

The Place of Dead Roads

THE GHOST OF **WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS** INHABITS DESERT HOT SPRINGS' BEAT HOTEL. **MAX BLAGG** STOPS BY FOR A *NAKED LUNCH*.

"It is unmistakably a sex smell quivering in his spine as he moves forward feeling the dry desert air on his cheek warm and electric but cool around the edges as evening shadows fall..." -William Burroughs, from Ah Pook is Here

H eading east on I-10 out of Los Angeles, it's a two hour drive to Desert Hot Springs, top down under a vast blue California sky. The Chrysler's poor acceleration makes merging tricky in this intolerant traffic, but soon I'm gunning it past the dinosaur park and the wind turbines, channeling Broderick Crawford and playing Gram Parsons loud on the stereo, "calling me home, that hickory wind." I'm looking for the Beat Hotel, off Highway 62, where the first annual Interzone Beat festival, honoring the late William Burroughs, is scheduled to take place.

I first read *Naked Lunch* at the age of sixteen, after my English teacher said it was the filthiest book he had ever read. I checked it out of the local library's restricted shelves that same afternoon, and scurried home to be confronted by dizzying visions of Mugwumps, hanged boys, crazed doctors and violent sodomites. It lodged in my psyche and has been there ever since, a benevolent literary tumor.

The California desert is a natural orgone box, an energy accumulator filled with the same weird vibrations and human eccentrics that inhabit Burroughs' work. Stephen Lowe, the late founder and owner of the Beat Hotel—who passed away in January—befriended and then collaborated with Burroughs in the late seventies, and the two men remained close until the author's death in 1997.

The building is a clean white cube, eight elegantly appointed rooms surrounding a pool and a natural hot spring. It had been empty for 16 years when Lowe bought it and began its transformation into a Burroughs study center and literary retreat. His long term plan was to replicate the creativity of the legendary Beat Hotel in Paris, the Villa Muriaria in Tangier, places where much of Burroughs' most brilliant experimental work had been conceived and executed.

It is already as full of relics and icons as any Spanish church. There is a typewriter in every room, and those antique machines conjure the David Cronenberg version of *Naked Lunch*, a fairly unsuccessful translation of that extraordinary book into film. A full-sized Mugwump, rescued from the set, sits in the library now, guarding the vitrines filled with first editions and the dream machine, a kind of stroboscopic light fixture invented by the artist Brion Gysin, supposedly capable of triggering orgasmic visions and the occasional epileptic seizure.

