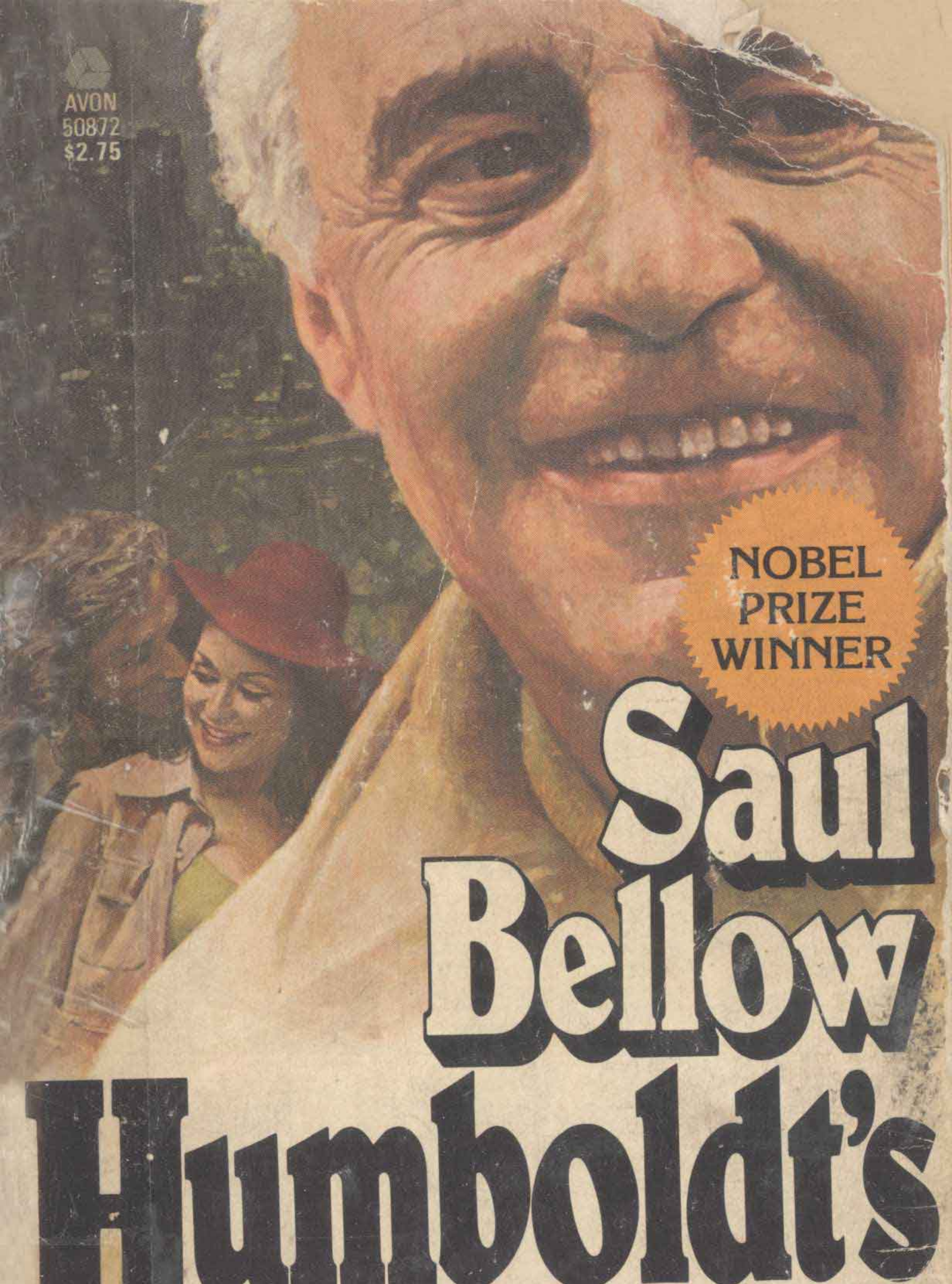

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Saul Bellow

Humboldt's Gift

AVON
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The book of ballads published by Von Humboldt Fleisher in the Thirties was an immediate hit. Humboldt was just what everyone had been waiting for. Out in the Midwest I had certainly been waiting eagerly, I can tell you that. An avant-garde writer, the first of a new generation, he was handsome, fair, large, serious, witty, he was learned. The guy had it all. All the papers reviewed his book. His picture appeared in *Time* without insult and in *Newsweek* with praise. I read *Harlequin Ballads* enthusiastically. I was a student at the University of Wisconsin and thought about nothing but literature day and night. Humboldt revealed to me new ways of doing things. I was ecstatic. I envied his luck, his talent, and his fame, and I went east in May to have a look at him—perhaps to get next to him. The Greyhound bus, taking the Scranton route, made the trip in about fifty hours. That didn't matter. The bus windows were open. I had never seen real mountains before. Trees were budding. It was like Beethoven's *Pastorale*. I felt showered by the green, within. Manhattan was fine, too. I took a room for three bucks a week and found a job selling Fuller Brushes door to door. And I was wildly excited about everything. Having written Humboldt a long fan letter, I was invited to Greenwich Village to discuss literature and ideas. He lived on Bedford Street, near Chumley's. First he gave me black coffee, and then poured gin in the same cup. "Well, you're a nice-looking enough fellow, Charlie," he said to me. "Aren't you a bit sly, maybe? I think you're headed for early baldness. And such large emotional handsome eyes. But you certainly do love literature and that's the main thing. You have sensibility," he said. He was a pioneer in the use of this word. Sensibility later made it big. Humboldt was very kind. He introduced me to people in the Village and got me books to review. I always loved him.

Humboldt's success lasted about ten years. In the late Forties he started to sink. In the early Fifties I myself became famous. I even made a pile of money. Ah, money, the money! Humboldt held the money against me. In the last years of his life when he wasn't too depressed to talk, wasn't locked up in a loony bin, he went about New York saying bitter things about me and my "million