

OF THOSE WHO DIED

A Poem of the Spring of 1945 Read by the Author

SAMUEL CHARTERS



PRIVATE SAMUEL CHARTERS IN THE SUMMER OF 1951

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Total time: 17:45

The book *Of Those Who Died* is published by Oyez, Box 5134, Berkeley, CA 94705.

Other recent books by Samuel Charters include the biography of the Soviet poet Mayakovsky *I LOVE*, written with Ann Charters, the long poem *IN LAGOS* (Oyez), and the blues study *SWEET AS THE SHOWERS OF RAIN* (Music Sales). In the winter of 1980-81 Marion Boyars Books will publish the travel and musical study *THE ROOTS OF THE BLUES, An African Search*.

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SAMUEL CHARTERS

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

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A POEM OF THE SPRING OF 1945 READ BY THE AUTHOR

SAMUEL CHARTERS

I don't think that my experience of the last months of the second World War was substantially different from what so many others of my generation experienced, but I was surprised to find - when I began the poem - that those weeks were still so strongly imprinted on my memory. I was nine years old when the war broke out, and I can still remember walking down an empty street late in the afternoon and hearing the shouts of the newspaper boys saying that war had begun. The next year my uncles began to leave for the service, and by the time I was fourteen and fifteen older friends, or at least older acquaintances, were beginning to go. I was fifteen when the war ended, and then six years later I was twenty-one, another war had begun and it was my turn to follow the others into the Army.

The focus of the poem is on the last months of the war in 1945, but it is the whole ten years, from 1941 to 1951, that go into it. The background of the poem is Pittsburg, where I grew up, but by the time I went into the Army myself we had moved to California, and the scene of the basic training in the fourth section of the poem is Fort Ord, California. Schiller's Pharmacy, where I was working after school, was on Aiken Avenue in Pittsburg. The train trip that comes into the second section was from Pittsburg to Los Angeles early in June, 1945. The war in Europe had ended and the American forces were being shifted to the Pacific; so the trains were even more jammed. I think the woman sitting across the aisle from me was part of this movement, though I was too young to think of it at the time.

I've often wondered why it was the deaths of the carrier pilots in the Pacific that touched me so deeply. I think it was because the first great battles of the Pacific war came when I was still so young and made such a strong impression. I know that the first "war" book I read was about one of the torpedo plane squadrons at the Battle

of Midway, and their losses had been very high. The book described pilots who couldn't get back to their ships and finally dropped into the ocean. I was conscious that carrier pilots from both sides were dying this way, and I tried to write the poem in such a way that someone could read it on either side of the Pacific and recognise the emotions.

The poem was begun in 1973, but it was a number of years before it took on its final form. It was difficult to go so far back into my own years of adolescence and find something coherent in all the jumble. A short poem of William Everson's titled "Weeds" helped me when I found myself struggling. It is a poem describing a couple lying in the weeds just outside fence boundary of his base - they lie there for the night together and then at dawn he has to report for duty. Everson's adolescent years were also spent in the Sacramento Valley, and there was something in the poem that helped me find my way to my poem. Another book I read often in the late 1960s, Randall Jarrell's Little Friend, Little Friend, also helped me find my way through some of complications of what I was trying to describe. The uncle who allowed me to include the paragraph he'd written about his sons is Major William J. Kelley, now retired from the Army and living in Sacramento, California.

The two shorter poems were also written during the same period that I was working on Of Those Who Died. The "Two Beach Poems" were written in 1974 and they describe a walk on a beach on the island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea. The woman in the poem is my wife, Ann Charters. The title was taken from Edith Södergran, the brilliant and tragic Finnish-Swedish poet whose work I was translating during this period. "A Poem Is" is a kind of test piece for poets - I think we should all write something like it at some point or other. It has obvious references to a number of poems and poets that have given me pleasure to read. Robert Duncan has said somewhere that we're all writing the same poem. "A Poem Is" is what I'm adding to it.

Samuel Charters

October 15, 1980

The second section of the poem.

II

What do I feel now
when I see their faces in the discoloring
distance of photographs,
as tense, as apprehensive
as small animals in a cage?
What do I see in those
surprised eyes,
what do I hear from those thin, pressed mouths?
I can almost hear them talking,
see their lips move—
but instead of words
I only hear the words of the songs
they sang as they clung to their girls
at dances. Lipstick stains on wrinkled shirts
as heads pressed against shoulders, hips stiffly
crushed against hips.
Even I, standing nervously watching,
could hear the songs.
It was always the same song,

it always said the same thing,
even when the words, or the song,
were different.
"Kiss me once and kiss me twice
and kiss me once again,
it's been a long, long time . . ."
And part of the stiffness as they danced
in their wrinkled uniforms
was their fear,
and their fear became part of the song,
as close to them, and as elusive
as insects
caught in amber's unending sunset.

