



HERBERT HUNCKE



THE EVENING SUN TURNED CRIMSON



THE EVENING SUN TURNED CRIMSON

Herbert E. Huncke

Introduction
by
Allen Ginsberg

Cherry Valley Editions

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THE EVENING SUN TURNED CRIMSON

If universe is a dream-illusion as Gnostics & Buddhists chant, one Alien, one Stranger, one Caller of the Great Call, one Knower, one Enlightened Being waking in the midst of Dream can shiver the fundament of Kosmos with his lone realization—because it is the only verifiable thing among myriads of phantom phenomena.

'O go way Man I can
hypnotize this Nation
I can shake the Earth's foundation
with the Maple Leaf Rag'

The whole stage-scenery of Moloch's altar-Time, Life, Fortune, Pentagon, Madison Avenue, Wall Street, Treasury Department, St. Patrick's Cathedral, Wrigley Building & all-shuddered evenescent in sunset, (The Evening The Sun Turned Crimson,) when Herbert E. Huncke's consciousness was opened.

Toward the end of the planetary conflict then called World War Two Mr. Huncke was a familiar stranger hustling around Times Square 42'nd Street New York, so Alien in fact that several years later the Police themselves banned him from the street as a Creep. A number of subtle revolutions had begun by that time: a change in national music to variable rhythmic base called Bop, a corresponding change in poetic Prosody (W. C. Williams' Variable American Foot), hip styles of diction & posture & hand-gesture signalling revolution of consciousness from Harlem & 52 Street jazz meccas, breakthroughs of cosmic consciousness (or planetary consciousness if the latter phrase is more acceptable to city-minded critics) occurring to Whitmanic isolatos in myriad cities of these States, drug-induced ecstasies & hallucinations passing from Black and Red subcultural hands into the heads of scholarly whites, changes in bodyawareness & recognition of sexual tenderness heretofore acknowledged by Sherwood Anderson in the same provincial American ken as prophet Walt Whitman. Herbert Huncke

on Times Square quite literally embodied all these hustling tendencies in his solitary frame, and was to be found in 1945 passing on subways from Harlem to Broadway scoring for drugs, music, incense, lovers, Benzedrine Inhalers, second story furniture, coffee, all night vigils in 42nd Street Horn & Hardart and Bickford Cafeterias, encountering curious & beautiful solitaires of New York dawn, in one season selling newspapers, in another serving as a connection for the venerable Dr. Alfred Kinsey pursuing his investigations of the sexual revolution statisticised for credibility, and in one Fall of the mid-Forties appearing as companion on the streets to Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, myself and others.

Huncke's figure appears variously in Clellon Holmes' novel *Go*, there is an excellent early portrait in Kerouac's first Bildungsroman *The Town and The City*, fugitive glimpses of Huncke as Gotham morphinist appear in William Lee's *Junkie*, Burroughs' dry first classic of prose. He walked on the snowbank docks with shoes full of blood into the middle of my own rhapsody, *Howl*, and is glimpsed in short sketches by Herb Gold, Carl Solomon & Irving Rosenthal scattered through subsequent decades.

As far as I know the ethos of what's charmingly Hip, & the first pronunciation of the word itself to my fellow ears, first came consciously from Huncke's lips; and the first information and ritual of the emergent hip subculture passed through Huncke's person. Not that he invented this style of late XX Century individualistic illumination & naked perception—but that in his anonymity & holy Creephood in New York he was the sensitive vehicle for a veritable new consciousness which spread through him to others sensitized by their dislocation from History and thence to entire generations of a nation renewing itself for fear of Apocalyptic Judgement. So in the grand Karma of robotic Civilizations it may be that the humblest, most afflicted, most persecuted, most suffering lowly junkie hustling some change in the all-night movie is the initiate of a Glory transcending his Nation's consciousness that will swiftly draw that Nation to its knees in tearful self-forgiveness.

One incidental condition of the junkie—Huncke in particular—should be understood (as it has not been in the

mass hallucinations of Treasury Department propaganda multiplied millionfold by Collaborators such as The Readers Digest & The Daily News)—that the junk “Problem” as it exists circa 1970 is the result of a sadistic self-serving conspiracy by Narcotics Bureau & Mafia to perpetuate their own business, which is supervising the black market in Junk and selling Junk, which both groups conjoined have done for decades. Though the Supreme Court in its 1925 Lindner Decision specified that the original junkie-registration laws were not intended to prevent doctors from ethical maintenance treatment of junkies (as successfully practised with modifications to this day in Great Britain), agents of Government have illegally & forcibly blackmailed, trapped, propagandized, strong-armed & snowjobbed everybody in the socio-medical field of junkdom to impotent silence & political futility. Given this context, little known by the liberal public, Herbert Huncke coincides with Poe’s old demonic dreaminess.

