You Get So Alone at Times That It Just Makes Sense Study Guide

You Get So Alone at Times That It Just Makes Sense by Charles Bukowski

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You Get So Alone At times That It Just Makes Sense is a collection of free verse poems by Charles Bukowski published in 1986. The collection—customarily rowdy, vulgar and candid—focuses on the themes of regret, acceptance, and solitude. It reflects the aging of notorious enfant terrible.

You Get So Alone begins with the poem "1813-1883," which introduces the poet-narrator, Chinaski, at his typewriter in his LA home with his cat. A mad storm rages outside, and the wine, weather and writing merge into a perfect cacophony.

In "red Mercedes," Chinaski is in a bad mood when he is cut off by a young man in a red Mercedes while entering the race track. He follows the man to valet parking and begins pounding on his car door. The man's girlfriend passes him a gun from the glove compartment, and Chinaski backs off and heads to the clubhouse.

"retired" tells a story of Chianski's father. Chinaski sits with his father, eating, and his father talks about all his favorite foods and belches and farts. His father has never missed a day of work and looks forward to retiring. One day, he suddenly dies, never making it to retirement.

In "working it out," Chinaski is typing in the early morning while the radio blares and on TV is a movie starring Gregory Peck as F. Scott Fitzgerald. Chinaski scoffs at the self-immolating idiocy of the world and continues to write accompanied by his cats. He tells them he will not read them his work; no one would understand it rightly anyway.

In "beasts bounding through time—" the author lists out a number of renowned and doomed artists: Van Gogh, Hemingway, Dostoevsky, Plath, Lorca, for example. He finishes by lamenting the impossibility of being human and commends these people who shed some light on that.

The author focuses on the derelicts of Skid Row in "trashcan lives," likening American democracy to a dictatorship except that the homeless are not exterminated, just ignored.

In "the lost generation," Chinaski talks about two wealthy arts patrons in the twenties and the cohort of artists they keep around like pets. Eventually the woman publishes some stories and her husband commits suicide. Chinaski hates them and the famous artists who kowtowed to them.

In "no help for that," the author ruminates on the emptiness at the center of life that is never filled.

Chinaski returns to the subject of his father in "my non-ambitious ambition." His father is fond of motivational clichés, which he doles out at dinner. Chinaski hates this and considers his father intensely discouraging. His father, in turn, calls him a bum and says he will never amount to anything. Chinaski is proud to have succeeded in that.

Pp. 13-28 Analysis

You Get So Alone At Times That It Just Makes Sense begins with a portrait of our poet drinking and listening to Wagner on a stormy night. He feels a strong kinship with the German composer; indeed, Chinaski has a powerful understanding of his connection to generations of artists that preceded him. This is reflected in this section not only by "1813-1883" but also by "the lost generation" and "beasts bounding through time—" His work is akin to the passionate art that came before and a rebuttal to the insipid work of authors like Fitzgerald.

In the second poem of this section, "red Mercedes," the author introduces a frequent setting of his work: the race track. He also, in the conflict between Chinaski and the young rich kid, sets up the frequent implicit class conflict in the collection. Chinaski is a man who will not abide entitlement by the independently wealthy. The flip side of this rage is articulated in the pathos of "trashcan lives." In that poem, Chinaski expresses the central tragedy of being poor in America: you are locked out of the prosperity.

In "retired" and "my non-ambitious ambition" Chinaski presents the character of his father. Chinaski's father serves as classic foil for the poet. He is hard-working, optimistic, and just as utterly intractable in his opinions. He never misses a day of work and spouts inane clichés about the value of labor. His early death is both ironic and tragic, reflecting the utter injustice of the universe and the foolishness of optimism in the face of overwhelming odds. Chinaski, after all, know his father will never make it to retirement, and that is why he resolves to be a bum.

Pp. 29-50

Pp. 29-50 Summary

Chinaski remembers his childhood in "education." In school he has difficulty with words and falls behind the other children. His teacher, Ms. Simms, calls his mother in for a conference. She says that Chinaski is not trying to learn, and Chinaski's mother begs her to give him another chance. On the way home, Chinaski's mother laments that his father will be very angry, and Chinaski resolves to learn nothing in school.

In "downtown L.A." Chinaski is drunk in a hotel room with a prostitute and breaks a window. This is the type of night that produces his best work. He sweet-talks the prostitute, saying that she is not like the other whores. He decides not to have sex with her, and they drink together. The next morning, he wakes up to her going down on him. They check out and head to a bar for some morning beers.

In "another casualty," one of Chinaski's cats is hit by a car. He gets the animal back from the vet, and it immediately tries to mount a female cat. Chinaski understands the impulse.

Chinaski laughs at the absurdity of drivers giving each other the finger in "driving test." One day, however, he gives another driver the finger in a supermarket parking lot and feels like an idiot.

In "that's why funerals are so sad," the author talks about a boxer with all the right moves but no ambition to make it. He just wants to chase girls, dress well, and drive a nice car. Chinaski points out how few people have the drive to succeed.

In "cornered" Chinaski sits in empty bars, a man past his prime. All of his critics say he has finally lost the gift. He thinks, in the end, it has been a good fight.

The author introduces Chinaski's lover Jane in "bumming with Jane." He discusses how he and Jane lived on next to nothing, drank, fought, and antagonized the world. He loved it.

In "darkness" Chinaski laments the lie of the American dream. He speaks of everyday people who have been ground down to empty shells from the reality of the world. Educators, leaders, and parents promise a bright future that almost never happens. Still, we regroup and soldier on despite our failures.

In "termites of the page" the author lambasts the so-called poets of his day. He says their words are meaningless since none of them has ever worked a day in their lives. These arid wordsmiths with their wealthy families have made the author grow to hate the word poet.

Pp. 29-50 Analysis

This section contains a series of poems that serve as a defense of listlessness. The story of his decision to learn nothing in school in "education" can be seen in corollary with the story of the un-ambitious boxer in "that's why funerals are so sad." Moreover, in "downtown L.A." and "bumming with Jane" Chinaski creates a microcosm for his life: drinking, breaking things, shouting and sleeping with prostitutes. Clearly this life has been the basis and wellspring for his success. His existence is a justification for indolence and excess.

The counterpoint of this life is expressed in the lamentation of "darkness." This piece is a clear rebuttal to the ideals of his father's generation. To Chinaski, who has worked low-end jobs and lived among the itinerant and starved, the promise of the American Dream is a lie. An average man or woman's chances of making it from rags to riches are not great.

The author also assail the institution of poetry in this section with the poem "termites of the page." Chinaski points out—truthfully enough—that most poets are children of privilege, black sheep of wealthy families. The lack of dirt beneath their fingernails renders them useless artists. Our author, time after time, states that an artist must understand the real world to create decent art.

Pp. 51-72

Pp. 51-72 Summary

The author tells his story in the third-person in "a good time." It takes place in a hotel room in Vegas, and the woman he is with wants to have quick anonymous sex. He declines, choosing to drink instead. She gets annoyed and demands he take her back to L.A. He agrees, saddened by the utter anonymity of the world.

The author tells the story of William Saroyan in "the still trapeze." Saroyan insists he needs to gamble in order to write. He loses all his money at the track and flees the U.S. for France. He returns to America after the Depression, but his optimistic work sells badly post-Depression. He dies an ignominious death in a country that has outgrown him.

The poem "January" is a survey of a world from high to low, where everyone acts according to his place and nothing ever changes, even the weather.

In "sunny side down," Chinaski sits in a diner looking for the waitress. He considers how the great events of recent history—specifically World War II—mean nothing in the face of everyday malaise. This world is a meaningless world, and Chinaski cannot get his coffee.

In "the man in the brown suit," the author tells the story of a diminutive man who sits at a desk in his bank and stares at him. Chinaski hates this man and considers screaming at him. One day, a large black man gives a teller some trouble, and the small man in the brown suit subdues him single-handedly and calls the police. From then on, Chinaski just smiles at the small man.

