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RIVERFRONT TIMES



"I am getting so far out one day I won't come back at all."

THE NAKED LUNCH

"In the U.S. you have to be a deviant or die of boredom."

"Happiness is a byproduct of function, purpose, and ..."



"Love is a ..."

A century ago St. Louis gave birth to the wildest Beat writer of them all

In Search of William S. Burroughs

by Danny Wicentowski

Kevin Cannon '14

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BY DANNY WICENTOWSKI * ILLUSTRATIONS BY KEVIN CANNON

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AS A CHILD GROWING UP IN ST. LOUIS, WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS HAD IDEAS of what it would be like to be a writer. A writer, thought the young Burroughs, was rich and famous and possessed a powerful appetite for both debauchery and adventure.

“They lounged around Singapore and Rangoon smoking opium in a yellow pongee suit,” wrote Burroughs in a 1985 essay. “They sniffed cocaine in Mayfair and they penetrated forbidden swamps with a faithful native boy and lived in the native quarter of Tangier smoking hashish and languidly caressing a pet gazelle.”

It’s unclear if Burroughs ever accomplished the latter — owning an antelope. But as for the drugs, fame and adventure? He had those in spades. The Beat writer spent nearly two decades as a heroin addict, traveling the world

on his parents’ dime while filling notebooks with what would become his controversial 1959 masterpiece, *Naked Lunch*, in which Burroughs ripped apart the conventions of linear narrative and dared to write openly — disturbingly so, at times — about his fantasies and homosexuality.

From there he would go to stand alongside the likes of fellow Beat luminaries Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, influencing generations of disillusioned outcasts, hippies and punks alike. Burroughs is that guy in a tie sandwiched between Marilyn Monroe and the guru Sri Mahavater Babaji on the cover of the Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Decades later the author would collaborate on spoken-word projects with Kurt Cobain, Tom Waits and many other musicians.

“He was the first person who was famous for things you were supposed to hide,” explained boundary-pushing director John Waters in the 2010 documentary *William S. Burroughs: A Man Within*. “He was gay, he was a junkie, he didn’t look handsome, he shot his wife, he wrote poetry about assholes and heroin. He was not easy to like.”

Burroughs, who died in 1997 at the age of 83, would have turned 100 this month. (February 5, to be exact.) And although he left St. Louis as a young man, he remained tied to the pre-war city of his childhood, a place he called “a different world” in a 1982 interview with the counterculture and conspiracy-theory magazine *Steamshovel Press*. It’s here in St. Louis that Burroughs first expanded his mind as a hallucinating and fevered child, first dabbled in the underground scene and had his first clumsy forays as a writer. And it’s here, too, that he came to rest for eternity in the Bur-

roughs’ family plot in Bellefontaine Cemetery. In the novella *The Wild Boys*, Burroughs refers to St. Louis as the “the old broken point of origin.” Barry Miles, a British counterculture historian who first met Burroughs in London in 1965, says the city of Burroughs’ youth exerted powerful influence on his work.

“The magical kingdom of his childhood was something he always tried to preserve and always tried to bring back,” says Miles. “You could read his books with St. Louis in mind, and it is right there in most of them. The city runs right through.”

But what besides his grave remains of Burroughs’ time in St. Louis? And is anything left of that “magical kingdom” of his childhood?