Like Anderson and like Poe, Huncke writes weird personal prose—provincial, awkwardly literate—the same characteristic exaggerated into insane rhetoric in Melville’s *Pierre* makes that much unread book a funny delight to prose cognoscenti. Huncke’s prose proceeds from his midnight mouth, that is, literal storytelling, just talking—for that reason it is both awkward and pure. There are traces of old hifalutin literary half-style that give a gentlemanly antiquity to the writer’s character—Poe-esque or Chinese Moderne fustian of the Thirties & Prohibition. What is excellent as prose in *The Evening Sun Turned Crimson* is naked city man speech, clear and magnanimous as personal conversation. The book is memorable for these traces of American tongue, and equally remarkable for its chapters of American History.

ALLEN GINSBERG
September 18, 1968

THE EVENING SUN TURNED CRIMSON

I remember so many strange happenings from the past sometimes I can sit after having taken a shot of heroin for several hours completely absorbed by visions of places and people and the odd twists which make one person or place or experience a bit outstanding from every ordinary routine.

Once when I was a young child I had been invited by friends of my parents to spend several weeks in the country living in a summer cabin as it was called—where there was a large flower garden and an even larger vegetable garden and great huge trees and hills and a beautiful winding river where I swam and went canoeing. There were narrow gravel roads twisting and climbing up and down hills—shaded on either side by old and gnarled trees where occasionally simply out of pure joy I would see one I could climb up into—sometimes reaching almost the very top branches which I would cling to swaying slightly from my own weight and while gazing out over the landscape I believed I could see for many miles and my whole body would delight at the softly blowing wind.

The people I lived with owned a big brown and white collie dog named Tamer and he was my constant companion. It was my first encounter with a dog as a friend and I talked to Tamer as though he could understand every thing I said—revealing secrets to him I had never shared with anyone.

The cabin or house was built at the top of a hill and from the screened enclosed front porch one could see clear over to the opposite side of the river. Immediately in front of the house the hill began descending and it was rather a long distance down to the river banks. In the evening the view of the setting sun was beautiful.

The one very unusual happening of that summer for me had to do with a sunset and all these years I've remembered every so often that particular sunset.

I was a fairly intelligent child and usually could be 11

depended upon to obey instructions and behave in a self-reliant manner. Therefore when one afternoon I was left alone there was very little worry on the part of the people who had left me. I fail to recall why they had to leave me behind when they drove away but they had praised me and explained there was no need for me to have someone with me on this occasion since Tamer was to be left behind also and surely I was big enough to help myself to food which had been prepared and set aside for me and going to bed would be no problem. They assured me they would return before the next morning and of course I was too sensible a boy to be afraid of anything like the dark.

Actually I was thrilled at the prospect of having the house all to myself and reassured everyone that I was quite capable of taking care of myself. I think I was five years old at the time or perhaps six and extremely precocious.

And so suddenly I was all alone and master of the house. It was getting late in the afternoon and for the first time since I had come to this place I became aware of the sounds around me.

I had heard them before but not quite as I was hearing them now. Everything took on a new dimension for me and although everything was familiar—still there was seemingly something new about everything. I realized for the first time I was alone and I became a bit uneasy. It is rather difficult to explain now and was then but I had to admit to myself perhaps I wasn't very brave after all and this business of being alone was a good bit different than simply being indifferently aware of others being around or near.

I spoke to Tamer and kept him as near by as possible; even though I was still a long way from real fright it still felt good having him close. He and I moved through the several rooms of the cabin and although it wasn't dinner time I decided to have something to eat. There were only two neighbors and they had their places a good distance from our place and although I could look through the kitchen window and see another house through some trees—it seemed rather far away and again I was aware of being alone. I ate half heartedly and shared some of my food with Tamer and then decided to go and sit on the front porch and

boats and canoes with every so often a small motor boat spreading a wake which would cause the other river craft to rock rather roughly and the people in the boats would break into smiles and the women invariably reached for the sides and their laughter sometimes carried up the side of the hill and could be heard by those of us watching from the security of our front porch.

On the evening of this story as I walked from the interior of the house out on to the porch I became aware of the sky which had turned a wild furious crimson from the huge glowing red disk of the sun radiating shafts of gold light and or at rushing speed plunged below the horizon. I stood—nearly rivited to the spot bathed in pinkish tint and surrounded by an almost red world—everything reflecting the sunset and filled with awe and an inward fright I felt the intenseness of my being alone and although I've suffered acute awareness of loneliness many many times throughout my life I've never sense it quite as thoroughly or traumatically as on that evening when all the world turned into burning flame and it was as though I was already in the process of being consumed. I was not brave at all any longer and was out and out afraid—plain scared—as I've ever been in my life.

