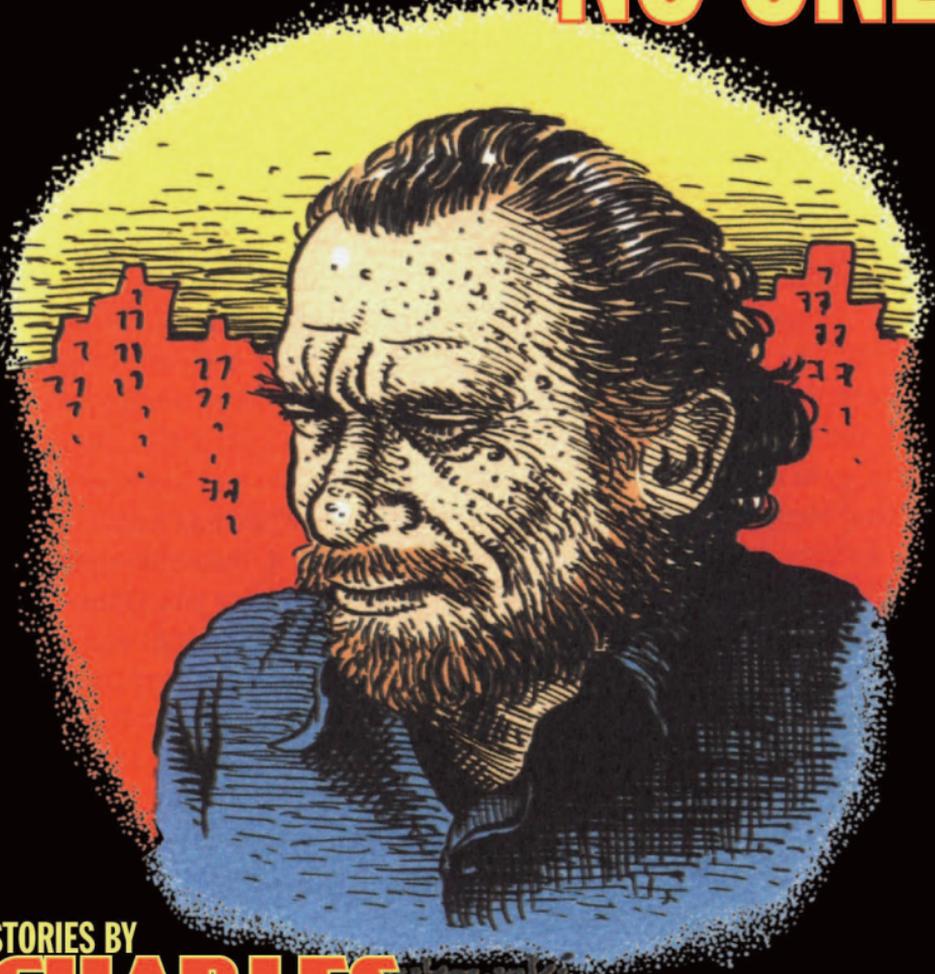


The **BELL TOLLS**
for **NO ONE**



STORIES BY

CHARLES Bukowski

BUKOWSKI

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY DAVID STEPHEN CALONNE

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City Lights Books | San Francisco

INTRODUCTION

Charles Bukowski's Graphic and Pulp Fiction

David Stephen Calonne

Charles Bukowski was devoted to “graphic fiction” from the beginning of his career: one of his earliest works, “The Reason Behind Reason,” published in 1946 in *Matrix*, is adorned with a lively drawing depicting the anti-hero Chelaski with legs flying, arms outstretched comically attempting to catch a flying baseball.¹ During his years crisscrossing America between 1942 and 1947—a period in which he sometimes had to pawn his typewriter due to lack of funds—Bukowski also submitted to Whit Burnett, editor of the celebrated *Story* magazine, a series of hand-printed, illustrated short stories, including “A Kind, Understanding Face,” demonstrating that he often conceptualized text and image together in a complementary relationship. He wrote Burnett from Los Angeles in November 1948: “I thought the drawings came out especially well in this one and I hope you do not lose it.”² Burnett urged Bukowski to collect his drawings in book form and also repeatedly asked him to consider writing a novel. On October 9, 1946, from Philadelphia, Bukowski also composed an illustrated letter to Caresse Crosby, publisher of *Portfolio*. Already he had developed the clean line style of his charming, minimalist, Thurberesque drawings which could not but ingratiate him to prospective famous editors such as Crosby and Burnett. Here a stunned man with a bottle and lines for eyes drinks, smokes, and lies in bed with bare lightbulb, curtain with a drawstring, bottles on the floor. Later he would add sun, flying birds, companionable dogs. Psychologically, it is clear that these gently humorous drawings were one of the ways he had developed to deal with his considerable childhood wounds: his physical abuse by his father, the eruption of *acne vulgaris*, his status as misfit German-American. Here was a medium in which he could play and entertain, qualities he also strove for in his writing.

