jailed overnight, while Burroughs' parents wired the $173-dollar fine.

As Burroughs wrote to Ginsberg on June 5, from New Orleans: "I'm selling out in New Waverly and moving to New Orleans. Have bought some farm land in Rio Grande Valley ...."—probably referring to the 40 acres he bought on May 6, 1948 in Hidalgo County, Texas.

He added: "I lost my Texas driving license [...] May buy a house here [in New Orleans]. In fact negotiating in that direction now, since I must have some place to stash these brats. [...] I still have a crop left at the farm. Will go back there to get it in a week or so, but may find the harvest unsuitable for reasons of security."

(In a classic Burroughs fumble, he had realized too late that in the remotest, poorest bayou country of east Texas, the sudden appearance of a Northerner—rich enough to have a Ford *and* a Jeep, and obviously inexperienced at farming—far from being "anonymous," would be closely scrutinized and gossiped about by the clannish neighbors.)

When Burroughs and Vollmer signed a deed selling the east Texas farm on June 23, 1948, it was as man and wife, and they were already living in New Orleans, in a rooming house west of the city at 111 Transcontinental Drive. Just six weeks later, on August 2, 1948, Burroughs purchased a house for his family at 509 Wagner Street in Algiers, Louisiana, across the Mississippi River from the French Quarter, for $3,800 on a promissory note he gave to the seller, the Eureka Homestead Society. In *Junkie* he wrote: "New Orleans was a strange town to me and I had no way of making a junk connection. [...] and besides I wanted to stay off, or at least I thought I wanted to stay off." But he knew junk was freely available around the city, as it had scarcely been at either of his rural Texas locations.

Also in New Orleans was a more open homosexual subculture, and although Burroughs had set about being a family man, he now went back to his former ways: "In the French Quarter there are several queer bars so full every night the fags spill out onto the sidewalk." One night a boy whom he had picked up cheated him out of ten dollars for a hotel room. The next day he met a junky named Joe Ricks ("Pat" in *Junkie*), and quickly picked up his next drug habit.

Burroughs was also busy with his real-estate ventures. On Oct. 14, 1948, he contracted to buy a lot in the Woodland Acres Subdivision in Kenner, west of New Orleans, from the Trudeau Syndicate. As he referred to it in a Nov. 30 letter to Kerouac: "I am buying a small tract of land in a swamp near N.O., where I will build a house."

By then Burroughs was re-addicted, as he wrote to Ginsberg, also on Nov. 30: "I will be leaving in a few days for the [Rio Grande] Valley to look after my interests there, and may extend my trip into Mexico. I hope to rid myself of the habit in the course of this trip."

A few weeks earlier he had reminded Ginsberg that he and Kells Elvins had incorporated their south Texas farm holdings and hired a manager to operate the enterprise; he hoped to make an enormous $15,000 profit within six months. But by January he was complaining in letters to Ginsberg that a hard freeze in the Valley—according to Valley histories, it was the

first such freeze in fifty years—had knocked out a third of his anticipated earnings. (Unlucky to the end, Burroughs was trying to finalize the sale of his last south-Texas real estate when another hard freeze hit, in February 1951.)

On Feb. 7, 1949, Burroughs mentioned in a letter to Ginsberg that he was "involved in 2 lawsuits," and on March 15 he wrote to Kerouac about his latest real-estate investment:

> The fact is I am in process of moving, having bought a place in the French Quarter consisting of 2 houses and a patio. We will live in one and rent out the other. [...]
>
> I am having tenant trouble already. Two insufferable fruits live in the back house on my new property, and I find to my surprise and indignation that I can not evict them without removing the premises from the rental market.

(The February "lawsuits" probably had to do with his efforts evict the tenants, Bert Golding and William Dymond, Jr., who, according to New Orleans directories, then lived in the houses that Burroughs was buying at 1128–1130 Burgundy Street in the Quarter.)

In January 1949, Jack Kerouac arrived in New Orleans for a one-week visit at the Burroughses' home with his friends Al Hinkle and Neal Cassady, and Neal's ex-wife, LuAnne Henderson. By then Neal had married Carolyn Robinson, and she had borne him a daughter on Sept. 6, 1948, but they were now separated and she was back in California. This road trip was one of several cross-country odysseys that ended up in Kerouac's *On the Road*.

Burroughs had been anxiously looking forward to their arrival: Hinkle had sent his wife, Helen, ahead to New Orleans in late December, soon after he married her on Dec. 18, but then Cassady's departure was delayed, and Helen Hinkle ended up boarding with the Burroughs family for a couple of weeks. From his mid-1980s interviews with Al and Helen Hinkle, Ted Morgan reported:

> The household seemed to operate on the principle of total permissiveness. The children were allowed to go potty wherever they liked, whether it was on the dining room floor or in the Revere Ware in the kitchen. The little boy, not yet two, was beautiful, with fine blond hair, and the six-year-old girl was thin, with filthy, matted hair—apparently they washed whenever they felt like it. [Julie] had nightmares and had formed the habit of chewing her left arm, in the crook of which there was a large scar.
>
> The state of the children was not negligence on Joan's part, Helen observed, but a deliberate attitude of leaving them largely to themselves.

One may well wonder where Bill and Joan got their apparently-definite ideas about the best way to raise children—or whether their preoccupation with their own drug usage might have favored this *laissez-faire* approach, for its convenience.

Although Burroughs respected Helen Hinkle and sympathized with her position—in a letter of Jan. 16 to Ginsberg he allowed that she was "a perfect guest, and very conscientious about helping out"—he was exasperated by the uncertainty surrounding the actual timing of the Cassady-Hinkle party's arrival to collect her. He wrote to Allen in care of Allen's brother, Eugene Brooks, in no uncertain terms about his feelings, and presently the wayward New York-Denver boys did arrive in Algiers.

Cassady made a poor impression on Burroughs on this first meeting, but Kerouac—he thought—was much improved since their last encounter three years earlier. Apparently

Kerouac saw Burroughs differently, and was distressed by his unchecked drug habit. Gerald Nicosia, in his indispensable Kerouac biography, *Memory Babe*, writes:

> If Jack was disappointed in Bill's listlessness, he was shocked by Joan's diseased appearance and psychotic behavior. For the past four years she had been using benzedrine constantly, and she now consumed from three to ten tubes of paper per day. [...]
>
> All the while she had been growing gaunt and hard-faced, and a recent case of polio had left her with a limp [...]
>
> She puttered about the house and yard day and night, seldom talking except to answer some remark made by Bill [...] Her devotion to him was as fierce as her concern for her children [...]

Without being able to identify Nicosia's exact source for this description, we are entitled to consider it questionable in some respects. If Joan was "seldom talking," that seems inconsistent with continual benzedrine use; if she showed a "fierce ... concern for her children," one must remember that there was probably no one else in New Orleans who could baby-sit for her, and Bill was always going out—scoring for junk and boys.

Burroughs' extramarital sexual encounters with boys were no secret from Joan, but her feelings about this are difficult to imagine clearly. From this rather brusque letter that Burroughs wrote to Ginsberg on March 18, 1949, from New Orleans, we can infer that Allen, in New York, was concerned for his friend Joan's sake:

> Now this business [in your letter] about Joan and myself is downright insane. I never made any pretensions of permanent heterosexual orientation. [...]
>
> I am *not* responsible for Joan's sexual life, never was, never pretended to be. Nor are we in any particular mess. There is, of course, as there was from the beginning, an impasse and cross purposes that are, in all likelihood, not amenable to any solution.

If Joan complained to Ginsberg, by phone or letter, about Bill and his boys, no evidence of it has yet been found. But Bill's position was that she knew he was homosexual when she married him.

A new disaster was around the corner. With his junky partner, Pat Ricks, Burroughs was caught up in a circle of New Orleans addicts, busy scoring on the street. According to *Junkie*, one day Burroughs drove to New Orleans, taking the ferry across from Algiers, with "a pistol to take [into] town and pawn it." He described his friends: "Red McKinney, a shriveled-up, crippled junkie"; and "Cole, a young merchant seaman" who was "a real tea head." Burroughs had "several ounces of weed" in his house; the four of them drove there and sampled the marijuana, and "Cole" agreed to purchase four caps of junk for Burroughs in exchange for two ounces of weed.

While they were back in the city driving around, looking for a connection, a policeman recognized "Pat" and there was a car chase, followed by their arrest. Burroughs remembered this as taking place on Carondelet Street, but in fact it occurred on Calliope, which runs east to the river from below Lee Circle—named by Burroughs as a "hot spot in New Orleans for junk or anything."

As reported on April 6, 1949, by the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, Burroughs was arrested by New Orleans police in the 1800 block of Calliope at 4:15 P.M. the day before, in a car along with Joseph M. Ricks, Horace M. Guidry, and Alan Cowie. Ricks was 40, Guidry 41, and Cowie 21 years old. The cops had recognized Ricks, who was driving Burroughs' car, and after a hot pursuit and search, they found marijuana on Cowie. The police department had just launched a "dope drive," and the Burroughs group were only four of nineteen such arrests that day.

Burroughs allowed the officers to search 509 Wagner, accompanying them to his home in Algiers—much to Joan's surprise, no doubt. There they seized more marijuana, and several handguns. Two days later, wracked with withdrawal symptoms in his cell at the Second Precinct, Burroughs was released on $1,500 bond and taken directly to De Paul Sanitarium for treatment of his addiction. His 42-year-old attorney, Robert S. Link, Jr., arranged the transfer and accompanied him. Of course, his parents sent the money.

In a remarkable letter about these developments, Joan Vollmer wrote to Ginsberg on April 13, 1949:

> Please explain to Jack [Kerouac] that a letter expressing our delight at his success [i.e., the publishing contract for his first novel, *The Town and the City*], along with a letter to you, approximately half-a-dozen firearms, and a jar and several smaller bits of contraband material were seized, along with the person of William, by a trio of New Orleans city detectives a week ago yesterday. [...]
>
> Luckily nothing was on him at the time—what they found was discovered in the course of a search of the house, made without a warrant, upon information contained in Bill's statement to the police. [...]
>
> It's quite possible we can get an acquittal or an eventual *nolle prosse*, and if this can be done I think our boy Link is the man to do it.
>
> So far he's handled everything very nicely—got Bill's bail set before he was even charged, which is most irregular, arranged a neat little group of witnesses to the evidence of coercion, got Bill into a hospital where he's almost completed a practically painless cure, and gotten us the D.A.'s permission for us to leave the State for an indefinite period of time, until the case comes to trial or whatever.
>
> Mr. B. is about to swoop down upon [us] from St. Louis with the intention of hospitalizing Bill elsewhere for at least six months, but Link tells me there's no way he can accomplish this over our objections, so I guess that will be okay.

As Burroughs writes in *Junkie*, "My wife came to see me [at De Paul] and reported that the management did not know anything about junk or junkies." Joan talked with Link, and they found another doctor, who intervened to prescribe Demerol, which eased Burroughs' misery.

Upon Burroughs' admission to De Paul, an interviewer named Joyce Adams took a complete social history from the patient's wife, Joan Vollmer Burroughs. Ms. Adams' "Impression" entry is revealing:

> Patient's wife appeared to be an attractive woman [...] She was expensively dressed, walked with a limp due to polio in the past year. She was restless, spoke with a fixed, forced smile throughout the interview, smoked one cigarette practically after the other. She was admittedly "nervous," ducked or raised her head to the ceiling when speaking, but seldom met interviewer's eyes. She [...] is believed not to have been completely frank with the knowledge in her possession. [...] There were several bruises on her arms, for which she declined to give an

> explanation other than words to the effect that she "bruised easily." On the surface, she was friendly. Her vocabulary was excellent.

Among the many interesting things in this document are Joan's answers to questions about Burroughs' parents, Mortimer and Laura Lee Burroughs:

> In their efforts to be helpful to patient, the parents are stated to "mean well," and they are "good" to patient, but they also attempt to "arrange" things for him, and "always get him out of trouble," and patient "violently opposes them occasionally," as he "would rather do for himself." [...] They phone frequently and keep in touch with the patient. The father sends substantial checks frequently. Recently, the parents came to New Orleans—visited the patient at his home in Algiers, were not fond of the house, and purchased a new one for patient in the city on Burgundy Street. They had purchased the Algiers home for [the] couple when patient and his wife came to New Orleans about a year ago.

This offers a quite different perspective on the French-Quarter house project from the one Burroughs was projecting in his letters to Ginsberg and Kerouac. But Burroughs' contract purchases of the Algiers and Kenner properties show no guarantees by Mortimer Burroughs on their face; if Mortimer "bought" the real estate, perhaps he furnished the sellers separate letters of guarantee.

It is unclear whether the threatened visit by Mortimer and Laura, mentioned by Joan on April 13, two days before Burroughs would be released, occurred soon after that, or occurred at all—but the possibility of such a visit was clearly of concern to Joan. Burroughs probably convinced his parents that he was indeed already "cured," and in any case, Laura would remember how firmly and successfully Joan had opposed a lengthy psychiatric hospitalization after his severe drug habit in the winter of 1947–48.

De Paul's admitting physician, John W. Bick, closed the file with this entry on April 15:

> The patient [...] gives me the impression of being grossly immature, lacking all adult sense of responsibility, and being grossly dependent on his wife, who seemed to enjoy taking care of the serious problem which he represented. An attempt was made [...] to point out to her that a long period of hospitalization should be considered. She would not agree to this, however, and on April 15, 1949, removed him from the hospital against advice.

Burroughs signed himself out of the hospital, "against medical advice," or so he wrote in *Junkie*, and then "went into a bar and drank four whisky sodas and got a good lush kick. I was cured." The next day Burroughs wrote to Ginsberg from Wagner Street: "If convicted I am subject to 2–5 years in Angola [the infamous Louisiana state penitentiary], which is definitely not a Country Club."

Mortimer Burroughs did not need to go to New Orleans to take a hand in developments there: on April 8, three days after the arrest, the Security Building & Loan Association drew up papers to sell the French Quarter property to Mortimer's agent, attorney J. Raeburn Monroe, Esq. of the firm of Monroe & Lehman—which suggests that this was an emergency substitution of Burroughs' father for himself on the purchase contract, perhaps in fulfillment of a guarantee.

On July 11, Mortimer completed his purchase of the French Quarter houses; two weeks later Burroughs sold his Algiers house back to the Eureka Homestead Society. He defaulted on his contract for the "swamp land" in Kenner, and it was eventually put up at sheriff's sale and repurchased by the developers. Burroughs' real-estate ventures in Louisiana were rapidly being rolled up; one wonders how the French Quarter eviction lawsuits were resolved.

Burroughs' lawyer, Link, informed him that he had the judge's permission to leave the State to visit his farm property in the Rio Grande Valley, and hinted that if Burroughs wanted to go over the river into Mexico and stay there, it might not be a bad idea. Within days, he and Joan and their two kids were in Pharr, Texas, in a rented house on Route 1—a few miles from the Mexican border, which must have seemed convenient in case he needed to flee the country.

Compare Vollmer's thoughts on her family's quandary, in these further lines from her letter to Ginsberg, with Burroughs' own speculations when he wrote to Kerouac a month later.

> Vollmer, April 13, from Algiers:
>
> I don't know where we'll go—probably either a cruise somewhere or a trip to Texas to begin with—
>
> After that, providing Bill beats the case, it's harder to say. New Orleans seems pretty much out of the question, as a second similar offense, by Louisiana law, would constitute a second felony and automatically draw 7 years in the State pen.
>
> Texas is almost as bad, as a second drunken driving conviction there would add up to about the same deal. N.Y. is almost certainly out—largely because of family objections. What else is there, really? Maybe Chicago—I don't know.
>
> It makes things rather difficult for Bill; as for me, I don't care where I live, so long as it's with him.
>
> Burroughs, May 27, from Pharr:
>
> My own plans are in a state of flux. Will most likely be here (we have rented a house) 'till cotton-picking (circa Sept. 1, before we get all our $). Then, *quien sabe*? I may take a trip through Mexico and Central America to view the Mayan antiquities. May stay down there and live cheap for a spell. May return to N.Y. May go to Angola. (The Courts resume business in Sept.)

Joan's letter is focused on Bill, his shrinking options, his family; Bill's letter contemplates his further travels, and does not mention Joan or the children.

Burroughs spent the summer in Pharr, drinking nightly cocktails with Kells Elvins, reading Wilhelm Reich's *The Cancer Biopathy*, and hoping for a good cotton harvest in September. His letters at this time, and his account of the "Valley" period in *Junkie*, make no reference to Joan, and Rob Johnson's recent research indicates that Burroughs spent a lot of his time in the Valley drinking and socializing with other men his own age or younger—"the black sheep of the country club set"—in Pharr and nearby Reynosa, Mexico. Very likely Joan spent most of her time alone with her children; presumably she could still obtain her over-the-counter benzedrine inhalers in the drugstores of the Valley, too.

On Sept. 26 Burroughs wrote to Kerouac: "I am just back from Mexico City where I have rented an apartment preparatory to moving down there with the family." It may have been that his car, which was impounded by the New Orleans authorities after the arrest in early April, was finally released to him, through attorney Link's persistent efforts, and that this made his trip possible.

Burroughs' case was set for trial on October 27, but he was not in court in New Orleans on that day. On November 2, he wrote to Kerouac from Mexico City: "My case in New Orleans looked so unpromising that I decided not to show. So I figure to be in Mexico quite some while. I think it's 5 years before a case is canceled out by the statute of limitations." He added that he thought he might go into farming, or maybe open a bar on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande, perhaps in Reynosa, where he had often partied while living in Pharr.

If Burroughs and his family drove their automobile down the recently-completed Pan-American Highway from Laredo, Texas, through little foothills-towns like Tamazunchale ("Thomas and Charlie," he called it in *Naked Lunch*) to Mexico City, they must have gotten rid of the vehicle after arriving, because there is no evidence that Burroughs operated a car in D.F.—the Distrito Federal of Mexico City.

To assure that he would not be extradited, Burroughs was looking for a lawyer. At the Reforma Hotel one day a flashy, Italian-looking man overheard him talking with someone on the phone about this, and said, "The man for you to see is Bernabé Jurado"—a highly colorful, swashbuckling and famous Mexico City lawyer of that time.

Jurado told Burroughs he would file a petition for Mexican citizenship, or something similar. Normally an immigrant must live five years in Mexico before becoming eligible for actual citizenship, and he must first obtain a change in immigration status from "tourist" to "immigrant." But a student immigrant visa would be valid for one year, and could easily be renewed, according to a student-advice item in the Mexico City College *Collegian* of April 12, 1951. M.C.C. even furnished the services of a "go-between," named Mr. Lozano, who would facilitate the required registration of student visas within 30 days of entry. But Burroughs preferred to place his faith in Bernabé Jurado.

Burroughs' M.C.C. application photo, Nov. 1949.

Mexico City College was founded by two American educators in the Colonia Roma neighborhood of D.F. in 1940. After 1944 the school was accredited under the new "G.I. Bill"—Public Law 346—which furnished all U.S. service veterans a subsistence allowance while enrolled in college courses. By early 1950 seventy percent of the college's 800-odd students were American veterans, and a sizable number of them were less interested in their studies than in wild parties and nightlife.