In "a magician, gone..." Chinaski remembers Joe O'Brien, a fine jockey that has recently died. Chinaski considers Joe one of the finest jockeys he has ever seen race, smaller than most but fluid. He will be hard to replace. The other jockeys hold a memorial at the track, and it reduces Chinaski to tears.

"well, that's just the way it is..." is a short quip of a poem in which Bukowski says it is still nice to be Bukowski.

In "the chemistry of things," Chinaski recalls Mary Lou, a friend from his youth that everyone but he wanted to screw. One day Mr. Hunn, the chemistry teacher, molests her. Chinaski tells her to forget about it. She asks him to beat him up, but he does not want to be sent to juvenile hall. Mary Lou tells her mother, who gets Hunn fired. Mary Lou marries a loser her senior year, and Chinaski goes off to college.

In "rift," the woman that Chinaski lives with calls him disgusting and says she cannot live with him any longer. He sits in a chair in his underwear, sucking down beer and laughing. She storms out, and he admits that he does not feel at all alone.

Pp. 51-72 Analysis

Loss plays a significant role in the poetry of You Get So Alone ... In this section, the poet waxes on this subject in different ways. Perhaps the most personal examination comes in "the still trapeze." Focusing on the Depression stalwart William Saroyan, this piece discusses a hard-living man whose talents cannot hold up to the changing times. Clearly, the aging Bukowski faces the same fear of obsolescence, but in "well, that's just the way it is..." he brushes off the notion that he would trade any part of his life away.

Loss is dealt with in a more abstract way in the narrative of "a magician, gone." The death of Joe O'Brien represents to the author the passing of a rare talent, reducing him to tears. The same will be said later in the collection of John Fante. Chinaski respects those that pay their dues to the world, and O'Brien did that several times over.

In "rift" we see a recurring motif in this work: Chinaski left alone. In this poem, his girlfriend walks out on him, insulting him on the way out, and he does not feel especially bothered by it. True to the title of this collection, our poet finds solitude something of a blessing. Being alone and silent is a blessing; he will state this opinion in various ways throughout this book. Solitude is a reprieve from the forces that grind a person down.

Pp. 73-93

Pp. 73-93 Summary

In "my friend, the parking lot attendant," Chinaski describes the smooth-talking attendant at the race track. He always has a quick remark regarding the protagonist's car or girlfriend. One day, he is no longer there, and Chinaski is certain he has moved on to better things.

"miracle" describes an obscure symphony by Mozart. The author cannot imagine the amount of energy and joy contained within it.

In "a non-urgent poem" Chinaski receives a letter from a man saying Chinaski's poems have lost their sense of urgency. Chinaski is confused as to the purpose of the letter. He has seen many fellow writers deteriorate and not felt the need to write them.

In "my first affair with that older woman," Chinaski describes a woman ten years older than he. She hates life, and they abuse each other terribly. She ends up in a coma and dies. He is desolated for two years after that.

"the freeway life" describes Chinaski's tribulations on the freeway to the track. Flying down the freeway, Chinaski passes a slow-moving car and busts his gas tank on a piece of debris. This car begins pouring out gas, and he makes it to a gas station and calls a tow truck. Getting the car back a few days after that, he finds the steering column ripped loose and blocking the brake. He removes it and drives with the car's wiring resting on his lap. As the poem ends, he flies past another slow-moving car.

Chinaski is at the track in "the player" when his horse in the seventh race goes down and throws the jockey. He wins the next race before another of his horses throws a jockey, and he decides to call it a day. On the way out he sees a man who asks him for bus money. He gives the man a dollar and tells him to steer clear of the track.

In "p.o. box 11946, Fresno, Calif. 93776" Chinaski returns from the track to find a letter from the IRS. He owes more than 14,000 dollars, and interest is accruing daily. He figures he will have to win about 15,000 dollars tomorrow at the track.

The author discusses his friend in "poor Al." Al always dates crazy women who never let on that they have emotional issues until after they move in. After a while, he goes to a shrink to see if it has something to do with him. It does not, and Al feels even worse.

In "for my ivy league friends:" Chinaski talks about how all the other crazy poets he used to write with now have teaching jobs, write easy poetry, and regularly attack his work. Now, his only defenders are European, and Chinaski either thinks his critics are wrong or he has stopped caring.

In "helping the old" Chinaski tries to assist an old man in line at the bank. The man drops his glasses first; then his cane. Neither man says a word.

In "bad times at the 3rd and Vermont hotel" Chinaski tells the story of Alabam, a thief that lives in his same boarding house. Alabam tries to rob him one night, and in revenge Chinaski sleeps with his girl. Alabam starts crying, and Chinaski apologizes. The two share a bottle of wine.

Pp. 73-93 Analysis

The flip side of Chinaski's preference for solitude is his utter distrust of humanity. In this section several pieces show fellow human beings as untrustworthy, vile creatures. In "my first affair with an older woman" Chinaski is emotionally abused by a woman right up to the moment she dies, waking from her coma momentarily to make a snide comment. His decent friend Al is constantly victimized by deceitful lovers in "poor Al." In "bad times at the 3rd and Vermont hotel" Chinaski and a thief called Alabam all but destroy each other.

On the other hand, the author acknowledges that all people have is each other. Even in the above-mentioned poems there are momentary peace offerings. Bukowski seems to be saying that, yes, people are capable of empathy or at least pity, but by-and-large, relationships are more painful than anything else.

One relationship that the author describes in two poems—"a non-urgent poem" and "for my ivy league friends"—is his relationship with his critics. The poet is acutely aware that he is on the wane, and he definitely reads the scathing criticisms lodged against him. Still, Bukowski remains resolutely dismissive throughout this collection. He figures he has earned the right to be past his prime and he sees no reason to get bent out of shape by those that feel the need to mention it.

Pp. 94-112

Pp. 94-112 Summary

In "the Master Plan" Chinaski describes how after starving in a Philadelphia winter he decides to give up writing for a while and focus on drinking. In ten years, he becomes the best drunk in the neighborhood. After that time he goes back to writing and drinking together.

"garbage" tells of a magnificent beating Chinaski takes an unfamiliar town. He wakes in the morning in an alley, and as he stumbles to his hotel he passes another severely beaten man whose eye is hanging out of its socket. Chinaski keeps going, gets to his room, and lies down.

Chinaski tells of his favorite field in "my vanishing act." It is an abandoned graveyard he lies in when he tires of his bar. He is always welcomed back, though; he is the bar freak.

In "let's make a deal" Chinaski tries to reason with the hangover deity, Captain Walrus, to rid him of his hellish hangover. He promises any sort of sacrifice or penance, except not drinking or gambling.

In "16-bit Intel 8088 chip" the author mixes and matches different computer terms before explaining that the natural world does not change.

Chinaski is consumed by writer's block in "zero." He sits in his room drinking, looking at his watch and imagining the joys of either people's lives. He decides to watch TV with his wife.

In "putrefaction" Chinaski thinks the country is regressing in the eighties. We are wasting more, fearing more, and oppressing more.

The author is grateful in "I'll take it..." as he thinks back to all the boozing, whoring and fighting he has done and come out famous and prolific. He should be dead by now.

In the morning of "supposedly famous" Chinaski takes stock of his life. He pities his wife for putting up with him, and he loves his cats. He is now famous, though he does not think much of his competition. Beyond that, there is not much about which to care.

In "the last shot" the author has his last drink for the night. Cheered that he is not in jail, he realizes he is drinking with the best companion around: himself.

Pp. 94-112 Analysis

In "the Master Plan" our author relates his famous origin story. Starving as a struggling poet, Chinaski decides to forget about he writing game and focus on drinking for ten

years. In that time, he becomes the best drunk in town. Stories from this period—in this section "garbage" and "my vanishing act" stick out—are marked by horrific images (the man with his eye hanging out), moments of unrestrained destruction, and an acute awareness of Chinaski's disintegration into a social leper. Still, the author states that this period produces most of the best work he has created. "I'll take it..." is dedicated to the simple marvel that he survived the ordeal.