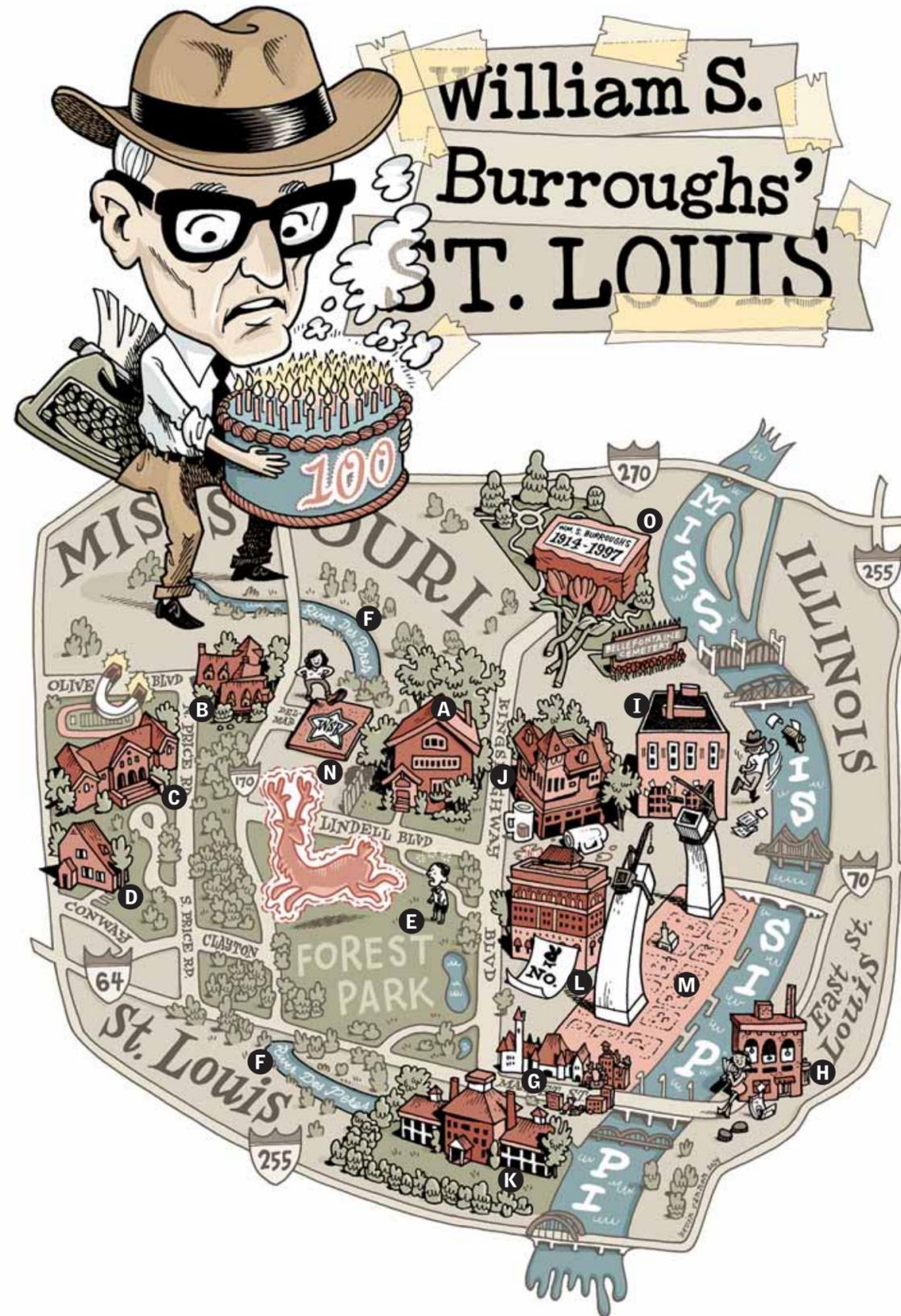
PERSHING AVENUE ST. LOUIS MISSOURI IN THE 1920S.... RED BRICK THREE-STORY HOUSES. LAWNS IN FRONT, LARGE BACK YARDS WITH GARDENS SEPARATED BY HIGH WOODEN FENCES OVERGROWN WITH MORNING GLORY AND ROSE VINES AND AT THE BACK OF THE YARD AN ASH PIT AND NO ONE FROM SANITATION SNIFFING AROUND IN THOSE DAYS. — COBBLESTONE GARDENS (1976)

William S. Burroughs II arrived in the dead of winter 1914, born in the master bedroom of his family’s well-appointed home in the Central West End. The Burroughs manor, designed and built by Burroughs’ father, Mortimer, is still there — a three-story brick home on stately Pershing Avenue. Scott Duellman, a 36-year-old accounting professor at Saint Louis University, purchased the house just six months ago. He is well aware of its literary significance.