On November 21, 1949, Burroughs applied for admission to the School of Higher Studies at M.C.C., in the department of "anthropology or archaeology," with a "Special interest in Mexican archaeology." He was admitted on January 2, and the next day he began his courses in Spanish, "Mexican picture writing" and codices, and the Mayan language. The Anthropology Department at that time boasted a stellar faculty, including Wigberto Jiménez Moreno, Pedro Armillas, César Lizardi Ramos, and the enigmatic Robert Hayward Barlow (under whom Burroughs studied the Mayan codices), among others.

Burroughs' awareness of M.C.C. and the P.L. 346 benefits is clear from this Jan. 22, 1950, letter to Kerouac: "I am going to Mexico City College on the G.I. Bill. I always say keep your snout in the public trough." His student file in the Mexico City College archives at Universidad de las Americas / Puebla confirms that he was registered and did receive a U.S. government subsidy.

In his application to M.C.C., Burroughs gave his address as Río Lerma 26, but four months later, in a letter to Kerouac (March 10, 1950), he noted: "But I don't exactly live there. I live at [Paseo de la] Reforma 210, house 8."

It is not clear why Burroughs needed two residences, but the passages in *Junkie* about "the Chimu Bar" may hold a clue. Apparently very soon after his arrival in Mexico, Burroughs began to frequent this queer bar—which was probably the famous Linterna Verde, "the green lantern," on Monterrey, not far from the M.C.C. buildings.

Burroughs' account of picking up a boy at "the Chimu" is the second passage in the Mexico section of *Junkie*, and the third passage then tells of his two-year casual affair with a Mexican boy named Angelo. Although he takes the first boy to "a hotel," Burroughs writes that Angelo always "insisted on sweeping the *apartment* out whenever he spent the night there" (emphasis added). Clearly, these and other similar goings-on were not occurring in the same place where Joan and the two children lived.

The residence on Reforma (now demolished) would have been a cheap, simple "motel" on a noisy major thoroughfare, whereas the Lerma building (still standing) is an elegant two-story townhouse on a corner—very much the "quiet, high-class neighborhood" that Burroughs described in his January 22, 1950, letter to Kerouac. One is tempted to speculate that his "*casa*" on the busy Reforma boulevard was Burroughs' bachelor pad, for entertaining his boys.

Since Burroughs' narcotics-related fall in New Orleans had again shattered his family's domestic world, leading him to flee the country and take them with him to Mexico, it is reasonable to assume that Joan and Bill had given each other some promises to straighten up and fly right. On Oct. 13, 1949, shortly after moving his family down to Mexico, Burroughs wrote to Ginsberg: "Joan took the loss of her medicine surprisingly well, and feels better than in years. I myself have been strictly on a lush kick despite every opportunity to pick up on anything and everything. I just don't want any."

Oliver Harris' footnote is very helpful:

> Joan's "medicine" consisted of Smith, Kline and French benzedrine inhalers, two per day [*sic*]. She couldn't get them in Mexico, though she could get tequila at

> forty cents a quart. She wrote Ginsberg [on Oct. 31, 1949]: "I'm personally fine also, although somewhat drunk from 8 a.m. on ... I shan't attempt to describe my sufferings for 3 weeks after the benzedrine gave out, but with thyroid tablets, Reich and faith, I made it."

Joan's four-year speed run had come to an end, and within only a few weeks of arriving in Mexico City she had begun a routine of all-day tequila drinking, which she apparently continued for the next (and last) two years of her life.

In *Junkie* Burroughs says he had been in Mexico City for "several months" when, on a visit to Jurado's office, he first met a "shabby, middle-aged man" named David Tesorero—"Old Ike" in the novel—whom he immediately made for a junky. (Burroughs and Kerouac both misunderstood this man's name as "Tercerero"—"the third one"—but no such family name exists in Mexico, whereas "Tesorero"—"treasurer"—is not uncommon.)

At dinner with David Tesorero that night, Burroughs admitted the drug use in his past, and Tesorero did the same. Within a short time, Burroughs was hooked again: "I had been off junk three months at this time. It took me just three days to get back on."

Burroughs and Tesorero, on San Juan de Letrán, D.F., ca. 1950. Photo anonymous.

At first Burroughs was scoring through "Old Dave" for the heroin that came from María Dolores Estévez Zulueta, known as "Lola la Chata"—the most important drug trafficker operating in Mexico City from the thirties to the fifties. From *Junkie*: "There is only one pusher in Mexico City, and that is Lupita"—as he called Estévez in the novel.

(Born in 1906, Dolores Estévez had been a "*burro*" (drug courier) from the age of thirteen. In the 1930s she set up her operation in D.F., and thereafter ruled the city's retail heroin trade with an iron hand, but was in and out of jail—more out than in—until she was finally imprisoned in 1957; she died in confinement a few months later.)

So within "several months" of his Mexico arrival—i.e., by January 1950—Burroughs was back on heroin.

A disturbing scene in *Junkie* seems to have occurred around this time:

> When my wife saw I was getting the habit again, she did something she had never done before. I was cooking up a shot two days after I'd connected with Old Ike. My wife grabbed the spoon and threw the junk on the floor. I slapped her twice across the face and she threw herself on the bed, sobbing, then turned around and said to me: "Don't you want to do anything? You know how bored you get when you have a habit. It's like all the lights went out. Oh well, do what you want. I guess you have some stashed anyway."
>
> I did have some stashed.

Burroughs' version of this to Ted Morgan in the mid-1980s was a little different:

> I was cooking up and she grabbed the spoon and took it and threw it into the toilet and I did slap her. She threw the contents in the toilet. So I slapped her and went out and bought some more.
>
> "Oh, don't you ever want to dig up ruins or do anything?" She said, "You get so boring when you're doing this."
>
> She was very tolerant, but what could she do? [Go back to upstate] New York? That would have been a pretty empty threat, because I knew she would never do that.

Bill—through Old Dave—at first scored for "Lupita's papers." Then for awhile they obtained and filled legitimate (and expensive) prescriptions; but within a few months of their meeting, Tesorero—financed by Burroughs—had obtained a government permit to obtain fifteen grams of morphine per month as a registered addict, for about thirty dollars; as he said in *Junkie*: "Like a junky's dream" ... or Joan's nightmare.

By June 1950 Bill and Joan were living at 37 Cerrada de Medellín, an architecturally eclectic one-block street now known as Calle José Alvarado. This was an apartment (third floor, rear) in a modern building that still stands. Just five blocks away was the Bounty Bar and Grill, in a five-story building at the northeast corner of Chihuahua and Monterrey, number 122. John Healy was one of two American bartenders there, and the clientele was largely M.C.C. students—a wild, hard-drinking crowd. Burroughs and Vollmer were right at home in the Bounty.

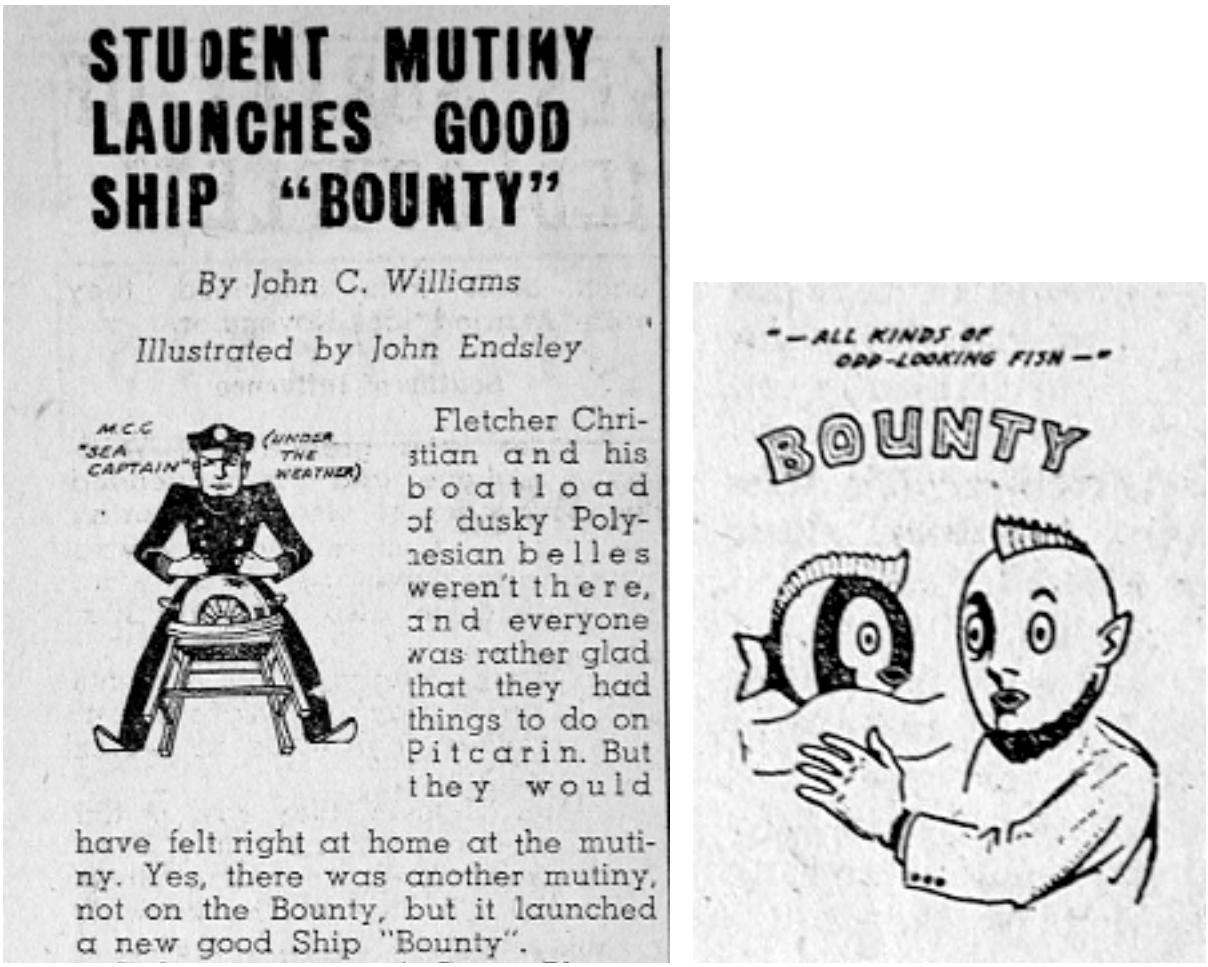
Mexico City College was well aware of the Bounty and the party scene around it. An article in the Feb. 15, 1950, issue of the *Collegian*, the student paper, announces the opening of the bar; and as one can sense from the casual, in-group tone of the story (typical of student newspapers, and especially in this insular, expatriate case), the young editors of the *Collegian* fully expected their readers to understand exactly what sort of place they were describing:

A large group of Carta-Blanca-favoring students have for several years, since the birth of our Almy Mammy, hung out at a joint called "Tato's," almost next door to building Cain. [...] the beer was never cold enough, so they decided to mutiny.

A well-worn member of the beer-guzzling group leased a place called the Bounty[,] while a former collegiate wrestler at the Universidad of Nuevo León, and a constant hanger-on with the *cerveza* connoisseurs, Luis Carpio, raised enough money to rent it, buy a good stock of beer, redecorate the grand salon, renovate the galley, and throw a free-food-and-drink opening night.

The decor is strictly nautical; all kinds of odd-looking fish swim around the wall—and between the walls, of course, all kinds of odd-looking fish just swim. The chair backs are spoked like the wheel of a ship—poke you in the back every time you relax. There are colored lights running around the walls and over the bar. [...]

The joint's at Monterrey 122, about a half-block off Avenida Obregón. There is enough room for about 22-1/2 people if they're all leprechauns, but the prices are low, the food is good, the beer cold, and with all that you can still mingle with the old members of "The Poet's Corner."



STUDENT MUTINY LAUNCHES GOOD SHIP "BOUNTY"

By John C. Williams

Illustrated by John Endsley

Fletcher Christian and his boatload of dusky Polynesian belles weren't there, and everyone was rather glad that they had things to do on Pitcarin. But they would have felt right at home at the mutiny. Yes, there was another mutiny, not on the Bounty, but it launched a new good Ship "Bounty".

Mexico City College *Collegian*, Feb. 15, 1950

Jack Kerouac rode down to Mexico City with Neal Cassady and Frank Jeffries, arriving June 24, 1950. They found Joan and Bill at 37 Cerrada de Medellín, and rented "a cheap two-bedroom apartment next door" (Nicosia). About a week later, Cassady drove to New York, and Frank enrolled in writing and acting courses at Mexico City College. Ann Charters, in her notes for Kerouac's *Selected Letters 1940–1956*, writes that Kerouac "became ill from dysentery" and tried to revise his first draft of *On the Road*; by late July he was back in New York. During Kerouac's visit, Burroughs' coursework at M.C.C. suffered, and he temporarily withdrew from school.

Then Lucien Carr arrived in August for a one-week visit, accompanied by his then-girlfriend, Liz Lehrman—who, in a circumlocutory recent account of her visit in the *Rolling Stone Book of the Beats* (1999), signed "Liza Williams," purports to have witnessed Joan cooking up a shot and injecting it ... this is very puzzling, as Burroughs said several times to me and other friends, years later in Lawrence, Kansas, that Joan hated needles and the effects of opiates equally.

As Ted Morgan writes: "After Lucien's departure, Joan went to Cuernavaca and filed for divorce." Indeed, in Burroughs' court hearings after Joan's death this was also reported:

> A surprise question from the *fiscal* [prosecutor] made the North American William Seward Burroughs acknowledge that a year ago he initiated a petition for divorce, in Cuernavaca, [state of] Morelia. [...]
>
> This confession, which very much disturbed the defense lawyers of the accused [...] overthrew the affirmation made and repeated by [Burroughs] that he never had quarrels with his wife. [...]
>
> The accused said, behind bars, that a year ago, by mutual agreement, his wife and he asked for a divorce [...] but then they thought better of it, and dropped their plans to separate. [...]
>
> He insisted that there were never grave differences between himself and Joan, and that in recent times they had not had any kind of argument.
>
> (*Excelsior*, Sept. 9, 1951)

> It was known yesterday [...] that approximately one year ago they went to divorce themselves because they were tired of one another and continually had arguments due to his complete dedication to alcohol.
>
> (*Novedades*, Sept. 9, 1951)

A piece of confirming evidence is the Mexico City marriage license of two M.C.C. students, Frank Jeffries (another Denver boy, and a friend of Hal Chase) and Alice Hartman, on December 9, 1950.

The witnesses to this act were two members of the M.C.C. faculty—Earl Sennett and Edmund John ("Ted") Robins—along with a 48-year-old student photographer, Maria Luisa Pease, and "Joan Wollmer [*sic*] Burroughs," age 27, of Cerrada de Medellín 37, whose marital status is given as: "*divorciada*." (This could refer to her former marriage to Paul Adams, but that seems unlikely, as she had, in effect, re-married since that 1944 divorce.)

Earl Sennett, at 27, was the head of the M.C.C. theater department, in one of whose productions, "The Madwoman of Chaillot," Frank and Alice Jeffries first met, in summer 1950. Sennett lived at 28 Río Lerma, just across Río Guadiana from the Burroughses' first Mexico City address. Ted Robins, then 41, was a former student of Margaret Shedd, who in that summer of 1950 established The Writing Center at M.C.C.; Robins came down from the San Francisco area to teach under her. Neither Sennett nor Robins ever married.

In early January 1951, Burroughs' old friend Kells Elvins and his then-wife, Marianne, arrived in Mexico City, where Elvins planned to study psychology with Erich Fromm in the medical school of UNAM, the Universidad Autónomo de México.

A few weeks later, on Feb. 15, the *Mexico City College Collegian* ran a story on Burroughs in its "Personalities on the Campus" section. As you read this article (written by one Thomas Wason), remember that Burroughs had not yet done anything newsworthy on any scale beyond the horizons of M.C.C.; he was just one of the campus characters:

> William Burroughs' vocations have been as varied as the countries he has visited since he first left home at 18. He has been a detective, copy writer, newspaper reporter, farmer, and medical student. He has partially satisfied his wanderlust by visiting France, Austria, Greece, Yugoslavia, Italy and Albania.
>
> Burroughs has, in addition to his varied occupational pursuits, studied English literature, medicine and anthropology. He graduated from Harvard in 1936 with a degree in English literature and a minor in anthropology. The following year he left for Vienna where he began a medical course, but gave it up because of difficulty in transferring credits obtained in Europe to any American university. Staying in Vienna seemed rather impractical, anyway, since it was no secret that, at any time, the Germans would be on the march.
>
> Albania impressed him as being the most interesting of the countries he visited. The customs there are similar to those in the Southeastern section of the States, especially the amicable [*sic*] tradition of feuding. This Moslem country retains a peculiar language that is not related to or similar to any other.
>
> In 1939 Burroughs tried his hand at writing ads for a New York advertising agency, and a year later [*sic*] was running down leads for a newspaper in St. Louis. Then he was a personality right out of [Erle Stanly] Gardner, when he checked up on shady characters and delivered summonses as a private sleuth in New York. After the war he decided to raise cotton on a farm in the Rio Grande Valley.
>
> He has been attending MCC since last year and is working on a Master's degree in anthropology. After he is awarded his higher degree, he is contemplating the observation of Central and South America as farming possibilities.

In March 1951 Burroughs reported to Lucien Carr that he was off the junk, and he reiterated the same to Ginsberg in early May. This corresponds roughly to *Junkie*: "One morning in April, I woke up a little sick. [...] 'I'm going to quit, ' I said aloud." Perhaps he was inspired by his old friend Elvins' presence in the city, or perhaps by the mantle of "respectability" conferred by the story in the *Collegian* ....

After the usual withdrawal horrors, Burroughs started to drink from morning to night (as Joan was also doing), and within a couple of weeks he was drinking so heavily that he was threatening bar patrons with his pistol—which was unceremoniously taken away from him by a Mexican policeman. There is a scene in *Junkie* where "Rollins" (Elvins) remonstrates with the narrator for his drunken, impulsive conduct: "You're going to get your head blown off carrying that gun. [...] If there's one thing I don't want to be around, and I think no one else particularly wants to be around, it's a drunk with a gun."

When Ted Morgan interviewed Hal Chase in Paso Robles, California, on March 15, 1985, it seems he made notes, but no tape recording. Chase's comments are quite interesting and

revealing; here is an assembly of some of what Chase told Morgan about Vollmer in Mexico City—Chase then happened to be at M.C.C., studing the Zapotecan language:

> Joan was such a castrator. She would irritate Bill in Mexico.
>
> Bill was constantly being disarmed. The Mexicans were armed, and he went to Mexican bars and got into arguments with these *políticos* with great *pistoles* and cartridge belts, and in the course of these altercations he would get his gun taken from him.
>
> And Joan would say, "So they took your gun away from you, did they?" [...]
>
> She loved to see Bill get embarrassed. Bill had to posture before the whole world, but he didn't have to in front of her. [...]

In a letter to Ginsberg on May 5, Burroughs tells the story of a drunken pistol-confiscation that matches the version in *Junkie*; so March–April 1951 was the period of withdrawal followed by manic drunkenness, when he was "drunk for a month." During this period, as he wrote in *Junkie*, "My emotions spilled out everywhere. I was uncontrollably social and would talk to anybody I could pin down. Several times I made the crudest sexual propositions to people who had given no hint of reciprocity."

