

Charles Bukowski – Ham on Rye

A couple of days later my mother didn't leave to go job hunting, and it wasn't my day to go to the L.A. County General Hospital. So we were in the house together. I didn't like it. I liked the place to myself. I heard her moving about the house and I stayed in my bedroom. The boils were worse than ever. I checked my airplane chart. The 1:20 p.m. flight was due. I began listening. He was late. It was 1:20 p.m. and he was still approaching. As he passed over I timed him as being three minutes late. Then I heard the doorbell ring. I heard my mother open the door.

“Emily, how are you?”

“Hello, Katy, how are you?”

It was my grandmother, now very old. I heard them talking but I couldn't make out what they were saying. I was thankful for that. They talked for five or ten minutes and then I heard them walking down the hall to my bedroom.

“I will bury all of you,” I heard my grandmother say. “Where is the boy?”

The door opened and my grandmother and mother stood there.

“Hello, Henry,” my grandmother said.

“Your grandmother is here to help you,” my mother said.

My grandmother had a large purse. She set it down on the dresser and pulled a huge silver crucifix out of it.

“Your grandmother is here to help you, Henry...”

Grandmother had more warts on her than ever before and she was fatter. She looked invincible, she looked as if she would never die. She had gotten so old that it was almost senseless for her to die.

“Henry,” said my mother, “turn over on your stomach.”

I turned over and my grandmother leaned over me. From the corner of my eye I saw her dangling the huge crucifix over me. I had decided against religion a couple of years back. If it were true, it made fools out of people, or it drew fools. And if it weren't true, the fools were all the more foolish.

But it was my grandmother and my mother. I decided to let them have their way. The crucifix swung back and forth above my back, over my boils, over me.

“God,” prayed my grandmother, “purge the devil from this poor boy's body! Just look at all those sores! They make me sick, God! *Look* at them! It's the devil, God, dwelling in this boy's body. Purge the devil from his body, Lord!”

“Purge the devil from his body, Lord!” said my mother.

What I need is a good doctor, I thought. What is wrong with these women? Why don't they leave me alone?

“God,” said my grandmother, “why do you allow the devil to dwell inside this boy's body?¹ Don't you see how the devil is enjoying this? Look at those sores, O Lord, I am about to vomit just looking at them! They are red and big and full!”

“Purge the devil from my boy's body!” screamed my mother.

“May God save us from this evil!” screamed by grandmother.

She took the crucifix and poked it into the center of my back, dug it in. The blood spurted out, I could feel it, at first warm, then suddenly cold. I turned over and sat up in the bed.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

“I am making a hole for the devil to be pushed out by God!” said my grandmother.

“All right,” I said, “I want you both to get out of here, and fast! Do you understand me?”

“He is still possessed!” said my grandmother.

“GET THE FUCKING HELL OUT OF HERE!” I screamed.

They left, shocked and disappointed, closing the door behind them.

¹ The Black Sparrow Press 2002 paperback edition of this book, of which I owned a copy last century, reads: “body's body”, which I do not remember. I have corrected the text here, assuming there was a mistake.

From: SAGReiss

Date: 20 December 2009

Subject: The Unloved

Note: I have just checked the facts on Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ham_on_Rye, and notice that I've got them all wrong hereunder. Nevertheless, I stick by my interpretation, even if Emily is not in fact Katherine's mother. Please remember that Buk is making all of this up, not because it never happened, but because they were speaking German, as Buk is careful to note on page 10. Also, Wikipedia & me both remember "all" being italicized, which it is twice, also on page 10, but apparently not on page 139. The days are long when Rose is not here & I wake up every morning at five to write you mail. The fucking week is going to be long. Anyway I had to retype Buk's text, and I highly recommend this seemingly mundane task if you wish to penetrate a text or piece of music. When you retype it, you are actually rewriting it, as my friend Borges noted in his story about Don Quixote. It becomes yours. The meaning changes & becomes sharper. Anyway as my fingers were typing my mind wandered into the text, wondering at Buk's mastery. Now I know he says: "Fuck" a lot, screams & generally makes noise while putting on a good show: <http://www.sagreiss.org/rose.htm#buk>, but look for example at what he does in that first paragraph. He weaves together a few threads from other parts of the story, some shit I can't remember about being poor, living near the airport, and whiling away the time observing flight traffic, when he wasn't drinking or fighting or listening to classical music, which his father hated, which is one reason why he loved it. But look at what he's doing while he distracts your attention with these mindless details. He sets the exact time & place of the scene without your even noticing his exposition. Then he enters right into it with this deadpan dialogue: "Emily, how are you?" "Hello, Katy, how are you?" What's wrong with this? There are no speech prefixes, or whatever that's called in non-dramatic prose. Why not? The two speeches are identical, except for the word: "Hello," which tells you that all is not well between mother & daughter. Beware C the G. When Rose begins to call you: "Catherine", you are in deep fucking shit. You will know you have lost the war. Now everyone puts up with grandmother's bullshit, but no one loves her. She is: "invincible", undying, never to be forgotten, but yet unloved.