

RAW MATERIAL

JÖRG FAUSER

Translated from the German by
Jamie Bulloch

With an introduction by Niall Griffiths



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Introduction

What do we know about Jorg Fauser? Outside Germany, not a great deal; Wikipedia has a small entry, and the website www.jorg-fauser.de offers some information: He was born in 1944 and became a drifter at a young age, a factotum in Britain, Ireland, Spain and Turkey, where he also became a junkie. He wrote poetry, novels, edited a small-press magazine, wrote a biography of Marlon Brando, kicked heroin and turned to booze. He wrote lyrics for, and performed in, various bands. His reputation as an important and respected figure in the German counter-culture survived even his commercial success as a detective novelist. His nomination for the Ingeborg Bachmann Prize aroused the ire of some leading literary notables, who publicly denounced him, not long before he was run over and killed by a truck in 1987 on the autobahn outside Munich at the age of forty-three (there is an online rumour that this was an assassination: Fauser was, at the time of his death, researching the links between the drug trade and high-ranking politicians). He is frequently mentioned in the same breath as the Beats and, especially compared to Charles Bukowski, who he travelled to LA to interview for *Playboy* in 1977 (at least, that's what the website says; I can find no other reference to this online, nor in any Bukowski biography).

Which brings us to the 'B' word. What is forgotten, or conveniently ignored, is that, when detached from his avowed project of warts-and-all running autobiography, much of Bukowski's work is mediocre. When he hits, he hits powerfully, but all too often he misses by a mile or more, and his work needs to be seen as inextricable from his lived life, the performance of it, the determination to eschew all bourgeois rules, be they social, political, literary or grammatical. Such a project, when done once, is done entirely, is exhausted; any imitation will, of necessity, not just be poor but otiose. The term 'Bukowskian' oftentimes simply equates to confessional boasting about drinking too much and tweaking tits and feeling a bit miserable while doing it (no foredoomed poet, either, destined to burn twice as bright but half as long – Bukowski was seventy-four when he died). Put simply, a comparison to Bukowski does not imply quality, or even readability; there are times, many of them, when his imitators become, unwittingly, his detractors.

So I would urge you to forget about such facile comparisons before you open *Raw Material*, because what you are about to read is, in many ways, like nothing else you will have read before. To foist a genre on it, it's a picaresque, but what a crazed, leaping, unmoored and hilarious voyage it is. It opens in the spring of 1968, a time of socio-political upheaval and an atmosphere drenched in revolutionary fervour, in Paris, Prague, Vietnam and Northern Ireland The Baader-Meinhof gang is active; the Red Army Faction, too. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *Last Exit to Brooklyn* are under scrutiny as is *Oz*. Our hero, Harry Gelb ('gelb' = 'yellow') is

twenty-four and living on a rooftop in Istanbul with his partner in crime, Ede. Gelb is a struggling writer (struggling so hard that he's crashed through the garret roof and landed on the tiles) and a struggling junkie (is there any other kind?), a swindler, a rip-off merchant, a scammer, a thief. This is the sixties, yes, but there's no peace-and-love, release the doves, flower-power, incense-and-kaftan idealism here; Gelb is 'rapidly approaching the season of hell'. No sooner are we settled on that roof-top with Harry, though, than we're whisked away, scooting across Europe, to a commune in Berlin, to Frankfurt, Vienna, back to Berlin, squat to squat, dead-end job to dead-end job, all in the company of an intensely observant and cuttingly incisive commentator, achingly aware of the terribly transitory nature of existence, the flux and the chaos of it, a breathless whirl of drugs and drink and women and doomed enterprises. The one point of solidity in Gelb's life is his heavy old typewriter, and the masterpieces he will write on it, one of which, *Stamboul Blues*, accompanies him wherever he goes, hawking it to various hopeless publishers in superbly comedic set-pieces. He gets a job on the editorial board of *Zero* magazine, where staff members levitate to attract funding, and where a table-tennis table is an essential item of office furniture because ping-pong 'represented the defeat of capitalist heteronomy, social democratic lethargy and Russian hegemonic self-importance'. Gelb is sent to London to interview William S Burroughs, specifically about his cut-up technique, an encounter related in a perfect pen-portrait of the man: 'Burroughs was tall, gaunt and slightly stooped when he walked. He'd turned white at the temples and his mouth was a

narrow, bloodless line ... Through his glasses he fixed me with his gaze. His eyes were blue and radiated the unshakeable authority of a high-court judge who's seen all manner of corruption, and even when every bribe is added together still doesn't amount to enough for him'. Burroughs witters on for a bit about cut-ups and about the apomorphine cure for heroin addiction, but that's about all we get of him; a couple of brilliantly withering sentences.