Again, we have evidence that his queer pick-ups were known to Joan, and that she chose to live with them: in May 1951, Burroughs wrote contentiously to Ginsberg from Mexico City:

> I have been laying women for the past 15 years [i.e., since 1936] and haven't heard any complaints from the women either.*1
>
> What does that prove except I was hard up at the time? Laying a woman, so far as I am concerned, is O.K. if I can't score for a boy.
>
> But laying one woman or a thousand merely *emphasizes* the fact that a woman is not what I want. Better than nothing, of course, like a tortilla is better than no food. But no matter how many tortillas I eat, I still want a steak.*2

Joan read this letter and added some footnotes:

> *1—Correct!
>
> *2—Around the 20th of the month, things get a bit tight and he lives on tortillas.

The clear implication is that Burroughs was paying cash for his boys in Mexico, but that his G.I.-Bill money tended to run out after the first three weeks of each month. Of course, the boys might be paid in free drinks and restaurant meals—while at the apartment, Joan and the children ate whatever food she had been able to buy at the beginning of each month.

It was at the Bounty Bar, in May 1951, that Burroughs met Adelbert Lewis Marker and began to woo the owlish-looking 21-year-old American boy from Jacksonville, Florida. Lewis Marker was a veteran of postwar service in the Counter-Intelligence Corps in Germany, and an indifferent student at Mexico City College.

Actually, Burroughs may have met Marker as early as the previous summer. A photograph in the July 27, 1950, issue of the *Collegian* shows a group of about fifty M.C.C. students arrayed on a wide stone stairway on the Street of the Dead in Teotihuacan, near the Citadel around the

Temple of Quetzalcoatl. The all-day outing, sponsored by the Sahagun Anthropology Club for more than 100 students, was led by Dr. Pedro Armillas of M.C.C.'s Anthropology department.

Clearly identifiable in the published photo are Dr. Armillas and Dr. Robert Hayward Barlow, and a cluster of four persons at the top center of the image contains some familiar-looking faces. Left to right, they *appear* to be: Lewis Marker; (unknown man); William Burroughs; Betty Jones; (unknown man); and Joan Vollmer. Armillas is the bearded man in the center of the detail below; Barlow, with mustache and hands in pockets, is upper right.

Marker? WSB + Jones? Vollmer?
(Armillas, with beard) (Barlow)

Mexico City College *Collegian*, July 27, 1950

Marker first enrolled at M.C.C. for the 1950 summer quarter, so he could have been in Teotihuacan then; and the face of Burroughs seems very recognizable. Burroughs' M.C.C. transcript shows that he did take a course with Dr. Armillas that summer quarter, but he ended up withdrawing from all four anthropology courses he had taken, due to a four-week absence that in a note dated August 4 he blamed on "acute sciatica" (back pain). He even produced a supporting excuse from his doctor, Perfecto Hernández Zuñiga, dated July 6, 1950. What is odd is that Fernández Zuñiga's specialty was "*Enfermedades Señoras y Niños*"—illnesses of women and children. Did Burroughs first meet this doctor when his wife or one of his children was sick, sometime after their arrival in D.F. the previous October?

If, as the doctor wrote, Burroughs was really "obliged to maintain absolute bed rest," that surely would have hindered his social activities with Jack Kerouac during the last part of Jack's four-week visit, which began in late June. Another possibility, of course, was that Kerouac's

arrival soon led Burroughs to cut classes so they could do things together—and that is what Allen Ginsberg suggested to Dr. Ed Simmen in an interview in Mexico City in August 1981.

The exaggerated, vaudeville "routines" that Burroughs spun to capture Lewis Marker's attention (which fill the text of his second book, *Queer*) are irresistibly hilarious, and eventually he succeeded in seducing the heterosexual Marker, whom he calls "Eugene Allerton" in the book.

Queer begins with "Lee" pursuing a young man called "Carl," but to little result. Then he tries to impress "Winston Moor," who hangs around the Bounty bar with his friend "Tom Williams." These latter two persons were, in reality, Hal Chase and Frank Jeffries—the same Denver boy who had married Alice Hartman in December 1950.

The future Alice Jeffries was enrolled in The Writing Center at M.C.C. since its inauguration in summer 1950, at the same time that Burroughs was first writing *Junkie*, and she did some typing for him. Burroughs later complained that Hartman made too many editorial changes. According to Hal Chase: "In Mexico while writing *Junkie* he had a girl typing for him, and every time he'd write 'junk' she'd type 'opiate,' change it to 'opiate.' In his best Southern, whining, complaining tone he'd say: 'But I want to use the word "junk"—I don't want to call it "opiates".' "

Chase's skepticism of Burroughs' tough-guy façade evidently began in the earliest days of their acquaintance, in New York. As he recalled for Morgan his 1951 re-encounters with Burroughs: "In Mexico I ran into Bill in the Hollywood [Hamburger] Bar. He was in this Western-gunman phase, impossible to be around. [He came on to me] in all sorts of different ways, like a real rough, ironic guy, a cracker. I'd laugh and kid with him, right back, but it was far from seductive."

In letters from spring 1951, Burroughs complained about the way Chase obtusely put him off when he made his approach in Mexico City:

> Hal Chase is down in Salina Cruz allegedly building a boat that is going to have golden sails to match his hair. Enough to make a man spew. So far as I am concerned the sooner he sails off into the sunset the better, from which you may conclude that I don't like him no more.
>
> (Burroughs to Kerouac, April 24, 1951)

> I guess Hal Chase, when he gets to the States—if he gets there—will be telling everybody how I tried to get in his pants and got sore when he turned me down. The first part of this proposition is true. I did make a play for him (verbal, of course [...]) but I didn't get sore because he turned me down. [...]
>
> But he has to give me the brush in the nastiest and bitchiest way he can devise [...] in front of a third party. I guess he could only scrape up one witness on short notice.
>
> (Burroughs to Ginsberg, May 5, 1951)

Compare this to the scenes in *Queer* that are obviously based on the same encounters:

> After dinner Lee walked back to Moor's rooming house with Moor and Williams. At the door Lee asked, "Would you gentlemen care for a drink? I'll get a bottle ...." He looked from one to the other.
>
> Moor said, "Well, no. You see we want to work on the plans for this boat we are going to build. [...] You see, this boat is more important to me than anything right now. It will take up all my time."

> Lee said, "Suit yourself," and walked away.
>
> Lee was deeply hurt. He could hear Moor saying, "Thanks for running interference, Tom. Well, I hope he got the idea. Of course Lee is an interesting guy and all that ... but this queer situation is just more than I can take." [...]
>
> Actually Moor's brush-off was calculated to inflict the maximum hurt possible under the circumstances. It put Lee in the position of a detestably insistent queer, too stupid and too insensitive to realize that his attentions were not wanted.

Although in letters as early as January 1951 Burroughs mentioned that he had sold his remaining south Texas land, in May he was still complaining to Ginsberg and Kerouac that the money from the sale had not arrived. He seems to have received it in June, because on the 20th of that month he sent a short, hasty-sounding note to Kerouac saying he had changed his address to 210 Orizaba, and that mail could also be addressed to him in care of John Healy at the Bounty, 122 Monterrey. Healy's apartment was upstairs from the bar, and it was the scene of frequent drinking parties, especially at the first of the month, when the American M.C.C. students' G.I. Bill allowances were paid out.

Marker and Burroughs, D.F. or S.A., 1951. Photo anonymous.

With the land-sale money in hand, Burroughs was able to invite Marker to accompany him on a trip to Ecuador in search of *yagé*, an hallucinogenic vine used ritually by the Indians. They probably left Mexico City in late June or early July. According to *Queer*, they flew to Panama City and on to Quito, then to Manta on the coast, and to Guayaquil on the delta of the Río Daule. They looked for a boat in Las Playas, then took a bus to Salinas. After returning to Guayaquil, they got a river boat up the Daule to Babahoyo, then took a bus (or flatbed truck) over the Andes, past the 20,700-foot peak of Mount Chimborazo to Ambato, finally arriving in Puyo.

Marker and Burroughs had a "deal" about sex: twice a week was Marker's promise. As their trip wore on, though, Marker became more disenchanted, even as Burroughs became more imploring and abject, which only worsened matters. This scene from the Guayaquil chapter of *Queer* conveys the ambivalent quality of their relations:

> "Oh, go away."
> "But, Gene ... I am due, you know."
> "Yes, I suppose you are." [...]
> [Lee] could see that Allerton was a little excited.
> Allerton said, "Maybe it would be better now. You know I like to sleep alone."
> "Yes, I know. Too bad. If I had my way we'd sleep every night all wrapped around each other like hibernating rattlesnakes."
> Lee was taking off his clothes. He lay down beside Allerton. "Wouldn't it be booful if we should juth run together into one gweat big blob?" he said in baby talk. "Am I giving you the horrors?"
> "Indeed you are."
> [and after sex, to Allerton:]
> "But you do enjoy it sometimes? The whole deal, I mean?"
> "Oh, yes."

Meanwhile in Mexico City, Lucien Carr arrived by car in late August, as he had in 1950, this time with Allen Ginsberg. Disappointed to find that Burroughs was away, they spent the week with Joan and the two kids on a wild, drunken car trip to Guadalajara, with a stop at the still-smoking volcano of Paricutín, near Uruapan, on the way back.

Ginsberg and Carr later described this week with Joan in Howard Brookner's 1983 documentary film, *Burroughs: The Movie*; the following is abridged from a transcription of that film's soundtrack, as edited by Brookner:

> GINSBERG: I was once on a trip to Mexico, and we were with Joan until 24 or 48 hours before she died.
> LUCIEN CARR: It had to be the longest drunken driving trip that I've ever taken, in which Joan Burroughs and I were at the wheel and Billy Junior and Julie were the unwilling passengers.
> GINSBERG: He was going around these hair-pin turns and she was urging him on saying, "How fast can this heap go?"—while me and the kids were cowering in the back.
> CARR: Joan and I were drinking and driving so heavily that at one point we could only make the car go if I lay on the floor and pushed on the gas pedal, while she used her one good leg to work the brake and clutch. It was a pretty hairy trip, but Joan and I thought it was great fun. Allen I don't think did, and surely the kids didn't. [...]
> GINSBERG: Joan was not making it with Bill, and was a little irritated with him. Bill had been off with a young friend. Julie, her daughter, was actually quite cute and was flirtatious. And I said, "She's going to give you some competition." And Joan said, "Aw, I'm out of the competition." So she had sort of given up on love life. [...]

As Lucien Carr told me in October 1999: "Joan had friends in Guadalajara; we had to go there to do something. The stop at Paricutín was on the way back. In Guadalajara there was a guy and

a woman, maybe two women, a little expatriate grouping, two or three people." And in his thoroughgoing 1989 biography, *Ginsberg*, Barry Miles writes: "Joan had a pot connection in Guadalajara, and suggested a trip there." (This is apparently based on Miles' interviews with Carr on March 9, 1986, or with Ginsberg on March 28, 1985.) The "friend in Guadalajara" must have been John Herrmann (described below).

Ginsberg hinted to Ted Morgan that Carr may have made love to Vollmer one drunken night during this trip. Others have suggested that Carr was carrying a torch for Vollmer since the New York days, but this is very unlikely. On his August 1950 visit to Mexico he was accompanied his girlfriend, Liz Lehrman, and by August 1951 he had been involved for several months with Francesca "Cessa" von Hartz, whom he would marry in early 1952.

Still, Ginsberg remembered that Lucien and Joan were very intimate by the end of their visit, and that he and Carr urged her to come back to New York with them. She declined, and the two men left Mexico City by car on Sept. 1.

Hal Chase offered Ted Morgan a haunting glimpse of Joan just at this time:

> [I] saw Joan a few days before she died. [I met her] in the street, and she shook her head pridefully in that way she had, and [I] put [my] arms around her, because she looked so awful. [I] was badly shaken.
>
> Joan was almost a beauty. She carried herself a little awkwardly, swinging one arm more than the other. She had an incurable blood disease. She had open running sores, and knew she was dying. She was thin-haired ... had lost some of her hair.
>
> "I'm not going to make it," she said.

In late August, in the jungle near Puyo, Ecuador, Burroughs and Marker were the unwelcome and uncomfortable guests of a Dr. Fuller—"Dr. Cotter" in *Queer*—who Burroughs thought might lead them to some *yagé*; but they never did find it. Their romantic cross-purposes came to a head in Puyo, and they decided their two-month anthropological expedition together was finished—along with their ill-omened love affair.

Burroughs and Marker were back in Mexico City on September 3, 1951. Three days later, Joan Vollmer was dead.

2) The death of Joan Vollmer Burroughs.

Many persons have suggested that William Burroughs "got away with murder" when he killed Joan Vollmer on Sept. 6, 1951, spent just thirteen days in prison, was released on bail, and then—in November 1952—finally fled Mexico for the U.S.

The basic facts of the crime are well-established, but because within an hour of the shooting Burroughs and the other two eyewitnesses were counseled to lie to the authorities and to the press, the exact circumstances have been confused by much contradictory testimony.

In the balance of this paper, I propose to put Burroughs "on trial," as nearly as that can now be done. Although Mexican law did not require a jury trial (a finding of facts, applicable law, and consequent sentencing could be made entirely by a judge), I am going to present the prosecution's case, with supporting evidence—and then put on a case for the defense. A jury's job is to make a finding of facts—and you, the reader, will be the jury.

First, a basic chronology of the events of Thursday, Sept. 6, 1951, and the following weeks, and a presentation of the limited evidence that is now available: the "discovery phase" of our trial:

When Burroughs returned from his South American voyage with Marker, Mexico City was under a deluge of rain. Hurricane "Dog" had already inundated large parts of the city, in the famous "flood of 1951," and Hurricane "Easy" was making landfall in Jamaica on Sept. 3, with Hurricane "Fox" not far behind. While five thousand men worked to cope with the "black water" flooding the old part of the city, the rain and clouds and gusty winds were continual for many days. There was a meter's depth of water in the streets of Colonia Roma Sur, just south of Burroughs' neighborhood.

122 Monterrey, D.F., August 2000; Bounty at lower left. Photo: James Grauerholz.

The shooting occurred in the early evening, in apartment 10 (third floor, north, on the west side) at 122 Monterrey, where John Healy was living above the Bounty, the bar where he worked. Also living in the six-room apartment were Luis Carpio, a co-owner of the Bounty, and Glenn and Betty Woods, an American couple—as well as Lewis Marker, before his trip with Burroughs.

Lewis Marker's childhood friend from Jacksonville—Edwin John "Eddie" Woods, Jr.—had arrived in mid-August and, by pre-arrangement with Healy and the still-absent Marker, had taken up temporary residence in the apartment. Marker returned to Mexico City in the first days of September 1951 and moved back into his old apartment, now with five roommates.

The landlady at 122 Monterrey (and at 210 Orizaba as well) was Juana, or Juanita, Peñaloza. She had allegedly been a housemaid to Leon Trotsky when he lived in Mexico City before his assassination there in August 1940—although John Healy flatly contradicted this in 1991—and her own apartment was upstairs in the Monterrey building.

Other residents included a young "Mexican medical student" who lived in a *jacal* (hut) on the rooftop; an American M.C.C. student named John Robert Bensmiller, who was a friend of Joan's; another M.C.C. student named Robert Addison; and (as Woods and Marker told Ted Morgan) Burroughs himself may have been renting a room in the building—perhaps another of his "bachelor pads," if this is true.

Lewis Marker and Eddie Woods were present with Burroughs and Vollmer at the moment of the shooting. No one else can be shown to have been there at the time, but others who were reportedly in the apartment within a few hours before, or just after, the shooting include Betty Jones, John Healy, Juana Peñaloza, and John Herrmann—who is intriguing enough to be worth a little digression here:

Born at Lansing, Michigan, in 1900, John Theodore Herrmann was 14 years older than Burroughs. He was in Paris in the Twenties, part of the famous expatriate American writers' circle there, when he met his first wife, the writer Josephine Herbst. His best-known books (and they are not very well-known) were *What Happens* (1928), *Summer is Ended* (1932), and *The Salesman* (1939). Josephine Herbst's career was rather more prominent; her books *Nothing Is Sacred* (1928), *Money for Love* (1929), *Pity is Not Enough* (1933), and *The Executioner Waits* (1934), among others, established her as an important American-socialist writer of the 1930s.

Herrmann and Herbst were both literary drunks, he worse than she, and both had Communist sympathies. The couple lived a few years in rural Pennsylvania, and were friends with Katherine Anne Porter, who had lived in Mexico for a time in the 1920s. They divorced in the early 1930s, and he went to work for the government in Washington in 1934 as part of the new Roosevelt administration. There the Communist Herrmann secretly spied for the Soviet Union, as part of the "Hal Ware group" within the American Agricultural Administration, for over a year.

Herrmann remarried, to Ruth Peck, and after serving during WW II in the U.S. Coast Guard at New Orleans, he went to Mexico and applied in March 1949 to Mexico City College as a speech and drama major. He attended for only two quarters, Fall 1950 and Winter 1951.

A photograph in the Nov. 16, 1950 issue of M.C.C.'s student paper, the *Collegian*, shows Earl Sennett speaking to twelve students in his "Studio Stages" drama group; among them are Frank Jeffries, Alice Hartman, and John Herrmann.

Earl Sennett, head of the Speech and Drama Department and director of Studio Stages, shows drama students how to project their personalities on the stage. Among those participating are, left to right: Morwena Turnbull, Ana Middendorf, Stephen Bolek, Frank Jeffries, Thelma Kilberry, Harold Manson, John Herrmann, Billy Poindexter, Alice Hartman, Benedict Le Beau, Pat Sadler, Phil Franklin, and Earl Sennett.

Mexico City College *Collegian*, Nov. 16, 1950

After the 1951 Winter Quarter ended in April, Herrmann and his wife moved to Guadalajara, where he enrolled at the Escuela de Bellas Artes in the Universidad de Guadalajara. The couple later had a child, John Ryder Herrmann, born June 12, 1952.

Burroughs and Ginsberg both remembered Herrmann in later years. My notes from a February 1991 talk with Burroughs include: "John Herrmann ... that son of a bitch, he's the one who spread the rumor about the jealousy angle, because of Lucien." This is the unique instance of Burroughs acknowledging Lucien Carr's role in any possible "jealousy angle," but it does not correspond to the archival record: nowhere in any of the Mexican newspapers I have reviewed so far is there any mention whatsoever of Carr, or Ginsberg.

In a taped conversation that he had with John Healy in Lawrence, Kansas, in September 1991, Burroughs said: "[Herrmann] lived in Guadalajara. He wrote a book at one point. British or something. I never met him." Burroughs also thought Herrmann was acquainted with his old friend, Kells Elvins.

When Ginsberg footnoted his 1954–1958 journals for a volume edited by Gordon Ball in 1995, he referred to Herrmann:

> An old note from 1951–2 — with Williams in Paterson: [...]
> "John Herrmann* — he was always lost."
> [footnote] * John Herrmann, American writer and labor organizer, friend of W. C. Williams, author of proletarian novel *What Happens* (1927 [*sic*]), then married to writer Josephine Herbst. I'd met him in Mexico City 1951, drinking, with broken leg in cast.—A.G. August 11, 1994.

If Ginsberg met Herrmann in Mexico in 1951, it more likely happened in Guadalajara than in Mexico City, since—as we will see—John Healy told *El Universal* on Sept. 6, 1951, that Herrmann had arrived in the city "only yesterday," and we know that Ginsberg had left the Mexico City (after his first-ever visit) a few days before that. There is, incidentally, no

corroboration for Herrmann's "broken leg" in this period, but as it happens, Betty Jones' husband Glenn's leg was in a splint at the time, for what that may be worth.