“I read *Naked Lunch* when I was sixteen or seventeen years old,” says Duellman, who keeps a copy of Burroughs’ most famous work in his living room. It’s right there, perched on a mahogany bookcase beneath a row of Kurt Vonnegut and Jonathan Franzen novels.

“I think a lot of the Beat Generation writers speak to us at a certain time, usually between the ages of fifteen and twenty. This house hearkens me back to a time when I felt those things. It’s like the house’s past and my own past, they’re just boiling together.”

Across town, on Price Road in Ladue, the



woman who opens the door of the home Burroughs moved into at the age of seven (in order for his family “to get away from people” the author would later write) has no idea about its former occupant. Carol Hager thought her home was once owned by that *other* Burroughs family — the ones behind John Burroughs School. Nope, although there is somewhat of a connection. The teenage William S. Burroughs attended the prestigious John Burroughs School, just a three-minute walk down the street. As a student there, Burroughs was something of an outcast. Though still unsure of his sexuality at the time, he became obsessed with a male classmate, to the point where his fawning devotion became embarrassingly obvious to his peers. They mocked him.

Like many lonely teenagers, Burroughs escaped to fantasy. He consumed crime novels, nickel paperbacks with stories of wild adventure, detective tales and Westerns. He began writing his own stories, the “first set” of his literary production, as Burroughs would later describe it.

The Burroughs’ family wealth derived from William’s paternal grandfather, William Seward Burroughs I, who invented an adding machine in the 1880s that would eventually be worth millions of dollars. Just before the stock-market crash of 1929, Burroughs’ father cashed in his shares of the Burroughs Adding Machine Company for \$276,000. The sum was serious money for the time, in the neighborhood of \$4 million today. By the late 1930s, however, the family fortune had dwindled to the point where Burroughs’ parents made ends meet by running a landscaping service and gift shop in Ladue called Cobblestone Gardens.

In Burroughs’ 1953 **continued on page 8**

Map Key

- A** Burroughs’ Birth Home, 4664 Pershing Boulevard
- B** Burroughs’ Suburban Home, 700 Price Road
- C** John Burroughs School, 755 South Price Road
- D** Cobble Stone Gardens Gift Shop, 10036 Conway Road
- E** Forest Park
- F** River Des Peres
- G** Market Street
- H** East St. Louis Brothel
- I** *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 900 North Tucker Boulevard
- J** Culpeppers, 300 North Euclid Avenue
- K** Jefferson Barracks, 533 Grant Road
- L** Chase Park Plaza Hotel, 212 North Kingshighway
- M** Arch grounds
- N** Star on the St. Louis Walk of Fame, 6362 Delmar Boulevard
- O** Burroughs’ Grave, Bellefontaine Cemetery



Burroughs

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semi-autobiographical novel, *Junkie: Confessions of an Unredeemed Drug Addict*, he describes his formative years spent in a “comfortable capsule” of suburban affluence, mostly under the care of a nanny and various domestic servants.

Miles, who corresponded regularly with Burroughs throughout his life, says that the author expressed “a tremendous amount of nostalgia” for those early days in St. Louis.

For instance, while bedridden with fever at the age of four, Burroughs began experiencing visions — shadow animals scurrying on his bedroom walls, little gray men playing in his block houses. One day during a walk in Forest Park, little Billy Burroughs spotted what he thought were tiny green reindeer, according to Miles’ just-released biography, *Call Me Burroughs: A Life*. The image of the delicate green reindeer, “about the size of a cat,” echoes through many of Burroughs’ later stories, poems and novels.

And an adolescent Burroughs began to rebel against his privileged upbringing by seeking out another side of St. Louis.

In the opening paragraphs of *Cobble Stone Gardens*, a memoir he named after his parents’ gift shop, Burroughs recalls walking with his young cousin to the nearby bank of River des Peres (then a free-flowing open sewer) and “watching as turds shot out into the yellow water from vents along the sides.” In another essay Burroughs describes a childhood ambition to become Commissioner of Sewers for the City of St. Louis — so that he could enjoy the benefits of corruption, just as the city officials

who turned the river into a latrine had done.