Characters appear without introduction in this book, and then vanish without fanfare or explanation. Trips are made on a whim and without any preliminary arrangements. The world just happens to Harry Gelb. Plot is a bourgeois construction, since to the materially disadvantaged, daily life is dramatic enough; there is ample conflict in renting a room from 'widowed house owners with dyed-blond perms and eyes the colour of old family safes'. There is very little on the physiological effects of junk, and even less on the attendant bliss; the concern is more with the act of scoring and the acquisition of money and the neglect that goes with addiction. Alcohol, however, is given close study; booze puts the fun in oblivion. Junkies require nothing and talk about nothing but 'the Nirvana of the needle' but drink is an immersive, highly social drug that can often lead to new friendships and interesting sexual adventures. It also leads to weight-gain and bloat, which is not a good look for a revolutionary; love-handles signify a lack of commitment to the cause. And it is in a drinking den – the Schmale Handtuch – where Gelb unearths a sense of belonging, even meaning, where, on 'days when you simply had to drink whether you wanted to or not', he meets Ede again, who searches only

for the next hit, and where he realises that the cards are stacked in this world, the game is rigged, and romantic revolutionary idealism is, really, nothing more than a passing phase: 'the lies of the revolutionaries sounded different from those of the reactionaries, but they were lies too. Revolutions were a hoax. One ruling class was replaced by another and the cultural apparatus spat out the pertinent editorials, the witty observations ... If you saw through the lies, you could live in spite of them.'

Raw Material is a book of dashed dreams, then, at the last. More, it's a book about how the doomed nature of political idealism can undermine any calmness in settled compromise. The image of an accepted domesticity can be seen in the dazzle of wildness – the future faithful wife in the sexually experimental one-night-stand, for instance. Or the reward of a few convivial beers at the end of a working week foreshadowed in the chaotic marathon drinking sessions that begin and end at dawn. Both yearned for and reviled, is this idea of a comfortable life, and no happy ending can issue from this clash; it must end with a bad beating in an alleyway. At the urging of his friend Fritz, Gelb is enticed away from playing with cut-ups, which 'ignored the hurly-burly', and towards the more linear and inexorable horror of Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, wherein the protagonist's collapse is all the more terrifying for its traceability. But where Lowry's hero is chased out of the novel by a dead dog, Fauser's is introduced into something else by a solitary blade of grass; as we are told, immediately before the knuckles and the toe-caps and the blood, 'writing is different. You can't give it up like alcohol or the needle. The most that can

happen is that writing gives *you* up. And it hasn't properly started with me yet.' This is the only safe anchorage in the mad world of this book, this crazed cut-up collage of wanderings and wishes and the inevitable destruction of dreams.

It's saddening to think on what the world has been deprived of by that truck on the autobahn outside Munich. But what you're now going to read – well, at least we have that. Gratitude and congratulations to the translator, Jamie Bulloch, and to Clerkenwell Press for giving us this. I'll be forever thankful.

Niall Griffiths, Cymru, August 2014

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For most of my time in Istanbul I lived in the Cağaloğlu district, just up from the Blue Mosque. The hotel was an old, five-storey building in a side street. It stood next to a school, and in the mornings the pupils would file out into the playground and sing the ‘İstiklâl marşı’. The Turkish national anthem goes on a bit and, like the song, Istanbul itself resembled a collage where the overlaps stray into infinity.

As they didn’t rake in enough with their five storeys, the hotel owners had put another structure on the roof. The view was overwhelming, as were the heat in summer and cold in winter. But for around two marks a day we could enjoy the same panorama for which tourists would have to shell out twenty or fifty times as much. And we could get ours on credit.