The Ware group's activities were investigated in the late 1940s by the House Un-American Activities Committee, and Herrmann was surveilled and questioned many times in Mexico by the FBI in connection with the HUAC inquiries, but never arrested. He died near the Pacific Ocean in April 1959, at the Hotel Navidad, in Barra de Navidad, Jalisco, from chronic alcoholism.

Betty Jones, who was 35 in 1951, was reportedly not entirely faithful in her marriage vows to Glenn. She appears in *Queer* as "Mary," a woman with whom "Allerton" (Marker) is always playing chess, which provokes jealousy in "Lee" (Burroughs). John Healy was also 35, and Juanita Peñaloza, the landlady, was in love with him, according to Woods (as told to Morgan). Woods also said that Healy sometimes made ends meet on the rent by obliging Juanita sexually.

When Burroughs returned to Mexico City in early September, he seems to have been out of cash after the two-month trip. The story goes that he made an appointment with an M.C.C. student, Robert Addison, to sell him a handgun, at John Healy's apartment on the afternoon of Thursday, Sept. 6.

At this point in our narrative we might best reconstruct the sequence of events by adducing the post-event testimonies of eyewitness Eddie Woods (interviewed by Morgan on March 19, 1985); eyewitness Lewis Marker, with Eddie Woods' sister, June Overgaard (interviewed together by Morgan on Jan. 27–28, 1985); and John Healy (from my interviews with him and Burroughs in September 1991). In *Literary Outlaw*, Morgan took a similar approach, but more abbreviated. I have taken the liberty of re-sequencing some quotations for clearer chronology, but my editing-gaps are indicated by ellipses.

EDDIE WOODS—March 19, 1985:

> [Joan] was a very plain-looking woman, her hair was straight, bedraggled, she wore faded flower-print dresses, seldom wore shoes when I saw her, which was around the Bounty, or out on the sidewalk. Just barefoot, quite frequently. [...]
>
> She didn't seem to have any upper teeth, she always seemed a little drunk and giggly—I should speak better of the dead. Just seemed like a decrepit, aging broad to me. Falling apart, didn't take care of herself. [...]
>
> Marker came to me and said, "Bill is a little short of cash and wants to meet this fellow who is going to buy some of his handguns from him, but he doesn't want to do it in his place."
>
> And I've never been in that place, he lived on the third floor in the back, he and Joan, and the two kids. [...] In the same building. [...] On the third floor in the rear. [...]
>
> He wanted to meet this guy in our place, and he wanted Marker and myself to be present, just in case anything came down—to have witnesses, and also the guy wouldn't know where he lived, and that's important.
>
> I think you should take into account what my attitude towards Burroughs was at the time: as I said, I thought he was somewhat sinister. I thought he was a bad influence on my [friend, Lewis]. And I'd heard all the talk about the dope and the guns. [...] I figured I was a new boy on the block, and I couldn't even object to Burroughs holding this meeting [in] what essentially was my living room. I

didn't care for it, but since Marker was going to be involved— we'd always been— we were allies, no matter what. [...]

So there we were, all— all sober, early in the afternoon. I remember Bob [Addison] dropped by. He also lived in the building, and had a beautiful seventeen-year-old Mexican girl with him [...]

And then Bill and Joan came in. [...] He had a little overnight bag, a little carry-all. I don't know how many handguns were in there. [...]

Joan Burroughs came in, and she was drinking— she was drinking *ginebra*, the cheap gin [...] Mixed with the thing they called *limonada*, [...] Like 7-Up, but darker green. It's a limeade, carbonated. [...]

And some people were just sitting there. [...]

I could never tell when Bill was— He was not drinking, you know. I don't know [if] he was drunk, but he didn't have a drink. [...]

There was no sense that there was anything wrong [between Bill and Joan] at all. I don't think he'd been back from Ecuador more than three, four days at the time.

She was quite jolly, but the thing is that we were all cold stone sober. Nobody was, either— hadn't had a drink that day, except her. She had not had it there, she had had it ... she'd gotten her drink down in the Bounty. It was the *limonada* and gin. So she brought the glass with her. That was the only drink I saw the entire day.

Of course, to the police and newspapermen, later, it looked like we'd had a wild orgy there, going on for three days. Well, we did for two days, but this wasn't it. [...]

Marker and I were sitting on the sofa, approximately like you and I are, except I was over there. Burroughs was in the dining room, but that was within arm's reach of me in your position, sitting in a chair there. As I say, there was hardly any way to distinguish between the dining room and living room, because the abutments only came out a couple of feet on either side. Burroughs was sitting so close that I could have reached over and grabbed that pistol. [...]

There was nobody else in the apartment except the four of us. Joan sat in the stuffed chair across from Lewis and I on the sofa, in the living room, and I don't know how the conversation got around to that, but Burroughs asked her to— he said: "Put that glass on your head, Joanie, let me show the boys what a great shot old Bill is."

That's exactly what happened, so she did, and she said with a giggle—and she turned her head, she is balancing the glass on her head, and she said—"I can't watch this, you know I can't stand the sight of blood."

I remember this vividly, and that's exactly what she said. And then it dawned on me, he was actually going to pull the trigger. [...]

So I started to reach for the gun, as he actually aimed it, and then I thought, "You'd better not, because if it goes off just when you reach it, and it hits her—" [...]

So I didn't grab it, and then *bang!*—the noise, that's the first impression I had, was the noise. Next thing I knew, the next impression I had was that glass was on the floor, [...] rolling around in concentric circles on the floor. [...]

Then I looked at her, and her head was over to one side. Well, I thought "She's kidding," you know. That's the first thing you think, and then I heard Marker say: "Bill, I think you hit her."

And then [Bill] said, "No!" And he started towards her, you know, and Marker got there first, and I got over there, too, and then I saw the hole in her temple, a little blue hole, and Burroughs jumped on her lap and he said, "Joan! Joan! Joan!"

I mean he was out of it, in shock that this happened. Again, to me, that's evidence it was absolutely an accident. He was shocked that he had hit her, and he was trying to wake her up. This guy was out of it.

And I heard the death-rattle then, the snoring sound [as if she were] asleep, so Marker [...] said, "We better go see Juanita."

So we left him there, sitting on her lap, trying to revive her ... and as I say, the death-rattle: *harrrrrrrrhhh*, like that. [...]

If he was a good shot— that was the worst shot I ever saw. But there was no way anybody could convince me that it was done on purpose, because of me and my relationship to Marker, and his relationship to Marker that I didn't know about, this would automatically make me an enemy of his, and would he expect me to say it was an accident? No.

He shot her, you know. And his immediate reaction when he did shoot her, it came as a complete surprise to me. He did not expect to hit her, he expected hit the glass, which in itself is foolish. [...]

So okay, maybe unconsciously—but I say *really* unconsciously, because he was not aware that was his intention, I just know that. I remember it so vividly, his shock.

JUNE WOODS OVERGAARD—Jan. 27–28, 1985:

You know, when [Eddie] told me the story of the shooting, I always took everything with a grain of salt. [...]

What he told me—and there would be some misunderstandings or some glossings-over on my part—was that [Burroughs said he and Joan] had a place ... now, whether they owned the place, or [whether it was] a place they liked to go to ... that you could only get to on [a] flood tide. Was it up some South American river, or some such thing?

Anyway, that's where they were talking about going—that, if you went up there and then— and we got into the summer tides, and there wasn't water for getting up— there'd be no way from them to get out, [and] that [Burroughs] would be able to get off of whatever it was he was on.

And that Joan said: "You— we'll starve to death, if we go up there and— because you won't be able to shoot, you'd be so shaky if you try to come off it, you'll shake, you won't be able to shoot anything."

And that he said: "Nonsense," he hadn't had anything for some period of time, and that he would prove that he could still shoot, he was steady enough to shoot—and she put the glass on her head and then he shot it, and that he was [going to] prove that he could shoot still. [...]

And I just wonder if [Burroughs] would remember— [...] I'm thinking what might be a flag, is the fact that there was some place he could go where he would not be able to get out, and he was going to get— [...] well, doesn't the [Río] Orinoco do that, and the Amazon, and some of the areas ... ?

[to Marker] Weren't there just the four of you there?

MARKER: Well, let's see, there would be five.

OVERGAARD: Who else was there? I just know the two of them, and you and Eddie.

MARKER: Betty Jones was there too, along with the three [*sic*] major participants.

LEWIS MARKER—Jan. 27–28, 1985:

[NOTE: in the course of this two-hour interview Lewis Marker becomes very noticeably drunk and slurred, and his recollections are progressively less and less clear. Marker died in Florida in 1998.]

[I met Burroughs] hanging around the Bounty, I suspect. Well, he lived in the [122 Monterrey] building there, too.

He had an apartment elsewhere—that was before, I recall—but he lived in the building quite a long time there. With one child ... the daughter I don't recall. Billy [Jr.] was always there.

I think he probably had a three-room [apartment], I don't remember. [The building] must have been about five stories high. [...]

Joan was a little withdrawn from the scene downstairs. [...] She was crippled, as I recall, probably polio or something like that. Kind of attractive, in a low-keyed sort of way. [...]

It wasn't unusual for people down there to have guns. As a matter of fact, it wasn't extraordinary for people to get shot. One of them right there in the Bounty [...] It was a kind of lively neighborhood, another guy got his brains blown out down there a couple of blocks away. [...]

[The shooting occurred] in the apartment house [...] above the Bounty, it was his [*sic*] apartment. Betty Jones and I were up there for a couple of drinks or something. Just the four of us, me and Betty and Bill and Joan.

The little tyke wasn't around at the time, maybe sleeping, who knows, or farmed off someplace, I'm not sure. Bill was probably sitting at the table, I'm not sure— anything of that. Joan maybe over there, possibly Betty and myself, who knows. [...]

Betty Jones, she was married but she was not all that close to Glenn. Well, I always kind of had the hots for Betty, for the only reason that she happened to be handy, you know, but we were never all that close, either, for that matter. [...]

The matter in the living room, it wasn't the kind of thing that would elicit a lot of alarm, actually, if you were accustomed to that kind of nonsense. [...] At the time, it didn't occur to anybody that there was anything especially alarming about it. [...]

Whatever conversation there was previous, was the usual sort of drivel, nothing to put to memory at all ... But at the very tail end, Bill said something to the effect that he was going to do a William Tell thing, you know, with the glass on the head. That was the only notable part of the conversation that I remember. [...]

There was some mention of William Tell; there was no suggestion, that I recall, that it had been done in the past, you know, but clearly, the implications

are obvious, you know. Probably even mentioned the glass on the head or something like that, since [they] didn't have an apple .... [...]

You could ascribe it to confidence in his marksmanship, or anything you want to ascribe it to, but there was no particular indication that I could see, as to why she was agreeable to the— little act. [...]

It was a little different than how it came out in the court. [...] It was a little William Tell act there, but the shot was about three inches low, let's say. [...] I think [Bill] was as stunned as anybody else. [...]

I think all of us sat around there completely stunned. As far as I know, I was the first to move. I don't even think [Betty Jones] had the presence of mind to scream. As far as I know, it was all nice and quiet. Everybody sitting there, staring and not believing. [...]

Once you see the red trickle, you're past the disbelief point, you know what happened. [...]

Only thing I could think of doing was— which was also a chance for me to get the hell out of there, I told you I'm a natural coward ... well, we had a guy up on the roof who was a Mexican medical student—Betty had the hots for him, by the way— [...]

JOHN HEALY—Sept. 12, 1991:

[At the time of this interview Healy, formerly a heavy drinker, had been sober for many years, living in Puerto Vallarta. Healy died in Mexico in the early 1990s.]

I used to drink with [Joan] a lot, she would come over for a drinking partner. She didn't like to drink alone. [...] She was an alcoholic.

[Bill and Joan would] come in [the Bounty] and sit around [...] when they were together, they would always take a table near the street, near the sidewalk. Then the kids played on the sidewalk. They were good little kids, the boy was kind of hyper, bounced around, couldn't stop bouncing around. [...]

When [Joan] came in, she would give me the high-sign and I would sit down and talk to her, and she liked that. She was as smart as a whip, she was no dummy, but she was just wearing out, she didn't look healthy at all. [...]

She used to put [Bill] down. [...]

I thought [Marker] was dull. I was never, ever able to carry on a conversation with him. [...] I saw the reaction of other people around him. He was kind of a butt of jokes. They used to make jokes about Marker, and so that is why I don't think Betty [Jones] would waste any time with him—much more eligible men around than Marker.

I guess he was harmless, never hurt anybody. I may be doing a big disservice—talking about him the way I do—but as far as I was concerned, he was a non-person. [...] I don't think he ever did anything bad, except that he was a moocher, goddammit, [it] used to piss me off.

GRAUERHOLZ: Did Betty Jones—some of the accounts were a little conflicting—was Betty around that party, or before the shooting?

HEALY: She was there. [...]

You know, they talk about whether [Joan] put the glass on her head, or whether Bill did ... I know Bill didn't put it there, but I can conceive of her

> putting it there and saying, "Go ahead, Bill, and shoot it off." Because she may have had a death wish, too. [...]
>
> Those cops—when they took me down when Bill got in trouble, when they were interrogating me, they were setting the apartment up: putting bottles on the floor, dumping ashtrays over, and made a total mess out of it, and they took pictures right in front of me, and that is the picture they put in the paper and were circulating around.

Another witness to the circumstances of the shooting was Manuel Mejía, a 20-year-old native of Oaxaca who had worked for Juana Peñaloza as the porter at 122 Monterrey for about a year at that time. Interviewed by Jorge García-Robles on Dec. 22, 1991, Mejía remembered what happened:

> [I was] in the building. I think we were in [the Bounty], and we heard a gunshot—then everyone ran to see. When we went up to look, all the blinds were drawn and there were many bottles on the table, a big table. And then we heard that he had said he was William Tell, and that he put a glass on his wife's head—[...]
>
> [I did not see her body], they had taken her away, the Red Cross arrived and they carried her. I did not go up to see [that]. I think that Juanita did go up there before the police arrived. [...] The police came later to seal everything, so nothing would be disturbed before the investigators could arrive.
>
> Yes, I saw Burroughs when the ambulance left, because I went with him ... not in the ambulance, because the Red Cross was not far away, about a block and a half. [...] I think we went on foot. [...]
>
> I had to give blood for the lady, at Red Cross, because when this happened she was not dead, they carried her immediately to the Red Cross. [...] Then I asked them what the blood was worth, and they said some amount. [...]
>
> Then, when he got out [of jail], I went to the Bounty again and told him, "Mister Burroughs, you owe me such-and-such." And he said, "Yes, yes, I am going to pay you."
>
> A month or two later, he did pay me 250 pesos. That's what he paid me for the blood.

When a student intern of Dr. Ed Simmen at UDLA interviewed Juanita Peñaloza on Apr. 20, 1982, the landlady remembered only that:

> He liked to play with his wife, they horsed around a lot. On a particularly bad day, when he was drunk, he put a glass on his wife's head and took a gun. He was so intoxicated that he hit his wife instead of the glass. [...]
>
> They both drank a lot, they had many parties and visited friends a lot. [...] Intelligent people, but they drank to forget, and then things changed.

Immediately after Joan was shot, Marker (to Morgan) remembered that he went up to the roof, looking for the Mexican medical student, but couldn't find him. Marker and Woods then went to Peñaloza's apartment and told her what had happened.

According to Woods (Morgan), Marker knew Bernabé Jurado was Burroughs' lawyer, perhaps from some visa assistance that had become necessary during their trip; Woods recalled

that "Maybe they had a little trouble in Ecuador, I don't know what it was. They had some trouble getting out."

So Peñaloza called Jurado first, and then called the Cruz Roja (Red Cross) hospital at Durango and Monterrey, four blocks north, and then called the police at the Octava Delegación (Eighth Delegation), the nearest police headquarters.

Woods remembered that Juana conveyed Jurado's advice to him and Marker: "That Marker and I, being the only witnesses to this thing, should go lie low in a hotel someplace, and then call him that night and he'd tell us what to do."

Someone, probably at the Eighth Delegation, tipped off some reporters, and soon the Cruz Roja ambulance medics, the police, and several reporters—and Bernabé Jurado—converged on Healy's apartment and on the courtyard at Cruz Roja, nearby. The medics put Joan in the ambulance and sped to the hospital; she was still breathing.

Burroughs arrived at Cruz Roja moments later, followed by reporters. He was answering their questions in the courtyard when he was approached by Lic. Luis Hurtado Vaca a Vaca, the investigative agent for the Ministerio Público assigned to Cruz Roja. Hurtado had been summoned by the medics to question Vollmer, which proved impossible, and he interrogated Burroughs instead.

Cruz Roja site, Durango & Monterrey, D.F., August 2001. Photo: James Grauerholz.

We should pause to assess the newspaper reporters whose accounts we will be hearing. *El Nacional* was the official organ of the Mexican government's ruling party, which was of course for decades the PRI, or the Partido Revolucionario Institucional. *Excelsior* was considered "even more conservative" than *El Nacional* (Anita Brenner, *Your Mexican Holiday*, Putnam's 1932, rev. 1947). *El Universal* (with United Press and New York Times wire services) and *Novedades* were

considered reliable enough in their reportage. *La Prensa*, however, was known to be quite uninhibited, even yellow, in its graphic journalism.

(Possibly-relevant contemporaneous published sources not yet examined include daily newspapers *Las Noticias, El Popular, El Universal Gráfico, Últimas Notícias (Excelsior), Today's Headlines, El Heraldo*; and weekly *revistas* and *semanarios* such as *Mexican Weekly News, Hoy, Mañana, Nosotros, Nota Roja, El Observador, Criminalia* and *Sucesos*.)

El Universal's writer reported what the Cruz Roja medics told him when he arrived at the hospital, and what he found when he reached the apartment:

> At about 7:30 P.M. a phone call received at the Cruz Roja by the *comandante*, Sr. Jorge Requía, caused him to send ambulance No. 4, manned by Lieutenant Tomás Arias, to house 122, apartment 10, Monterrey Street. The emergency personnel found the lady Joan Vollmer Burroughs seated on a little easy-chair [that was] covered with a pink cloth, with a wound in her forehead from which flowed abundant blood. To the right of the chair there was a cane thrown on the floor, which the North American girl had used because the infantile paralysis she suffered many years ago [*sic*] did not allow her to walk very well. [...]
>
> We arrived at the house of these deeds in Monterrey 122, apartment 10. There was the tenant, Johnny Healy, completely nervous. Near him was the lady Juana Peñaloza, in charge of the building.
>
> Upon the easy chair where Joan fell mortally wounded there was a coagulation of blood; on the floor, three ashtrays complete with cigarette butts, and one more upon a table, on which were also seen three glasses containing residues of liquor, North American magazines, two valises on a sofa, and a small wicker purse.
>
> On a large table in the dining room were four empty bottles of Oso Negro gin; some ten or twelve dirty glasses with liquor residues; a .380-caliber Star pistol; more cigarette butts in the ashtrays; and, thrown on the floor, the glass that served as the apple of the modern William Tell. In a closet, no less than thirty empty bottles.

This description is paralleled by several other reporters' accounts of the scene in the apartment; but as we recall, Healy and Woods later claimed that the newsmen had "set up" the picture.

