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Seymour Krim (1922–1989)

When I was twelve years old I wanted to be a beatnik because of the character Maynard G. Krebs on The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis. By the time I was fourteen my inspiration was Seymour Krim's paperback anthology The Beats—a collection of what he called “fantastic crazy nutty grim honest liberating fertilizing writing”—which made that scene look more glamorous than Peter Gunn. There's no greater advocate than a convert and Krim, who came to Beat from the mainstream milieu of Commentary and The Hudson Review, brought to the scene the enthusiasm of a St. Paul. You can feel it in “Making It!” from Views of a Nearsighted Cannoneer. It worked for me. Thanks Seymour, thanks Maynard.

Making It!

WHEN HAS an inside phrase like “making it” or so-and-so’s “got it made” shot with such reality through the museum of official English? In this terse verbal shorthand lies a philosophy of life that puts a gun in the back of Chase Manhattan rhetoric and opens up, like a money-bag, the true values that make the Sammys and Susies of modern city life run today. *You've got it made.* How the words sing a swift jazz poem of success, hi-fi, the best chicks (or guys), your name in lights, pot to burn, jets to L.A. and London, bread in the bank, baby, and a fortress built around your ego like a magic suit of armor! *You've got it made.* Royalties pouring in, terraces stretching out, hip movie starlets strutting in butt-parade, nothing but Jack Daniels with your water, your name in Skolsky's column, Tennessee for lunch, dinner with—somebody who swings, sweetheart! And tomorrow the world (as a starter).

Middle-class ideals of success once curled the lip of the intellec-

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tual; today he grins not, neither does he snide. Columbia professor, poet, painter, ex-Trotskyite, Partisan Review editor, G. E. engineer, Schenley salesman—they all live in the same world for a change and that world says, go! The Marxist, neo-Christian, romantic, humanitarian values of 20 years ago are great for the mind's library and its night-time prayer mat; but will they fill the cancerous hunger in the soul for getting what *you* want today? Softies become tough, toughies get harder, men dig that they'd rather be women, women say to hell with lilacs and become men, the road gets rougher (as Frankie lays his smart-money message on us) and you've got to move, hustle, go for the ultimate broke or you'll be left with a handful of nothing, Jack and Jill! What happened to the world out *there*, the one you always thought you loved and honestly-couldn't-get-enough-of-without-wanting-a-sou-in-return for your pure and holy feelings? *Baby, that world went up in the cornball illusions of yesterday! Forget it just like it never knew you were alive. This bit about being a fine writer, a dedicated actor, a movie-maker with Modern Museum notions of heaven, a musician because you truly love it, a painter because you die when you smell the color? Don't make me laugh—it's not good for the stitches, dad. This world (nuts, this rutting universe!) is a Mt. Everest, kiddo, and you've got to start climbing now or the dumbwaiter of this age will slam you down into the black basement. Use whatever you've got and use what you ain't got, too!*

Throughout the jumping metropolis of New York one sees vertical fanaticism, the Thor-type upward thrust of the entire being, replacing pale, horizontal, mock-Christian love of fellow-creature; the man or woman who is High Inside, hummingly self-aware, the gunner and the gunnerette in the turret of the aircraft that is Self, is watching out for number one with a hundred new-born eyes. He or she has been slicked down by the competition to a lean, lone-eagle, universe-supporting role. Hey Atlas, did you ever think that common man and woman would be imprisoned under the burden of your heroic weight and find it the ultimate drag rather than the ultimate god-like stance, without value, nobility or purpose? The ancient symphonies of Man

have lost their meaning. It is hopelessness that drives the modern whirlwind striver to put such emphasis on personal achievement.

In every brain-cell of intellectual and artistic life the heat is on in America today no differently than it is in business. Values? Purpose? Selectivity? Principles? *For the birds, Charley! I want to make it and nothing's going to stand in my way because everything is crap, except making it! I want my ego to ride high, my heart to bank the loot of life, my apartment to swing, my MG to snarl down the highway, my pennant to wave above the scattered turds of broken dreams for a better world! Why don't you level and say you want the same, you hypocrite? Be honest for Chrissakes!*

