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Introduction

The sweat lodge utilizes all powers of the universe: earth, and things that grow from the earth; water; fire; and air.

—BLACK ELK

The sweat lodge ceremony had to be performed in darkness. Deep in the two-foot firepit the stones glowed, tended by the firekeeper, whose tasks were to heat and replenish the stones, guard the lodge, and make the food. Over the pit, the roof of the lodge was shaped like an igloo, carefully constructed from interlaced twigs and branches, covered with black plastic. The shaman himself was Melvin Betsellie, a Diné elder Navajo from the Four Corners area of New Mexico. He was young, round-faced, heavily built, his hair center-parted in the traditional manner like Geronimo in the old black-and-white photographs. Betsellie's calm, placid expression inspired confidence. He was a highly regarded shaman—the *Oinkiga*, purification ceremony, must be performed by an initiate who has had at least four years' apprenticeship, including the vision quest and four years of the sun dance, climaxing in the ceremony of being painted. Only then do the shamans have the right to pour the water of life (*mini wic'oni*) on the stone people (*inyan oyate*)—the hot rocks—to create *Inikag'a*, the purification ceremony.

Betsellie had been invited to Lawrence, Kansas, by Bill Lyon, an anthropologist who specialized in shamanism. Lyon had spent twelve years with Wallace Black Elk, a Sioux medicine man, and wrote *Black Elk: The Sacred Ways of a Lakota*, in which he explained how Black Elk called up animal spirits of all kinds. Lyon was a friend of William Burroughs's and they had a number of conversations about the efficacy of shamans in expelling evil spirits from the body. Burroughs had spent most of his life trying to exorcise what he called "the Ugly Spirit" and wondered if a Navajo shaman might finally succeed. Lyon arranged for a ceremony for the purification of Bill's spirit in March 1992, to take place on the grounds of his house.¹

In the sweat lodge, all had stripped in preparation for the smoke and

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heat and had towels wrapped around their waists. Burroughs wore just his shorts, the scar from his recent triple-bypass operation showing as a brown line on his wrinkled chest. Though stooped and soft-muscled, his skull bony, at seventy-eight years he was still vigorous. His old friend Allen Ginsberg was completely naked except for his glasses, as was his wont. The author of "Howl" was now sixty-five years old, his trimmed beard and mustache threaded with gray, potbellied with scrawny legs, slightly stooped. Also present were Burroughs's old friend James Grauerholz, Grauerholz's twenty-five-year-old boyfriend Michael Emerton, Burroughs's assistant Steven Lowe, and Bill Lyon.

Burroughs had warned the shaman of the challenge before the ceremony: He "had to face the whole of American capitalism, Rockefeller, the CIA... all of those, particularly Hearst." Afterward he told Ginsberg, "It's very much related to the American Tycoon. To William Randolph Hearst, Vanderbilt, Rockefeller, that whole stratum of American acquisitive evil. Monopolistic, acquisitive evil. Ugly evil. The ugly American. The ugly American at his ugly worst. That's exactly what it is." William Burroughs believed in spirits, in the occult, in demons, curses, and magic. "I do believe in the magical universe, where nothing happens unless one wills it to happen, and what we see is not one god but many gods in power and in conflict."² He felt himself possessed, and had spent much of his life trying to isolate and exorcise this demon. Asked how he would describe his religious position, Burroughs replied, "An Ismailian and Gnostic, or a Manichean. [...] The Manichean believe in an actual struggle between good and evil, which is not an eternal struggle since one of them will win in this particular area, sooner or later."³ Throughout his life Burroughs felt engaged in this struggle against the Ugly Spirit. This time he was determined to win.

Burroughs had first identified the Ugly Spirit very early on, back in St. Louis: "When I was a young child, a feeling of attack and danger. I remember when I was five years old, I was sitting with my brother in the house that we had on Pershing, and I got such a feeling of hopelessness that I began crying. And my brother said, 'What's the matter with you?' and I couldn't tell him. It was just a feeling of being completely at a hopeless disadvantage. It was a ghost of some sort, a spirit. A spirit that was inimical, completely inimical. After that there were many times the condition persisted and that's what made me think that I needed analysis to find out what was wrong. [...] It's just I have a little bit, a much more clear insight than most people have, that's all. No problem like that is peculiar to one person."⁴ He knew already that he had been invaded by the Ugly Spirit. It took him a lifetime to expel it.