The autobiographical “A Kind, Understanding Face”

(1948) begins with an epigraph describing a crippled spider being dismembered alive by ants and sets the theme for many later stories: Nature red in tooth and claw. The protagonist, Ralph, like the young Bukowski, avoids the draft, has journalistic ambitions, and wanders the country from Miami to New York to Atlanta. Though Ralph is in some respects a stand-in for the author, in the story his father and then his mother are deceased, while Bukowski's mother Katherine died in 1956 and his father Henry in 1958. The tale presents a series of odd, disjunctive events, concluding with three mysterious quotations, appended without citations: one from Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Book Five, Chapter 30, "Our Visit to Satinland"; another from George Santayana's "Ultimate Religion" (1933); and finally a reference to René Warcollier (1881–1962), the French chemical engineer who developed a method of making precious stones synthetically and who also published *Experiments in Telepathy* (1938).³ Given that there is a reference to copulating and defecating in public, it's possible that Bukowski by this time had also encountered the writings of Diogenes the Cynic (ca. 412 CE–323 CE). Just as the narrative itself is weirdly dissociative, these three allusions left in the suicide note of young Ralph seem a kind of fragmentary riddle or hidden message which the reader is meant to assemble and decode: What, if any, is the connection between Diogenes, that odd manticore, the lofty language of Santayana, and the making of jewels from fish scales? One recalls Vladimir Nabokov: "Human life is but a series of footnotes to a vast obscure unfinished masterpiece." The range of these rather *recherché* allusions indicates the depth of Bukowski's reading, and placing them one after another may suggest the absurdity of the quest for meaning as well as the indecipherability of an obscure unfinished life.

From the beginning of his career, Bukowski depicted the terrible human encounter with the Other: insects (here spiders and ants) in particular pullulate through many of his early poems and stories. His work also shows the influence of Robinson Jeffers's hawks and herons as well as D.H. Lawrence, whose *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* can be heard

echoing in the title of Bukowski's first book of poems, *Flower, Fist and Bestial Wail*. Mockingbirds, wild horses, and dogs appear in three other poetry titles. In the stories in this volume, there is a frightening encounter with a hog, while another tale set in Bolivia depicts a man, a woman, and a monkey engaging in a bizarre psychological battle, a theme Bukowski would return in his late story "The Invader" (1986).⁴ And in "The Bell Tolls for No One," the narrative draws to a close on an awesome note: "Then in front of me there was an animal. It looked like a large dog, a wild dog. The moon was to my back and it shone into the beast's eyes. The eyes were red like burning coal."

In the same issue of *Matrix* as "The Reason Behind Reason," Bukowski's poem "Soft and Fat Like Summer Roses" appeared, recounting a love triangle involving a waitress, her husband, and her Greek lover; this suggests Bukowski most likely had read James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934), in which the plot is very similar, though the restaurant owner is Greek and the other man steals his wife. Cain famously shaped the style of Albert Camus's *L'Étranger*—the French existentialists owed a debt to the cool, tough American private eyes—and Bukowski also acknowledged Cain's style as a significant influence on his own work.⁵ Like Cain, Bukowski often takes a detached, clinical view of crime, and Los Angeles *noir* would be the style of his many "hardboiled" crime stories, culminating in his homage to the genre, his final novel, *Pulp* (1994).⁶ When Irene in one of our tales tells the Bukowski-character that he is the "greatest thing since Hemingway," he responds: "I'm closer to Thurber mixed with Mickey Spillane": the hero of *Pulp* is tellingly named "Nick Belane," obviously echoing "Mickey Spillane." Of course, Bukowski's gift for dialogue, monosyllabic Anglo-Saxon vocabulary, and skeletal, pared-down prose derives from Hemingway, supplemented with elements he often said he found lacking in Hemingway: humor, as well as liberal doses of slang, swearing, scatology, and obscenity. The title "The Bell Tolls for No One" is an obvious reference to Hemingway's novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, while in another story a pornogra-

pher husband and his wife carry on a humorous dialogue about Hemingway.

Bukowski often returned nostalgically to the legendary outlaws of the 1930s, and in the poem “the lady in red” recalled: “the best time of all / was when John Dillinger escaped from jail, and one of the / saddest times of all was when the Lady in Red fingered him and / he was gunned down coming out of that movie. / Pretty Boy Floyd, Baby Face Nelson, Machine Gun Kelly, Ma / Barker, Alvin Karpis, we loved them all.”⁷ For Bukowski, as for a writer in every way his opposite, William S. Burroughs (one of whose favorite books was Jack Black’s 1926 autobiography chronicling his adventures in the underworld, *You Can’t Win*), the American power structure was criminal at its very core and found its mirror image in the violent figures who struggled against it.⁸ Cain, Spillane, Dashiell Hammett, and Raymond Chandler depicted a hard, amoral universe that shows no mercy and provided Bukowski a tradition within which to dramatize his mythicized autobiography. His 1947 meeting with Jane Cooney Baker at the Glenwood Bar on Alvarado Street becomes a tale endlessly told and retold, shaped and refined. In a 1967 story for *Open City* he declares that Jane “had delicious legs and a tight little gash and a face of powdered pain. And she knew me. She taught me more than the philosophy books of the ages”—casting Jane in the *film noir* role of *femme fatale*. And the violence of this broken world is continual. Wallace Fowlie once wrote about Henry Miller: “I believe the quality which first attracted me in Mr. Miller’s writings was his violence. Not the violence of the things said, but the violence of the way in which they were said. The violence of feeling has become in his work the violence of style which has welded together all of his disparate passions and dispersed experiences into the one experience of language.”⁹ Similarly, Bukowski evolved his own original finely modulated “language” to portray a modern world in which the redemptive power of love was under continual threat.