In the early 1930s, during his summers home from Harvard, Burroughs would head over to Market Street between Union Station and the river. The area then was a skid row of sorts, full of bars, pawn shops and seedy rooming houses. He also spent a couple of weeks as a cub reporter for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* but apparently got fed up with the assignments; he particularly hated the task of obtaining photos of recently drowned and poisoned children from grieving parents.

“He one time referred to St. Louis as a ‘malignant matriarchy,’” recalls Kenn Thomas, a senior manuscript specialist with the State Historical Society of Missouri. Thomas struck up a friendship with Burroughs in the early ’80s and later founded *Steamshovel Press*, which published works and interviews with Beat writers.

In 1935, during the summer of his junior year in college, a 21-year-old Burroughs lost his virginity to a bosomy prostitute in an East St. Louis, Illinois, brothel. It cost \$5 per half-hour. He admitted in a 1974 interview that, “It wasn’t what I wanted, but it was better than nothing.” Even so, Burroughs became a repeat customer, and after the act he would drive to Culpeppers in the Central West End for after-whore drinks with his buddies.

“Burroughs’ nostalgia for the rough parts of St. Louis, that’s kind of a junkie thing, but

it’s also kind of a Buddhist thing,” his old friend Thomas says. “There’s a Buddhist principle to meditate on the most repulsive things that are out there. It’s a reflection of what’s real.”

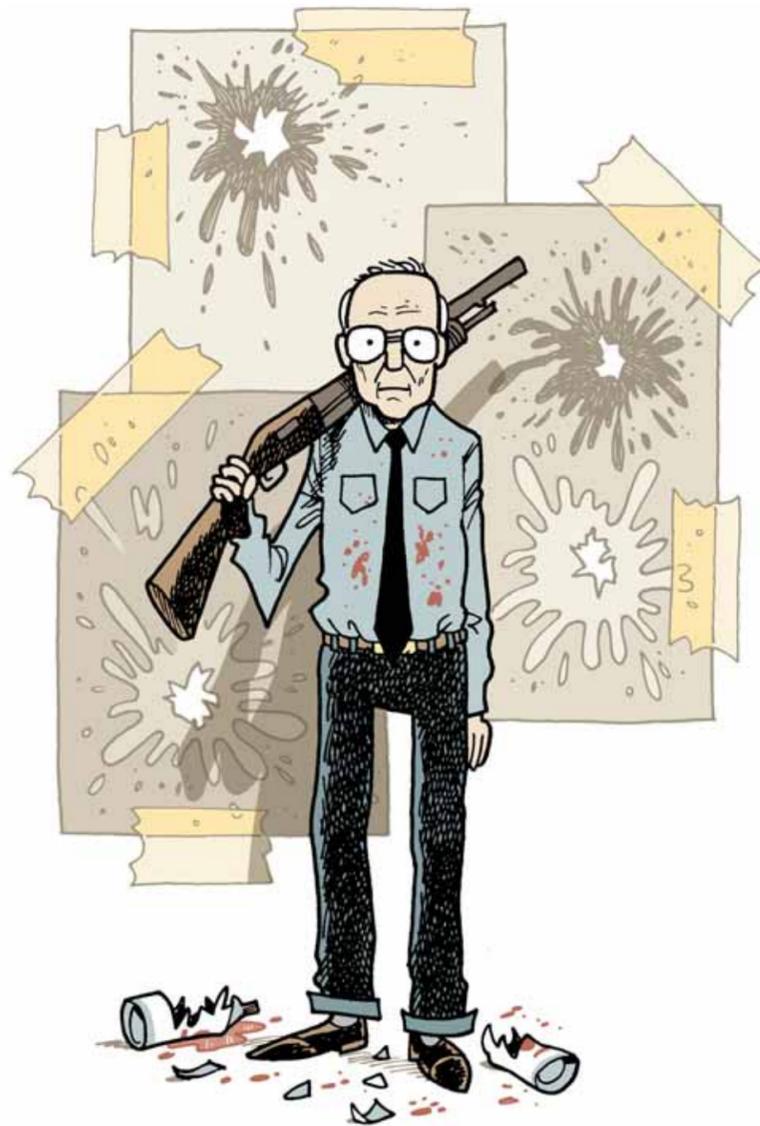
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BUT WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO MARKET STREET THE SKID ROW OF MY ADOLESCENT YEARS? WHERE ARE THE TATTOO PARLORS, NOVELTY STORES, HOCK SHOPS — BRASS KNUCKS IN A DUSTY WINDOW — THE SEEDY PITCHMEN...THE OLD JUNKIES HAWKING AND SPITTING ON STREET CORNERS UNDER THE GAS LIGHTS? — DISTANT 1920 WIND AND DUST... — “ST. LOUIS RETURN,” PUBLISHED IN *THE PARIS REVIEW* (1965)