dollars." "Take the case of Charlie Citrine. He arrived from Madison, Wisconsin, and knocked on my door. Now he's got a million bucks. What kind of writer or intellectual makes that kind of dough—a Keynes? Okay. Keynes, a world figure. A genius in economics, a prince in Bloomsbury," said Humboldt. "Married to a Russian ballerina. The money follows. But who the hell is Citrine to become so rich? We used to be close friends," Humboldt accurately said. "But there's something perverse with that guy. After making this dough why does he bury himself in the sticks? What's he in Chicago for? He's afraid to be found out."

Whenever his mind was sufficiently clear he used his gifts to knock me. He did a great job.

And money wasn't what I had in mind. Oh God, no, what I wanted was to do good. I was dying to do something good. And this feeling for good went back to my early and peculiar sense of existence—sunk in the glassy depths of life and groping, thrillingly and desperately, for sense, a person keenly aware of painted veils, of Maya, of domes of many-colored glass staining the white radiance of eternity, quivering in the intense inane and so on. I was quite a nut about such things. Humboldt knew this, really, but toward the end he could not afford to give me any sympathy. Sick and sore, he wouldn't let up on me. He only stressed the contradiction between the painted veils and the big money. But such sums as I made, made themselves. Capitalism made them for dark comical reasons of its own. The world did it. Yesterday I read in *The Wall Street Journal* about the melancholy of affluence, "Not in all the five millennia of man's recorded history have so many been so affluent." Minds formed by five millennia of scarcity are distorted. The heart can't take this sort of change. Sometimes it just refuses to accept it.

In the Twenties kids in Chicago hunted for treasure in the March thaw. Dirty snow hillocks formed along the curbs and when they melted, water ran braided and bril-

liant in the gutters and you could find marvelous loot—bottle tops, machine gears, Indian-head pennies. And last spring, almost an elderly fellow now, I found that I had left the sidewalk and that I was following the curb and looking. For what? What was I doing? Suppose I found a dime? Suppose I found a fifty-cent piece? What then? I don't know how the child's soul had gotten back. but it was back. Everything was melting. Ice, discretion, maturity. What would Humboldt have said to this?