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Burroughs believed the Ugly Spirit was responsible for the key act that had determined his life since September 6, 1951. That day he had been walking in the street in Mexico City when he found that his face was wet. Tears were streaming from his eyes for no logical reason. He felt a deep-seated depression and when he got home he began throwing down drinks very quickly. It was then, later that day, that Bill killed his wife, Joan Vollmer, fatally wounding her while attempting to shoot a glass from her head in a game of William Tell at a drinks party. Burroughs never really understood what happened that day, except to recognize that what he did was madness. Near the end of his life he said, “My accidental shooting of my wife in 1951 has been a heavy, painful burden to me for 41 years. It was a horrible thing and it still hurts to realise that some people think it was somehow deliberate. I’ve been honest about the circumstances—we were both very drunk and reckless, she dared me to shoot a glass off her head, and for God knows what reason, I took the dare. All my life I have regretted that day.”⁵ It was not until 1959 that the malevolent entity was given a name. Burroughs and his friend Brion Gysin were conducting psychic experiments at the Beat Hotel in Paris when Gysin, in a semitrance state, wrote on a piece of paper, “Ugly Spirit killed Joan because . . .”

In the much-quoted introduction to *Queer*, Burroughs explained how writing became his main weapon against possession by the evil spirit: “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, and 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.”

The shaman was making his way around the lodge. He thanked each one of them, starting with Burroughs, for inviting him to share the traditional medicine of his grandfathers and giving him the opportunity to use his healing medicine to drive the bad spirit from Bill’s body and out of his life. He turned to each of the four directions and prayed to the grandfathers, the water, the earth, the rocks, and the red-hot coals in the firepit, thanking them all and asking them to use their power to help Bill. He took a feather and wafted smoke toward each of the people there, and repeated the action with his hands. Then he threw water onto the hot stones, which exploded in great clouds of smoke and steam, filling the enclosed space, making it unbearably hot like a sauna. All anyone could see was the glow of the fire in the pit, and the vague shadowy outlines of

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their neighbors in the darkness, through the swirling, suffocating smoke. Their eyes ran with burning tears and the sweat began to pour off them. The ceremony was now under way. Chips of cedar wood thrown onto the stones gave off a powerful fragrance, mixed with the steam.

There were four long prayers, and after each prayer the shaman sprinkled more water on the hot rocks, which were replenished by the fire-keeper, to create more steam and heat. First he thanked the spirits, the grandfather spirit and the spirit that made Bill. He prayed to make Bill's passage easier when the time came for him to return to his creator. They were all asked to focus their attention on Bill and send him their healing thoughts. A heavy, long-stemmed pipe with a carved stone bowl filled with sweet, mild tobacco was passed around and each puffed three or four times, cradling it with one hand beneath the bowl and the other clasping the shaft. There were more rounds of tobacco and more prayers. Then, after the fourth round of steam heat, the shaman sprinkled water several times on each of them with his feathered fan. He took some of the hot coals in his hand and put them in his mouth, several times swallowing the coal that now contained the bad spirit and then retching it up. Michael Emerton and Steven Lowe were both stunned by the sight of the coals in his mouth, lighting up his throat. "It looked quite terrifying, the mask of his face openmouthed, the inside of his mouth lit up, you could see down to his throat in the red coal light," Lowe recalled.

Then the shaman approached Bill and touched him with a red-hot coal. Afterward Burroughs told Ginsberg, "I thought, my God, it's great that he touched me with the coal and I didn't feel any burns or anything. I was very impressed." Bill couldn't understand how the hot coal was circulating in the smoky darkness; it seemed to be flying through the air, circling around Bill and the fire, and then back again. But it was a long ceremony and the smoke and steam made Burroughs very uncomfortable. He felt weak and desperately needed to breath cool air, so he crawled nearer to the entrance. Afterward he told Allen Ginsberg, "I needed air, I needed to get out. I finally lay down near the door and then I felt better... and... I had to stick it out and stay there, I couldn't break the spell. As soon as he began using the coals, I immediately felt better."