With the blessings of psychiatry, enlightened (so-called) selfishness has become the motto of hip city life; the once-Philistine is admired for his thick skin and wallet; the poor slob who translates Artaud but can't make his rent, a girl, or hold his own at a party is used as a dart-board for the wit of others—not by the “enemy,” either, but by his very Village brothers who have forsaken a square idealism for a bite-marked realism. The only enemy today is failure, failure, failure, and the only true friend is—success! How? In what line? Whoring yourself a little? Buttering up, sucking up, self-salesmanship, the sweet oh-let-me-kiss-your-ass-please smile? *Don't be naive, friend. You think this hallucinated world is the moonlight sonata or something? You think anyone cares about your principles or (don't make me puke!) integrity or that they make the slightest ripple in the tempest of contemporary confusion? Go sit at home, then, you model saint and keep pure like the monks with your hands on your own genitalia! Because if you want to make it out in the world, baby, you have to swing, move, love what you hate and love yourself for doing it, too!*

The one unforgivable sin in city life today is not to *make it*. Even though the cush of success may seem hollow to the victor as his true self sifts the spoils, alone and apart from the madding cats who envy him, he knows that his vulnerable heart could not bear the pain of being a loser. Wasn't success drummed at him every day in every way in relation to women, status, loot—Christ, the image of himself in his

own eyes? Didn't he see those he admired in his tender years flicked off like so many flies because they'd never made a public victory of their talents? My God, man, what else could he do except be a success (or kill himself)—the world being what it is?

For *making it* today has become the only tangible value in an environment quaking with insecurity and life's mockery of once-holy goals, which the bored witch of modern history has popped over the rim of the world for sport, like an idle boy with paper pellets. *How can you buy grand abstractions of human brotherhood for that daily fix needed by your ego when Dostoevsky and Freud have taught us we hate our parents, brothers, sisters and wives, as well as friends? Oh, no, you can't snow us, you peddlers of fake hope! We know you for what you are: vaseline-tongued frustrates who wanted to make it and lost. Man, how the wound shows behind your pathetic rationalizations!*

The padded values and euphemisms of a more leisurely time have been ruthlessly stripped away under the hospital light of today's world; honesty, integrity, truthfulness, seem sentimental hangovers from a pastoral age, boy-scout ideals trying to cope with an armored tank of actuality that is crumpling the music-box values of the past like matchsticks. It is not Truth that is pertinent today, in the quaint dream of some old philosopher; it is the specific truths of survival, getting, taking, besting, as the old order collapses like a grounded parachute around the stoney vision of the embittered modern adult. *What is left but me?* mutters the voice of reality, *and how else can I save myself except by exhausting every pore in the race with time?* We see in America today a personal ambition unparalleled in fierce egocentricity, getting ahead, achieving the prize, making a score—for the redemption of self. Are the ends good? Does it matter to the world? Will it pass muster at the gates of judgment? *Such questions are ridiculous: they presume a God above man rather than the god of life who thumps within my chest for more, faster, bigger, conquers for me, me, ME!*

As the individual stands his lonely vigil in the polar night of the desolation of all once agreed-upon values—as they have receded like the tide, rolling back into the past—where else, he cries, can he turn

but to his own future? Who else will help him? What can he or she do but mount the top of personal fulfillment in a world that has crumbled beneath the foot? Upon the neon-lit plains of the modern city comes the tortured cry of a million selves for a place in the sun of personal godhood. As one by one the lights of the old-fashioned planets Peace, Love, Happiness, have flickered and gone out, plunging all into the spook jazzglow of a new surrealist dawn, the only believable light comes from the soul-jet of need that burns in the private heart. *Let the lousy world crash like a demented P-38! What can I do about it? I'm merely a pawn of this age like you. Man, my only escape-hatch is making it at the highest pitch I can dream of!*

An individualism just short of murder has replaced the phantom of socialism as the idols of the recent past shrink into mere trophies on the mocking walls of history. In an existence so dream-like, uncertain, swift, the only nailed-down values that remain are those that can be seen in the bank-book of life. *Can honors be taken away from me? Fame? Money? The beauty I can possess (by name or dollar) in both flesh and leather? No! Don't croon to me of art or soul in a world that has flipped loose from its moorings, seen the futility of truth, the platitude of spiritual hope, the self-deception in innocence, the lack of discrimination in goodness, the pettiness of tears! You live only once, Jack, and if you don't swing with the fractured rhythms of this time—if you hide behind the curtains of a former, simpler, child's world of right and wrong—you condemn yourself to the just sneers of those who dig the real world as it is! Baby, there is no significance today but YOU and the sooner you wake up to the full horror of this fact, the better!*

By time-honored esthetic and moral standards the knowing modern man, and woman, is a barely polite gangster; his machine-gun is his mind, ideas his bullets, power and possession his goals. The reduction of the real to the usable has been whittled into a necessity by the impossible number of potential choices within himself: he knows, after juggling more thoughts than he can reach conclusions about, that he must snap down the lid on fruitless speculation and use the precious energy for making warheads on the spears of practicality.