When reports were brought of the damaging remarks he made I often found that I agreed with him. "They gave Citrine a Pulitzer prize for his book on Wilson and Tumulty. The Pulitzer is for the birds—for the pullets. It's just a dummy newspaper publicity award given by crooks and illiterates. You become a walking Pulitzer ad, so even when you croak the first words of the obituary are 'Pulitzer prizewinner passes.'" He had a point, I thought. "And Charlie is a double Pulitzer. First came that schmaltzy play. Which made him a fortune on Broadway. Plus movie rights. He got a percentage of the gross! And I don't say he actually plagiarized, but he did steal something from me—my personality. He built my personality into his hero."

Even here, sounding wild, he had grounds, perhaps.

He was a wonderful talker, a hectic nonstop monologuist and improvisator, a champion detractor. To be loused up by Humboldt was really a kind of privilege. It was like being the subject of a two-nosed portrait by Picasso, or an eviscerated chicken by Soutine. Money always inspired him. He adored talking about the rich. Brought up on New York tabloids, he often mentioned the golden scandals of yesteryear, Peaches and Daddy Browning, Harry Thaw and Evelyn Nesbitt, plus the Jazz Age, Scott Fitzgerald, and the Super-Rich. The heiresses of Henry James he knew cold. There were times when he himself schemed comically to make a fortune. But his real wealth was literary. He had read many thousands of books. He said that history was a nightmare during which he was trying to get a good night's rest. Insomnia made him more learned. In the small hours he read thick books—Marx and Sombart, Toynbee, Rostovtzeff, Freud. When he spoke of wealth he was in a position to compare Roman *luxus* with American Protestant riches. He generally got around to the Jews—Joyce's silk-hatted Jews outside the Bourse.

And he wound up with the gold-plated skull or death mask of Agamemnon, dug up by Schliemann. Humboldt could really talk.

His father, a Jewish Hungarian immigrant, had ridden with Pershing's cavalry in Chihuahua, chasing Pancho Villa in a Mexico of whores and horses (very different from my own father, a small gallant person who shunned such things). His old man had plunged into America. Humboldt spoke of boots, bugles, and bivouacs. Later came limousines, luxury hotels, palaces in Florida. His father had lived in Chicago during the boom. He was in the real-estate business and kept a suite at the Edgewater Beach Hotel. Summers, his son was sent for. Humboldt knew Chicago, too. In the days of Hack Wilson and Woody English the Fleishers had a box at Wrigley Field. They drove to the game in a Pierce-Arrow or a Hispano-Suiza (Humboldt was car-crazy). And there were lovely John Held, Jr., girls, beautiful, who wore step-ins. And whisky and gangsters and the pillared doom-dark La Salle Street banks with railroad money and pork and reaper money locked in steel vaults. Of this Chicago I was completely ignorant when I arrived from Appleton. I played Piggie-move-up with Polish kids under the El tracks. Humboldt ate devil's-food coconut-marshmallow layer cake at Henrici's. I never saw the inside of Henrici's.

I did, once, see Humboldt's mother in her dark apartment on West End Avenue. Her face was like her son's. She was mute, fat, broad-lipped, tied up in a bathrobe. Her hair was white, bushy, Fijian. The melanin was on the back of her hands and on her dark face still darker spots as large as her eyes. Humboldt bent over to speak to her, and she answered nothing but stared out with some powerful female grievance. He was gloomy when we left the building and he said, "She used to let me go to Chicago but I was supposed to spy on the old man and copy out bank statements and account numbers and write down the names of his hookers. She was going to sue him. She's mad, you see. But then he lost everything in the crash. Died of a heart attack down in Florida."