The Chinaski of the present is a more docile figure, perhaps best characterized in "zero" and "supposedly famous." He drinks at home now and sometimes just settles down for a night of TV with his wife and cats.

More than anything, the Chinaski of 1986 is reflective. He reflects upon his own career, and he opines on the state of the world. In "putrefaction" Chinaski indicts 1980s America for its destructive, idiotic nature. He despises the regression of national attitudes back to selfish bigotry and militaristic fear.

Pp. 113-132

Pp. 113-132 Summary

In "whorehouse" Chinaski describes a trip to Tijuana with his friends Lance and Jack when they are all 17. They are drunk on tequila and decide to visit a whorehouse. Lance immediately disappears with a prostitute, and Jack and Chinaski are about follow too when Jack vomits all over the place. While Jack sleeps in the car, Chinaski pays for an older whore. Afterward, Jack drives them back to L.A. while the other two boys mock him for being a virgin. All the while, Chinaski feigns worldliness, like the night is all no big deal.

In "starting fast" Chinaski says his finest moment was sleeping on a park bench in a strange city.

In "the crazy truth" the author recalls seeing a half-crazy pedestrian verbally abuse a big shot in a red sports car.

Chinaski expounds upon the freeway in "drive through hell." He ruminates that all humanity is angry, frustrated and ready to burst. This rage comes out on the freeway. Chinaski sees the soul of the world on the freeway.

In "for the concerned:" Chinaski addresses the readers. He assures them that even though he writes less about boozing, brawling and whores, his agony is still intact. It has simply taken a new form.

"a funny guy" deals with the philosopher Schopenhauer, who hated the masses. The author says his funniest writing concerns a man whipping his mule to get it to move, nearly killing it in the process.

In "shoes" the author holds that a pair of women's shoes—while sexy to a young man—are just shoes to an old man.

"coffee" tells the humorous story of a man who recognizes Chinaski at a diner. He sees him hanging from a fourth-story window by his heels the night before. Chinaski cannot quite explain why he did it.

"together" takes place in a rented room with Chinaski and a woman. They are both drunk and shouting at each other. Their neighbor shouts through the wall for them to shut up. She gets even angrier, but soon thereafter she passes out. Chinaski carries her to bed.

"the finest of the breed" is the author's salute to those who face the overbearing emptiness of the world with drink in hand, head on.

Pp. 113-132 Analysis

In "drive through hell" the author develops one of the most vivid metaphors for modern America: the freeway. Chinaski believes that beneath the surface of our civilized culture lies pulsing, protean rage (a point quickly discussed later in "a funny guy"). Chinaski has always been willing to let this rage fly, as he does in "together," and he witnesses it on the surface of the derelicts of skid row in "the crazy truth." To see it in everyday bourgeois Americans, though, Chinaski points to the freeway. Here all rage and destructiveness is transformed into the hell-bent driving habits of the motorist.

Chinaski continues to ruminate on his age in "starting fast," where he pines ironically for his lean years, and in "shoes," where he considers the death of his libido.

In "for the concerned:" on the other hand, the poet consoles readers who may fear that he has lost his taste for prostitutes, booze and brawling. His voracious and self-destructive habits may have abated, he says, by his agony has not. It has only gotten quieter. This correlates to the poet's contention—stated in different ways throughout the collection—that what guides an artist is that which would drive him mad were he not able to create.

Pp. 133-154

Pp. 133-154 Summary

In "close to greatness" the author discusses meeting both a man and a woman who claim to have been acquainted with Ezra Pound. The woman even claims to have made love to him. The man claims the woman is lying. The author believes that—were Pound alive—he would not remember either of them. A great dead man is fair game for everyone.

Chinaski, in "the stride," recalls being 19 with his friend Norman. They stride cockily down the street and think themselves invincible. Norman dies in the War, and Chinaski thinks he would be disappointed to see how things turned out.

In "final story" the author describes an old babbling writer in a bar, possibly himself. The other patrons listen to him condescendingly, knowing one day he will commit suicide. Living with other people, it seems, is the awful part of life.

Chinaski recalls being young and starving in "friends within the darkness." He would sit in his room, hungry, and listen to classical music. Eventually the hunger becomes too much and he takes a menial job. Now he writes, but his days are still spent locked in a room with classical composers. "death sat on my knee and cracked with laughter" is similar in that it takes place in the starving early days of Chinaski's adulthood. In Miami Beach, he spends the last of his money on a loaf of bread. Bringing it back to his room, he finds it moldy. The next day, he wakes to find that the mice have eaten it.

"oh yes" is a short play on words.

Chinaski discusses the pornographic magazines he writes for in "O tempora! O mores!" He considers them too bald-faced and clinical. There is no allure, just flesh for consumption.

In "the passing of a great one" the author laments the passing of John Fante. Fante is the only writer he ever met that he admired. The author says writing for the movies killed him. The movie business turns people bitter. The author reads one of Fante's books in "the wine of forever." As he sits with his cat, he cannot believe a man so talented died in such pain. For the moment, he feels his friend is back with him.

"true" is a short rumination on Lorca's everyday agonies.

In "Glenn Miller," Chinaski recalls a soda shop before World War II where young people dance together. Chinaski pretends to be a rebel, but he likes the popular music, meaningless as it is.

"Emily Bukowski" deals with the author's grandmother. Emily is a religious woman, praying for her husband and the author. She lives separate from her degenerate

husband and tends her birds. She dies feeding her birds one day. The author thinks her a dull subject.

Pp. 133-154 Analysis

Past and present intermingle throughout You Get So Alone... Two poems of this section illustrate the author's general conceit regarding youth and age. In "stride" Chinaski recalls being a teenager and strutting down the road with his friend Norman. The two young men think themselves the haughtiest men around. Norman dies in the war, and Chinaski thinks this merciful. He argues that young Norman would be crestfallen to see what age does to a man.

The author juxtaposes "stride" with "the final story," which depicts an old, babbling drunk writer who is only tolerated by people because they know that soon he will be dead. Indeed, Chinaski seems inclined to view himself as a neo-Hemingway, aging into uselessness and inching toward his own eventual suicide. Bukowski, of course, dies a natural death, but the disappointments of age are central to this work.

The poet also writes two poems in this section dedicated to the author John Fante. "the passing of a great one" and "the wine of forever" are uncharacteristic in their portrayal of humanity. Chinaski generally treats all men as rubes and rascals, but his love for Fante is unbroken. Chinaski respects Fante's writing and he is genuinely distraught by the degrading spectacle of the man's death. Our author is a man who generally expects the worst fate possible for everyone, but worthy John Fante deserves better.

Pp. 155-174

Pp. 155-174 Summary

Chinaski once again responds to his critics in "some suggestions." He tires of being called "the world's greatest living writer," preferring instead to be its greatest "pool player," "horseplayer," or "fucker" (p. 155).

"invasion" is a surreal narrative poem. Chinaski is constantly interrupted by rumblings and movement in his room. It is keeping him awake. Large cat droppings appear in the morning, but his cats are house broken. He is confused until one night while reading the paper he notices a lion in his bedroom doorway. The lion walks down the stairway, and Chinaski stalks behind it with a baseball bat. The lion leaps through the glass screen doors facing the street and disappears into the night. Chinaski is dumbstruck. Then, he hears a scream from outside, and turns to seal himself up in the bedroom. Three lion cubs come down the stairs and go outside to join their mother in feeding on a man's body outside.

In "hard times" Chinaski gets out of his car down by the docks and runs into two men who painted his house. He offers to buy them a beer, and as they drink they tell him he was the nicest guy for whom they ever worked. Now there is no work. Chinaski hands them a ten as a belated tip and says goodbye. He does not know what else to do.

