

CHESTER HIMES
(1909-1984)

For most of his life, Chester Bomar Himes was a driven man. It is arguable that the only time he stayed still for any appreciable period was during the seven years, from 1928 to 1936, that he served in the Ohio State Penitentiary for armed robbery.

While he was serving his time, Himes began to write short stories and try to get them published. His models were Ring Lardner, Ernest Hemingway, Damon Runyon, and the Black Mask writers, particularly Dashiell Hammett. He swiftly graduated from black weekly newspapers such as the *Atlanta Daily World* to *Esquire*, a magazine with a relatively progressive attitude toward race at that time (*Esquire* also published the clever cartoons of the black artist Campbell Simms).

Himes's first sale to *Esquire* in 1934 was two stories: "Crazy in the Stir" and "To What Red Hell," the latter an extraordinary *mélange* of savagery and hilarious farce set in a top-security hoosegow that is burning to the ground. This potent mix of black farce and violence, recounted in a deadpan style, became Himes's hallmark. His one real financial success, though, was a sexual satire dealing with black-white relations called *Pinktoes* (1961), written for Maurice Girodias's notorious *Olympia Press* in Paris. Other than that one great success, Himes was in many ways a prophet in his own country, almost entirely without honor. Even his famous series of Harlem police procedurals, featuring the characters Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson, started and continued as a commission from the French publisher Gallimard for its *Serie Noire*, the celebrated line of hard-boiled thrillers with a distinctly existential edge.

Himes was often surprisingly modest about his own achievements. "I haven't created anything," he once said, "just made the faces black, that's all." But almost everyone who reads Himes would certainly disagree. Whereas most writers of the period, however gifted as stylists or character delineators, hardly did more than trot out insulting, stereotypical characters such as "dinge" sexual predators or Cab Callowayesque tap-dancing jesters, Himes let the reader in on the ethnic secret, with humor, vigor, and a faint but always discernible underscoring of anger.

His depiction of life at the rough end was unflinchingly accurate and involving, most of all because he had been there and seen it all. This is

no better experienced than in the sixty superb tales in his posthumous *Collected Stories: 1933-1978* (1990).

On a first reading, it may seem as though "Marijuana and a Pistol," which first appeared in *Esquire* in 1940, comes straight from the school of didactic "anti" propaganda, written by one who had never experienced the effects of marijuana at first hand but was simply writing from a government handout. Nothing could have been further from the truth. What Himes describes so graphically is precisely the effect of extremely strong "grass" going straight into the bloodstream. At fewer than 2,000 words, "Marijuana and a Pistol" is a little noir masterpiece of needle-sharp observation.

J. A.

1940

MARIJUANA AND A PISTOL

Red Caldwell bought two "weeds" and went to the room where he lived and where he kept his pearl handled blue-steel .38 revolver in the dresser drawer and smoked them. Red was despondent because his girl friend had quit him when he didn't have any more money to spend on her. But at the height of his jag, despondency became solid to the touch and attained weight which rested so heavily upon his head and shoulders that he forgot his girl friend in the feeling of the weight.

As night came on it grew dark in the room; but the darkness was filled with colors of dazzling hue and grotesque pattern in which he abruptly lost his despondency and focused instead on the sudden, brilliant idea of light.

In standing up to turn on the light, his hand gripped the rough back of the chair. He snatched his hand away, receiving the sensation of a bruise. But the light bulb, which needed twisting, was cool and smooth and velvety and pleasing to the touch so that he lingered a while to caress it. He did not turn it on because the idea of turning it on was gone, but he returned slowly to the middle of the floor and stood there absorbed in vacancy until the second idea came to him.

He started giggling and then began to laugh and laugh and laugh until his guts retched because it was such a swell idea, so amazingly simple and logical and perfect that it was excruciatingly funny that he had never thought of it before—he would stick up the main offices of the Cleveland

Trust Company at Euclid and Ninth with two beer bottles stuck in his pockets.

His mind was not aware that the thought had come from any desire for money to win back his girl friend. In fact it was an absolutely novel idea and the completely detailed execution of it exploded in his mind like a flare, showing with a stark, livid clarity his every action from the moment of his entrance into the bank until he left it with the money from the vault. But in reviewing it, the detailed plan of execution eluded him so that in the next phase it contained a pistol and the Trust Company had turned into a theatre.

Perhaps ten minutes more passed in aimless wanderings about the two-by-four room before he came upon a pistol, a pearl handled blue-steel .38. But it didn't mean anything other than a pistol, cold and sinister to the touch, and he was extremely puzzled by the suggestion it presented that he go out into the street. Already he had lost the thought of committing a robbery.

Walking down the street was difficult because his body was so light, and he became angry and annoyed because he could not get his feet down properly. As he passed the confectionery store his hand was tightly gripping the butt of the pistol and he felt its sinister coldness. All of a sudden the idea came back to him complete in every detail. He could remember the idea coming before, but he could not remember it as ever containing anything but the thought of robbing a confectionery store.

He opened the door and went inside, but by that time the idea was gone again and he stood there without knowing what for. The sensation of coldness produced by the gun made him think of his finger on the trigger, and all of a sudden the scope of the fascinating possibilities opened up before him, inspired by the feeling of his finger on the trigger of the pistol. He could shoot a man—or even two, or three, or he could hunt and kill everybody.

He felt a dread fascination of horror growing on him. He felt on the brink of a powerful sensation which he kept trying to capture but which kept eluding him. His mind kept returning again and again to his finger on the trigger of the pistol, so that by the time the store keeper asked him what he wanted, he was frantic and he pulled the trigger five startling times, feeling the pressure on his finger and the kick of the gun and then becoming engulfed with the stark, sheer terror of sound.

His hands flew up, dropping the pistol on the floor. The pistol made

a clanking sound, attracting his attention, and he looked down at it, recognizing it as a pistol and wondering who would drop a pistol.

A pistol on a store floor. It was funny and he began to giggle, thinking, *a pistol on a store floor*, and then he began to laugh, louder and louder and harder, abruptly stopping at sight of the long pink and white sticks of peppermint candy behind the showcase.

They looked huge and desirable and delicious beyond expression and he would have died for one; and then he was eating one, and then two, reveling in the sweetish mint taste like a hog in slop, and then he was eating three, and then four, and then he was gorged and the deliciousness was gone and the taste in his mouth was bitter and brackish and sickening. He spat it out. He felt like vomiting.

In bending over to vomit he saw the body of an old man lying in a puddle of blood and it so shocked him that he jumped up and ran out of the store and down the street.

He was still running when the police caught him but by that time he did not know what he was running for.