“Nothing is true, everything is permitted” was a phrase of Hassan-i Sabbah (ca. 1050 CE–1124 CE), the Ismaili

founder of the *Hashshashin*, repeated like a mantra by William Burroughs. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky proclaims: "If God does not exist, then everything is permitted," and Karamazov is cited in "A Dirty Trick on God." Another Bukowski favorite, Friedrich Nietzsche, declared in *The Genealogy of Morals*:

When the Christian crusaders in the Orient encountered the invincible order of the Assassins, that order of free spirits par excellence, whose lowest ranks followed a rule of obedience the like of which no order of monks ever attained, they obtained in some way or other a hint concerning that symbol and watchword reserved for the highest ranks alone as their secretum; "Nothing is true, everything is permitted." Very well, that was freedom of spirit; in that way the faith in truth itself was abrogated. Has any European, any Christian free spirit ever strayed into this proposition and into its labyrinthine consequences? Has any of them ever known the Minotaur of this cave from experience?—I doubt it.¹⁰

"The labyrinthine consequences" of such a philosophy become the subject matter of Bukowski's repeated portrayals of his characters' encounters with the Minotaur of the cave of unrelenting chaos. Crime becomes a metaphor for an unjust universe in which reward and punishment often seem unrelated to virtue: The unyielding, brutal, and powerful "Break In" contains an explicit speech on the unfairness of society, and in Bukowski the narrator often observes the occurrences helplessly, without commentary. He is at once quasi-participant and observer.

Yet these stories also demonstrate Bukowski's wide range; he can be witty, casual, intimate, and ingratiating, and he tries his hand at a variety of genres: science fiction, a send-up of Westerns, stories of jockeys and football players. While he is devoted to chronicling the *Sturm und Drang* of his private, emotional life, the political and social upheavals of the mid to late sixties are frequently portrayed, as

in "Save the World," which depicts his relationship with his partner Frances Smith. Although he pokes fun at Frances's devotion to liberal causes, Bukowski had met—and liked—Dorothy Healey, giving her inscribed copies of *Cold Dogs in the Courtyard* and *Crucifix in a Deathhand*. He wrote Will Inman, editor of *Kauri*: "Dorothy Healey, spokeswoman for the Communist Party, came to visit me. I was honored. I have no politics, but I was, nevertheless, honored."¹¹ One tale imagines an apocalyptic 1968 presidential victory of George Wallace and his vice-presidential choice, the Air Force general Curtis Le May; others make incisive comments on the return of American POWs following the end of the Vietnam War and allude to Bukowski's own questioning by the F.B.I. during the period he was under investigation for his supposedly incendiary writings for the underground press.

The political ferment of the period—from approximately 1967 to 1973—corresponds exactly with one of Bukowski's most brilliant and prolific phases. One might argue that the eruption of Dionysian sexual energy was directly related to the anti-war stance of the time: Make love not war. The gradual loosening of censorship restrictions allowed writers and artists new freedom for self-expression. Centered in San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district, the "comix underground" had taken off with the appearance of the famous *Zap #1* in 1968.¹² Bukowski himself continued to draw and paint prolifically and would ultimately get to know personally or have professional association with the three major figures of underground comics: Robert Crumb, Spain Rodriguez, and S. Clay Wilson.¹³ An admirer of Bukowski's writing, Robert Crumb demonstrated his genius at capturing its German Expressionist tragicomic essence in his illustrations for *Bring Me Your Love*, *There's No Business*, and *The Captain is Out to Lunch and the Sailors Have Taken Over the Ship*.¹⁴ Bukowski himself now began to draw cartoons for his stories in *Open City* and the *Los Angeles Free Press*. He also created several stand-alone comic strips such as "Dear Mr. Bukowski"—a hilarious account of a more-than-usually crazy day in his life—which appeared in the

June 27, 1975, issue of the *Free Press* and was then printed as a silkscreen set of fifty signed copies in 1979, as well as a series titled "The Adventures of Clarence Hiram Sweetmeat," which appeared in the October 24, 1974, and September 19, 1975, issues. The installment that appeared in the October 3, 1975, *Free Press* was published in 1986 in book form as *The Day It Snowed in L.A.*

Just as Burnett had in the forties, John Martin—who had begun publishing broadsides of Bukowski's poetry in 1966—urged Bukowski to write a novel. He worked on a manuscript titled *The Way the Dead Love* that was never completed, but several chapters were published in magazines.¹⁵ One chapter, which appeared in *Congress* (1967), vividly described some sexual hijinks involving "Hank" (Bukowski), "Lou," and a young lady in a cellar, and demonstrates Bukowski's newfound, jaunty, erotic style. In the early 1970s, it now seemed natural for him to begin writing for the men's magazines in order to supplement his income. Four stories in this volume—"The Looney Ward," "Dancing Nina," "No Quickies, Remember," and "A Piece of Cheese"—were submitted to *Fling*, published by Arv Miller in Chicago. Bukowski created the title "Hairy Fist Tales" as the rubric for the series, and the phrase likely derived from a poem he had published in the *Grande Ronde Review* 6 in 1966, "the hairy, hairy fist, and love will die," a fierce and frightening description of total spiritual defeat: "your soul / filled with / mud and bats and curses, and the hammers will / go in / there will be hairy / hairy / fists and / love will / die."¹⁶ These tales, however, are light-hearted and rambunctious. Bukowski had read Boccaccio, and the *fabliau* technique of folk-story telling familiar from Chaucer can be seen as well in "No Quickies, Remember" in which, as in a joke, the same story is repeated several times, leading to a surprise ending.