Numerous paintings and artworks executed by Burroughs and various

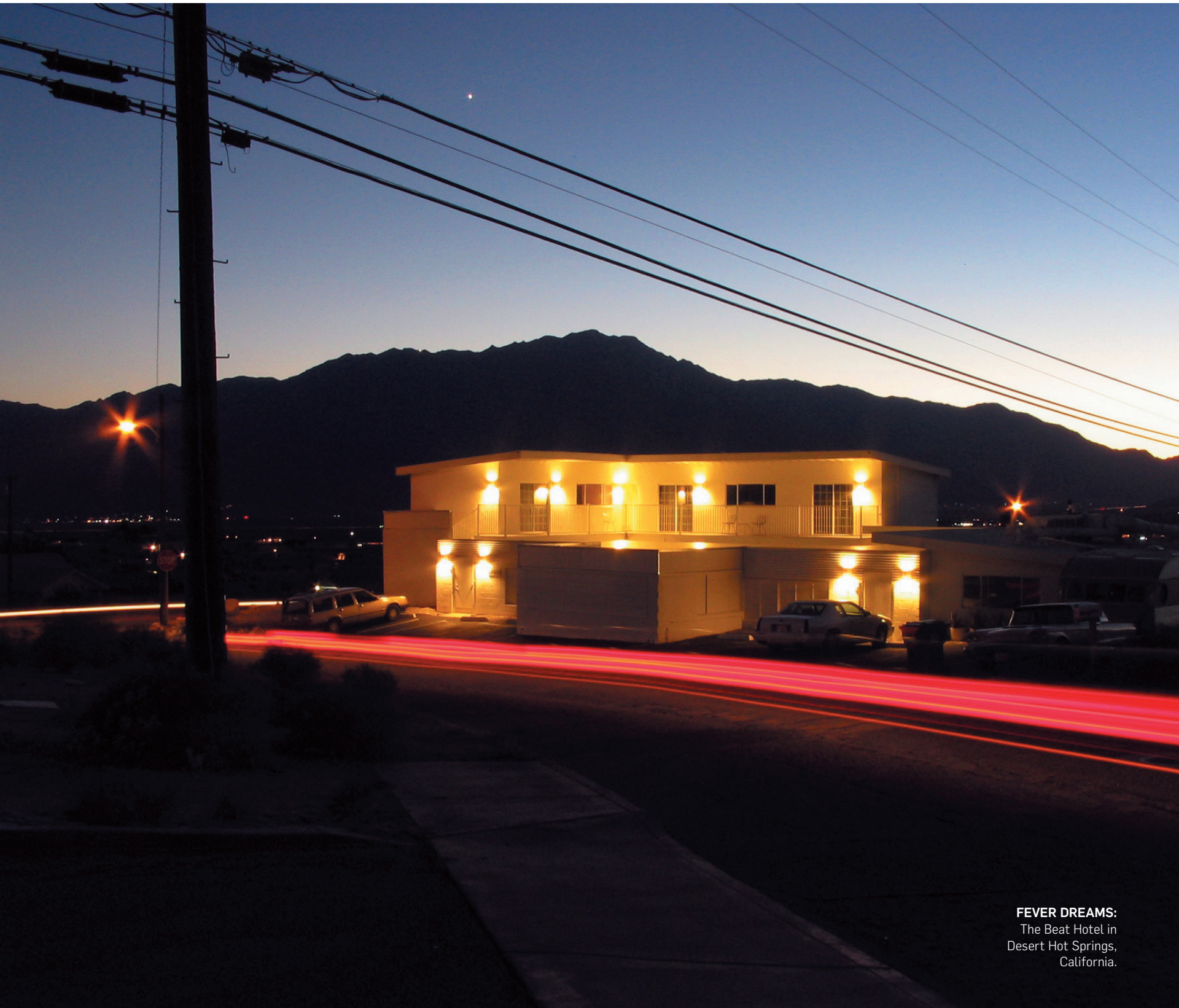
collaborators adorn the walls, including several sinister shotgun paintings, life-size cut-out figures that have been blasted with a 12 gauge shotgun or Burroughs' weapon of choice, the Smith & Wesson .38 police special.

The birthday celebration begins the following afternoon. Guests include old time Hollywood producer Robert Gregory and some of the new Hollywood crowd, art dealers, a cluster of exotic fairies from Silver Lake. The celebration coincides with the opening of a show of photographs chronicling the original Beat Hotel and Paris in the '60s by photographer Harold Chapman, a contemporary of Brassai and Doisneau. The pictures are hung in each of the eight rooms and in the lobby, and guests wander through at their leisure. Former Husker Du frontman Grant Hart plays a stirring set out by the pool, food and drink are served, and a motley crew of fans and friends toast the writer's enduring legacy.

The desert smells of mesquite and sumac and lately of tarmac as civilization rolls over the scorpions and the gophers. Vast tracts of identikit houses cover the outskirts of Desert Hot Springs, the result of an elaborate piece of speculation that has brought hundreds of new dwellings to a small desert town with no visible industry outside of tourism. It is about as far from the Beat sensibility as you can travel. But that night I have a dream.

Typewriters are clattering amid the sounds of revelry, music, breaking glass. I walk out onto the balcony. Neal Cassady, with a blonde as long as California hanging on his arm, comes up and asks me for the keys to the convertible. I try to explain that it's a rental but he's already gone in a cloud of dust. Too bad I didn't sign up for that extra insurance. Even in my dreams I'm worried about my credit rating. Not very Beat. Then Burroughs steps from the shadows and asks me to put the shot glass of tequila I'm holding on top of my head. Old party trick from down Mexico way he wants to show me. The rich emerald smell of hashish drifts through the night air, Allen Ginsberg is frolicking in the pool with Grant Hart and several very pretty boys. Everything is golden in that bleary Leary sixties glow. I'm as goofy as Dr. Benway after a successful operation. I put the glass on my head and Burroughs takes aim with his trusty .38. Fade out.

The writer's iconoclastic spirit is present in this beat encampment, with its Moroccan white walls and sweet hot spring, surrounded by the books and art created in his endless struggle against Nova corruption and governmental control. On the other side of the wall the great expanding American public is busy trampling the fragile ecology of the desert, laying concrete and brick over every available surface. Old Bill will leave scorpions in all their shoes.



FEVER DREAMS:
The Beat Hotel in
Desert Hot Springs,
California.