Foreword

AMY GOODMAN AND
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I understand dead white guys are out of fashion, but let's be tolerant . . . they used to be somebody.

CHARLES BOWDEN, speaking at a Lannan Literary Program
Event, Santa Fe, NM, December 15, 2010

Deep, lyrical, brutally honest prose thunders across these pages, casting an arc as wide open and at times as unforgiving as the western skies under which Chuck Bowden lived most of his life.

Blues for Cannibals: The Notes from Underground is the second of six connected volumes that Bowden referred to as his “Unnatural History of America.” In an endnote to the third book, he identified what became the premise for each of the six books, that they all “flow from a single question and a single hunger: How can a person live a moral life in a culture of death?” Thus sown, his trenchant narrative unleashes a whirlwind, part memoir, part reportage, part ruthless criticism of everything existing.

We met Bowden in his role as one of the foremost journalists covering the increasingly violent Mexico-U.S. border and the “war on drugs” that fuels the misery there. Bowden would appear on the *Democracy Now!* news hour and describe in his gravelly voice the corrupt institutional forces driving the abject suffering of the regular people in places

like Ciudad Juárez and Nogales. “We’ve been at it forty years,” he told us in 2009. “We’ve dropped hundreds of billions of dollars. We’ve created the highest prison rate in the world enforcing these laws. Anybody that’ll walk out of the house knows drugs are more prevalent now. They’re higher quality, and they’re cheaper than they’ve ever been. This is a failed policy.”

Chuck Bowden connected the extreme violence of the border to U.S. policy, to NAFTA. “What we’ve created, with foreign policy, meaning our free-trade treaty, is, one, slave factories all over the country, where nobody can live on the wages, two, generations at least of feral kids on the street. Fifty percent of the kids you call high school kids in Juárez neither go to school nor have jobs . . . Forty percent of the kids in Chihuahua, young males, want to become *sicarios*, professional killers,” he told us in 2010. “We’ve created something so bleak that crime and murder is actually a rational way to live.”

He cared deeply for his brother and sister reporters, especially those on the Mexican side of the border, who suffer one of the highest murder rates of journalists on the planet. “People ask me, you know, ‘Chuck, is it dangerous down there?’ It’s nothing for me. The Mexican reporters are being killed. The Mexican reporters are being tortured. And yet they’re putting out more honest news, in my opinion, about what’s going on in Mexico than the whole U.S. press corps.”

Bowden described the case of Emilio Gutiérrez Soto, a Mexican journalist who fled his home country to the U.S., seeking asylum. “In February of 2005, he published a tiny story in a daily in Chihuahua, reporting an incident where these drunken soldiers had gone into a third-rate hotel and robbed the patrons. For that, he was threatened with death by a Mexican general who’s in charge of the zone and told never to do it again. For the next three years, Emilio never wrote a story about the army.”

In 2008, Gutiérrez Soto got a tip that he would be murdered, so he took his son and fled north, hoping to reach relative safety in New Mexico. He made it, but, as we write this, has not been granted asylum. “Emilio is in limbo. He can’t get a work permit. He’s out of prison. He can’t get his case settled. And it’s a very important case, because hundreds, if not thousands, of Mexicans are watching it, and if he actually could get political asylum, it could open the floodgate of people fleeing the terror down there,” Bowden told us in 2010.

In December 2017, Emilio and his son, Oscar, were arrested by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE. Jailed, they are facing deportation and, according to Emilio and over a dozen national press organizations that have rallied to their support, certain death should they be forced to return to Mexico. An appeal is pending as this goes to press.

Blues for Cannibals draws from Bowden’s journalism but takes us deeper into darker, more personal realms. He writes of the volume, “I wrote it on my own lookout when I could snatch the time from earning a living . . . when I finished it, I pitched it on a shelf. And then once more the lean times came and I peddled it in New York.”

Early in the book he describes his tenure covering sex crimes for the *Tucson Citizen*, admitting at the outset, “I had no background in the business and I’d lied to get the job.” The litany of brutality, the repetitive domestic violence, took its toll on Bowden. “I would quit the paper twice, break down more often than I can now remember, and have to go away for days or a week or two and through violent exercise kill the things that roamed my mind.” It was on these forced marches into the desert where he found an escape. His written reflections on these sojourns caused many to call him an environmentalist, a label he disdained.