El Universal's writer approached John Healy at the apartment:

> Mr. Healy said that he was not present at the moment when the events occurred, that he did not know anything. [...] He said that Joan arrived at 1:00 P.M. in search of Mr. Herrmann, who had arrived [in Mexico City] only yesterday, and twenty minutes later her husband arrived. As Healy had to go out in the street, he left the Burroughs couple in his apartment [...]
>
> The police also interviewed Johnny Herrmann, who claimed to know absolutely nothing.
>
> We were told that Joan used to visit Mr. Healy in his apartment, but [Healy] affirmed that yesterday she was in search of Herrmann, and he did not know her before then. Herrmann, for his part, said that Joan had gone to visit Healy, even though he did know her and was friendly with her and her husband, for in previous years all of them had been together in this City and in Guadalajara.

Excelsior's account of Burroughs' first version was that "his wife went yesterday afternoon to visit her friend Johnny Healy, in Monterrey Street, where [Burroughs] went later, finding his wife, the aforesaid Healy, John Herrmann and another North American named Marker."

La Prensa reported that John Herrmann told them Vollmer had come specifically to visit John Healy, adding that Herrmann remembered seeing Bill and Joan "only on two occasions, in a house on Medellín Street." *Excelsior* said that John Healy told *them* she had come specifically to visit Herrmann.

These patently-conflicting stories, with an unescorted married woman going to meet one or more men, gave rise to a suspicion there might be a "jealousy angle"—something the Mexican reporters were accustomed to find in such cases, anyway.

Burroughs was arrested and taken to the third *turno* (eight-hour police shift) of the Eighth Delegation, where he was questioned by investigative agent Lic. Robert Higuera Gil. According to *Excelsior*: "The three Americans were detained at the Jefatura de Policía for interrogation." Presumably the other two were John Healy and John Herrmann, because it was reported by *La Prensa* on Sept. 7 that Marker and Woods (taking Jurado's advice) had "turned into ants," i.e., had vanished.

When the mortally-wounded Joan Vollmer arrived at Cruz Roja the medics began emergency life-saving measures: a blood transfusion (probably with Manuel Mejía's type-O blood), serum, and oxygen. It is unclear how long she survived; *El Universal* said she lived one hour after being shot, but other papers said she died "within minutes" of reaching the hospital. Considering that the medics did not arrive for about half an hour, these versions coincide. The burial order from the Dirección del Registro Civil of the Departamento del Distrito Federal to the Panteón Americano, however, gives the time of Vollmer's death as "7:00 P.M.," which is surely too early.

To the first round of questioning by Lic. Luis Hurtado at Cruz Roja, and in front of the reporters, a still-in-shock Burroughs gave "version #1" of the preceding events:

> At first the killer declared that in the said gathering, after there had been a great consumption of gin, he tried to demonstrate his magnificent marksmanship, emulating William Tell, and to that end he placed a glass of liquor upon the head of his wife, and aiming over the glass, at a distance of two meters, he fired, but as a consequence and result of the state of drunkenness in which he found himself, he missed the shot lamentably and injured the forehead of his wife with a bullet."
>
> (*El Nacional*, Sept. 8, 1951)

The reporters who witnessed this statement by Burroughs—Luis C. Marquez from *La Prensa*, Carlos Perez Patiño from *Novedades*, and un-bylined writers from *Excelsior, El Universal,* and *El Nacional*—all rendered nearly-identical accounts of this first version.

It was also reported that, while Burroughs was talking with Lic. Hurtado, word came from inside the hospital that the wounded woman had died—and that at that moment Burroughs "cried bitterly, tearing out his hair in desperation" (*Excelsior*, Sept. 7).

Photos: *La Prensa*.

Then, as *El Nacional* reported, "Just as he finished saying that, his defense attorney arrived and, in the presence of the reporters, told [his client] that he would not say *that* before the authorities, only that the pistol had fired accidentally—and if he didn't, he would surely be consigned to the Penitentiary."

La Prensa described this development thus:

> Minutes later he changed his mind, as the result of a chat that he had with a lawyer. He stated to the journalists that this professional told him: "Don't be stupid; don't say you wanted to make a target [of the glass]. Testify that you were examining the pistol, very drunk, and then the shot went off, that penetrated the forehead of Joan."
>
> From that moment on, William changed his first testimony, but not without first arguing, "But how am I going to say that the shot went off [that way], when several people saw the facts?" [...]
>
> Then, on the way to the scene of the crime, Bernabé Jurado himself went on saying to the reporters that he, in his capacity as the killer's defender, was obliged to do everything possible so that the punishment would be the least possible for his client.
>
> "I will prove that it was an accident," said Jurado. "The point is, William has not testified before the authorities [yet], and before he does, he will know perfectly what he has to say."

This candid account reveals Burroughs defenseless and heedless of the possibility that the reporter-witnesses might be skeptical or unsympathetic. Likewise, Jurado was unabashed in his explanation of his crooked strategy for the reporters' benefit. Although *La Prensa* was then (and still is) a rather sensational newspaper, the veracity of this account is supported by corresponding versions found in the other papers.

While the ebullient Jurado chatted with the journalist on the way down Monterrey to see the scene at Healy's apartment, Lic. Hurtado arrested William Burroughs for his wife's death, and ordered him transferred to a cell at the Eighth Delegation police headquarters.

Octava Delegación, D.F., August 2000. Photo: James Grauerholz.

A strange thing—as Ed Simmen has pointed out to me—is that, in all the contemporaneous Mexico City newspaper accounts (22 stories examined, to date), there is not one single mention of Mexico City College. And yet, the killer, and one of the eyewitnesses, and the young man who came by to consider buying a pistol from Burroughs, and the boy who identified Joan's body, and the tenant in whose apartment the shooting occurred—all were currently or recently students enrolled at M.C.C. The Bounty bar was almost entirely patronized by a certain subset of M.C.C. students; the entire 122 Monterrey building was full of them.

Just as clubby was the world of the college's American founders, President Henry L. Cain and Dean of Faculty, Paul V. Murray. Although M.C.C.'s finances were a tremendous struggle in the early years, and Dean Murray even mortgaged his home to support the school at one point, these two men were well-connected within a middle to lower rung of the American-Mexican "old-boy network." And this, at a time when Mexico was relatively supine beneath the postwar American business invasion. Murray and Cain had power, and—thanks to their primary patrons, the Jenkins Foundation—money. If they did not want their school mentioned in newspaper accounts of a lurid, scandalous killing, it was surely within their ability to see that it did not happen.

Of course, the American G.I. "colony" in Colonia Roma did not usually command wide journalistic attention in D.F.—except when it brought out a story like this one. Perhaps the reporters were simply uninterested in the M.C.C. connection; or perhaps their editors operated at that time under a general policy of not offending the American institutions established in Mexico. If Dr. Simmen's theory is correct, Murray or Cain must have somehow exerted influence on editors who were specifically looking to scandalize or discredit M.C.C.—and that is possible.

El Universal wrote that Joan's body was identified by Juanita Peñaloza and "John Bensmiller Rogerson," age 22, from Detroit, a "student" (no school mentioned) who lived at 122 Monterrey and who was said to be a friend of Joan Vollmer. John Robert Bensmiller was 23 years old at the time; he had been studying pre-law at Mexico City College since fall 1947, with a fairly good scholastic record, and he graduated in spring 1952. There is little to connect him

with Joan but his propinquity to the Bounty, and he must have been horrified to be called to Cruz Roja to see the woman's corpse.

Joan's body stayed in the amphiteater of Cruz Roja overnight, then was transferred Friday night to the old Juarez Hospital for the legally-required autopsy. A photograph reveals that, after her death, someone placed a Mexican saint's-relic pendant on her breast, as a blessing for the dead.

Photo: *La Prensa*.

3) The trial of William Burroughs for the death of his wife

At the Eighth Delegation, late Thursday night, Burroughs repeated to investigative agent Higuera Gil the Jurado-inspired "version #2" of the story: "While demonstrating his .38-caliber 'Star' pistol to some friends, a shot was produced and the bullet injured Joan in the forehead" (*Excelsior*).

In his holding cell, Burroughs must have been working on a written statement based on Jurado's advice, because to Lic. Higuera Gil, and in front of reporters that night, he read aloud a text that was reported verbatim in *La Prensa*—again, "version #2":

> "I am 37 years old. Three days ago I arrived in Mexico, accompanied by my wife, with whom I have been married for five years. We installed ourselves in 210 Orizaba, Colonia Roma.
>
> "At 3:00 P.M. I went to apartment 10 in 122 Monterrey to visit my friend John Healy. Hours later, we were all drunk.
>
> "I took my pistol from a valise and put it on the table; then I picked it up again, to demonstrate to those present how to handle it, and while I was playing with it the shot was produced that killed my wife, who was seated before me.
>
> "She fell to the floor and I thought she was playing a trick, but one of my friends informed me that she was hit. Then I lifted her up and seated her on an easy chair.
>
> "All my friends left. After that, my wife was taken by persons from the Red Cross. I went to that institution to find out her condition.
>
> "Later, from a friend of mine, I knew that Joan had died."

The papers next morning duly reported that Burroughs and his wife had arrived "as tourists" and "from Panama," only "three days before" the fatal event; that they had previously been in Mexico, thinking of buying land; and that lately they had been looking for land in South America instead, just before their return together.

As we know, none of this was true: they had both resided continuously in Mexico for two years; and Joan was alone in Mexico City in July and August 1951, with her two children (except for the visit by Ginsberg and Carr), while Burroughs was in Ecuador with Marker. This obviously-phony story seems to originate—once again—with Jurado, and it may have something to do with some shady moves he was making as he worked on Burroughs' Mexican immigration status.

U.S. citizens who entered Mexico on a tourist visa were obliged to go back to the border after six months to renew their papers; based on Burroughs' letters, it appears he did just this. On May 1, 1950, he wrote to Ginsberg, giving "Route 1, Pharr, Texas" as his return address: "I am still in process of getting my citizenship papers. The immigration dept. is like Kafka. Fortunately I have retained a competent advocate skilled in the intricacies of bureaucratic procedure."

But Burroughs had a problem: for all he knew, the State of Louisiana had issued an interstate bench warrant for his arrest, and this might come to light during any visa formalities on the U.S. side of the border. A recent search of Louisiana's extradition archives indicates that, actually, no such warrant was issued, nor any attempt made—after Burroughs' no-show at the State drug-charges hearing in New Orleans on Oct. 27, 1949—to pursue him as a fugitive. Very likely Link, his lawyer, was able to signal the prosecutors that his client had gone to Mexico, and he had lost touch with him—and this may have been good enough for the Federal and State agents following the case.

Why was it necessary for Burroughs to tell the reporters around him, on the night of Sept. 6, that he had arrived only three days before, by plane from Panama, and as a "tourist" in Mexico? If Jurado had made any progress at all toward achieving Burroughs' goal of "Mexican citizenship," surely Burroughs would have enjoyed some interim status that would have protected him. Then again, Burroughs may simply have let his last visa expire.

Apparently Jurado had told Mexican officials at the Instituto Nacional de Migración, or allowed them to believe, that his client *was not in Mexico* during 1950–1951. If Mexican immigration authorities could not access Burroughs' U.S. State Department files (concerning his cash benefits from the "G.I. Bill"), nor his enrollment and academic records at Mexico City College (run by wealthy, influential Americans), they could never prove Burroughs was "in country." But the eruption of attention caused by the Vollmer shooting made some explanation necessary.

Releasing Healy and Herrmann later on the night of Sept. 6, investigative agent Higuera Gil detained only Burroughs. Late Friday morning he remitted him to the Director of the Penitentiary of the Distrito Federal—that is to say, to the "Black Palace of Lecumberri," on the Avenida Eduardo Molino. (Inaugurated in 1900, the enormous structure was built on the starfish-shaped "panopticon" design for prisons, pioneered by the English philosopher, Jeremy Bentham.)

Lic. Higuera's remand letter states that Burroughs was being held as "presumed responsible for the crime of homicide." Burroughs would have been held with other provisional detainees, apart from the general, long-term population of the prison.

La Prensa says he was found at noon on Friday in the courtyard of the penitentiary—out of his cell, in the open air—and taking questions from reporters from the "national and foreign press." Did Burroughs at that moment really want to face the press? or were a dozen reporters and photographers allowed access to a reluctant, bewildered prisoner?


Un Trabajador y una Joven
Muertos por dos Gendarmes
LA PRENSA
QUISO DEMOSTRAR
SU PUNTERIA Y
MATÓ A SU MUJER
Crimen de un Norteamericano
Durante Escandalosa Juerga

Photos: *La Prensa*.

In a photograph obtained by García-Robles from the archives of *La Prensa*, we see Burroughs at Lecumberri reading the front page of the Sept. 7 edition, whose headline screams: "HE WANTED TO DEMONSTRATE HIS MARKSMANSHIP, AND HE KILLED HIS WIFE."

Three other stories published that morning focused on the Healy-Herrmann contradictions to offer up a "jealousy angle," which Burroughs—interestingly—now went out of his way to deny and contradict. He read aloud to the reporters a new statement, "version #3," and it was transcribed by all five D.F. newspapers—*La Prensa*, *Novedades, El Nacional, El Universal* and *Excelsior*—in their Sept. 8 stories:

> "My wife had taken several cups [of alcohol]. I pulled out the pistol to show it to someone. My wife was seated approximately 8 or 10 feet from me. The pistol slipped and fell, striking itself on a table, and discharged.
>
> "At first, I thought she was attempting a joke when she fell down, and I went to where she was. I moved her onto an easy chair. Then someone called the Red Cross, but Joan did not return from her swoon.
>
> "All was purely accidental. I am sure that none of those who were present could doubt that it was all accidental.
>
> "The jealousy angle that has been brought up by the newspapers is absolutely ridiculous. I loved my wife and I had no reason to be jealous.
>
> "I did not put any glass on her head. If she did so, it was a joke, and certainly I did not try to shoot at the glass.
>
> "Bernabé Jurado is my lawyer and I expect he will prove that it has all been an unfortunate accident."

Excelsior adds an interesting coda to their report of this statement by Burroughs:

> "I wish to put on record my gratitude to the Mexican authorities, who have treated me with every kind of consideration and in the most correct way."

Novedades also reported that Burroughs was being held in Cellblock H of the prison, where he was "protected by the underworld figure [*hampón*], Miguel Yancovich." *El Nacional* would later refer to Jurado as "*el abogado de hampa*"—"the underworld lawyer."

Saturday, Sept. 8, was Burroughs' first formal hearing. He listened and spoke from behind a wire-caged area as his lawyers contended with the prosecutor and the judge of instruction. Burroughs was represented by Jurado and his associate, Margarito Perez Armenta. Acting as *fiscal*, or prosecutor, was the Mexican novelist, Rogelio Barriga Rivas. The state's evidence was presented by Lic. Hurtado; and the *juez instructor* was Lic. Eduardo Urzaíz Jiménez, tenth judge of the fourth penal court. An interpreter, Maximino V. Mawa, translated between Spanish and English for the court.

According to *El Nacional* and *La Prensa*, Burroughs repeated the testimony of his "version #3," but with three new elements: (1) that he had gone to the Monterrey apartment to visit "his friend Luis [*sic*] Marker, who lives in apartment 10" and "who was in the company of another friend, Edward [*sic*] Woods"; (2) that he and Joan were standing up (*parados*) when the gun went off; and (3) that he had owned the gun six months but had not touched it in the last three months, so he did not know if it was loaded, and when he pulled back the slide to see that the chamber was empty, the gun fired. Some newspapers called this "version #4."

Burroughs was questioned first by Judge Urzaíz, and then by Lic. Barriga Rivas. (The prosecutor's novel, *La mayordomia*, was published in 1952—a year before the suspect's first book, *Junkie*—and was later filmed as *Animas Trujano*, in 1962.) Burroughs told Ted Morgan that Barriga Rivas was an old friend of Bernabé Jurado, from law school.

To Barriga, Burroughs explained why he picked up the gun: "My friend, Mr. Adams, who was present at the gathering, asked me to show him the pistol, because he might be interested in it and might want to buy it from me."

This must refer to Bob Addison, whose name the reporters—or Burroughs himself—may have mis-heard. Eddie Woods recalled the name as "Bob Allison," and told Ted Morgan: "Nobody dropped in [at Healy's apartment on the afternoon of Sept. 6] except earlier, Bob Allison, who lived in the building, and his girlfriend, who was seventeen, and there was [Betty Jones?]. They stopped in for a moment just visiting, then they left." And John Healy, in our 1991 conversations, told stories about "Bob Adams," "Bob Anderson," and "Bob Addison" as if they were all the same person.

Robert Eugene Addison, from Columbus, Ohio, was almost 26 at the time of Joan's death. He first applied to M.C.C. in 1948 to study psychology and radio journalism. His negligible scholastic performance over three years bottomed-out in the Fall Quarter of 1951 and he was refused re-admission for the Winter Quarter of 1952. According to John Healy, Addison's uncle was Edward Arnold, a 1930s–1940s movie star whose son, Edward Arnold, Jr., also worked in Hollywood. Healy remembered that he ran into Addison years later in California, wearing the uniform of a Venice Beach policeman. But Healy also remembered that in Mexico City, "Bob Anderson couldn't buy a water pistol. Never had enough money ... when he did get any extra money, he bought clothes."

Another revelation at the Sept. 8 hearing was the Burroughs-Vollmer divorce filing in Cuernavaca in 1950. Four papers reported this, the grounds given ranging from "they were tired of each other" to "he was bored with her," or "for lack of understanding"—but two papers coincided in mentioning their "continual arguments" and Burroughs' "drunkenness" as reasons. More likely, it was his heavy morphine use. It was noted by all observers that Burroughs said that he and Joan had reconciled, and dropped the formal divorce proceedings.

There is an intriguing passage in *Naked Lunch* that seems to be based on an actual incident in Cuernavaca, and the first-draft typescripts of this passage (in the collection of Ohio State University) confirm that Burroughs first composed these lines using Joan's real name. When I asked Burroughs about this passage in August 1991, he asserted—not very convincingly—that the scene was entirely fictional:

> In Cuernavaca or was it Taxco? Jane meets a pimp trombone player and disappears in a cloud of tea smoke. The pimp is one of these vibration and dietary artists—which is a means [by which] he degrades the female sex by forcing his chicks to swallow all this shit. He was continually enlarging his theories ... he would quiz a chick and threaten to walk out if she hadn"t memorized every nuance of his latest assault on logic and the human image.
>
> "Now, baby. I got it here to give. But if you won"t receive it there"s just nothing I can do."
>
> He was a ritual tea smoker and very puritanical about junk the way some teaheads are. He claimed tea put him in touch with supra blue gravitational fields. He had ideas on every subject: what kind of underwear was healthy, when to drink water, and how to wipe your ass. He had a shiny red face and great spreading smooth nose, little red eyes that lit up when he looked at a chick and

> went out when he looked at anything else. His shoulders were very broad and suggested deformity. He acted as if other men did not exist, conveying his restaurant and store orders to male personnel through a female intermediary. And no Man ever invaded his blighted, secret place.
>
> So he is putting down junk and coming on with tea. I take three drags, Jane looked at him and her flesh crystallized. I leaped up screaming "I got the fear!" and ran out of the house. Drank a beer in a little restaurant — mosaic bar and soccer scores and bullfight posters — and waited for the bus to town.
>
> A year later in Tangier I heard she was dead.

Without being able to identify the (presumably American) "pimp trombone player" in this story, it remains impossible to assess its relationship to the divorce action entered into by Burroughs and Vollmer in the fall of 1950.