Bukowski began writing a series of stories about the women he met during the period 1970–1976 which would ultimately take shape as the novel *Women*, and the *Los Angeles Free Press* began serializing them in the February 13–19, 1976, issue with an editor's note calling the sequence

a “novel-in-progress” under the title *Love Tale of a Hyena*. (The title was kept for the German edition of the novel: *Das Liebesleben der Hyäne*.)¹⁷ His relationship with Linda King is portrayed. Liza Williams appears in several; at one of her parties, Bukowski describes meeting Robert Crumb (but declines the invitation to meet the editor of *The Realist*, Paul Krassner). Writing and women form a constant counterpoint in his stories. He plunges into the cauldron of love, passion, sex, attempting to heal the wounds of his past, attempting to find in romantic love a salve for the demons that try him. Yet he can only momentarily find such redemption, and returns to his self, and gains distance from his solitude by crafting the experiences into narrative. His life exists mainly to be transcribed and transformed into words. He goes to Arizona, describing himself writing, and immediately refers to Gertrude Stein and Hemingway, weaving in his encounters with women and children and the life immediately taking place around him at the moment. Sex is a matter of occasional ecstasy and frequent laughter; love is a matter of life and death: He gives us both, in alternation. The stories also exemplify the gender wars of the period, during which women’s liberation had begun. Bukowski typically reverses the situation to show how the “politically correct” stance can be easily turned on its head. He also, however, satirizes men, and shows the absurdity of the whole romantic love complex. Pathos, farce, tragedy: Often, humor saves the situation. He is able to defuse the pain by poking gentle fun at the entire absurdity of love relationships. Massage parlors, a pornographer engaging in late-night discussions with his wife, adult bookshops, older women picking up younger men: The entire panoply of the fading sexual revolution is held up to satire and ridicule.

Bukowski’s shift to becoming a “professional writer” in 1970 in some ways altered his method of composition. He had always reshaped the same material into poem and story, but now he was devoting his time to writing novels as well as submitting to the adult magazines. Several of the stories included in this volume demonstrate how he worked and reworked this material. He creates the same

narrative anew; he doesn't copy, but starts over. He is always telling his autobiography but selecting different details, reinventing instead of rewriting. For example, "An Affair of Very Little Importance" about Mercedes exists in another version in *Women*, but the narrative and emphasis are different. And the story "I Just Write Poetry So I Can Go to Bed with Girls," for example, also exists as the "Dirty Old Man" installment included here: It keeps some of the plot, but takes a completely different approach to the meeting with Gregory Corso.¹⁸ It is typical of Bukowski's method of selecting episodes from his life and reworking them, adding specific details and usually elaborating on reality by adding invented plot elements. He is constantly engaged in telling and retelling his life, giving it the structure of myth so that the two become inseparable. The basic structure of his life is mythic, a variation on the hero's journey, the genius as hero: his abandoned childhood, primal wounding by his father, and his skin disfigurement, his wanderings in the wilderness, his near-death by alcoholism in 1954, and his resurrection.¹⁹

These stories from 1948–1985 demonstrate Bukowski's growth as a writer of short fiction. He gradually hones his craft and learns how to combine the tragic and comic modes effortlessly. In his late phase, Bukowski had mastered his style to the point of making the laconic, finely modulated prose we see in "The Bell Tolls for No One." The mood is swiftly established, and not a word is wasted. His goal in his fiction was to entertain, yet he was driven to explore the dark places, the Nietzschean cave with the monstrous Minotaur. As he once said: "I can't name it. It's just there. The thing is there. I have to go see it. The monster, the god, the rat, the snail. Whatever's out there I have to go see it and look at it and endure it and maybe not endure it but it's needed. That's all. I really can't explain it."²⁰ The unspeakable, monstrous, inscrutably violent and tender mystery at the heart of existence will not leave him in peace.

A Kind, Understanding Face

The parents died younger than it is usual to die, the father first, the mother soon afterward. He didn't attend the father's funeral but he was at the last one. Some of the neighbors remembered him as a boy and had thought him a "nice child." Others only remembered him grown, on sporadic one or two week stays at the house. He was always in some far off city, Miami, New York, Atlanta, and the mother said he was a journalist and when the war came without his becoming a soldier, she explained a heart condition. The mother died in 1947 and he, Ralph, entered the house and became a part of the neighborhood.

He became the victim of scrutiny, for the neighborhood was decently average, home-owned, home-lived rather than rented so that one was more aware of the permanence of things. Ralph seemed older than he should have been, so quite worn. At times, though, in favorable shades of light he was almost beautiful, and the left lower eyelid would sometimes twitch behind an almost gaudily lit eye. He spoke little and when he did he seemed to be joking, and then he would walk off, either too fast briskly, or he would slouch-swagger off, hands in pockets and flat-footed. Mrs. Meers said he had a "kind, understanding face." Others thought he sneered.

The house had been well cared for—the shrubbery, the lawns and the interior. The car disappeared, and soon in the backyard were three kittens and two puppies. Mrs. Meers, who lived next door, noticed that Ralph spent much time in the garage breaking the spider webs with a broom. Once she saw him give a crippled spider to the ants and watch them cut it to pieces alive. This, beyond one incident, gave vent to the most early conversations. The other: coming down the hill he had met Mrs. Langley and had said, "Until people learn to excrete and copulate in public they will be neither decently savage nor comfortably modern." Ralph had been intoxicated and it was understood that he was grieving. Also, he seemed to give more time to the kittens than the puppies, almost teasingly so, and this, of course, was strange.

He continued to grieve. The lawns and shrubs began to yellow. He had visitors, they kept late hours and were sometimes seen in the mornings. There were women, stout, heavy-laughing women; women too thin, shabby women, old women, women with English accents, women whose every other word referred to the bathroom or the bed. Soon there were people day and night. Sometimes Ralph was not to be seen for days. Somebody put a duck in the backyard. Mrs. Meers took to feeding the pets and one evening Mr. Meers, in an anger, attached his hose to Ralph's faucets and gave the place a good soaking down. He wasn't stopped, wasn't even noticed, except by "a thin, terrible-looking man" who came out of the screen door with a cigar in his mouth, walked past Mr. Meers, opened the incinerator, looked into it, closed it, walked past Mr. Meers and back into the house.