Burroughs tried very hard to enlist in the military even before Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. He applied to become an ambulance driver for the American Field Service and then as a pilot with the Glider Corps. Both rejected him. He then hoped to become an officer in the newly formed Office of Strategic Services, the intelligence and espionage agency that preceded the CIA, but that didn’t pan out either. Five weeks after Pearl Harbor, Burroughs showed up at Jefferson Barracks, resigned that he would serve his country as just another officer.

Instead, Burroughs was classified 1-A Infantry. He went AWOL with a buddy, got caught and was tossed in the brig at Jefferson Barracks, where he spent the next five months. His mother would make frequent trips to visit, bringing along steam tables filled with gourmet meals. Though the process was slow, it wasn’t difficult to convince the military that Burroughs wasn’t mentally fit for the infantry: A psychiatrist confirmed that while living in New York in 1940, Burroughs cut off part of his left pinkie out of jealous anguish. The object of his obsession, a bisexual young man named Jack Anderson, would bring men and women back to the apartment he and Burroughs shared. Burroughs did not handle the competition well, so out **continued on page 10**





Burroughs

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came the poultry shears and off went the pin-kie. (He was on a “Van Gogh kick” at the time, he would later write.)

After escaping the military, Burroughs moved to Chicago, finding work as an exterminator. In September 1943 he moved back to New York City, ending up in an apartment with future Beat Generation idol and *On the Road* author Jack Kerouac. Also living in the apartment was his future common-law wife, Joan Vollmer, a spirited Barnard College graduate and an intellectual driving force in her own right during the early years of the Beat movement.

While in New York, Burroughs became addicted to morphine, sparking an almost lifelong affair with drugs, especially heroin. He learned to rob drunks, or “roll luses,” on subway cars and sold heroin in Greenwich Village. Later, he and Vollmer (who was addicted to amphetamines) relocated to Texas to start a pot farm. Their only child, William S. Burroughs Jr.,

was raised by Burroughs’ parents in St. Louis and died in 1981 due to complications related to alcoholism.

Burroughs had frequent run-ins with the law, but his parents bailed him out every time. They also gave him a \$300-per-month allowance (a “livable sum,” as he put it), allowing Burroughs the freedom to travel.

“It’s very much an American tradition, to be an outsider and to remake yourself in a new form,” Miles says of Burroughs’ exploits. “He did that time and time again. After he shot his wife, for instance.”

The killing occurred in Mexico City in 1951. According to James Grauerholz, Burroughs’ editor, literary executor and close companion, the author boasted to those present “what kind of shot old Bill is,” before taking aim at a glass of water balanced atop Vollmer’s head. The bullet struck Vollmer in forehead. All involved were drunk and likely high. Yet again, Burroughs’ family money and legal connections allowed him to avoid a two-year

prison term for manslaughter.

While awaiting trial, Burroughs did spend a couple of weeks in a Mexican jail. There he began writing what would become the novel *Queer*, though it wasn’t published until 1985.

“Everything was different after the killing,” says Miles, who will be at Left Bank Books in the Central West End on Thursday, February 6, to discuss his latest Burroughs biography. “He went off into the Amazon jungle for six months and tried to take drugs that were so powerful that they would change him into a person who could not do that kind of thing,” he says. “He thought that he was being occupied by something spiritual that he wanted to get rid of.”