At the end of the Sept. 8, 1951, hearing, Bernabé Jurado approached Judge Urzaíz and told him that he was going to petition for Burroughs' release from prison, because "he only committed a crime in a manner mostly accidental, or through imprudence."

The judge did not agree; he ordered Burroughs bound over through Sunday for more hearings on Monday, and issued citations for Marker and Woods to appear and testify at the next court date.

Jurado (rear), typist, Healy, Mawa, Burroughs (in cage), Sept. 10, 1951.

Monday, Sept. 10, was the third day of Burroughs' imprisonment. The law required that within 72 hours of his arrest, the prisoner's status must be determined to a particular standard for him to be held longer; either *formal prisión* would be decreed for him, or he would be freed.

Again at this hearing were (at least): the accused; his defender Jurado; the investigator Hurtado; the Judge Urzaíz; and the interpreter Mawa. This time they were joined by four witnesses: Eddie Woods; Lewis Marker; Betty Jones and John Healy. They testified in that order,

as Burroughs' older brother, Mortimer Burroughs, Jr., looked on. Mort had arrived the day before on a plane from St. Louis, sent by their parents to do what he could to save his brother.

Visible in a news photograph are: (unidentified, possibly Barriga Rivas); Bernabé Jurado; stenographer; John Healy; interpreter Mawa; (unidentified, possibly Lic. Perez Armenta); and at far right, behind a wire cage, William Burroughs.

El Universal's writer noticed that Burroughs was noticeably nervous while Woods offered the first testimony. From what Woods and Marker each told Ted Morgan years later, we know they had been summoned from their hiding place to a coaching meeting with Jurado in the lawyer's sumptuous penthouse in the trendy Zona Rosa, not far from Mexico City College or—for that matter—from the scene of the crime. In 1985 Woods remembered that:

> We called Jurado, and on at least two occasions, maybe three ... Marker and I—who were more or less staying away from 122 Monterey and the Bounty and all that—went over to Jurado's very lavish townhouse late at night to discuss this with him, while he set up the story for us. And we were followed [by plainclothes police] every time we left there.

A pair of news photographs captures the facial expressions of Jurado, Woods, Marker and Jones during a smoke break before or after the Sept. 10 hearing. Marker looks anxious, compared to Woods' breezy, self-assured posture; Betty Jones looks haggard and apprehensive, and Jurado's suspicious scowl is almost melodramatic.

Jurado, Woods, Marker at Lecumberri; Betty Jones (Marker, rear), same day. *La Prensa*.

El Universal reported that Marker testified that Burroughs stood up, pulled back the pistol's slide, and accidentally fired, from three meters' distance—"version #4," in other words.

Woods stated he had known the Burroughses less than 25 days, did know not know any "Mr. Adams," but was introduced that day to "Mr. Addison," who he understood was interested in

buying a pistol. (Apparently the Adams-Addison-Anderson name confusion occurred in the questions put to him.)

Betty Jones and John Healy both swore they were not present at the moment of the shooting.

Only the end of Betty Jones' testimony, and all of John Healy's, are presently available from the judicial files. Both witnesses claimed to have known the Burroughs couple for less than a year, and both said that their marriage seemed close and loving, and the couple was often seen eating or drinking together.

Healy stated that he was from Hibbing, Minnesota, aged 35, residing in apartment 10 at 122 Monterrey; and that the party started around 2:00 P.M.—but that when he left, the Burroughs couple was with Mr. Addison, and when he returned around 9:00 P.M., he could see (and was told) what had happened.

There was also testimony from the *médicos legistas*, the forensic doctors who performed the autopsy on Joan's body at Juarez Hospital:

> The cadaver presented small, old scratch-like scars on the exterior, and bruise-discolorations of the first degree on its lower members, and likewise a wound by a projectile from a firearm, with a circular entry-orifice of 7 millimeters diameter and a depression of 3 millimeters, situated in the frontal region, 4.5 centimeters to the left of the mid-line [of the forehead], and without any exit wound.

The absence of an exit wound, from a .38-caliber bullet fired at a distance of only six feet, might suggest that the Czech-made "Star" .380 pistol had misfired, or that the cartridge had an insufficient powder charge . But the .380 shell is a standard short load, and a through-and-through head-shot would be unusual, even in this case.

At the conclusion of the hearing Judge Urzaíz determined that, all things considered, Burroughs could rightfully be held for *formal prisión*. In his ruling he cited the legal grounds for this decision:

> The *corpus delicti* of the crime is found fully proved within Articles 94, 96, 105 and 121 of the Code of Penal Proceedings, in relation to Articles 302 to 304 of the Penal Code [...] and furthermore, that the death occurred within the time period prescribed by section II of Article 303 of the Penal Code. [...]
>
> In the opinion of the undersigned, the investigation lays out enough facts to make possible the legal guilt of the detainee William Seward Burroughs in the crime of murder that is imputed to him, for he himself confesses that the shot that wounded and caused the death of Joan Vollmer Burroughs was produced by the pistol that, in the event, he had in his hands. [...]
>
> The crime of murder deserves physical punishment, according to Articles 307 and other relevant ones in the Penal Code.

Most of the cited laws of D.F. remain unchanged today, in the *Código Penal para el Distrito Federal*.

Articles 94 and 96 are within Title Fifth ("Extinguishment of Penal Responsibility"), Chapter IV, headed "Recognition of innocence and pardon." They provide for the release of the accused "when it appears that the person sentenced is innocent."

Article 105, in Chapter VI of the same Title, headed "Prescription," says: "The penal action will prescribe a period of the arithmetical one-half of the term for the penalty of deprivation of liberty that is indicated for the crime in question, but in no case will it be less than three years."

Articles 302, 303, 304 and 307 are in Title Nineteenth ("Crimes Against Life and Bodily Integrity"), Chapter II, headed "Homicide."

Article 302: "He who deprives another of life commits the crime of homicide."

Article 303, paraphrased: To apply the corresponding sanctions, a wound will not be considered mortal unless these circumstances are present: (I.) that death is due to physiological changes caused by the wound, or their immediate consequences or inevitable complications; (II.) [repealed 1994]; and (III.) that if the deceased's body is found, two experts, after making an autopsy, declare that the wound was mortal.

Article 304, paraphrased: Whenever these three circumstances are verified, a wound will always be considered mortal even though it might be proved that (I.) death could have been avoided by timely (medical) assistance; or (II.) that the wound would not have been mortal for other persons; or (III.) that death was due to the victim's physical constitution, or the circumstances in which the wound was received.

And Article 307: "Upon the party responsible for any simple, intentional homicide, unless a special sanction is indicated in this Code, will be imposed 8 to 20 years' imprisonment."

Burroughs was facing serious charges indeed.

The next day, Sept. 11, Bernabé Jurado filed a petition for *amparo*. This was a standard legal maneuver, amounting to a writ of *habeas corpus*. It represented a request, to a different court, that the accused should be protected from wrongful actions by the court that had ordered imprisonment, and, for that matter, by the director of the penitentiary, for holding the prisoner wrongfully. How routine it was can be seen from the fact that "Lola la Chata" had petitioned for *amparo* on a narcotics-trafficking arrest in May 1951.

Burroughs himself often said later that Jurado suborned one or more "ballistics experts" who testified that the story of a handling-error misfire—"version #4"—was consistent with the bullet's trajectory and lethal effects. But no such testimony is mentioned in the Penitentiary's files from the *amparo* hearing (a month later)—which contain the only available pages from the document written after the Sept. 10 hearing—and there is no official document at hand to show when or under what circumstances Burroughs was freed from the penitentiary after two weeks.

We can infer that Jurado was boasting to Burroughs about his control of the "ballistics experts" because *Novedades* mentioned skeptically that such experts might "opine that none of the versions is certain, because of the bullet's high trajectory," and *El Nacional* noted that "previously there was the danger that [Burroughs'] defense would collapse when the ballistics experts entered an opinion in which the trajectory that the bullet followed would be shown." But none of the newspapers or court documents obtained so far make any mention of the appointment of such experts, or any testimony from them.

The *fondo de amparo* was admitted for filing with the first judge of the Distrito Federal for penal matters, Lic. Antonio Fernández Vera, and a hearing was set for noon on Oct. 27.

I found no report, in any of the five newspapers, that Burroughs was conditionally released from prison on Friday, Sept. 21, but several sources point to thirteen days as the exact length of his Lecumberri stay, which began on Sept. 7. When the Mexican reporters allowed themselves to speculate about the results of the hearings, they made reference to "*baja caución*" and "*libertad condicional*" as possible outcomes—i.e., release on bail. It may be that the *amparo* petition was enough to cast legal doubt upon the validity of Burroughs' imprisonment, and to obtain his temporary freedom, pending a hearing on that petition.

As if to assure himself that the prisoner was unlikely to flee, on Sept. 19, Judge Urzaíz's first secretary, Lic. Manuel Monroy Baigén, wrote to the director of the penitentiary to request a search for any record of the accused's previous imprisonment there. On Oct. 17, Lic. José Fabah,

the prison's general secretary, answered that Burroughs had never been incarcerated in Lecumberri before.

Upon his release Burroughs was reunited with his brother Mortimer, who had turned 40 earlier that year. They had not seen each other for at least three years; the last time may have been in early 1948, before Burroughs' narcotics treatment in Lexington, Kentucky, when he apparently visited his family in St. Louis before eventually returning to Texas.

Years later Burroughs recalled that in Mexico City in 1951, he and his brother had an emotional, drunken *rapprochement* that ended with them sleeping—or passing out—in the same bed.

Although he seemed a stolid, even dour man, sober in the extreme, Mortimer nevertheless was known to go on drinking binges that could last for several days, even in his later years (according to his daughter Laura). Perhaps the strain of his rescue mission to Mexico, or the freedom of being away from his wife, "Miggie," and twin daughters, Dorcas and Laura, led Mortimer to drink too much during his two weeks in Mexico City after Sept. 9.

In any case, Mort immediately made a negative impression on all Burroughs' friends: Marker, Healy, Jones and Woods. They found him haughty and condescending, and when he made a drunken pass at Betty Jones one night, they were quite offended. As Woods remembered in 1985:

> We went over to Burroughs' apartment on Orizaba a few days after the shooting incident to—as I recall, it was on the instructions of his lawyer—to clean up anything thing that might seem incriminating, just in case, because the Mexican Police had a reputation for simply entering and planting or taking away anything they wanted.
>
> And Mort was along—because, after all, he was in charge of all this—and he was a little high—and Lewis Marker, John Healy, Betty Jones—who was the wife of Glenn Jones, one of the people who I shared this apartment with—and Mortimer, who was a little snockered at the time ....
>
> He made a very ungraceful direct pass at Betty Jones, who was also a little drunk, and I felt insulted on behalf of my friend, Glenn, the absent husband, and said something to that effect to Mortimer—and Mortimer referred to her as "just another cheap broad," or something like that ... and that's when I decided I didn't like him very much, but gained, by comparison, some respect for his brother.
>
> That was the difference, that's when my attitude towards Burroughs started to change.
>
> Initially I went along with these things simply because my friend Marker asked me to, and because I saw what had actually happened ... but when I saw what a schmuck Mortimer was—who was representing the American Middle West, and night school, and upstanding living and the hard work, you know, and no vices—he was a whiny, mealy-mouthed puke.
>
> Compared to him, his brother looked all right to me. [...]
>
> Mort was a whiner, for one thing. He complained, he didn't handle his booze very well, and when he was in his cups—which was several times—he tended to denigrate his brother [and] whine about his own lack of opportunity when they were kids.
>
> I remember specifically: "But *I* had to go to night school and get my degree, and I've always worked," you know, "and that son of a bitch has never worked"—that sort of thing.

> And I say, "Hey, Burroughs is toughing it out in jail here, and here's the brother coming down here, he doesn't care what happens to him" ...
>
> He definitely gave me the impression that he just wanted it all [to] shut up and go away.
>
> He was assigned to do this. He didn't do it voluntarily. Obviously the family sent him.

In 1991 John Healy told Burroughs:

> Well, we went up to your apartment while you were up at the Black Palace, because you wanted us to get rid of some stuff you had at the apartment. When we got up there, the goddamn squad car was patrolling all over the place, so we crawled up the back and got in your window, and we got in your apartment and we found a pipe in there, looked like it was made out of cement or something, and we took that and a couple of syringes and some other shit like that, and we climbed back out—and how we did it without getting arrested, I will never know.
>
> Remember that theater that was down there? We went to that theater and dumped all of that stuff in one of the boxes in the theater.

Mort dealt with Jurado and his partners, and (reportedly) with the interment arrangements for Joan's body at the Panteón Americano. He also had to confront Mr. and Mrs. David Vollmer, Joan's parents; they had arrived from Albany, New York, soon after the shooting, and they were still in town when Burroughs was released. In an awkward, painful meeting with the Vollmers that Burroughs never forgot, it was settled that Mort would take the young children, Julie and Billy, to St. Louis, where Burroughs' own parents had offered to raise them both. The Vollmers eventually decided to raise their granddaughter themselves in Albany, leaving Billy with his grandparents in St. Louis.

The "*Registro de Inhumaciones*" at Panteón Americano indicate that Joan's remains were sent over by the Tangassi funeral parlor for interment, and that on Sept. 9 her body was placed in *fosa* 1018 in Section A / New. The cause of death was given as "injury from a bullet."

Nothing in the existing documents specifically confirms Burroughs' memory that Mortimer dealt with the cemetery, or that he paid "advance rent" on the burial plot for only seven years; but the latter practice would not have been uncommon at that time. The Panteón's records confirm that a fee of 320 Pesos was paid for the *fosa* (grave), but not by whom. But Mort had arrived on Sunday, Sept. 9, according to the newspaper stories, and William Burroughs could not have made any arrangements on that day, from jail.

On Sept. 24 the American Embassy mailed to Burroughs, at 210 Orizaba, a form entitled "Report of the Death of an American Citizen." This certificate—like the marriage-witness document Burroughs got at the U.S. Embassy in Athens when he married his first wife, in 1937—was a consular service offered to Americans abroad. It was usually requested by surviving kin.

The Embassy document states that Vollmer's last known address in the U.S. was "New Orleans, Louisiana"; that she was 27 years old at the time of her death; and that she was buried in "the American Cemetery" on Sept. 9. The cause of death was "Bullet wound penetrating cranium, as certified by Dr. Luis Lardizabal Gásparo." Her death was recorded at page 276, book 9 of the Second Civil Registry and signed by Enrique Ledesma. The "Local law as to disinterring remains" confirms: "Cannot be disinterred within seven years." The "Disposition of the

[deceased's personal] effects" was stated as: "In possession of husband, William Seward Burroughs."

Burroughs must have faced the sad task of disposing of Joan's clothing, books, and other personal belongings alone.

On Oct. 27 Burroughs' *amparo* petition was heard by Lic. Antonio Fernández Vera. By then Burroughs had been back home at 210 Orizaba for six weeks, signing in at 8:00 A.M. each Monday at Lecumberri prison to prove that he was still in town. From the ruling that Judge Fernández issued on Nov. 15, we can confirm the exact charges against Burroughs:

> The complainant himself agrees that the legal exigencies are fulfilled insofar as the objective facts that refer to the death of Joan Vollmer Burroughs, even if not to the subjective elements of the crime of murder, and in that which relates to the first assessment it is quite certain that the legal extremities of the crime of murder are proved, in terms of Articles 94, 96, 105, 106-121 and other relevant parts of the Code of Penal Proceedings, applicable in D.F. and the Territories. [...]
>
> Basically, the facts that caused the arrest of William Seward Burroughs and the ruling of *formal prisión* consist of this: on [...] September 7 [*sic*], the complainant was in the building 122 Monterrey, apartment 10, where his friend John Healy lived, and where—in company with the wife of the same complainant and other persons—they were ingesting alcoholic beverages; and that at a given moment, the complainant took out of his holster a pistol, pulling back the slide, and producing a shot that caused the death of the now-deceased lady.
>
> Basically, this is the version of the witnesses Edwin John Woods [and] Louis [*sic*] Marker, but the petitioner cannot hold himself out as proving the exclusion of responsibility which is referred to in Fraction X of Article 15 of the Penal Code; that is to say, that if an injury was caused, that it was by mere accident, with neither intention nor any imprudence, carrying out a legal deed with all due precautions.
>
> So in a way, those extremities can be shown, even accepting the version given by the aggrieved and the witnesses, for even though the test offered would be in the nature of discarding the intentionality in the commission of the punishable deed, there exists the possibility and probability that the death of the victim would have been due to an *imprudencia*, for the complainant ought to have recognized the state of inebriation in which he found himself—he, who took no precaution to [determine] if the weapon was loaded, nor pointed the barrel in a direction in which no damage could be caused. [...]

Let us look more closely at the Fractions of Article 15, which is within Title First ("Penal Responsibility"), Chapter IV, "Causes for exclusion of [criminal responsibility]":

> A crime is "excluded" when:
>
> I. The deed occurs without the intervention of the actor's will;
>
> II. The absence of any of the elements integral to the typical description of the crime in question is shown;
>
> [...]
>
> VII. At the moment of the occurrence of the typical deed, the actor has not the capacity to comprehend the illegal character of it, or to conduct himself in

> accordance with that comprehension, by virtue of suffering a mental disorder or retarded intellectual development—but not where the actor might have culpably provoked his own mental disorder, in which case he will be responsible for the typical result, when he might have foreseen it or it was foreseeable.
>
> When the capacity referred to in the preceding paragraph is only "considerably" diminished, it will be at the disposition of Article 69-bis of this Code;
>
> VIII. The action, or omission, occurs due to an unavoidable error [...];
>
> X. The typical result is produced by an accidental situation. ("*El resultado típico se produce por caso fortúito*.")

Jurado's theory was the *caso fortúito* scenario. Alternatively, he might have relied upon Fraction VII., which refers to Article 69-bis, which is within Title Third ("Application of Sanctions"), Chapter V, "The treatment, in confinement or at liberty, of un-blameable persons (*inimputables*) and of those who have the habit or the necessity to consume intoxicants or psychotropic drugs"—(an Article that, we should note, may have been codified into law some time after 1951):

> If the capacity of the actor to comprehend the illegal nature of the deed, or to guide himself in accord with that comprehension, is diminished only by the causes indicated in Fraction VII of Article 15 of this Code, then, in the judgment of the Judge, he will proceed thusly: there will be imposed up to two-thirds of the penalty corresponding to the crime committed, or up to half the confinement in [psychiatric] security referred to in Article 69, or both, where it shall be necessary, taking into account the degree to which the "un-blameability" of the actor has affected him.

Burroughs' lawyer might have argued that his client was an alcoholic and a drug addict, within the definitions of Chapter V., Title Third, and that his diminished responsibility therefore dictated the sentencing reductions provided in Article 69-bis. More than that, he might have emphasized Fraction I. of Chapter IV, Article 15: that the deed had occurred without the necessary element of will, or intent. But Jurado was going for the whole Fraction X. *tamale*: everything was "purely accidental."