Sometimes at night the men fought in the backyard and once Mrs. Roberts (on the other side) called the police, but by the time they arrived everybody was in the house again. The police went into the house and remained some time. When they made their exit they were alone.

It began to be almost too much when suddenly the neighbors noticed that the people were gone. The duck was gone too. It began to be quiet nights. In the days there was only one woman, thin-faced, with an English accent and rather snobbish, though cleanly dressed and younger than the others had been. Ralph was seen coming home with library books and then leaving every morning at 7:15 A.M. in overalls. He began to look better, though Mrs. Meers smelled whiskey on the woman the few times she spoke to her. Ralph began to water and trim the yard. The left lower eyelid was improved. He spoke more. "People are good. Everybody's good. I hope we can be good friends," he spoke to Mrs. Roberts. "I guess I've been a kid most of my life. I guess I'm just growing up. And don't mind Lila. She's . . . she's really . . ." He didn't finish. He just smiled and waved a hand and turned the hose onto a bush.

Sometimes on weekends they saw him intoxicated, and her, of course; but he always made work and was very

kind, really a good-natured person. "If she could only be like Ralph. Oh, I know he takes a drink! But he's a brilliant boy—and that job, you know! He is so nice. But I guess he needs her."



"ONCE SHE SAW HIM GIVE A CRIPPLED SPIDER TO THE ANTS
AND WATCH THEM CUT IT TO PIECES ALIVE."

He must have needed them too. They started coming back, first a few, and then the rest. The woman, Lila, seemed to dislike it most. She was in a fury but Ralph just laughed. Then the duck came. When the duck came Lila went into silence. The kittens and puppies were almost full-grown and the poor duck, once master, had its troubles. The "thin, terrible-looking man who went to the incinerator" was seen building a pen and thereafter the penned duck was understood by the neighbors to belong to the "thin, terrible-looking man who went to the incinerator."

One of the dogs died. They bought a piano and played it almost continually, day and night, for a week then left it alone. They buried the dog behind the garage, setting up a cross in the neck of a whiskey bottle half sunken in the soil. But they had buried the hound shallow and it set up

an odor. One night a husky woman invaded the grave and burned the remains in the incinerator, cussing loudly and violently, laughing and then vomiting and crying. "It's not death that aches us, it's the getting older, older . . . wrinkled hands, wrinkled face . . . Christ, even my keester's wrinkled! Christ, Christ, old age: I hate it, hate it!"

They evidently sold the refrigerator. Everybody tried to help the moving van men get it into the truck. There was much laughing. The piano went too. It was understood that Lila had tried a suicide and failed. For several days she was very drunk, dressed in an extremely short skirt and four inch spiked heels. She spoke to everybody, even the neighbors.

Some of the crowd thinned out. It was understood that Ralph was charging rent. He was getting thinner and quieter. He bought some seed and planted a lawn, fencing off the new soil with stakes and string. He was seen leaving early every morning in his suit, and several weeks later he was leaving at 7:15 A.M. in his overalls. The crowd remained, though, but weren't quite as noisy. In a fashion, the neighborhood had accepted the house. The lawn came up fine, and it wasn't unusual to see Ralph, in the evenings, speaking to Mr. Meers as they worked about the yards. The other inhabitants seemed to have a certain disdain and central fancy in mind, but Ralph was nice, even on the weekends when he did take a drink. He was just too easy-going putting up with those people; and you could see, he did care much for Lila.

The piano came back. The refrigerator came back. Lila began to wash Ralph's clothing, though Mrs. Meers still smelled whiskey when she spoke to her. Lila had something though. She was really an upper class girl meant for Ralph. She wasn't, in spite of it all, as Mrs. Roberts said, quite like those others. They both had education and good upbringing. You could see that. Ralph had been a journalist . . .

So Ralph's suicide was a real surprise. Of course, they all are, though they say it's old stuff, nothing new. The note

seemed written in a moment of agonized frenzy. And on the back of the note were some disconnected notations taken from his readings, as strange as everything else had been:

I saw some manticores, a most strange sort of creatures, which have the body of a lion, red hair, a face and ears like a man's, three rows of teeth which close together, as if you joined your hands with your fingers between each other: they have a sting in their tails like a scorpion's and a very melodious voice.—Rabelais.

The absolute love of anything involved the love of universal good; and the love of universal good involves the love of every creature.—Santayana.

Warcollier established himself before World War I through an invention for the manufacture of artificial jewelry from the scales of a fish. Factories were opened in France and the United States . . .

The lawn went to pot.

City Lights

Save the World

She came in and I noticed that she was banging into the walls and her eyes didn't seem to focus. It was the day after her writer's workshop, and she always seemed that way as if she had been taking dope. Maybe she was. She hit the kid for spilling her coffee and then got on the telephone and had one of her everlasting "intelligent" conversations with somebody. I played with the little girl who was my daughter. She hung up. "Are you all right today?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you act kind of . . . distracted."

Her eyes looked like the eyes of people in movies who played at being insane.

"I'm all right. Are *you* all right?"

"Never. I'm always confused."

"Have you eaten today?"

"No. Mind throwing some potatoes in the pot to boil? The pot's in the sink, soaking."

I had just come out of the hospital and was still weak.

She walked into the kitchen, then stopped and looked at the pot. She propped, stiff, swaying in the doorway as if the pot were an apparition. It couldn't have been the kitchen that scared her because she had been the worst housekeeper of all my ex-wives.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

She didn't answer.