In "longshot" Chinaski has lost a lot of blood and is in a hospital ward for poor folk. People die on a regular basis, and clergy abound in the ward. Chinaski enjoys watching the Mexican girls who tend the bedding, but after three days he does not die and they release him. On his way out, the gay orderly wheeling him mentions that the odds of his surviving that ward are fifty to one. Chinaski wonders what his first drink will be.

"concrete" tells the story of a certain poet who invites Chinaski to his house after a public reading. Chinaski agrees and heads to the poet's house. They drink until one in the morning and watch the eagles that soar nearby. When Chinaski gets home, he takes a call from his girlfriend who accuses him of cheating on her. He cannot dissuade her from this notion. He goes to bed thinking about this other poet's concrete poetry.

Pp. 155-174 Analysis

"invasion" is the longest and strangest of the poems in You Get So Alone... Telling an oddly surreal story of a lion that has taken up residence in Chinaski's house, the aura of foreboding does not let up during the narrative. It begins with mysterious noises and droppings, and halfway through the lion is revealed. The animal tears Chinaski's place apart and attacks a man on the street. In many ways, this lion seems to represent the fire inside of the poet, the will that tears apart the house and brawls in the street. The notion that this present day Chinaski—a man settling into domestic life—lets the lion

escape his house into the night is indicative of the author's leaving behind of his most outward vices.

That he came through his wild years and has survived to his autumn years is a constant source of amusement, particularly in "longshot." This poem tells of his residency in a horrid hospital ward for the poor. Odds of a patient surviving are fifty to one, but Chinaski survives. Chinaski, it seems, always survives.

Lastly, two juxtaposed poems, "hard times" and "concrete," provide insight into the dichotomy of Chinaski's personality. In "concrete" Chianski goes to a fellow poet's house and spends the whole time watching eagles and ogling the man's wife. In "concrete" he runs into two men who painted his house and also does not know what to say. He is ill at ease both in laboring and poetic circles because he exists between them and belongs to neither world.

Pp. 175-194

Pp. 175-194 Summary

Chinaski describes the cafes of Paris in "Gay Paree." He says they are exactly as one would imagine, snobby and expensive. The food, he declares, is under-spiced. Paris is a lovely city full of cowards, like the world in general.

"I thought the stuff tasted worse than usual" is a classic joke. Chinaski drinks with Jane until 3 a.m. At 5:30, he goes to work at the post office. A coworker saying he smells like gasoline, and Chinaski asks him not to light a match.

In "the blade" Chinaski is working at a post office and can never find a spot. He ends up parking by a slaughterhouse and, every night, he watches the workers at the abattoir pushing the pigs toward the blade. After a while, he stops going to work after watching the pigs. Eventually, he parks at a Chinese restaurant instead to curb his absenteeism.

"the boil" involves Chinaski's youthful tenure at the Nabisco factory. He becomes the mysterious rugged stranger that all the women want. One day, though, he gets a large boil on the side of his face that will not go away. Everyone loses interest in him, and he is laid off. He feels like the factory has discovered some awful sin of his.

Chinaski is back at the track in "not listed." In the final length of a race, his horse's front leg snaps. Chinaski is annoyed that a horse's accident potential is not listed in the racing sheets. He runs into an ex-jockey agent called Harry, who lost on the last race as well. Harry has given Chinaski good tips in the past; so he gives Harry the last of his cash. Also, he figures Harry has earned whatever cash he gets; the races are a hard racket.

In "I'm not a misogynist" the author talks about all of the young women that send him sexual propositions in the mail. He tells them to spend their nights with young men; he is not for them.

"the lady in the castle" tells the story a women with incredibly long hair who lives in a large house whose interior resembles a castle. Chinaski tries to sleep with her several times, to no avail. This annoys him, but a year later she calls him, asking to come over. He is in the middle of receiving oral sex, and he shouts at her to stop calling him. This offends the woman who is blowing him, who leaves. Alone, Chinaski spends the next several hours trying to type a poem, again, to no avail.

Pp. 175-194 Analysis

Early in this section is a poem called "I thought the stuff tasted worse than usual." This title is in fact the unspoken punch-line to a poem that is essentially a bar-room joke. This is a frequent form that the author's work takes, a sort of gallows-humor vaudeville

with set up and punch-line. He sets up a scenario and then tosses in a twist at the last moment, as he does in "the lady in the castle." In that poem, he tries to sleep with two women, is eventually accepted by both, and ends up with neither. A key fact in these twists is that they end with Chinaski privately enjoying the irony, as he does in the title of the first and in the final moment of the latter.

In "not listed," "the boil," and "the blade" Chinaski focuses on the hidden horrors of life. Each of these manifest themselves him strange forms: a pig being slaughtered, a large boil, a horse toppling on the ground. In each poem, the author is at something of a loss trying to reconcile this horror with the rest of the world. He leaves his job, gives money to a broke friend, and finds another place to park. His coping mechanism is perhaps best expressed in the final lines of "the blade:"

it seemed less real, and that was

what was

needed. (p. 180)

Pp. 195-215

Pp. 195-215 Summary

In "relentless as a tarantula," the author warns the reader that the bitter forces of the world will never let them relax or enjoy life. The best one can hope for is ten free minutes every now and then.

"their night" is the author's indictment of the lost generation and their petty rich problems. He frames the charge around his distaste for Fitzgerald's Tender is the Night. In his mind, these people have no struggle in their lives.

The author ruminates on his inconsistent fame in "huh?" He states that in Germany he is followed by adoring young fans, but in the U.S. he has a precious anonymity. Still, he concludes, he owes his life to those fawning Europeans.

"it's funny, isn't it? #1" takes place at a birthday party that Chinaski and his wife attend. Chinaski hears a good statement from a man and insists that they sit next to him. Once seated, the man drones on, and Chinaski declares his disappointment. He goes on to similarly berate a movie star and the birthday lady. When he returns to his table the man is still droning on.

In "it's funny, isn't it? #2" the author recalls how as a kid he and his friends agreed they wanted to die fucking. Now, he believes every older person wants to die in his sleep.

In "the beautiful lady editor" Chinaski recalls being miserable and freezing and writing a load of letters to people begging for help. The only people who write back are his father—saying he deserves to be miserable—and a beautiful lady editor. She writes that she has found God, is no longer publishing, and is helping the poor in Europe. Chinaski wishes he were with her. When she dies, he still thinks she is beautiful.

In "about the PEN conference" the author states that a writer without his typewriter is just a madman.

In "everybody talks too much" Chinaski is pulled over by a cop. He says nothing as the officer writes the ticket. The cop asks him why he does not talk, and he shrugs his shoulders. The cop is visibly nervous when he hands him the ticket. Chinaski says nothing to cops or angry women, because if he did they might kill each other.

Pp. 195-215 Analysis

The author is in a particularly populist vein in "relentless as the tarantula" and "their night." The former is a vicious screed against the unseen forces that hold men down. Presumably these forces are the elite and the wealthy. This poem is especially fatalistic because it implies at the end that the best a person can hope for is a few minutes peace

in the midst of this subjugation. This idea of a few minutes peace—the respite that makes life bearable—will appear with greater regularity in the coming pieces. In "their night" Chinaski connects his populism with his distaste for the Lost Generation. "What problems can the rich really have?" he seems to ask as he explains his reasons for never reading Tender Is the Night.

He has affection for the beautiful lady editor in the poem of the same title, despite her wealth. This poem is atypical of Bukowski in that respect. The poet sees this woman, who did not send him money in his poor younger days, as a guardian angel. Her insistence that she is helping the poor in Italy somehow makes Chinaski think how much better off he is than most wretches in the world. This warm empathy is in short supply in most of the rest of the collection.

Pp.. 216-235

Pp.. 216-235 Summary

In "me and my buddy" Chinaski imagines himself by a river in China with the eighth century poet Li Po. They get drunk on wine and fiddle with their poems. Chinaski uses his for a cushion; Li Po burns his. All good poetry disappears in the end.