Burroughs directly confronts this occupying force in the introduction to *Queer*: “[T]he death of Joan brought me into contact with the invader, the Ugly Spirit, and maneuvered me into a lifelong struggle, in which I had no choice except to write my way out.”

* * *

SO I MAKE THESE LAST ENTRIES IN THE LOG BOOK OF MY ST. LOUIS RETURN — LUGGAGE STACKED IN THE LOBBY — BACK THROUGH THE RUINS OF MARKET STREET TO THE UNION STATION NUDES WAITING THERE IN THE DRY FOUNTAIN OF AN EMPTY SQUARE. I HAVE RETURNED TO PICK UP A FEW PIECES OF SUNLIGHT AND SHADOW — SILVER PAPER IN THE WIND-FRAYED SOUNDS OF A DISTANT CITY. — “ST. LOUIS RETURN,” PUBLISHED IN *THE PARIS REVIEW* (1965)

Burroughs returned to St. Louis in 1965 when *Playboy* commissioned him to write a story about his hometown. He stayed in the Chase Park Plaza during the visit. By then he had kicked his hard-drug habit (he relapsed later in life, however) and enjoyed cultural and literary notoriety for *Naked Lunch*.

The story produced from that homecoming, “St. Louis Return,” would prove too weird and disjointed for *Playboy*, but *The Paris Review* happily picked it up.

In the article Burroughs expresses dismay over the urbanized, cleaned-up city before him. He describes the under-construction Arch grounds as having “an ominous look like the only landmark to survive an atomic blast.”

Burroughs only made a handful of visits to St. Louis after that. In 1989, Robert Lococo, a St. Louis gallery owner trying to make a name for himself in the industry, reached out to Burroughs to commission a series of prints based on the seven deadly sins.

“I did some research on him and I thought, ‘Wow, this guy’s a real sinner,’” Lococo explains today.

In 1981 Burroughs followed Grauerholz, who essentially managed Burroughs’ personal life from the 1970s until his death, to Lawrence, Kansas. There the writer developed into a full-fledged visual artist. His preferred technique involved setting up spray-paint cans near a flat surface, then blasting the cans with a shotgun to create

an abstract explosion of color.

Lococo traveled to Lawrence in 1990, and Burroughs shot up seven plywood panels with shotguns and pistols. After treating them with Mylar, Burroughs drew and stenciled the panels to create the templates for the final prints. Lococo keeps the originals safely stored in his Olive Boulevard gallery, but the prints — as well as accompanying panels with Burroughs’ authored text — have been shown in galleries around the world.

Burroughs traveled sparingly in his final years. After visiting St. Louis to attend his brother’s funeral in 1983, he returned just a few more times for a gallery show and for an appearance at Left Bank Books. He stayed with Lococo during his visits.

Lococo remembers him as a man you didn’t

want to cross but who had a sweet and grandfatherly side.

“I saw the best side of Burroughs. He wasn’t doing drugs except smoking pot after 4 p.m.,” he says. “At 4 p.m. he would have a Ritz cracker, cheddar cheese and a joint. That was it.”

(Well, not really: Burroughs was also on a doctor-prescribed methadone regimen from the time he moved to Kansas until his death.)

In 1990 Burroughs received a star on the St. Louis Walk of Fame, but a heart attack and broken hip prevented him from accepting it in person. Thomas accepted the honor on his behalf.

Burroughs’ final return to St. Louis came in a hearse, as part of his funeral procession from Lawrence to Bellefontaine Cemetery. Lococo was there, along with punk-rock goddess Patti Smith, poet John Giorno and others. At a rest

stop along Interstate 70, a group of traveling Phish fans recognized Giorno and Smith and joined the motorcade all the way to St. Louis.

In the end, Burroughs returned to the city that bore him, though it was probably too clean (and certainly too conventional) for his liking.

Sixteen years after his death, his fans still make pilgrimages to Bellefontaine Cemetery to pay their respects and leave tokens — poems, bottle caps, pens, pennies — on his tombstone. No, not the towering obelisk erected for his inventor grandfather of the same name. The other one, the modest headstone a few feet to the right. The one with the simple epigraph “American Writer.”

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