"The pot's all right. It just has soapwater in it. Just scrub it out a bit and dump it."

She finally came out, walked around a bit, bumped into a chair, then handed me a couple of magazines: PROGRAM OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY U.S.A. and AMERICAN DIALOGUE. DIALOGUE had a cover of a baby asleep in a hammock made out of a couple of gun belts with bullets protruding. The cover also indicated the contents: THE MORALITY OF OUR TIMES. ON THE SUPERIORITY OF THE NEGRO.

"Look, kid," I said, "I'm not much on politics of any kind. I'm not much good that way, you know. But I'll try to read this stuff."

I sat there and went through it, a bit of it, while she put some meat on in the kitchen. She called me in and the kid and I went in. We sat down to it.

"I read about the superiority of the Negro," I said. "You know, I am an expert on the Negro. Down at work most of them are Negroes . . ."

"Well, why don't you just be an expert on Whites?"

"I am. The article spoke of the 'fine, tough muscular system. The beautiful, rich color, the full broad features, and the gracefully frizzled hair of the Negro' and that when Nature got to the white man she was pretty well exhausted, but she pinched up his features and did what she could."

"I knew a little colored boy once. He had the softest, shortest hair, his hair was beautiful, beautiful."

"I'll try to read the Communist Party Program tonight," I told her.

"Have you registered to vote?" she asked.

"I never have."

"You can register at your nearest school on the 29th. Dorothy Healey is running for County Tax Assessor."

"Marina is getting more beautiful every day." I spoke of my daughter.

"Yes, she is. Listen, we've got to go. She goes to sleep at 7. And there's something I must hear on KPFK. They read one of my letters over the air the other night."

KPFK was an FM radio station.

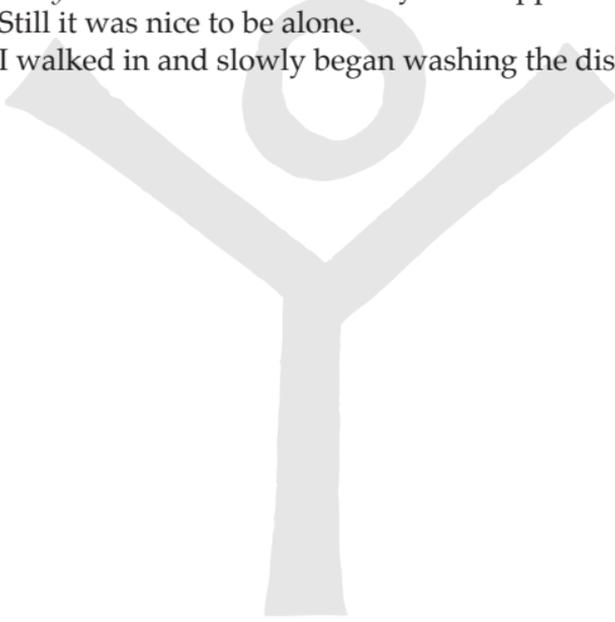
"All right," I said.

I watched them leave. She pushed the kid across the street in the stroller. She had the same old wooden stride, nothing fluid at all. I watched them go. A better world. Jesus. Everybody has a different way, everybody has a different idea, and they are all so *sure*. She's *sure* too, that wooden woman with the insane eyes and grey hair, that woman running into her walls, crazy with life and fear, and she would never quite believe it that I didn't hate her and all her friends who gathered 2 or 3 times a week and

praised each other's poetry and were lonely and who made each other, and carried signs and were very enthusiastic and sure, they would never believe that the solitude, the privacy I asked for, was only to save myself so I might guess who *they* were and who the enemy was supposed to be.

Still it was nice to be alone.

I walked in and slowly began washing the dishes.



City Lights

The Way the Dead Love

My head hurt for a week and a half. I had some beautiful hangovers that way. Lou would get on the wine and apologize until I felt like vomiting. I even worked a couple of days unloading boxcars. Lou found a wallet in the crapper of a bar with \$35 in it. So we went on. A while. But I felt like I owed Lou something. I think I got it one night. Lou was talking about his girlfriend.

"What a body! What breasts! And she's *young*, Hank, *young!*"

"Yeah?"

"Only she can't stop drinking. She's drunk all the time. She can't pay her rent. She's down in the cellar."

"Down in the cellar?"

"Yeah, that's where they put 'em when they can't pay their rent."

"Is she down there now?"

"Yeah."

We drank a while. Then I said, "Lou, I gotta call it off early tonight. I've got something to take care of."

"Sure, kid."

He left and I went out and got a fifth of whiskey. I went down to the cellar. There was only one door down there. I knocked. The door opened and here stood this young piece in panties and bra, in high heels, with just this thin negligee on. I pushed my way in. She screamed:

"Get out of here! You get out of here!"

I took the fifth out of the bag and held it before her eyes.

"Get out," she said in a lower voice.

"You've got a nice place here. Where are your glasses?"

She pointed. I went over and got 2 waterglasses, filled them half up and we sat on the edge of the bed.

"Drink up. I live upstairs."