With the arrival of winter, Ede and I moved into the same rooftop room. When the wind from Russia whistled through the cracks and the snow seeped through the unrendered roof, it was definitely more practical to share. One of us would pour spirit on the stone floor and light it, and, while the flames gave out a little heat, the other would try to find a vein. We took everything we could get our hands

on. Mainly we'd cook up raw opium, Nembutal to make us comatose and all manner of amphetamines to get us up and running. When we were up and running we had to score fresh supplies of gear and get whatever else we needed – we lived predominantly off tea and sweets – and then we'd lie there, wrapped up snugly in our covers, playing with the cat and working. Ede painted and I wrote.

Ede was a powerful guy from Stuttgart, whose addiction was burning him out from the inside. His bone structure was still stable, but all tissue, fat and muscles were gradually being pared down to the bare minimum. I watched this process with fascination to begin with, but then couldn't be bothered any more. Addiction makes you retreat into yourself, and only when your metabolism sets off alarm bells do you become aware of your environment, which can easily set you into a panic. That's why you always need to have something to do besides drugs, so that the time in-between still exists when you need it (time: the thing we can never get enough of), and Ede found out that for him this meant painting. Most of the money we occasionally made went on canvases and paint. Ede had what you might call a fresh style; he plonked his colours at random on the canvas. Once he'd passed through this initial abstract phase he went over to painting figures and landscapes. They were probably rather naive canvases, but I liked them. The gloomier the winter, the more colourful Ede's pictures became. A psychiatrist would have had a field day with the two of us.

Like I said, I wrote. The Turks sold hard-wearing notebooks with oilcloth covers in all conceivable sizes, and I discovered the advantages of the Rapidograph pen – a fine

stroke combined with the durability and class of real ink. What persuaded me to write from the outset was that it was a relatively cheap activity, compared to what Ede had to fork out for his materials. But I had to concede that he risked a lot for it. Maybe he was a born painter.

There was one district where virtually no foreigners dared go: Tophane. I expect there were just as many opiate addicts living there per square metre as in Harlem or Hong Kong. They said Tophane was a fairly dangerous place – and you did see the odd corpse lying on the street – but nothing bad ever happened to me apart from being fleeced when purchasing. If a large sum of money was involved and the customer who'd been ripped off came back, the place could be transformed within a few hours, as if the entire squalid area were a film set. Where a jammed teahouse had been, now the doors were barricaded up with dust on the windows; the cinema on the corner was showing a romance rather than the flick about the Huns; the hut where you'd been swindled was a carpenter's workshop; and where a corpse had lain beneath a bush on the corner, a mechanic was now tinkering with an old Ford taxi. Seemingly, the dealers you were looking for had vanished from the face of the earth. Were these actually the same houses? You'd rub your eyes, but that didn't help either. When hallucination becomes as everyday a phenomenon as a cigarette, the doors of perception, like perception itself, are crafted from a substance more deceptive than intoxication.

And when the boundaries of perception are blurred, other yardsticks lose their legitimacy too. Ede and I devised our

own scam. It involved picking up one of the clueless young foreigners who were pouring into the city in ever greater numbers and who wanted to score a kilo of gear before boarding their Pan Am or Qantas flight, so they could play the experienced globetrotter and travelling sales rep for hashish back on their campuses in the Midwest or New South Wales. You ran into them everywhere in the Pudding Shop and teahouses around the Blue Mosque: blonde, sun-tanned, ever cheerful boys and girls on their Europe trip, sitting together in their hotel rooms playing guitar, singing protest songs and swearing they'd never go to Vietnam, to kill. They made Ede, myself and the few other long-term German residents on the Bosphorus feel like ancient Asians, steeped in the ruthless philosophy of opium: if you have something, it will be taken from you. If you have nothing, you will die. And like all philosophers we thought it was only fair to pass on some of our knowledge to the community – before they listened to anybody else. Finding suitable victims was easy. When you live on the edge you develop an eye for travellers' luggage. So one of us would make a beeline for the boy or couple – of course, we only sought out those who were absolutely non-violent and looked a bit stoned – and bring them to the hotel. The room was decorated appropriately. The easel with a painting made an excellent impression, and from there people's gaze wandered instinctively to the corner with Ede's entire oeuvre. In the other corner my well-thumbed paperbacks caught the eye, as did my heap of carefully folded airmail editions of the *London Times*. When we started passing round a joint, the atmosphere was truly 'beat', and ever since Kerouac 'beat'