Chinaski and his friends Julio and Henry sit together drinking in "song." Julio plays a song he wrote about a girl who recently left him. He goes on abut how much he misses her and eventually leaves. Chinaski calls the girl later; evidently Julio dropped by.

In "practice" Chinaski recalls his buddies Eugene and Frank during the Depression. They have wild fist fights all the time, and their parents only intervene if their clothes get ripped. In the end, Eugene joins the Navy and Frank becomes a justice of the California Supreme Court.

"love poem to a stripper" is dedicated to Rosalie, an exotic dancer the author saw at the Burbank and the Follies in 1953. He imagines her either dead or unimaginably old now but tells her he snuck into the club just to watch her.

"my buddy" takes place in New Orleans, and a 21-year-old Chinaski is living a misanthropic life, constantly blowing off two giddy girls in his boarding house. He has a friend, an old decrepit man. They go for a walk together every day. Chinaski wishes the girls had bothered his old friend instead.

Chinaski is still in New Orleans in "Jon Edgar Webb," now writing lyric poems. He cannot seem to get along with folks, but a publisher in town accepts everything Chinaski gives him.

In "thank you" the author thanks all of the whores with whom he has been. He had no idea at the time how many poems he would get from them.

The author returns to Skid Row in "the magic curse." He recalls trying to avoid the crowds there in his leaner days. He has always gotten a little strange around crowds of people. At one point he even thinks of going to a shrink but fears he might be cured.

The next three poems are all short ruminations on solitude. In "party's over" the author celebrates the moment after he throws everyone out of his house and can enjoy a drink alone. "no nonsense" is a portrait of Faulkner in his later days, sifting through his fan mail for checks. "escape" describes the end of the night when Chinaski cloisters himself from the world and is not missed.

Pp.. 216-235 Analysis

The majority of the poems in this section are reminiscences about Chinaski's life. They involve people from his past going back to the Depression ("practice") and his years of heavy drinking ("my buddy," "love poem to a stripper," "John Edgar Webb"). The most recent story appears to be "song" relating to a musician friend he has made since achieving fame. The running theme throughout all of these is that people must develop defense mechanisms—strength, resilience, eccentricity, artistry—to deal with the blows of the world. The title of his piece "practice" is particularly clever. He implies that fist-fighting may be preparation for their later careers as a soldier, poet, and a judge.

The last three poems of this section are all focused on the theme of solitude. Chinaski is so content with himself that when he separates himself from the world, it is no great matter to him. The description of quiet aloneness in "party's over" illustrates particularly well the moment of reprieve that Bukowski lauds in the last section. All sycophants and hangers-on have been thrown out; now our poet can enjoy a quiet drink alone.

Pp. 236-255

Pp. 236-255 Summary

The author explains the dynamic among him, his wife, and his cats in "wearing the collar." Some days they all like him; some days some like him; some days none of them do. The author stays with this dynamic in "a cat is a cat is a cat is a cat." Here, his wife is shouting for one of their cats while he tries to type and listen to Beethoven. He reaches the conclusion that he prefers a cat to a person any day.

In "marching through Georgia" Chinaski ruminates on what a hot, mean world it is. It turns everything to a burnt chicken wing, even this poem.

In "gone" the author laments that somewhere along the dull course of his life, he lost it.

"I meet the famous poet" tells the story of Chinaski's visit with Philip Lamantia, the ecstatic poet. Chinaski shows up with his own beer and shocks the delicate homosexual Lamantia with his boorish behavior. Eventually Lamantia leaves the room and Chinaski passes out on his sofa. The next morning, Chinaski wakes to Lamantia asking him if he meant it when he said Lamantia looks like a Norseman. Chinaski does not recall saying this. Later, Lamantia writes horrible critiques of Chinaski's work, but he is responsible for getting him into a famous poetry collection.

In "seize the day" Chinaski describes a dirty, truly grotesque man who suddenly becomes popular after winning the lottery. Chinaski mentions that the lottery funds our educational system, which is wanting.

In "the shrinking island," the author describes the drunken moment he gives up on typing and stumbles to bed. His wife wakes and tells him not to step on the cat.

In "magic machine," Chinaski recalls listening to his parent's record player while they are out of the house. This is the best thing in the world to do when he is young.

Chinaski recalls Irene and Louise in "those girls we followed home." They are the prettiest girls in junior high, and Chinaski and his buddy Baldy follow them home every day. This gives them a mad thrill, and they imagine one day they will go into the house and have sex with Irene and Louise. After all the false stories they told in junior high, though, they never do have sex with them.

Pp. 236-255 Analysis

Much of this section of the collection is dedicated to Chinaski's domestic life, a setting dominated by his wife and five cats. These companions are a largely benevolent group, occasionally given to castigating him as in "wearing the collar." In this setting, though, Chinaski has clearly found a certain contentment.

The poem "seize the day," about a disgusting bum who wins the lottery and becomes the toast of the town is clearly a metaphor for the author's success. Bukowski has enjoyed the rare treat of being able to act appallingly in public and be lauded for it. The reality behind the metaphor is made explicit later in "I meet the famous poet," when Bukowski appalls the poet Lamantia and gets a publishing deal as a result.

The last two poems of this section deal with lost pleasure of the author's youth. This coincides with his often-stated belief that the hopes and joys of our younger days are inevitably lost to disappointments of age.

Pp. 256-276

Pp. 256-276 Summary

"fractional note" reads like an apocalyptic dirge. The author describes a world in which all art is getting worse, all certainties are disappearing, and all hope is diminished. Our author, though, does not feel too bad.

In "a following" Chinaski gets a call from a publisher in Denver demanding some poems. The caller's insistence that Chinaski has a following in Denver is undermined by a background voice telling the poet to fuck himself. Chinaski hangs up.

"a tragic meeting" tells of Chinaski's meeting with a fan called JoJo. JoJo is one of the rare students to whose letter the poet responds. They meet at her college, and Chinaski takes her back to his place. There he tries to sleep with her and nearly does, but she insists she has to leave on the verge of consummation. Chinaski lays down and thinks he will never be able to write about this lukewarm meeting. Soon, he feels an itching all over his body and realizes that JoJo has fleas.

In "an ordinary poem" Chinaski lists out many things he does not like, from the Brontes to Sinatra to Labor Day to goldfish. He also dislikes this poem.

The author considers the relationship between his drinking and his writing in "from an old dog in his cups..." He wonders how the hundreds of drinks he has had have not killed him, but he acknowledges his words only get better with them.

In "let 'em go" Chinaski says he is tired of waiting and demands we fire all the nuclear missiles immediately.

In "trying to make it" Chinaski tells the unfortunate story of a jockey from Arizona who comes to LA to race. He misses his first race due to traffic, and his horse wins with another jockey. The next day, his horse is scratched late. Chinaski comments that getting started in the big time is difficult and often meaningless.

Chinaski recalls a preferred whorehouse above a hoagie shop in "the death of a splendid neighborhood." The owner of the hoagie shop dislikes the whores, and one day Chinaski finds the whorehouse empty and riddled with bullet holes. Not long after, the hoagie shop burns down. Not long after that, Chinaski's girlfriend starts cheating, and he leaves town.

Pp. 256-276 Analysis

"fractional note" is Bukowski's manifesto of entropy, like Eliot's Wasteland or Yeats' Second Coming. His essential argument is that there are no certainties or essential truths in this world. In recent years, he has seen America regress—as stated in earlier

pieces—but he ends the poem with a curious statement that will inform the latter poems of You Get So Alone... He states that he is at peace with the end of his home culture. This idea is reflected in a more satirical way in "let 'em go."

This idea of entropy is reflected in an allegorical form in "the death of a splendid neighborhood." The central whorehouse of the narrative functions as the pivot for Chinaski's universe. When it is destroyed everything else follows: the hoagie shop, his relationship, his apartment. Chinaski just moves on.