I worked her breasts loose. They were fine. I kissed her on the throat and mouth. I was in form. We had another drink, then I worked her pants off and put it in. It was still good. I stayed all night, we went another round, and then

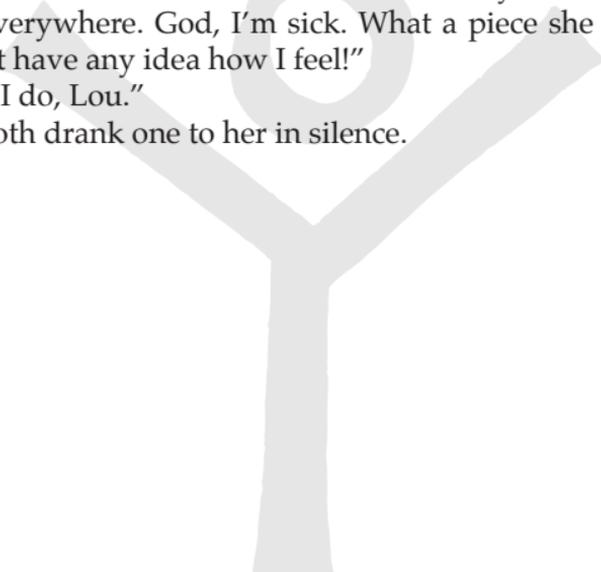
once again before I left in the morning. She seemed to like me. And she was a very good piece.

I was sitting up in Lou's place one night and I asked him, "You seen your girlfriend lately?"

"No, no, I meant to tell you. They threw her out. They threw her out of the cellar. I can't find her anywhere. I've looked everywhere. God, I'm sick. What a piece she was! You don't have any idea how I feel!"

"Yes, I do, Lou."

We both drank one to her in silence.



City Lights

I have met enough writers, artists, editors, professors, painters, none of them were truly natural men, interesting individuals. They looked better on paper or in paint, and while you can't deny this has importance, it is still very uncomfortable to sit across from these same creatures and listen to them talk or look upon their faces. The life-seed, if there is any, is lost in their work. For my amusement and fill and grace and look-upwardness I have had to seek elsewhere. And in the manswarm, stamped so alike, there is still always the individual madman or saint to be found. I have found many but will tell you about a few.

There was this hotel at Beverly and Vermont. We were on the wine, my ladyfriend and I. Jane was a natural, and she had delicious legs and a tight little gash and a face of powdered pain. And she knew me. She taught me more than the philosophy books of the ages. We'd see some man or woman walking down the hall and they would reek of the death and the plague and the vomit of sell-out, and I'd feel it but stand silent in some morning hangover shade, rather cleaved in half again about how low the human being could descend without effort. And I'd be thinking this thing and then I'd hear her voice: "That son of a bitch! I can't STAND him! He makes me sick!" Then she'd laugh and she always made up some nickname for the creature—like Greenjaws or Anteyes or Deadears.

But to get on with it, one time we were sitting around our room drinking our port wine and she said, "Ya know, I think you'd like to meet the F.B.I." She worked as a maid in the place and knew the roomers.

"Forget it, sweetie," I told her, "I've already met the F.B.I."

"Well, o.k."

We gathered the half empty wine bottle and the two or three full ones and I followed her down the hall. It was the darkest hall of hell, dozens of people leaning up against the wallpaper, all behind in the rent, drinking wine, rolling cigarettes, living on boiled potatoes, rice, beans, cabbage,

hogshead soup. We walked a little way down and then Jane knocked, the insistent little knock that said: this is not trouble.

"It's Jane. It's Jane."

The door opened and here stood a fat little bitch, rather ugly, a bit dangerous, demented, but still all right.

"Come in, Jane."

"This is Hank," she introduced me.

"Hello," I said.

I came in and sat down in a straightback chair and one of the ladies went around filling the large waterglasses full of deathstink wine.

Meanwhile, in the bed, unIntroduced, sat, no *sprawled*, was this male creature ten years later than I.

"What goes, shithead?" I asked him.

He didn't answer. He just looked at me. When you get a man who doesn't care to rejoinder in common conversation, you've got a wild one, you've got a natural. I knew that I was in deep. He just SPRAWLED there under that dirty bedsheet, wineglass in hand, and worse, he looked quite handsome. That is, if you think the vulture is handsome and I think that he is. It is. He had the beak and eyes of living and he lifted that glass and ran the wine down his throat, one run down, all that deathstink wine, without a blink, since I was the heaviest drinker born in the last two centuries there was nothing for me to do but throw that filthy poison into my stomach, hold mentally to the sides of the chair and keep the straight pokerface.

A refill. He did it again. I did it again. The two ladies just sat and watched. Filthy wine into filthy sadness. We went around a couple more. Then he started to babble. The sentences were energetic but muddled in content. Still, they made me feel better. And all the time, this big bright electric light overhead and these two drunken madwomen talking about something. Something.

Then it happened—the sprawl was over. He pushed upward in the bed. The beautiful vulture eyes and the big electric light was upon us. He said it very quietly and with easy authority.

bersome journey and I think we awakened everybody in the apartment building with our cussing and falling against walls and doors and stair-rails. Anyhow, I got the door opened, and then I tripped over one of his big feet. Down I went, straight and flat upon a coffeetable with a one-quarter-inch glass covering. The whole table smashed straight to the floor—I weigh around 218—and all 4 legs crushed under, the top of the table cracked in 4 places, but the slab of glass itself remained perfect, unmarred. I got up. “Thanks, old buddy,” I told him. “Nothin’ to it,” he said. And then I sat there and listened to him crashing into doorways and falling down the steps. It was like the whole building was under bombardment. He made it on down, gravity was on his side.

He had a good wife. I remember one time they cleaned up my face with cotton and some kind of sterilizer when it was all smashed-in from a bad night out. They seemed very tender and concerned and serious about my smashed-in face, and it was a very odd feeling to me, that care.