Judge Fernández was required to decide only whether the accused's rights, as guaranteed by Mexican law, had been violated. He ruled that they had not, and that the imprisonment of Burroughs was legal. After citing the testimony of Lic. Luis Hurtado Vaca a Vaca—Burroughs' "version #1," given in the courtyard of Cruz Roja—and Judge Urzaíz's written findings and rulings, Fernández issued his *amparo* ruling, excerpted here:

> The Justice of the Union does not shelter nor protect William Seward Burroughs against the acts that he complains of, by the 10th judge of the 4th penal court and the Director of the Penitentiary of D.F., consisting of (as to the former) the act of formal imprisonment that [the judge] decreed on September 10, as presumed guilty of the crime of murder; and as to [the actions] that the latter took in the execution of such resolution, since he was carrying out a legitimate mandate from a competent authority.

Newspaper coverage of the Oct. 27 hearing was small; *Excelsior, La Prensa* and *El Nacional* ran brief stories.

If the pendency of the *amparo* petition underlay Burroughs' freedom on bail, this ruling ought to have ended it. But Burroughs remained free, under weekly supervision. He later told Ted Morgan that he put up a bond of "$2,312" and paid Jurado a $2,000 fee, plus $300 "to bribe the four ballistics experts appointed by the court"—if any such experts were, in fact appointed.

But Eddie Woods told Ted Morgan, "I realized that the Burroughs' family was paying through the nose all the time and [must have laid out] ten, twenty thousand dollars. He did jump bond, didn't he?" Wood's speculation about these fees is uncorroborated.

In any case, Burroughs lived quietly in the Orizaba Street apartment after September 1951, nursing a case of hepatitis ("jaundice") and being looked after by his temporary roommate, Lewis Marker; Burroughs' letters to Ginsberg at this time reveal his undimmed hope that Marker would come with him to South America (with little Billy in tow, of course). But Marker went back to the States after only a few weeks, plunging Burroughs into broken-hearted depression. He eventually recovered and turned his attention to the final manuscript assembly of *Junkie*—which Ginsberg had finally sold, to Ace Books in New York. Then in mid-November 1952, Burroughs suddenly decided to leave the country.

Bernabé Jurado had gotten himself in trouble: on Nov. 13 a car full of drunken teenagers sideswiped his brand-new Buick Roadmaster, parked in the street outside his home at Avenida México 187, and he fired a few shots at the car. A boy of seventeen, Mario Saldaña Cervantes, was struck by one bullet, but the wound was not immediately fatal.

Jurado went into hiding, and when the boy (whose family happened to be well known among many Mexican legislators) finally died on Nov. 29—allegedly from *meningitis supurativa*, or, as Burroughs remembered it, from blood poisoning caused by the bullet—the public outcries for justice reached as high as the offices of the newly-elected President, Avila Camacho. Jurado fled Mexico for the U.S. and then Europe, not to return for several years.

In a curiously slanted memoir of his relationship with Burroughs, Jurado himself is quoted in Maria Luisa Solares' 1981 book, *Bernabé Jurado: Litigante de su Destino*. In Jurado's memory:

> I got him out, *baja caución*. I don't remember how much I had to pay ... but I do remember that his brother came from Missouri, where the Burroughs company was located [*sic*]. He signed a promissory note for me that would cover the amount of 250,000 Pesos for the defense of his brother.
>
> The following day I obtained my client's freedom, and they did not pay me a single *centavo*, because he fled the country.
>
> And as I, too, had to leave precipitately, accused of a homicide, I left the matter pending.
>
> I re-encountered [Burroughs] in Morocco, in a cabaret in Casablanca.
>
> I wasn't sure that I recognized him, so to make sure, I approached from behind and said, "Hello, Bill."
>
> He spun around rapidly and said, "Oh, no ... ! " He was paralyzed.
>
> I suggested that we leave the cabaret, to discuss the case.
>
> He thought I was bringing an extradition order to take him back to Mexico. He was pale and out-of-breath.
>
> "Look," he told me, "I'll pay you all you want, but please don't take me back to prison."
>
> He gave me twenty thousand dollars.

This figure seems a little incredible, and it hardly seems likely that in Tangier in 1957, Burroughs would be afraid of Jurado's reappearance. In any case, he certainly could not have come up with that much money at the time, not even from his family. Jurado still wanted to believe in the myth of "the Burroughs millions." He was mistaken in thinking the "Burroughs company" was based in Missouri; its headquarters had been in Detroit since 1906. Another odd note is the alleged location of the encounter: Casablanca was not a place where Burroughs went very often—maybe only once.

Deprived of his legal protector in Mexico, and looking forward to the publication of *Junkie* sometime during the coming year in New York, in mid-November 1952 Burroughs rode to the Texas border in a car with "a Bolivian Trotskyite" whose name may have been "Tex" Riddle. If Burroughs had put up an appearance bond, surely it was forfeit when he fled.

Burroughs' parents had moved from St. Louis to Palm Beach in spring 1952 (perhaps their son's widely-reported uxoricide had undone the last of their tenuous social status in the wealthy society of Clayton/Ladue), and Burroughs went to Florida to see them and his son, Bill, Jr., now five years old.

From Florida, Burroughs set out in January on an eight-month trip, alone, through Panama, Ecuador, Colombia and Peru—again, in search of *yagé*. On May 5, from Lima, he said in a letter to Ginsberg: "Got a letter from Jurado. I am sentenced *in absentia*. I feel like Romans felt when they were exiled from Rome." Surely the latter remark was tongue-in-cheek. (It seems the formal sentencing order was actually handed down seven months later, as noted below.)

After a final visit to Mexico City in fall 1953, Burroughs returned to the U.S. and spent two months with Allen Ginsberg in the latter's New York apartment, working on what became *The Yage Letters*. In late December he sailed on a steamship to the Mediterranean, to meet Alan Ansen in Rome.

And on Dec. 14, 1953, back in Mexico City, the slow-grinding wheels of Mexican justice at last ground exceeding fine: Lic. Eduardo Urzaíz Jiménez found Burroughs guilty of homicide and sentenced him to two years in prison, less thirteen days served, with no reparations to be paid. The sentence was suspended, and no further effort was made by Mexico to capture or punish William Burroughs for the death of his wife.

Burroughs wrote or spoke about the shooting of Joan many times in the next forty years before his death, and since our "mock trial" should allow at least a sampling of all possible evidence, here is a selection of his comments on the event, in later life.

On February 7, 1954, he sent Ginsberg these lines, which were deliberately omitted (in Burroughs' lifetime) from the 1993 collection of his letters, edited by Oliver Harris:

> May yet attempt a story or some account of Joan's death. I suspect my reluctance is not at all because I think it would be in bad taste to write about it. I think I am *afraid*. Not exactly to discover unconscious intent, it's more complex, more basic, and more horrible, as if the brain *drew* the bullet toward it.
>
> Did I tell you Kells' dream the night of Joan's death? This was before he knew, of course. I was cooking something in a pot, and he asked what I was cooking and I said "Brains!" and opened the pot, showing what looked like "a lot of white worms." I forgot to ask him how I looked, general atmosphere, etc.
>
> To summarize, I pass along one of my specialized bits of wisdom, like "Always use poultry shears to cut off fingers":

> *Never* participate in active or passive role in *any* shooting things off of, or near one, or knife throwing or *anything similar*, and, if a bystander, always try to stop it.
>
> I told you of a horrible nightmare and depression and anxiety I had that whole day, so that I asked myself continually, "What in God's name is the matter with me?" ...
>
> One more point. The idea of shooting a glass off her head had *never entered my mind* consciously, until—out of the blue, as far as I can recall—(I was very drunk, of course), I said: "It's about time for our William Tell act. Put a glass on your head, Joan."
>
> Note all those precautions, *as though I had to do it,* like the original William Tell. Why, instead of being so careful, not give up on the idea?
>
> Why indeed? In my present state of mind, I am afraid to go too deep into the matter.
>
> I aimed carefully at six feet for the very top of the glass.

It is not to Burroughs' credit that, after he became famous with the 1959 publication of *Naked Lunch* and began to be interviewed for literary journals, he maintained the "cover-up" for many years. For example, in 1965 he was interviewed by Conrad Knickerbocker for *The Paris Review*, and when asked about his wife's death (fourteen years earlier), he said:

> I was [in Mexico] during the Alemán regime. If you walked into a bar, there would be at least fifteen people in there who were carrying guns. Everybody was carrying guns. They got drunk and they were a menace to any living creature. I mean, sitting in a cocktail lounge, you always had to be ready to hit the deck. [...]
>
> And I had that terrible accident with Joan Vollmer, my wife. I had a revolver that I was planning to sell to a friend. I was checking it over and it went off—killed her. A rumor started that I was trying to shoot a glass of champagne from her head, William Tell–style. Absurd and false.
>
> Then they had a big depistolization. Mexico City had one of the highest per capita homicide rates in the world.

An interview in summer 1974 with Andrew Wylie and Victor Bockris is excerpted in Bockris' 1988 book, *With William Burroughs: Report from the Bunker*. Here, Burroughs is questioned more aggressively, and answers more honestly (but without describing the "William Tell" scenario):

> BOCKRIS/WYLIE: How'd you feel when you shot your second wife?
>
> BURROUGHS: That was an accident.
>
> That is to say, if everyone is to be made responsible for everything they do, you must extend responsibility beyond the level of conscious intention. [...]
>
> On the day in which this occurred, I was walking down the street and suddenly I found tears streaming down my face.
>
> "What in hell is the matter? What in hell is wrong with you?"
>
> And then I took a knife to be sharpened which I had bought in Ecuador, and I went back to this apartment.
>
> Because I felt so terrible, I began throwing down one drink after the other. And then this thing occurred. [...]

> My lawyer came to see me [in jail]. Everyone's evidently overwhelmed by the situation, in tears, and he says, "Well, your wife is no longer in pain, she is dead. But don't worry: I, [Bernabé Jurado], am going to defend you."

When Burroughs sat for Howard Brookner's documentary biography in 1980, in a room at the old Chase Park Plaza Hotel in St. Louis, he finally gave a fairly straightforward account for Brookner's camera:

> BURROUGHS: We were down in Mexico and she began drinking quite heavily. She'd put away a quart of tequila a day, just slugging it down all day, you know. Never showed the least sign of being drunk.
>
> That day, I knew something awful was going to happen. I remember I was walking down the street, and tears started just streaming down my face. Well, if that happens to you, watch out, baby.
>
> You see, I've always felt myself to be controlled at some times by this completely malevolent force, which Brion [Gysin] describes as the Ugly Spirit. My walking down the street, and tears streaming down my face, meant that I knew that the Ugly Spirit—which is always the worst part of everyone's character—would take over, and that something awful would happen.
>
> I took a knife that I'd bought in Ecuador, and left it with a knife sharpener to be sharpened. I went back to the apartment where we were all meeting, and with this terrible sense of depression. And foolishly, of course, in order to relieve the depression, I started tossing down the drinks.
>
> Then I said to Joan: "It's about time for our William Tell act." And she put a glass on her head.
>
> I had this piece of .380 junk. I fired the shot. The glass hadn't been touched. Joan starts sliding down towards the floor. Then Marker said—[he] walked over and took one look at her—he said, "Bill, your bullet has hit her forehead."
>
> I said, "Oh, my God..."
>
> The ambulance came, the police came. I went down to police headquarters with them, and I hadn't been there five minutes when my lawyer walked in. He said, "Don't say anything Bill, don't say anything, this is a shooting accident."
>
> BROOKNER (off-camera): Had you done the William Tell thing before?
>
> BURROUGHS: Never. Never. Never. Just an absolute piece of insanity.

During 1983–1986 Burroughs was interviewed for a hundred hours by Ted Morgan. These passages are taken, not from *Literary Outlaw*, but from a new transcription of the original Burroughs-Morgan tapes:

> I'll never quite understand what happened. Allen was always making it out as a suicide on her part, that she was taunting me to do this, and I do not accept that cop-out. Not at all. Not at all. [...]
>
> I left for South America with Marker, it was very shortly after we got back that Joan was killed, the same week. [...]
>
> I started drinking. I get back to the apartment, go up there, and Joan is there. And in order to deal with this terrible depression, I start drinking more and more and more.
>
> I knew something was going to happen. Something very bad was going to happen. I didn't know what it was. [...]

> It was up in Healy's room, right above the Bounty Bar, where this happened. It was like a living room, bedroom with a sofa. Eddie Woods and Marker were both there. The gun was in a holster in a suitcase. I intended to bring the gun there, I went everywhere with a gun at this point.
>
> I suddenly say, "I guess it's about time for our William Tell act."
>
> I see her, she's sitting there in a chair. She takes a glass and slowly puts it onto her head. It was a cheap gun, a .380 automatic. I knew that it [might shoot] low.
>
> She put the glass up on her head, and now she has the glass on her head, and I shoot—and hit— and dead— and I'll never be ....
>
> Of course, I was drunk. It was an utterly and completely insane thing to do. I mean, quite apart from the fact [that] if I'd hit the glass, it would have been terribly dangerous for the two people sitting there! Glass splinters would have been flying everywhere.
>
> So it was literally an insane thing to do.

In the mid-1980s the original 1952 unfinished manuscript of *Queer* became available for publication, thanks to the philanthropist and manuscript collector, Robert H. Jackson. In late 1984 Burroughs forced himself to re-read his long-ago writings, and to remember the feelings and events of those dark years. He wrote an "Introduction" to the 1985 edition of *Queer*, in which he tried to confront Joan's death directly. He refers to a "cut-up" message created by his collaborator, Brion Gysin, around 1958:

> Brion Gysin said to me in Paris: "For ugly spirit shot Joan because ..." A bit of mediumistic message that was not completed—or was it? It doesn't need to be completed, if you read it: "Ugly spirit shot Joan *to be cause*"—that is, to maintain a hateful parasitic occupation. [...]
>
> I had bought a Scout knife in Quito. [...] It was about three o'clock in the afternoon, a few days after I came back to Mexico City, and I decided to have the knife sharpened. The knife-sharpener had a little whistle and a fixed route, and as I walked down the street towards his cart, a feeling of loss and sadness that had weighed on me all day so [much that] I could hardly breathe intensified to such an extent that I found tears streaming down my face. [...]
>
> I am forced to the appalling conclusion that I would never have become a writer but for Joan's death, and to a realization of the extent to which this event has motivated and formulated my writing. I live with the constant threat of possession, a constant need to escape from possession, from Control. So the death of Joan brought me in contact with the invader, the Ugly Spirit, and maneuvered me into a lifelong struggle, in which I have had no choice except to write my way out.

This last paragraph has been quoted so often that most Burroughs scholars know it by heart. When Canadian filmmaker David Cronenberg made a film in 1992 loosely based on *Naked Lunch*, he took Burroughs' words here quite literally, and in the concluding scenes he even repeated the shooting of "Jane" as "Lee's" response to a demand from a border official in "Annexia" who asks "Lee" to show him that he really is a writer ... !

Other commentators have taken Burroughs' statements in the *Queer* introduction as a sort of "key" to the writer's *oeuvre*, again taking his words at face value: to redeem himself of the sin of murder, William Burroughs dedicated his life to writing. But this *apologia* may be just a bit disingenuous, because Burroughs had already written a nearly-complete draft of *Junkie* by December 1950, eight months before Joan's death.

4) The judgment of history.

Now let us reconstruct what really happened. In this trial the defense would surely stipulate to the facts of the shooting of Joan Vollmer by William Burroughs, at the time and place alleged, and the death of Vollmer at Cruz Roja as a direct result of the shooting.

But for a conviction of first-degree murder (in U.S. law), or of *homicidio* (in the law of the Distrito Federal), the prosecution must prove homicidal intent.

What was Burroughs' motive for wanting Vollmer dead?

First, they had been estranged for at least a year. The Cuernavaca divorce move—whether it was formally filed, or filed by both or only one of them—proves that all was not well between them. The newspaper stories point to alcohol, and certainly that was a major factor. There were also drugs: benzedrine, morphine, probably cocaine, and certainly cannabis. Joan was physically ill, with her drug abuse and the after-effects of her bout with polio in New Orleans, and possibly other conditions.

And Burroughs was sexually unfaithful: in New Orleans and in Mexico City he freely allowed himself relationships with boys, and made no effort to conceal these from his wife.

Burroughs was demonstrably more mobile and organized than Joan in summer 1951—exactly when his wife's physical and mental collapse (not to mention the welfare of their two children) posed their greatest threat to his freedom from responsibility. He wanted out, and he wanted to take the children (or Billy at least) and live with Lewis Marker in a jungle fantasy.

We can debate how consciously he acknowledged it to himself, but for him, Joan had undeniably become a "drag on the industry." Burroughs had good reasons for wishing her gone.

And what about the "jealousy angle" ? Despite Joan's physical condition and looks, she was lively enough to be drunk and sexual with Lucien Carr, just days before her death.

Could Joan also have been having an affair with John Herrmann, another alcoholic writer who put little emphasis on marital fidelity? Or with John Healy, also alcoholic and promiscuous at that time?

One uncorroborated source (Graham Seidman, based on what Burroughs told him when they were both around the "Beat Hotel" in Paris in the late 1950s) even suggests that Joan had slept with Lewis Marker, and that perhaps Burroughs had surprised them *in flagrante*.

Any one of these situations could have contributed to Burroughs' wish to kill Vollmer. He wanted the Marker boy all to himself, and in fact, for a few months after killing Joan, they did live together, in what was probably their most intimate period.

And in the long run, what were Burroughs' consequences? Two weeks in jail, and a year of getting up early every Monday. His parents paid for everything, and even took his little boy off his hands. He could do exactly what he wanted now, with Joan out of the way.

Then, even if you strike down the homicidal intent, there is still the criminal carelessness. Burroughs was always playing with guns, he bought and sold them, showed them to people in public, even drunkenly threatened people with them, and sometimes had the guns taken away from him.

Burroughs thought of himself as a tough guy, but really he was merely less fearful of other people when he was carrying a gun. He was an inveterate show-off and grandstander, and very resentful when his ego-balloon was pricked by anyone—as it so often was, because he had an enormous weakness for folly and superstition. He was a drunken coward with a gun, who shot his annoying wife.

Finally, this so-called drunkenness does not excuse anything. There is conflicting testimony on whether Burroughs or Vollmer drank anything at the gathering that day, or whether or how drunk they were when they arrived.

Certainly Burroughs' doctored "statements" after the fact emphasize that "everyone was very drunk," as do the statements of the Jurado-coached witnesses Marker and Woods. But Mexican law does not allow alcoholic intoxication as a complete defense of diminished capacity; to have recourse to that protection, the accused's defender must show that he was mentally incapacitated and had not "culpably provoked *his own* mental disorder," by "throwing down the drinks."

Even though he was drinking, Burroughs was not out of his mind; he was just drunk—but still culpable.

Now, the defense:

Burroughs did not hate Joan Vollmer or want her dead. He probably had no idea what he wanted to happen to her. What was uppermost in his tortured mind was his one-sided, doomed love affair with Lewis Marker—an affair that had preoccupied him for five intense months. And this same 21-year-old boy was present at the scene of the shooting.

Burroughs and Marker had just ended, in a miserably failed way, their two-month quasi-honeymoon expedition in South America. Now Marker was reunited with his childhood friend, Eddie Woods, who was as thoroughly heterosexual as Marker was privately flexible. In front of Eddie, there would be no "queer" affection or warmth shown by Lewis to Bill.

Joan had grown increasingly provocative and hurtful. She knew exactly what to say and where to strike, to puncture Burroughs' ego. Evidently, at the fatal party, she saw fit to mock his grandiose plans to take their little family to Ecuador and live off the land—again, in front of Marker (and Woods).