This was the background of those witty cheerful ballads. He was a manic depressive (his own diagnosis). He owned a set of Freud's works and read psychiatric journals. Once you had read the *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* you knew that everyday life *was* psychopathology. That was all

right with Humboldt. He often quoted me *King Lear:* "In cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked 'twixt son and father. . . ." He stressed "son and father." "Ruinous disorders follow us disquietly to our graves."

Well, that's where ruinous disorders followed him seven years ago. And now as new anthologies came out I went down to Brentano's basement and checked them. Humboldt's poems were omitted. The bastards, the literary funeral directors and politicians who put together these collections had no use for old-hat Humboldt. So all his thinking, writing, feeling counted for nothing, all the raids behind the lines to bring back beauty had no effect except to wear him out. He dropped dead in a dismal hotel off Times Square. I, a different sort of writer, remained to mourn him in prosperity out in Chicago.

The noble idea of being an American poet certainly made Humboldt feel at times like a card, a boy, a comic, a fool. We lived like bohemians and graduate students in a mood of fun and games. Maybe America didn't need art and inner miracles. It had so many outer ones. The USA was a big operation, very big. The more *it*, the less *we*. So Humboldt behaved like an eccentric and a comic subject. But occasionally there was a break in his eccentricity when he stopped and thought. He tried to think himself clear away from this American world (I did that, too). I could see that Humboldt was pondering what to do between *then* and *now*, between birth and death, to satisfy certain great questions. Such brooding didn't make him any saner. He tried drugs and drink. Finally, many courses of shock treatment had to be administered. It was, as he saw it, Humboldt versus madness. Madness was a whole lot stronger.

I wasn't doing so well myself recently when Humboldt acted from the grave, so to speak, and made a basic change in my life. In spite of our big fight and fifteen years of estrangement he left me something in his will. I came into a legacy.

He was a great entertainer but going insane. The pathologic element could be missed only by those who were laughing too hard to look. Humboldt, that grand erratic handsome person with his wide blond face, that charming fluent deeply worried man to whom I was so attached, passionately lived out the theme of Success. Naturally he died a Failure. What else can result from the capitalization of such nouns? Myself, I've always held the number of sacred words down. In my opinion Humboldt had too long a list of them—Poetry, Beauty, Love, Waste Land, Alienation, Politics, History, the Unconscious. And, of course, Manic and Depressive, always capitalized. According to him, America's great Manic Depressive was Lincoln. And Churchill with what he called his Black Dog moods was a classic case of Manic Depression. "Like me, Charlie," said Humboldt. "But think—if Energy is Delight and if Exuberance is Beauty, the Manic Depressive knows more about Delight and Beauty than anyone else. Who else has so much Energy and Exuberance? Maybe it's the strategy of the Psyche to increase Depression. Didn't Freud say that Happiness was nothing but the remission of Pain? So the more Pain the intenser the Happiness. But there is a prior origin to this, and the Psyche makes Pain on purpose. Anyway, Mankind is stunned by the Exuberance and Beauty of certain individuals. When a Manic Depressive escapes from his Furies he's irresistible. He captures History. I think that aggravation is a secret technique of the Unconscious. As for great men and kings being History's slaves, I think Tolstoi was off the track. Don't kid yourself, kings are the most sublime sick. Manic Depressive heroes pull Mankind into their cycles and carry everybody away."

Poor Humboldt didn't impose his cycles for very long. He never became the radiant center of his age. Depression

fastened on him for good. The periods of mania and poetry ended. Three decades after *Harlequin Ballads* made him famous he died of a heart attack in a flophouse in the West Forties, one of those midtown branches of the Bowery. On that night I happened to be in New York. I was there on Business—i.e., up to no good. None of my Business was any good. Estranged from everybody, he was living in a place called the Ilscombe. I went later to have a look at it. Welfare lodged old people there. He died on a rotten hot night. Even at the Plaza I was uncomfortable. Carbon monoxide was thick. Throbbing air conditioners dripped on you in the street. A bad night. And on the 727 jet, as I was flying back to Chicago next morning, I opened the *Times* and found Humboldt's obituary.