Anyhow, the drinking got to Mick, and it gets to each of us differently. With him, the body swelled up, doubled, tripled in size in various places. He couldn’t zip his pants and had to cut slits in the pant legs. His story was that they didn’t have a bed for him in the vet’s hospital. My feeling was that he didn’t want to go there. Anyhow, one day he made a foolish move and tried the General Hospital.

After a couple of days he phoned me. “Jesus Christ, they’re killing me! I’ve never seen a place like this. No doctors anywhere and nurses don’t give a damn and just these fruit orderlies running around like snobs and happy that everybody’s sick and dying. What the fuck is this place? They’re carrying the dead out by the dozens! They mix up the food trays! They won’t let you sleep! They keep you awake all night fucking around with nothing and then when the sun comes up, they wake you up again. They throw you a wet rag and tell you to get ready for breakfast and then breakfast, if you want to call it that, arrives around noontime. I never knew that people could be so cruel to the sick and dying! Get me outa here, Hank! I beg you, pal,

I beg you, let me out of this pit of hell! Let me die in my apartment, let me die with a chance!"

"Whatcha want me to do?"

"Well, I asked to get out and they won't give me my release. They've got my clothes. So you just come on down here with your car. You come up to my bed and we'll bust out!"

"Don't you think we better ask Mona?"

"Mona don't know shit. Since I can't fuck her anymore she don't care. Everything about me swelled up but my dick."

"Mother nature is sometimes cruel."

"Yeah, yeah. Now listen, you comin' on down?"

"See you in about 25 minutes."

"O.K.," he said.

I knew the place, having been there 2 or 3 times myself. I found a parking spot near the entrance building and walked on in. I had the ward number. It was the stink of hell all over again. I had the strange feeling that I would die in that building some day. Maybe not. I hoped not.

I found Mick. The oppressive helplessness hung over everything.

"Mick?"

"Help me up," he said.

I got him to his feet. He looked about the same.

"Let's go."

We went padding down the hall. He had on one of those chickenshit gowns, untied in back because the nurses wouldn't tie them for you, because the nurses didn't care about anything except catching themselves some fat young subnormal doctor. And although the patients seldom saw the doctors, the nurses did—in the elevators, pinchy pinchy! oh hee hee hee!—with the smell of death everywhere.

The elevator door pulled open. There sat a fat young boy with pimples sucking at a popsicle. He looked at Mick in his gown.

"Do you have a release, sir? You have to have a release to get out of here. My instructions are . . ."

"I'm on my own release, punk! Now you move this

thing down to the street floor before I jam that popsicle up your ass!"

"You heard the man, son," I told him.

We moved on down, smartly, and straight through the exit building where nobody said a word. I helped him into the car. In 30 minutes he was back at his place.

"Oh fuck!" said Mona. "What have you done, Hank?"

"He wanted it. I believe a man should have his own wishes as much as possible."

"But there isn't any help for him here either."

I went out, bought him a quart of beer and left them in there together to fight it out.

A couple of days later he made the vet's hospital. Then he was back. Then he was at the hospital. Then he was back. I'd see him sitting on the steps.

"Jesus, I could sure use a beer!"

"How about it, Mona?"

"All right, goddamn it, but he shouldn't!"

I'd go get him a quart and he'd light up all over. We'd go inside and he'd show me photos taken when he'd first met Mona in France. He was in his uniform. He'd met her on a train. Something about a train. He'd gotten her a seat on the train when the brass had wanted to kick her off. Something like that. The photos were of 2 young and beautiful people. I could not believe that they were the same people. My guts hurt like murder. They gave me some kummel they said Mick couldn't have. I made fast work of the kummel. "You were a very handsome man, Mick." There he sat, puffed out of belief, all chance gone. "And Mona. What a babe! I still love you!" I said. Mick really liked that. He wanted me to know that he'd caught a good one. I think it was about a week later I saw Mona outside the apartment house.

"Mick died last night," she said.

I just kept looking at her. "Shit, I don't know what to say. Even all puffed up like that I didn't think he would die."

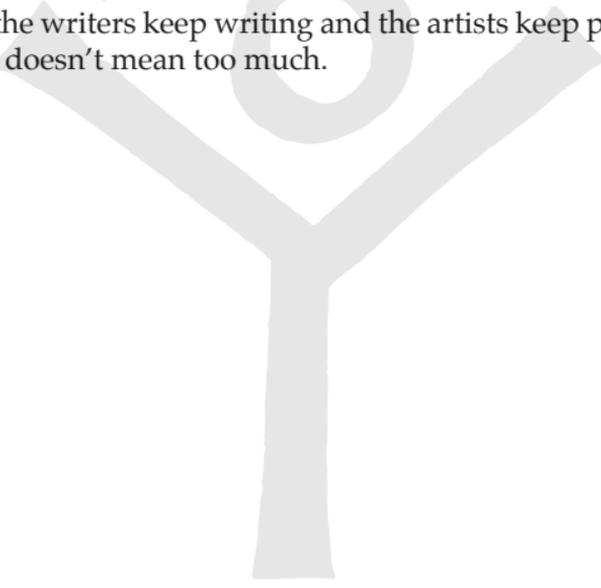
"I know," she said. "And we both liked you very much."

I couldn't handle it. I turned around and walked into the apartment house entrance, right past apt. #1 where we

had had so many good nights. He wasn't in there anymore. He was gone like last year's Christmas or an old pair of shoes. What shit. I made my way up the stairs and started in. The Coward. I drank, I drank, I drank, I drank. Escapism. Drunkards are escapists, they say, unable to face reality.

Later, I heard, she went to Denver to live with a sister.

And the writers keep writing and the artists keep painting but it doesn't mean too much.



City
Lights