"trying to make it" clarifies for the reader the complex meaning of the race track. The Arizona jockey cannot make his first race in LA, almost as if the fates are aligned against him. The poet points out not only how difficult it is to make to the big time in this country; even if you do it no one especially cares.

Pp. 277-297

Pp. 277-297 Summary

The next poem in the collection is called "you get so alone at times that it just makes sense." In it, Chinaski recalls losing fifty pounds trying to get published. As he gets thinner, he decides to focus on drinking and whoring. When he returns to the writing game, he is nearly a hundred pounds heavier and ready to go.

Chinaski celebrates his fellow drinking writers in "a good gang, after all." They have kept the faith, he says, and are always ready for the fight. On a similar theme in "this," Chinaski contends that his typewriter is a better companion than any women he can imagine.

In "hot" the author says that there is a fire in everything around him, and he is ready to write about it. Everything is burning, and that is how he likes it.

In "late late late poem" Chinaski begins to tell a story about a pretty girl in Malibu to whom he tries to give a ride, but his car breaks down. Partway through the poem, he interrupts himself complaining that late in the evening he always accidentally sets a fire. His poems are not that good then, anyway. The story of one such fire is told in "3 a.m. games:" Chinaski stumbles around the room searing for a workable match or lighter for one last cigarette. Lighting the cigarette and flicking the match away, he inadvertently sets fire to a pile of debris in the room. After working in a frenzy to smother the flame, Chinaski hears his wife inquire as to the commotion. She has bought him a steel wastebasket so things like this do not happen.

In "someday I'm going to write a primer for crippled saints but meanwhile ..." Chinaski declares that he is not too worried about the Bomb. He figures it will take more than the Bomb to kill him. In the end, he declares his love to the reader, but he is unsure what to do.

In "help wanted" Chinaski recalls as a young man reading a book by a "crazed old man" (p. 290). Looking at the same man's work years later, he finds him no longer mad. This disappoints Chinaski, who consoles himself that many crazed men grow crazier over time. This gives him something for which to strive.

Chinaski responds to his female critics in "sticks and stones..." He says they are critical out of lack of talent. He tells them to show him a little leg and contends he is not sexist.

Chinaski thinks about his glory days with women in "working." He cannot imagine how many women came to his bed despite the fact that he was ugly. At one point, the mailman asks him how he does it. He honestly does not know.

An old acquaintance contacts Chinaski in "over done," and he will not stop talking. After listening for far too long, Chinaski says his meat is overheating and he needs to leave. Chinaski's girlfriend says there is no meat cooking. Chinaski is talking about himself.

Pp. 277-297 Analysis

Chinaski discusses his current writing habits in this section. In "this" he states that the best love he can imagine is his typewriter. In "late late late poem" and "3 a.m. games:" he describes the little defeats and emergencies that crop up in the midst of a long night of typing. A constant problem seems to be his setting fires by mistake in his writing room. It is as though all the madness of his past has concentrated itself in this room.

Chinaski clearly is concerned—despite his airs of nonchalance in previous poems—that he will never live up to his promise. In "help wanted" he recalls reading an author whom he considered absolutely mad. Over time this madness waned, it appears. Clearly Chinaski knows he is settling into a calmer existence, but he worries that his work cannot seem calm.

In "sticks and stones..." the poet answers accusations of misogyny with the distinctly misogynistic invitation to his female critics to show him some more leg. Bukowski is most definitely sexist in the sense that he has little to no respect for women outside of the pleasure they can provide him. Still, the poet has little respect for any other person regardless of gender. He prefers his typewriter and his cats.

Pp. 298-313

Pp. 298-313 Summary

In "our laughter is muted by their agony" the author discusses the good everyday people who struggle through the lie that they can achieve anything.

Chinaski talks about great writers past their prime in "murder." They wind up writing commissions they do not want, appearing on talk shows and becoming gossip snipes. They wind up in debt. It happens all the time.

In "what am I doing?" Chinaski wonders why he is so inclined to drive like a maniac and risk death. He figures the day will come when he will be nothing more than a gruesome photo in traffic court, used to scare offenders.

Chinaski tells the story of a trip to a store in "nervous people." As he checks out, the teller cannot quite get the item to ring up correctly. Chinaski's wife says he makes people nervous. When they get the item home it is defective.

"working out" is a short comic poem about Van Gogh. He finds it ridiculous that the painter gave his ear to a prostitute. She probably wanted money.

In "how is your heart?" Chinaski recalls how all thorough his worst times, while hung over, homeless, lost and in pain, he always has a certain contentment. To him, that is the important thing in life: how you press through it.

In "forget it" Chinaski warns his friends and colleagues not to get choked up after his death. Theirs is coming soon.

In "quiet" Chinaski is writing his poems longhand so as not to wake his wife. One of his cats joins him. Chinaski imagines he must be slipping in his old age, but he feels he has earned the right to slip a little. After all, there is no perfect statement to be made, and Chinaski is just happy to be with his cat and the darkness beyond his window.

In "it's ours" the author discusses the brief moment of contentment when the world is not drilling one down. This moment is always simple: pouring a glass of water, staring out the window. This moment ensures that the world cannot fully destroy us.

Pp. 298-313 Analysis

In "how is your heart?" the author creates a unifying statement for this collection. He says the important thing in life—through all the suffering and rage—is how you pass through it. In this statement is a window to understanding why Bukowski, despite his association with tragic writers of the past, does not take his own life. Indeed, Bukowski

tells people not to weep when he eventually dies in "forget it." He has lived his life several times over.

"quiet" provides a window on a gentler Chinaski, sitting with his cat on a calm night writing by hand to avoid waking his wife. Surely this is a sign that he has lost his edge. Chinaski consoles himself with the idea that a perfect sentiment does not exist. This is the primary lesson of his experience. This is why he continues and is not depressed by old age.

In the end, You Get So Alone At Times That It Just Makes Sense codifies into a single work central notions about life. The world is terrible and degrading, and no one grand act or work of art can change it. The best one can do is hope for a little peace from the tumult. This is the theme of the final poem in the collection, "it's ours." Bukowski has found this peace, and he is content with life.

Characters

Chinaskiappears in All poems

Chinaski is Charles Bukowski's alter ego, a misogynistic, crude poet with a cultish following. Chinaski's biography is identical to Bukowski's making him and the poet interchangeable in most respects. He is the narrator of the collection.

Chinaski grows up during the Depression and is known in his youth as a bullying jerk. He is not a man with an incredible amount of empathy, particularly toward women like his friend Mary Lou. By 17, he and his buddies are drinking and taking regular trips down to Mexico. Chinaski disappoints his father by moving away and becoming a writer, a profession that the father regards as useless.

Eventually settling in New Orleans, Chinaski cannot get published. He begins to starve, losing thirty pounds. At some point he resolves to give up writing for a while, take a series of menial jobs, and focus on drinking. He works at the Nabisko factory and at a Post Office. He has a series of affairs with older women and drinks prodigious amounts.

After a decade, Chinaski returns to writing and develops a reasonable following in America and a hysteric following in Europe. He meets most of the literary luminaries of the sixties and seventies and offends all of them. By the eighties, though, Chinaski has settled down. He still drinks himself into oblivion every night, but he does it at home with his 5 cats and his wife. He has put the brawling and whoring aside and now views the world with a sardonic inquisition.

Chinaski's Fatherappears in retired, my non-ambitious ambition, education

Chinaski's all-American father figures prominently in several poems. His is the dissenting voice to Chinaski's working-class hedonism, a bourgeois self-improver who believes in the American dream, conspicuous consumption, and a strong work ethic.

In "retired" Chinaski lays out the tragedy of his father's life. He works every day of his adulthood and speaks relentlessly about the glorious retirement that waits him. Chinaski's father never sees that retirement, though. He dies suddenly one day, and all his friends say he looks young in his coffin. He never missed a day of work.