I knew that Humboldt would soon die because I had seen him on the street two months before and he had death all over him. He didn't see me. He was gray stout sick dusty, he had bought a pretzel stick and was eating it. His lunch. Concealed by a parked car, I watched. I didn't approach him, I felt it was impossible. For once my Business in the East was legitimate and I was not chasing some broad but preparing a magazine article. And just that morning I had been flying over New York in a procession of Coast Guard helicopters with Senators Javits and Robert Kennedy. Then I had attended a political luncheon in Central Park at the Tavern on the Green, where all the celebrities became ecstatic at the sight of one another. I was, as they say, "in great shape" myself. If I don't look well, I look busted. But I knew that I looked well. Besides, there was money in my pockets and I had been window-shopping on Madison Avenue. If any Cardin or Hermès necktie pleased me I could buy it without asking the price. My belly was flat, I wore boxer shorts of combed Sea Island cotton at eight bucks a pair. I had joined an athletic club in Chicago and with elderly effort kept myself in shape. I played a swift hard game of paddle ball, a form of squash. So how could I talk to Humboldt? It was too much. While I was in the helicopter whopping over Manhattan, viewing New York as if I were passing in a glass-bottomed boat over a tropical reef, Humboldt was probably groping among his bottles for a drop of juice to mix with his morning gin.

I became, after Humboldt's death, an even more intense physical culturist. Last Thanksgiving Day I ran away from

a mugger in Chicago. He jumped from a dark alley and I beat it. It was pure reflex. I leaped away and sprinted down the middle of the street. As a boy I was not a remarkable runner. How was it that in my middle fifties I became inspired with flight and capable of great bursts of speed? Later that same night I boasted, "I can still beat a junkie in the hundred-yard dash." And to whom did I brag of this power of my legs? To a young woman named Renata. We were lying in bed. I told her how I took off—I ran like hell, I flew. And she said to me, as if on cue (ah, the courtesy, the gentility of these beautiful girls), "You're in terrific shape, Charlie. You're not a big fellow but you're sturdy, solid, and you're elegant also." She stroked my naked sides. So my pal Humboldt was gone. Probably his very bones had crumbled in potter's field. Perhaps there was nothing in his grave but a few lumps of soot. But Charlie Citrine was still outspeeding passionate criminals in the streets of Chicago, and Charlie Citrine was in terrific shape and lay beside a voluptuous friend. This Citrine could now perform a certain Yoga exercise and had learned to stand on his head to relieve his arthritic neck. About my low cholesterol Renata was well informed. Also I repeated to her the doctor's comments about my amazingly youthful prostate and my supernormal EKG. Strengthened in illusion and idiocy by these proud medical reports, I embraced a busty Renata on this Posturepedic mattress. She gazed at me with love-pious eyes. I inhaled her delicious damp, personally participating in the triumph of American civilization (now tinged with the Oriental colors of Empire). But in some phantom Atlantic City boardwalk of the mind I saw a different Citrine, this one on the border of senility, his back hooked, and feeble. Oh very, very feeble, pushed in a wheelchair past the little salt ripples, ripples which, like myself, were puny. And who was pushing my chair? Was it Renata—the Renata I had taken in the wars of Happiness by a quick Patton-thrust of armor? No, Renata was a grand girl, but I couldn't see her behind my wheelchair. Renata? Not Renata. Certainly not.

Out in Chicago Humboldt became one of my significant dead. I spent far too much time mooning about and communing with the dead. Besides, my name was linked with Humboldt's, for, as the past receded, the Forties began to be valuable to people fabricating cultural rainbow textiles, and the word went out that in Chicago there was a fellow

still alive who used to be Von Humboldt Fleisher's friend, a man named Charles Citrine. People doing articles, academic theses, and books wrote to me or flew in to discuss Humboldt with me. And I must say that in Chicago Humboldt was a natural subject for reflection. Lying at the southern end of the Great Lakes—twenty percent of the world's supply of fresh water—Chicago with its gigantesque outer life contained the whole problem of poetry and the inner life in America. Here you could look into such things through a sort of fresh-water transparency.