He left that difficult crime beat after three years, and with it, the prospect of a career as a newsroom reporter.

“I still live in the same town and for me, it is studded with kill sites—lonely desert trees where a child’s bones were finally found, alleys where dawn found a woman naked and cold and cut to hell,” he writes of Tucson. “Until this moment, I’ve avoided remembering what became of me . . . I learn that whatever is bad is not necessarily alien to me. Or you.”

Bowden takes us from scenes of infanticide to the death chamber, as a member of the press invited to witness an execution. Shorter than the book-length treatments by Norman Mailer or Truman Capote, Bowden offers a penetrating account of the crime and punishment of the Poland brothers, Michael and Patrick. The pair was found guilty of robbing an armored car and killing its two guards. “Capital punishment,” Bowden writes, “is not a deterrent (except to the man or woman killed), paralyzes juries, gums up the legal system with endless delays, and occasionally kills innocent people. And in a nation such as ours, riven by class and race and gender differences, it will never be handed out in a fair or equitable manner. But executions will be used frequently for the rest of my life. We demand this killing and we will have our demand met.”

Bowden bobs and weaves, describing suicide and its painful reverberations, delving into almost-forgotten history of indigenous rebellion. Throughout, his narrative is resoundingly personal and emphatic. He died unexpectedly in his sleep at the age of sixty-nine in Las Cruces, New Mexico, just miles from the border that shaped him. His sister, Peg Bowden, who lives not far from the Mexican border in Arizona, wrote a moving remembrance of her “sweet, irascible, intense, tender, brilliant brother.” She described a seminal aspect of his political development. “Chuck became involved in the civil rights movement during the 1960s, and was a member of SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. He was on fire about the people he met and

sat in Fannie Lou Hamer's living room in 1967 discussing voter registration and nonviolent protest. Hamer impressed upon Chuck the relationship of racism, sexism, violence and economic injustice, and how all of these factors intersect to keep poor people down. She called him a 'white cracker boy,' and he was highly amused by her teasing. Chuck wrote me a letter at that time, pleading with me to join him, as there was a clinic that needed nurses and I was a recent graduate RN from the University of Arizona. I always regretted not jumping in my car and driving to Mississippi.

"I believe that Chuck's lifelong interest in those who are trapped behind the walls of racism, poverty, and our fears about who is getting a piece of the pie began in the living room of Fannie Lou Hamer. He told me she was almost totally blind from being beaten by the police while registering people to vote, and yet she saw this country more clearly than any other person he knew."

Chuck Bowden saw the worst of humanity but never stopped fighting despite it all. In *Blues for Cannibals*, he writes, "My wounds kept me alive, my wounds, I now realize, were life."

He told an interviewer in 2003, "I've been waiting for the arrival, not of a virtuous society, because they wouldn't let me in, but of a sane society . . ." A sane society, in harmony with nature. At the outset of *Blues for Cannibals*, he notes, "There is something missing, some vivid touch that the cool computer screens we now all stare into at work and at home cannot deliver," as we are increasingly enveloped in a technological vortex on a warming planet.

Chuck Bowden died about ten months before Donald Trump announced his candidacy for president in 2015. We can only imagine how Bowden would have reacted to Trump—to the relentless attack on the most vulnerable among us, to the overt racism directed at Mexicans and others from south

of the border. Bowden prophesied Trump's chest-beating insistence on building a medieval wall between the U.S. and Mexico, on *Democracy Now!* in 2010:

"Mexicans are coming north because NAFTA in good part destroyed their economic base in Mexico. You're not going to have a peaceful world if you're making war on the poor. Now, I don't have a solution to immigration, but I know one solution is nobody is going to stay there until they can make a decent living. If we destroy their living, they're going to come here. You want to build walls for recreation, go ahead. They're irrelevant. They didn't work for the Chinese, either. They got a Mongol emperor eventually."

Those who knew him, those who have read his prolific work, know that Chuck Bowden would not have been silent.

I thought I had more time to say goodbye, and now it is too late for all the tender things I meant to say.

CHARLES BOWDEN, *Tucson Citizen*, June 27, 2003, reflecting on the Aspen wildfire that devastated the mountain community of Summerhaven in the Santa Catalina Mountains north of Tucson. The rebuilt community center there was renamed in his honor.