Ginsberg wrote, "The spirit was caught, jiggled in the shrill flute and blown into the fire. Put the spirit into the rocky fire-pit still glowing, steaming with cedar-fragrant smoke in our eyes." Now the Ugly Spirit was in the firepit and Betsellie concentrated on sending it back to whoever, or whatever, put it in Bill in the first place: an animal, possibly, or more likely a malevolent person. Once more he wafted smoke at each of them separately and prayed. Burroughs was moved by the ceremony and

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kept repeating, “Yes, yes. Of course, thank you, I’m grateful,” maintaining his customary good manners, until at the very end the heat and smoke were too much for him, and he begged, “Please. Please—open the door, I need to go out.” But this was not the end of it.

At Lyon’s house Betsellie had set up an altar with medicine bottles and skins, the bone flute, sand from a sacred power mountain, and a white bald eagle feather placed on top of feather fans all laid out before the big fireplace. The objects were all gifts from his grandfather and teachers. They were tended by a Winnebago Sioux woman. Here the ceremony carried on for another hour and a half before the altar with the shaman on his knees asking for help to preserve old medicines and old ways, to stay in touch with the grandfathers, sky, wood, rock, nature. He thanked his grandfathers and his parents who had died six years before and cried for his mother. At first Burroughs was given a blanket and a pillow to sit on the floor, then he was seated in a chair, facing the altar brazier, holding a sprig of green leaves. Then came the climax of the long ceremony. Betsellie dropped to his knees and chanted several very long prayers in his melodic native Navajo tongue while waving smoke at each of them separately. He prayed to the bear spirit, the four-legged people, the two-legged people, the crawling people, the insects, the families, the brothers and sisters there and everywhere, the relatives and their own brothers and sisters or relatives. “Family, all one family, no matter what race we come from. All relatives together in a room.” He asked them all to help the old man on his way with a strong heart and clear head; to give him a long happy life, a peaceful life from now on, the bad spirit, the Ugly Spirit, having gone back to where it came from, and whoever it came from.

Finally the ceremony ended. The fire attendant had prepared a homely pot roast and gratin potatoes with salad followed by coffee and homemade iced cake. Afterward Ginsberg questioned Burroughs about his reaction to the exorcism ceremony, and how he felt about the waves of love and affection shown to him by the participants. “I feel it very deeply,” he said. “I like the shaman very much... The way he was crying. Deeply sad, deeply... That was something...”

Afterward Burroughs and Melvin Betsellie sat together and discussed the evil spirit. The next day Bill explained to Allen, “He was suffering, he was hurt by this spirit. And he says he hadn’t realized the power of this entity, the full, evil power. It was almost too much for him.” The shaman had said it was the toughest case he’d ever handled and for a moment he thought he was going to lose. He wasn’t expecting the strength and weight and evil intensity of this spirit, or “entity,” as he called it. “The same way the priest in an exorcism has to take on the spirit,” said Bill.

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“Some of them are not strong enough. Some are killed.” In the opinion of Bill Lyon, who had arranged the ceremony, “It scared Betsellie on a deep shamanic level. He entered into the purification of Bill’s spirit in an incautious, overconfident manner. Yes, he’d got the bad spirit. He knew he’d got him, but it hit him harder than he anticipated.”

Burroughs asked Betsellie what the spirit looked like. He said it had a white skull face but had no eyes, and there were some sort of wings. Discussing it the next day, Allen asked Bill if he recognized the image. Bill said that he had identified it many times in his paintings. He had shown some of them to Betsellie, who had immediately recognized the spirit in the swirls of abstract brushwork, pointing to it saying, “There it is, right there.”

When Ginsberg asked him, “Did you get anything from the shaman’s sweat lodge ceremony?” Burroughs replied, “That was much better than anything psychoanalysts have come up with. [...] Something definite there was being touched upon. [...] This you see is the same notion, Catholic exorcism, psychotherapy, shamanistic practices—getting to the moment when whatever it was gained access. And also to the name of the spirit. Just to know that it’s the Ugly Spirit. That’s a great step. Because the spirit doesn’t want its name to be known.”

This is the story of William Burroughs’s battle with the Ugly Spirit.