"How do you account, Mr. Citrine, for the rise and fall of Von Humboldt Fleisher?"

"Young people, what do you aim to do with the facts about Humboldt, publish articles and further your careers? This is pure capitalism."

I thought about Humboldt with more seriousness and sorrow than may be apparent in this account. I didn't love so many people. I couldn't afford to lose anyone. One infallible sign of love was that I dreamed of Humboldt so often. Every time I saw him I was terribly moved, and cried in my sleep. Once I dreamed that we met at Whelan's Drugstore on the corner of Sixth and Eighth in Greenwich Village. He was not the stricken leaden swollen man I had seen on Forty-sixth Street, but still the stout normal Humboldt of middle life. He was sitting beside me at the soda fountain with a Coke. I burst into tears. I said, "Where have you been? I thought you were dead."

He was very mild, quiet, and he seemed extremely well pleased, and he said, "Now I understand everything."

"Everything? What's everything?"

But he only said, "Everything." I couldn't get more out of him, and I wept with happiness. Of course it was only a dream such as you dream if your soul is not well. My waking character is far from sound. I'll never get any medals for character. And all such things must be utterly clear to the dead. They have finally left the problematical cloudy earthly and human sphere. I have a hunch that in life you look outward from the ego, your center. In death you are at the periphery looking inward. You see your old pals at Whelan's still struggling with the heavy weight of selfhood, and you hearten them by intimating that when their turn comes to enter eternity they too will begin to comprehend and at last get an idea of what has happened. As none of this is Scientific, we are afraid to think it.

All right, then, I will try to summarize: at the age of twenty-two Von Humboldt Fleisher published his first book of ballads. You would have thought that the son of neurotic immigrants from Eighty-ninth and West End—his extravagant papa hunting Pancho Villa and, in the photo Humboldt showed me, with a head so curly that his garrison cap was falling off; his mama, from one of those Potash and Perlmutter yapping fertile baseball-and-business families, darkly pretty at first, then gloomy mad and silent—that such a young man would be clumsy, that his syntax would be unacceptable to fastidious goy critics on guard for the Protestant Establishment and the Genteel Tradition. Not at all. The ballads were pure, musical, witty, radiant, humane. I think they were Platonic. By Platonic I refer to an original perfection to which all human beings long to return. Yes, Humboldt's words were impeccable. Genteel America had nothing to worry about. It was in a tizzy—it expected Anti-Christ to burst out of the slums. Instead this Humboldt Fleisher turned up with a love-offering. He behaved like a gentleman. He was charming. So he was warmly welcomed. Conrad Aiken praised him, T. S. Eliot took favorable notice of his poems, and even Yvor Winters had a good word to say for him. As for me, I borrowed thirty bucks and enthusiastically went to New York to talk things over with him on Bedford Street. This was in 1938. We crossed the Hudson on the Christopher Street ferry to eat clams in Hoboken and talked about the problems of modern poetry. I mean that Humboldt lectured me about them. Was Santayana right? Was modern poetry barbarous? Modern poets had more wonderful material than Homer or Dante. What they didn't have was a sane and steady idealization. To be Christian was impossible, to be pagan also. That left you-know-what.

I had come to hear that great things might be true. This I was told on the Christopher Street ferry. Marvelous gestures had to be made and Humboldt made them. He told me that poets ought to figure out how to get around pragmatic America. He poured it on for me that day. And there I was, having raptures, gotten up as a Fuller Brush salesman in a smothering wool suit, a hand-me-down from Julius. The pants were big in the waist and the shirt ballooned out, for my brother Julius had a fat chest. I wiped my sweat with a handkerchief stitched with a J.