Chainski's father is presented as an overeating blowhard. He spouts self-help clichés and regularly refers to his son as a bum. When Chinaski is young and is failing school, his father is the overbearing threat in the room if things do not change. When Chinaski is starving as a struggling writer, his father sends him a letter saying he deserves his failure.

Chinaski's Motherappears in education

Chinaski's Mother is a meek, quiet woman who is easily overpowered by larger personalities. She appears in "education" at a conference with Chinaski's teacher. The teacher says Chinaski is not willing to learn, and his mother bursts into tears, begging the teacher to give her son one more chance. On the way home, Chinaski's mother is still crying, terrified of how her husband will react to the teacher's news.

Janeappears in bumming the Jane, I thought the stuff tasted worse than usua

Jane is Chinaski's lover during much of his decade-long hiatus from writing. He describes his time with her as among the happiest of his life. They drink to excess, shout at each other through the night, barricade themselves into their room, make love, and generally live life to the hilt. He is living with her around the same time he works at the Post Office.

Chinaski's Wifeappears in zero, supposedly famous, it's funny, isn't it? #1, wearing t

Chinaski's wife at the time that he writes these poems is a largely silent figure though she is frequently referenced in the collection. Clearly, she and Chinaski live a relatively peaceful domestic existence. She is used to his excesses, buying him a steel wastebasket to avoid his setting the house on fire and warning him not to step on the cats when she is half-asleep and he is drunk. Clearly, Chinaski has modulated his recklessness for her, writing his poems longhand while she is asleep in "quiet" so as not to wake her. Chinaski portrays his wife and cats as clear-eyed companions of his later years, critical at times but utterly reliable.

The Man in the Brown Suitappears in the man in the brown suit

The Man in the Brown Suit works at Chinaski's bank. When Chinaski is in line for the teller, this diminutive man with a spindly mustache often eyes him. Chinaski debates at length whether he should go up to the man one day and call him out. One day, however, Chinaski witnesses a large man harassing the teller, and the man in the brown suit springs to life. This tiny man single-handedly subdues the large instigator. From then on, Chinaski just smiles at him.

Joe O'Brienappears in a magician, gone...

Joe O'Brien is one of the finest jockeys Chinaski has ever witnessed. Smaller than most, he is able to rally a horse in the final lengths. He has just died in "a magician, gone..." and Chinaski thinks he will not easily be replaced. The other jockeys hold a small memorial at the track that brings tears to Chinaski's eyes.

Alappears in poor Al

Al is one of Chinaski's better friends. He has the constant problem of inviting women to move in with him that turn out to be crazy. It always happens immediately after they move in. He tries to make one go to a psychiatrist, but she refuses to continue after a couple visits. At one point, Al goes to a shrink himself, thinking this could be the result of some imbalance on his part. The shrink says he is perfectly sane, making Al feel even worse.

Alabamappears in bad times at the 3rd and Vermont hotel

Alabam is a thief that lives in the same boarding house as Chinaski during his decade of boozing. One night, Alabam comes into Chinaski's room while the latter is dead drunk. Chinaski tries to force him out, but he is far too inebriated. When he sobers up, he has sex with Alabam's girlfriend for revenge. Alabam is heartbroken, and Chinaski apologizes to him, offering to share a bottle of port with him.

John Fanteappears in the passing of a great one, the wine of forever

John Fante is a real author of American novels. Chinaski discusses their friendship in two poems, for Fante is the only author he has ever met that he truly admires. Fante goes to Hollywood eventually to write movies. There, his diabetes overtakes him and he loses a leg. Shortly thereafter, he dies an excruciating death, which unnerves Chinaski. In "the wine of forever" Chinaski reads one of Fante's books and feels as though his friend is with him.

Emily Bukowskiappears in Emily Bukowski

Emily Bukowski is Charles Bukowski's grandmother. An old-fashioned and—by the author's estimation—dull woman, she does not partake of popular entertainment and thinks the devil is in her grandson. She thinks the same of her husband, from whom she is estranged. She dies one day while feeding her canary.

The Beautiful Lady Editorappears in the beautiful lady editor

The Beautiful Lady Editor publishes some of Chinaski's early work. When he is starving in a freezing shack, he writes her asking for help. She writes back to him that she is no longer in publishing, that she is in Italy helping the poor. Chinaski wishes desperately that he were there with her.

Objects/Places

The Trackappears in a magician, gone..., the player

The Track in Bukowski's poems is one of his favorite places. He regularly states that he would rather be known for playing the horses than for writing. The track is often a metaphor for the trials of life, and jockeys metaphors for people struggling for success. Three examples are Joe O'Brien, Harry the jockey rep, and the new jockey from Arizona; all are talented men defeated by the horse-race racket. The Track is an ambiguous location, filled with revelry and devastation.

The Freewayappears in the freeway life, drive through hell, what am I doing?

Chinaski loves to drive fast and wild on the freeway in L.A. In "the freeway life" he passes a man going eighty-five and destroys his fuel tank, leaving his car a wreck. In "driving through hell," he sets up the Freeway as a metaphor, a place where the inner hostility of humanity is loosed with abandon. Later in the collection, he theorizes that the Freeway makes him reckless and will kill him one day.

Chinaski's catsappears in working it out, another casualty; supposedly famous

Chinaski's five cats—Ting, Ding, Beeker, Bleeker, and Blob—are his constant companions in the present. He looks to them for inspiration. They represent peace and contentment to him, along with his wife.

Captain Walrusappears in let's make a deal

Captain Walrus is a fictional deity to whom Chinaski prays in "let's make a deal." In this piece, he is contending with a horrific hangover, and he promises Captain Walrus all sorts of atonement in return for a little reprieve from the pain.

Rejection slipsappears in the Master Plan, death sat on my knee and cracked with laugh

These rejection slips, generally from the Atlantic Monthly, are the bane of young Chinaski's existence. In several poems, he refers to his work as waiting for these slips in the mail. After a time, he tires of the rejection and decides to take 10 years off to focus on drinking, whoring, and travel.

The Bombappears in putrefaction, let 'em go, someday I'll write a primer ...

The Bomb—referring to the nuclear escalation between the USSR and America—is a metaphor for stupid paternalistic terror in the 1980's. Our author believes our greatly diminished society has no business with the Bomb, and in "let 'em go" he invites our leaders to get it over with and destroy humanity.

Chinaski's typewriterappears in I'll take it..., this

Chinaski's typewriter is his constant lover and companion. When women leave him in the night, his first recourse is to slide a page into the typewriter. In "this" Chinaski states that he prefers his typewriter to any woman he can imagine.

Classical musicappears in 1813-1883, miracle, the stride, friends within the darkness

Throughout the collection, Chinaski spends his evenings holed up in his room listening to classical music, specifically Wagner, Mozart, and Beethoven. He feels a greater kinship to these men—so full of life—than to almost any living person.

Boozeappears in All poems

Booze is Chinaski's omnipresent companion. The author is a bar freak, the messiest, angriest, most idiotic man at the bar. After early years of starvation and failure, Chinaski dedicates a decade to booze. He marvels, particularly in "from an old dog in his cups..." that the booze has not killed him, only made his work better.

The Lost Generationappears in working it out, the lost generation, their night

The writers of the Lost Generation—most specifically Fitzgerald—are a sort of foil to Chinaski. He despises everything about them. He is sickened by their wealth and the pitiful "problems" they face in their rich lives. He also hates that they were the pets of the rich patrons who kept them fed.

The Post Officeappears in I though the stuff tasted worse than usual, the blade

Chinaski works in a Post Office for several years. It is the "menial job" that he mentions most often. While working there, he parks his car by a slaughterhouse, but the sight of pigs dying causes him to skip work often.

Skid Rowappears in trashcan lives, the magic curse

Skid Row is a thoroughfare of Los Angeles famous for its derelict population. Chinaski mentions it in two of his poems as a metaphor for the vast majority of people in America that are cut off from wealth.