Very slowly and carefully I looked all around me speaking in whispers to Tamer and finally along with Tamer withdrawing into the room which had been mine since my coming there to visit. I climbed into my bed and tried to coax Tamer up beside me. He simply refused and stalked in somewhat haughty manner out of the room disappearing from my view and eventually I suppose settling down for the night in his own spot.

There isn't much more except to say the sun setting on that warm summer evening was one of the most frightening experiences in my life. Today a sunset can fill me with an awareness of beauty that nothing else can.

BRIEF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

I was born in a small town in Massachusetts. Odd in a way because my father was born in Chicago and my mother in Laramie Wyoming and neither of them did any traveling until shortly before my birth. My father obtained work in a company manufacturing precision tools used around motor and machinery constructions. This was his chosen field and one he was respected in—later becoming something of an authority whose opinion was a decisive factor on several occasions among his associates concerning a point requiring the knowledge of an expert. At any rate going back to Greenfield Massachusetts in 1915 my parents and grandmother—my mother's mother—were living there and I was on the way. My mother was quite young—fifteen and in ignorance of sex. My father was very nearly as bad although a few years older. At any rate he violated my mother in a rather crude fashion so the whole idea of sex became repellent (to her) and remained so until I was in my early teens and began opening her mind to a more honest approach—later having the satisfaction of knowing she accepted lovers and became better adjusted per result. This followed nearly twelve years of marriage with my father then two years of living separately and finally divorce.

I know my birth caused pain and fear and perhaps my mother never quite forgave me. We were friends but she always betrayed me and this became her way of balancing the score. She was truly a spoiled child who had wanted to sing and become part of the theater world and wasn't quite clear how she had become a wife and pregnant. I gathered later my grandmother was mostly responsible. She was a young wealthy widow and wanted to see a little of the world. My mother presented a bit of a problem and she presumably decided since my father was there—presentable and showed promise in his line—it was a good match.

My mother had also received generously from her father
14 and when the estate was settled had enough to help my

father establish himself finally in Chicago as an independent business man. My mother was having her first contact with the opposite sex. They made a good looking young couple and marriage was logical. All of it has never been quite clear in my mind and I speak of it from what I have heard from my mother my father and my grandmother.

My father was apparently going thru some kind of training period which lasted four years. I therefore spent my first four years in the New England town of my birth. We supposedly lived well and I have a very faint memory of a sled—some kind of fur coat and mittens—being drawn along thru a world of snow and ice finally reaching a little bridge festooned with icicles over a solidly frozen stream the banks piled high with snow and became afraid my father would let go of the rope and along with the sled I would slip off the bridge into the ice and snow below. This lack of trust in my father never changed.

There is another vague memory of Greenfield—having something to do with a wire basket I had climbed inside and tried rolling down a hill in. My mother came on the scene and whether or not I was punished I can't recall but I do remember her annoyance and her screaming at me.

The next positive memory occurred in Detroit where we lived for approximately a year and where my brother was born. I was playing on a porch—slipped and cut my head in such a way it was necessary to put stitches in the wound to close it. Also it must have been about then I developed a fear of fire engines and would run and hide under the bed whenever I would hear one roaring thru the streets.

Next there was Chicago and my real troubles began. Everything I did was wrong and what was supposed to be a substantial American middle class home was really a household of screaming hysterical women and an angry-confused and frustrated man. There was very little peace. My mother began unleashing her resentment of the injustices she felt were being perpetrated against her. There was no love and among the adults only nagging and arguing. At least one scene in which I recall my grandmother removing a pair of scissors from my mother's hands by force because she was threatening to cut her throat. There was much mystery 15

about my father's activities away from home. Other women—that type of thing. My mother always complaining—arguing first with my father then with my grandmother. My father became about this point openly hostile toward my grandmother allowing this attitude to grow over the years into intense hate.

Most of the love I was at all aware of came from my grandmother and I strongly resented anything which might lead to being separated from her. She indulged most of my whims and it was in her presence I could be myself. She was a very beautiful woman selfish and indifferent to things not affecting her directly. She had conditioned herself to believe she was entitled to and could get along with only what she considered the best. She spent fantastic amounts of money on clothes going only to the places money was the important factor. Elegant and expensive hotels—restaurants and living quarters. Much of this spilled over on to me and I have never quite lost my taste for the things money can buy. All in all she was never far away from us.