Of course, Burroughs may have taken similar verbal pot-shots at her at times, in private or even in the company of others; but in general, he had a life-long aversion to "scenes," and would usually go out of his way to avoid one.

Perhaps Burroughs *did* dare Vollmer to take part in a shooting stunt; perhaps he even placed the glass on her head himself (although that is not at all clear, from the evidence). But for Joan to leave the glass on her head, and to pose with it as a target, means that we must apportion to her a large share of the responsibility for what happened when he missed.

Allen Ginsberg (who privately questioned Marker in Florida in 1954, and Woods in California in the 1960s, about the shooting) made these remarks in the 1983 *Burroughs* film:

> My impression when we left [Joan in Mexico City in late August 1951] was that there was something scary about her—suicidal. [...]
>
> Just as she had said to Lucien, "How fast can this heap go?" I think she said to Bill, [like] "shoot that off my head." I always thought that she had kind of challenged him into it—that it was sort of like using him to ... that she was, in a sense, using him to get her off the earth, because I think she was in a great deal of pain.
>
> Years later, I've heard a few different things from Bill. He said that he wept a great deal. He also said that at one time many years ago he was puzzled by what got into him that he would actually pick up on it.

Though Ginsberg was inclined to defend and excuse his friend, he is not the only observer who felt that Joan was suicidal. Lucien Carr saw the same thing: "After Joan was killed, I remember thinking that she was much more the Sender than Bill was ... that the shooting was really her doing." (Oct. 11, 1999, to me, at his home in Washington, D.C.)

Even Hal Chase, who was fond of Joan and unimpressed by Burroughs, said to Ted Morgan: "She wanted to die, and she offered Bill a chance to kill somebody. That William Tell stuff was a

sham. [Her] death was a put-up thing to release Bill, to let him commit 'the ultimate crime'—he was childish about things like that. [...] Joan gave her life for Bill."

It is even questionable whether Burroughs made the famous "William Tell" remark. Eddie Woods says he did not, and the Mexican journalists might well have supplied the phrase in the first hours after the event.

Of course, in Friedrich von Schiller's 1804 play, William Tell was *forced* by the wicked Governor of Schwytz to shoot, with bow and arrow, an apple off his young son's head—and the whole point of the story is that Tell managed to *hit* the apple and spare his son, and later, to avenge himself on the man who tormented him. If Burroughs did mention this old Swiss legend, it confirms his intention to shoot the glass, and not his wife's forehead.

Burroughs had just returned from two months in Ecuador with his would-be boyfriend; how could he be jealous about anyone with whom his wife might have slept while he was away?

Granted, we do see his capacity to be jealous of her in the *Naked Lunch* passage about "Cuernavaca, or was it Taxco?"—but was that the jealousy of a cuckold, or of an intimate friend feeling ignored and neglected by his confidant?

If Joan had any sexual relations with Carr, or Herrmann, or even Marker, and if Burroughs knew about that, it could only be because Joan told him about it—which would have been a further example of hurtful provocation.

As for Joan's possible extramarital liaisons, the only scenario that would have elicited Burroughs' jealousy is the least likely: Joan having sex with Marker. Burroughs could demonstrably be possessive of Marker—but probably not of Joan.

Burroughs tells us that he heard the whistle of the itinerant knife-sharpener, and decided to sharpen a Boy Scout knife that he had bought in Quito. He was then overwhelmed by an "inexplicable" feeling of depression. This he followed by "tossing down drinks," and he "went back to the apartment where we were all meeting" (Brookner film interview, and Bockris/Wylie interviews).

In his interview with Morgan, Burroughs says: "I get back to the apartment, go up there, and Joan is there." Compare the above to *El Universal*'s report of what John Healy said on Sept. 6: "Joan arrived at 1:00 P.M. [...] and twenty minutes later, her husband arrived."

These details suggest that perhaps Burroughs was already *with* Marker and Woods when he heard the knife-sharpener's whistle, then excused himself to take the knife down to the street for sharpening. Later he returned to the apartment, to find that Joan had arrived in the meantime, and was talking with the two boys.

Was she there to meet John Healy? He told reporters he was around the apartment that day, but left in the early afternoon. Vollmer, he said, arrived around 1:00 P.M., and Burroughs arrived twenty minutes later; when Healy left, they were both there.

Was she there to meet John Herrmann? She had probably seen Herrmann in Guadalajara with Ginsberg and Carr only a few days before, and he had just arrived in Mexico City. Burroughs told *Excelsior* that when he arrived at the apartment, Herrmann was there with Vollmer, Healy and Marker. Hermann was also present in the apartment in the moments after the shooting, but he denied knowing the couple very well, and what he said about the brief meetings from which he knew them matches up with Herrmann's year in Mexico City, in 1950.

Had Joan and Bill quarreled at their apartment in the three days since he got back to town, after two months away? However much money had arrived from the Texas land sale in June 1951, Burroughs was broke when he got back, and presumably Joan and her household were also flat. Several observers say that Burroughs went to Healy's apartment to sell a gun because he was short of cash. How had she been feeding the children, or paying for her daily tequila?

And what is the mysterious significance of the knife-sharpener and his whistle?

The trade of the Mexico City *afilador de cuchillos* is a traditional one, sometimes coming down through families. The *afilador* typically rides a bicycle with a whetstone mounted on one of the wheels, so that he can stop and elevate his bike on a kickstand and spin the stone with the pedals. His pipe—called variously a *flauta*, *siringa*, or *zampoña*, but usually *silvato*—is a simple panpipe, a row of reeds of different lengths lashed together, and his melody is a plain but haunting *glissando* up and down the scale of his pipes. And he calls out: "*¡Cuchillos, navajas, tijeras que afilaaaaar!*"

The panpipe is, of course, one of mankind's oldest musical instruments, and its invention is attributed to its namesake, Pan, the ancient Greek god of panic and riot. Mexican legend has it that the sound of the *afilador*'s pipes can plunge the hearer into a dream. In the Oct. 29, 2000, edition of *La Jornada*, Eduardo Galeano wrote a short item about the *afilador*: "The neighbors say that if one were thinking about something, and [then] he heard the sound of that flute, he would immediately change his opinion."

Burroughs was familiar with the panpipes, having heard them while traveling in the mountains of Albania in 1937—and much more recently, in the high Andes of Ecuador, with none other than Lewis Marker.

Marker was with him when he bought that knife in Quito—either by his side, or back at the hotel, where perhaps Burroughs thought he would make a gift of the knife to him. (Burroughs often gave knives as gifts, or certainly did so in his later years.) Was it refused? Did he think better of it, while in a fit of annoyance with Marker, and withhold the gift?

We will never fully know the significance to Burroughs of the Scout knife from Quito, but it is clear that it was very significant somehow.

Add to this the echo of the Andean panpipes, and the never-ending rain in Mexico City, and perhaps Burroughs' "overwhelming depression" becomes less mysterious: he was heartbroken over his failed love affair with Lewis Marker.

There is no reason to doubt that Burroughs and Vollmer, and all the others, were drunk. They were all heavy drinkers, accustomed to starting well before the time of the incident (early evening).

As Burroughs later described Joan's drinking, she was what is known as a "maintenance drunk"—she went through one or two bottles of tequila a day, but in sips, all day long. Spending every waking hour at least a little bit drunk is known to lead to depression, not to mention a decline in judgment.

The documented events in the moments leading up to Burroughs firing the pistol make it clear that his definite intention was to hit the glass, not his wife. He was probably burning with embarrassment as she tried to make him look foolish in front of the boys—who were very likely unaware of the deeper dimensions of the tableau. Above all, he wanted to hit the glass with unerring aim, so that *she* would be the one to look foolish, for doubting his accuracy and trying to belittle him.

Finally, there are the uncontroverted reports that in the early minutes after the shooting, Burroughs was hysterically anguished. As much as they ridiculed his ever-changing stories, the newspaper reporters never tried to suggest that he was weeping crocodile tears in the courtyard of the Cruz Roja hospital when the news came that Joan had died. These are not the actions of a man who is satisfied with what he has done, but of one who is awash in a sea of remorse.

In later years Burroughs recalled that he was found guilty of *imprudencia criminal*. Although he may have heard this phrase from Bernabé Jurado, there is no degree of culpability on the Mexican law books that corresponds exactly to this term. He was accused and convicted of *homicidio*—murder—but his sentence was suspended.

The court documents show that Judges Urzaíz and Fernández made a conscientious effort to determine the facts of the case, and to arrive at fair and justifiable decisions.

Of what other crimes might Burroughs have been guilty under Mexican law?

Title First, Chapter I, Article 9 of the Penal Code of D.F. says: "He acts culpably who produces the typical result, and who did not foresee the foreseeable result, *or foresaw it, but believed that he would not produce the result*, by virtue of a violation of a duty to take care, that he ought to have, and could have, followed, according to the circumstances and personal conditions" (emphasis added). This clearly applies juridically to Burroughs' case.

Title Twelfth, Chapter V, Article 247, Fraction I of the same Penal Code, says: "He who—upon declaring before an authority who is exercising his functions, or in pursuit of them—lacks in truthfulness in relation to the facts that caused the intervention of the authorities, will be sanctioned with a penalty of 2 to 6 years in prison and a fine of 100 to 300 days." With Burroughs' many changes of his sworn story, this perjury statute would surely apply.

Even worse, Title Nineteenth, Chapter IV, Article 323 says that : "Upon him who deprives of life his blood-line ancestor or descendant, brother, *conjugal partner*, concubine male or female, adopted parent or child, with knowledge of this relationship, will be imposed imprisonment from 10 to 14 years" (emphasis added). This unequivocal statute could not apply more clearly to Burroughs' deed, and one must wonder why it was not cited against him.

Still, if Jurado had merely emphasized the evidence pointing to his client's lack of the requisite homicidal *intent*, the case might well have been decided exactly as it was eventually decided, two years later.

Burroughs believed that the Mexican justice system was infinitely corrupt, or corruptible. While it is certain that, during the administration of President Miguel Alemán, 1946–1952, the *mordida* (bribery system) reached new heights of prevalence, there is no evidence that either of the two presiding judges was swayed by any such bribes.

As the newspaper stories indicate, if anything, Mexicans were over-sensitive to such accusations, and were offended by the evasive tactics of Jurado and Burroughs and the others. Look at these newspaper headlines:

THE AMERICAN SEWARD TRIES TO MOCK JUSTICE

THE COVER-UP OF THE AMERICAN WITH BAD AIM

NOW THE NORTH-AMERICAN WHO KILLED HIS WIFE
SAYS IT WAS AN ACCIDENT

IT APPEARS THAT SEWARD USED HIS WIFE AS A BULL'S-EYE

BURROUGHS CHANGES HIS VERSION ABOUT
THE DEATH OF HIS YOUNG AND LOVELY WIFE

SEWARD CONSTANTLY CHANGES HIS STORY

ENORMOUS SUSPICIONS THAT BURROUGHS
DID NOT KILL HIS WIFE ACCIDENTALLY

SEWARD TRIES TO MOCK THE AUTHORITIES

A SERIES OF CONTRADICTIONS IN WHAT THE
NORTH-AMERICAN WHO KILLED HIS WIFE SAYS

Can Judge Urzaíz Jiménez have been entirely unaware of all these front-page stories? (That is, the front page of the second section in these national newspapers.) Urzaíz consistently ruled against Burroughs, ordering that he be held in prison, until he finally ordered the two-year sentence suspended.

Burroughs' freedom on bail may have been granted by the Director of the Penitentiary, without any legal necessity to consult Judge Urzaíz—and that result may perhaps have been assisted with a bribe.

But I question whether Bernabé Jurado, in his cocaine-fueled mania, really did pull off a "miraculous early release" of his client from jail, after only two weeks. Without a comparative study of similar cases in Mexican jurisprudence at the time, it is impossible to say how "miraculous" it was.

The Jan. 2, 1951, issue of *El Nacional* reports that on New Year's Eve there were 14 murders, 76 woundings, 25 robberies, four arson fires, three fraud arrests, and two dead from cold-weather exposure ... "the tragic balance of the last night of 1950." That suggests something like 4,000 murders and 22,000 woundings annually.

Just one day after Joan died in September 1951, an off-duty Mexico City policeman named Vicente García was showing off with his gun and accidentally shot Marcela del Refugio Torres Torres in the head as she looked on through a nearby window ... what was García's punishment?

I leave it to some student of Mexican crime statistics to put Burroughs' release on bail in true perspective.

Jurado may actually have come close to making his client's situation worse than it already was. His shameless deviousness in front of the Mexican newspaper reporters was published in lurid, mocking stories the very next day.

In conversation with me, José Férez has argued that Jurado's strategy was to introduce confusion and doubt, so that the facts became too cloudy to be judicially established. But the surviving court documents show that neither the judge with jurisdiction over the crime, nor the judge reviewing the *amparo* petition, gave judicial credence to any other version than one that would encompass *all* the "versions" given by Burroughs: "That at a given moment, [the defendant] took out of his holster a pistol, pulling back the slide, and producing a shot that caused the death of the now-deceased lady."

If Burroughs had not already been Jurado's client, with his citizenship and perhaps his divorce actions, Marker or Peñaloza would have called the U.S. Embassy for assistance in the crucial hour, and an English-speaking attorney would have been sent to the Eighth Delegation to assist Burroughs.

Of course, the accused had a potential legal problem that his friends may not have known about: the possibility that he might be actively wanted in Louisiana for jumping bail on the drug charges. If an Embassy lawyer had succeeded in getting Burroughs deported, he might have been going back to face prison time in Angola. Had he only made the effort to keep in touch by telephone with his New Orleans attorney, Link, after October 1949, Burroughs might have known the critical information that Louisiana was not seeking his extradition.

Still, I must concede that many aspects of this long-ago case will forever remain unknowable. Férez tells of a woman who spent fifteen years in prison in Mexico while the facts of her case were "being investigated." Despite his privileged status as a U.S. citizen and the relative wealth and power of his St. Louis family, Burroughs might have remained in limbo—and in prison—far longer than two weeks. But eventually it should have been possible to demonstrate that his crime lacked the essential element of homicidal intent, and he would have been freed within a few years.

How differently might Burroughs' life have unfolded then! If he had been deported to the U.S., or imprisoned, he would not have remained through all of 1952 residing at 210 Orizaba in Mexico City, where he was writing the final drafts of *Junkie* and the unfinished *Queer*

manuscript; and his second South American trip, with the apparently life-transforming experience of taking the hallucinogenic *yagé* in 1953, would never have occurred.

Burroughs had already been in psychoanalysis since 1940, with a series of at least six psychiatrists, and in that time was psychiatrically hospitalized twice. Perhaps his family would have prevailed upon him to submit to a new inpatient treatment of many months' duration, such as the year he was urged to spend (but did not spend) at Chestnut Lodge in Maryland, after he obtained his 1942 psychological discharge from the U.S. Army. But that is all idle conjecture.

5) Epilogue.

On August 27, 1990, the Panteón Americano finally acted on the long-overdue "cemetery rent" on Joan's grave: they published a notice in the *Diario Oficial de México* calling upon her family members to come forward and renew the interment arrangements. No one responded, and in January 1993 the cemetery dug up Vollmer's bones and placed them in one compartment of a long, new wall of funerary *nichos*.

Joan's grave in Section A / New of the Panteón had been marked only by a number—"*fosa* 1018"—penciled on a wooden stick in the ground; now her *nicho* was marked with only a chalked reference on the thin marble covering: Number 82, Class R, Section PR.

This ossuary transfer came to William Burroughs' attention when José Férez and I were trying to determine the fate of Joan's grave, in January 1996. At that time William and José worked out a simple inscription, and William sent the fee to have the words engraved on the stone covering the front of her *nicho*:

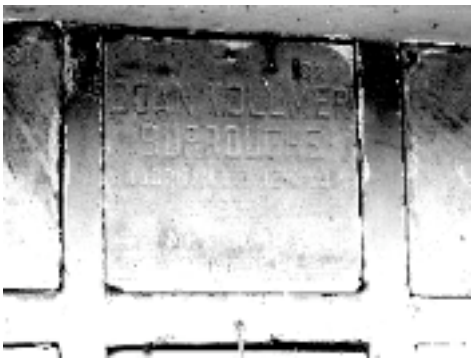


Photo: James Grauerholz.

JOAN VOLLMER BURROUGHS
LOUDONVILLE, NEW YORK
1923
MÉXICO, D.F.
SEPT. 1951

In August 2000 I went to Joan's grave at the Panteón Americano for the first time. After a moment of silent communion with the spirit of this unusual woman whose life—and death—had so indelibly marked my best friend, William Burroughs, I paid the cemetery attendant $40 to rub gold leaf into the lettering on the front of the concrete box. And as I left, I looked back at the wall of *nichos* and I knew that I had now done almost all that I could do to honor Joan.

During the last nine months of his life, November 1996–July 1997, Burroughs wrote almost daily in journals that he knew would be his last writings. *Last Words: The Final Journals of William S. Burroughs*, edited and with an introduction by me, was published in 2000.

In these two passages from those journals we see, in literally his last days, William Burroughs prosecuting himself, defending himself, and finally, convicting himself:

> <u>December 2, 1996</u>
>
> Tell any feminist I shot Joan in a state of possession, and she will scream: "Nonsense! No such thing. HE did it."

July 27, 1997

Memories of Lexington. I hear now the inmates get *nothing*. When I went in, I got a quarter [grain] of morphine, and five milligrams of Methadone. I was stoned. [Had] been in kick city for four lousy days. And all the St. Louis croakers too chicken to give me even a lousy quarter g. That was when things were tough—real tough.

So when I got to Lex—my mother screaming behind me she had some idea I should go to a private nut house—and I said:

"All I need is [a] withdrawal cure. Period."

And she was very annoyed by me and Joan taking the bull by the horns and opting for Lexington.

Mother said about Joan: "She was just like a *tigress*." Said no to any enforced confinement.

She was right there, and other where's and there's.

What can I say—

Why who where when can I say—

Tears are worthless unless genuine, tears from the soul and the guts, tears that ache and wrench and hurt and tear.

Tears for what was—

He died five days later, on August 2, 1997, from a heart attack. The death of Joan Vollmer at his hands was mentioned in hundreds of obituaries published worldwide.

William Burroughs, a tormented, disturbed American in his late thirties, foolishly and recklessly shot and killed his much-younger wife, without consciously intending her death. His wife may have wanted and intended to die then, but she had as little legal right to determine that as he did, and her "death wish"—if any—may likewise have been unconscious.

Innumerable similar cases abound in the history of North American domestic crime, but only because Burroughs later became an internationally significant artist do we know his disgraceful disaster as well as we do. All his life—forty-six more years—he struggled with his private memories, and with the public's awareness, of his crime. For many, it is all they know of him.

All his life Burroughs had a dark fascination with "possession" by malign spirits; his dread of possession may have had its roots in a childhood molestation by his nanny, around age four. The only explanation Burroughs could give to himself for the "sheer piece of insanity" was that he was *forced* by a possessing entity to miss the glass and kill Joan. But he did not offer that explanation as exculpatory; rather, he said that it is always one's *own responsibility* to resist and overcome possession by "the Ugly Spirit," using one's own best efforts. By Burroughs' own standards, he failed to resist in September 1951—and perhaps not for the last time.

Shall we say that Burroughs got off easy? Or that he was a pawn of the forces who guide all our unknowable destinies?

The enigmatic stain of Joan Vollmer's tragic death spreads across all of William S. Burroughs' long life and work.

END