I could sense the song
in the photographs of their faces.
It was there, a sound, just beyond the edge
of the frame.
A customer at my afternoon job at Schiller's Pharmacy
was a young wife who sat for an hour
every day at a table,
her desperation as conspicuous as a statue.
She was at that moment when her body
yearned to bear,
and she trembled with its yearning like
someone pressing against
a wind that wasn't there, that pulled at her
clothes, that mussed her hair.

As I watched her she drank
the Coca Cola I brought her with an intensity
that sagged from her shoulders
like a tear,
and her fingers twined, untwined on the
table's glass top,
twined, twisted at the ring
on her finger.
Twisting it as if she'd pull it off,
twisting it
as if she'd force it on more tightly.

Seersucker dresses, skirts creased
from the heat
that sifted through the opened door,
her stockingless legs brown from days
empty of everything but sun,
her hair combed, but her lips left plain.
Her body crouched in its hunger
as if she were forcing herself
not to run from the table.
But she waited the months out
like someone marking off the hours in a cell,
and one day on the street
I saw her walking slowly with the red-faced,
limping man who was her husband,
and the wind had died.
Nothing was pulling at her,
and her hair was tied with a ribbon
that held it close to her head
with the softness of breath.
"Kiss me once and kiss me twice . . ."

And I heard the song's whispered lines
in the flaccid, rumpled body of a woman
swaying against the stale smells
of a stained seat across a train aisle from me,
her hair straggling into
small groping strings down her
perspiring neck,
her eyes rimmed with dark
fingers of shadow.
Her body was as heavy
with its hungers,
but the uneasy spread of her legs
said that she, unlike the other woman,
was helpless against it.
Three soldiers in uniforms
as fingered as the train seats
sat with her, one beside her,
the others helping her drink.

"I'm married to a fly boy, you know,"
she whined in a voice that seemed to look
at itself
 in the dirty mirror of the sounds
 around them,
"He was shipping out and all and I didn't think
we ought to wait so we got married.
He's got a leave coming in a month."
A month, a month,
 but at this moment, with the dying
sunlight spewing itself over
 the dirt of Colorado,
her body was slipping helplessly
 through her fingers.
It wasn't a wind that was pressing against her,
 tangling her clothes, her hair,
 it was a flood
 that was carrying her out,
turning her over in its swirling current.
"He's just done his year's tour so he's getting
three weeks and we can have us a little
honeymoon together."

 The arm on her shoulder
 was a question, the unshaven face
of the soldier leaning against her
 was a question.
"I thought I'd come out and get us a
 room in L.A. or Long Beach,
and wait for him to get there."

The smell of whiskey rind, the days
 in the train strewn on the floor
 in twisted shreds
of cigars, the fingers of her hair
trailing down her neck,
 the soldier's
 fingers like a vein spreading
over the sagging weight of her breast.

"My husband
 gets back stateside next month . . ."
 the whining voice no one
 was listening to,
"Thought I'd get out early, you know,
and hunt something up."
The flood rising around her in the
 last, heavy, yellowing breath
of sunset.

 The train shaking as it fumbled
over a switchpoint,
 the eyes around her glittering
as the light sieved into darkness.

Her voice thinning, whiskey licked
from fingers as paper cups leaked,
 the current pushing at her,
 prodding her.

 In the stifled darkness
under a huddled blanket
 on the slow slope to the New Mexico
state line
 she and the soldier beside her
managed a kind of convulsive coupling,
 and I watched their
 bodies heave
over and over again in a raging,
 lurching movement as the current
 tore them, rolled them, pulled them
down into its heaving eddies,
 until with a drunken mewling
I heard her dragged under.

 An aimless pushing of shadows
as the morning came into the car
 and made its way down the aisle
a seat at a time.

 A low droning of sleep
from the woman sprawled open mouthed now
on the seat across from me,
 clothes rumpled,
pulled loose under the blanket's sweat,
 skin dirtied, a half-opened eye
reddening with the sun's reflection,
 the skin grainy, lips burning
as the train
 fled from the cruelty of the flaccid
yellow dawn into New Mexico.
With a voice like a torn sleeve
 she asked for a cup of coffee.

I couldn't talk to the men
 who were going to die,
I couldn't talk to the desperate,
yearning women they left behind them.

 They had taken a few steps
away from me and I could see them
as they stood talking in the half light.
The only thing I could understand
 from the movement of their lips
were the words to their songs.

"Kiss me once and kiss me twice
and kiss me once again . . ."