Victims of their own subjective desperation, pigmies under the heavens of thought that dot the roof of their minds with a million perverse stars, converge upon the external prizes of life like hordes released from prison: eager to bury the intolerable freedom of the mind's insanity in the beautiful sanity of—making it! *Yes, yes, I will convert the self that bugs me into an objective victory in the steel and weighable world! I will take the scalding steam of my spirit and hiss it outward like an acetylene torch upon the hard shale of life, and cut diamonds for myself! You say this therapy of mine adds brutality to the gutter of modernity, that I care only for my private need at the expense of the world? That my fuel is desperation and that I'm marvellously indifferent about adding my shot of cruel self-interest to an already amoral environment? I don't deny it. Survival at its highest conception means making it! To live you must conquer if you're normal enough to hate being stuck with your futile being and smart enough to know you must trade it for success!*

For what else is there? Dying at parties, as I used to, when I saw some headliner bring the fawn out of even the best people, who swooned around this living symbol of magic? Eating my heart out because I didn't have the admiration, the quiff, the loot, the attention I and all human beings demand out of life? Suppose I do know how cheap and unlike my original ideal it all is? You want it too, you envious bastard, you know you do! Spit it out that the ego is the world today for all of us and that without its gratification living is a hell, a roasting on the skewer of frustration as you watch others grab the nooky! Jack, life is too far gone—too man-eat-man—for your wistful moralizing and pansy references to the cathedrals of the past. It's only the present that counts in a world that has no foreseeable future and I'm human enough to want to swing my way to the grave—sweetheart, you can have immortality!

In an age that has seen the abandonment, because they are too costly, of cherished political and personal hopes, hypodermic realism inside and business-like efficiency outside becomes the new style. The address-book replaces the soul, doing is the relief of being, talking of thinking, getting of feeling. *I've got to numb myself in action, exhaust*

this inner fiend, or else all the hopelessness of this so-called life of mine will come bursting through its trap-door and overwhelm me! I've got to swing, plan, plot, connive, go and get and get some more, because what else is there, Buster? The frenzied tempo of achievement is matched only by the endless desert within; the futility-powered desperado drives himself ever forward, trying to find in action some publicly-applauded significance that is freezingly absent in solitude. Does it matter that he finds his buddies who have made it as rocket-desperate and unsatisfied as himself?

Hell no. Doesn't the world admire us and isn't it obvious that it's better to be miserable as a storm-trooper than as a Jew? Wasn't my picture in Look, wasn't I on Mike Wallace's show and didn't I turn down an invitation from Long John? Doesn't my answering-service hum with invitations, haven't I made it with that crazy-looking blonde who sings at the Persian Room as well as that distinguished lady novelist who lives near Dash Hammett's old apartment on West 10th? Don't I jive with Condon as well as Wystan Auden, Jim Jones (when he's in town) as well as Maureen Stapleton, Bill Zeckendorf, Bill Rose, Bill Styron, Bill Faulkner, Bill Basie, Bill Williams, Bill de Kooning, Bill Holden—just on the Bill front? Don't I get tips on the market, complimentary copies of Big Table as well as Holiday, didn't I put down Dali at that party for being square and get a big grin from Adlai Stevenson for doing so?

Man, I know what I'm doing! I'm swinging instead of standing still, I'm racing with a racing age, I'm handling 17 things at once and I'm scoring with them all! Life's too wild today, sonny, to worry about the fate of the race or private morality or nun-like delicacies of should-I or should-I-not; anyone with brains or even imagination is a self-driven marauder with the wisdom to know that if he hustles hard enough he can have a moat full of gravy and a penthouse-castle high over life's East River! I'm bartering my neuroses for AT&T (not crying over them to Beethoven's Ninth like you, you fake holy man!) and bemoaning my futile existence with Mumm's Extra Dry and the finest hemp from Laredo and my new Jackson Pollock and my new off-Broadway boff and my new book and my new play and my new pad and this TV show they're gonna build around me and—Jesus, I've got it made!

... while down below the lusting average man and woman sweats in jealousy at the sight of these dexedrine angels, the very inspiration of what he and she can become if only they too can put that last shred of shame behind them and swing, extrovert yourself, get with it, make that buck, make that chick, make that poem, make this crazy modern scene *pay off*, O my heart, so I too can sink my teeth in the sirloin and wear the pearls of hell!

Views of a Nearsighted Cannoneer, 1961