Themes

Solitude is Contentment

True to the title of the work, You Get So Alone At Times That It Just Makes Sense is a portrait of an artist who has discovered his preferred existence: one of utter solitude. In poem after poem, Chinaski is aggrieved by the uselessness of other people, from the long-haired girl of "the lady in the castle" to the entire bourgeois crowd of "it's funny, isn't it? #1."

in contrast to this is Chinaski's love for moments of quiet. This is most overtly expressed in "party's over," where he revels in the peace after throwing everyone out of his house, and "this," where he loves his typewriter more than any woman he can imagine. The recurring image of these poems is of a man cloistering himself off in bed or at his typewriter after some violent event. Normally this event involves a woman that either does or does not have sex with him. Regardless, this moment of solitude is Chinaski's true joy; it is the moment where he takes control of a world that cripples so many.

The most eloquent explanation of this comes in the last poem of the collection, "it's ours." In this piece, the author speaks in praise of that moment—quiet, alone—when the world cannot grind one down. This moment, he says, is worth a lifetime of hardship. Surely, Chinaski has lived this hardship—much of it his own making—but in the end:

that space

there

before they get to us

ensures

that

when they do

they won't

get it all

ever. (pp. 312-313)

A Hard Life Makes for Good Art

In "termites of the page" the author states:

... there is nothing

that will put a person

more in touch

with the realities

than

an 8 hour job. (p. 48)

Chinaski is a man that passionately love words, poetry, creation, but he feels he has achieve aptness with them through his days of boozing, whoring, brawling, and working menial jobs. In numerous poems ("the Master Plan," "death sat on my knee and cracked with laughter") He recalls going days without eating and freezing in tired rooms. He jokes that his most miserable moments, sleeping on a park bench and such, were also his finest.

For the author and his alter-ego, all worthy art comes from the gutter, from the realization that large portions of life are off-limits to everyone except a select few. He speaks at length about the locks on everything in "trashcan lives." In the end, after all, the fodder that has produced his best work has come from the whores, brawls, and drunken homeless nights that comprise his life. Bukowski is the poetry of the gutter, unequivocal, unrelenting, and entirely honest. One imagines his writing with the express purpose of being absolutely true to his subjects.

We All Pass Our Prime

You Get So Alone At Times That It Just Makes Sense is a work written by an older Charles Bukowski. Having lived harder than any thought possible and nonetheless surviving through middle age, he writes with a certain elegiac tone. He knows he is past his prime and ruminates on it with oddly light beauty.

Early in the collection, in a poem called "beasts bounding through time-," the author rattles off a laundry list of great scribes who died before their time, sometimes by change and sometimes by their own hand. To Bukowski, these men and women understand the impossibility of making that one grand statement and reacte accordingly. He on the other hand has inexplicably aged beyond his shelf date, and many of his pieces are direct responses to his critics.

His response, it seems, is that we all pass our prime. His assurances to his fans are often in a sardonic tone, as in "for the concerned:" when he promises his fiery agony is still intact. It simply no longer manifests itself in violent nights and prostitutes. Bukowski hearkens back to his past throughout the collection, discussing in several pieces his cockiness as a kid. These works often end with codas describing the fates that befell all the players. This creates an air of fatalism: we none of us achieve what we hoped in our youth.

By the end of the collection—most pointedly in "quiet"—the author has made clear that he is not distraught that he is passed his prime. He has accepted that the perfect sentiment in poetry does not exist, and his longevity has given him leave to stumble a bit in his art.

Style

Point of View

The point-of-view of You Get So Alone At Times That It Just Makes Sense is first-person. By and large every poem is told from the subject position of the author's frequent alter-ego Chinaski.

Chinaski is a hard-drinking, misogynistic poet in his middle age. He has grown from a raging id to a slightly detached ego. Much of the collection is dedicated to his analyzing of past debaucheries and excesses. The gist of experience has allowed Chinaski to understand the meaning of these jags. In particular, our poet understands acutely the meaning of his decade-long hiatus from writing. His ten years of drinking and traveling, discussed in several works, were education for his career as a poet. The voice of every one of these pieces is brusque, authoritative, confrontational, and weary, a portrait of a hard-liver past his prime.

There are two distinct exceptions regarding the identity of the first-person narrator. In the poems "well, that's just the way it is..." and "Emily Bukowski" the speaker is clearly the real-world Charles Bukowski. One should note, though, that the tone and subject of the poems is not different from those spoken by Chinaski. In this respect, the two personas are largely interchangeable.

Setting

By and large, the setting of You Get So Alone At Times That It Just Makes Sense is Los Angeles in the early 1980's. Bukowski is writing from this vantage point, living with his wife and cats in L.A. Many of his poems, including "fractional note" and "let 'em go," are direct critiques of Reagan-era America. Several pieces have references to Skid Row, a poverty-stricken area of L.A.

Several specific locations in 1980s Los Angeles play prominently in the collection. Certainly, Chinaski's room where he types his poems is featured prominently. In middle age, this room has become the reliquary of his raucous life, the place were he drinks heavily. It regularly bursts into flames. Another prominent location is the Race Track. This is Chinaski's favorite place of recreation, and it becomes a metaphor for the intensely uphill struggle to make it in America. Lastly, the freeway is a frequent setting of poems. The freeway is a modern-day Coliseum, where enraged citizens batter away at each other.

A few poems in this collection exist as flashbacks to Chinaski's youth and take place in various locations like New Orleans or Tijuana. They take place any time from the Depression to the sixties. One should note, however, that the narrative of these pieces is resolutely still in the present (1986). As such, this collection should be considered a work set exclusively in the mid-eighties.

Language and Meaning

The language of You Get So Alone At Times That It Just Makes Sense is spare and vulgar. It reflects completely the personality of the author and his alter-ego Chinaski.

The syntax of the poetry is conversational. Our narrator regularly uses the second person when discussing hypothetical situations. On occasion, he employs phonetic phrasing like "'em," "gotta," and "um." In "late late late poem" Chinaski stops in the middle of a story and candidly states to the reader that he just set a fire in his wastebasket, and he is aware that this poem is not one of his best.

One other hallmark of the language of You Get So Alone ... is that the author uses no capitalization except for proper nouns and the titular reference to his "Master Plan." Often, Bukowski also disposes of punctuation as well. This creates the impression of a scrawled note, immediate and uninhibited. One is reminded of the single sheaf on which Kerouac wrote On the Road or the slap-dash manner that Joyce used in writing Finnegan's wake.

By and large, one gets the impression created by the language of this collection is of a grizzled old man—which is, after all, what Bukowski is in 1986—braying at the world. He speaks to the reader like the guy on the next barstool; we just met, but we might well be best friends.

Structure

You Get So Alone At Times That It Just Makes Sense by Charles Bukowski is a three-hundred page collection of 138 poems. Most poems in the collection span one to three pages in length, but some are as long as eight pages in length.

Bukowski writes in a free verse structure. This means that there is no set meter, rhyme scheme or stanza structure. In most poems, the lines are no longer than five words in length and a stanza consists of one sentence. This allows the poet to break down his phrasing into its constituent parts, punctuating key words. In some cases, such as poems obviously written in inebriated states, it gives the impression of a numbed mind searching for the next correct word.

Some poems—for example, "what am I doing?" and "you get so alone at times that it just makes sense"—have much longer lines and fuller stanzas. The syntax of these poems is often circuitous, with long digressions and florid metaphors. The poems weave in and out of concrete images and metaphors. Often they are more reflective, analyzing ideas on which Bukowski his long fixated. In the two examples above, these subjects are the madness and danger of the road and his decision to spend years doing nothing but drinking and traveling.

Taken together, the poems of You Get So Alone ... comprise a surprisingly wide range of structure. Though the reader will certainly not find a sonnet in the mix, he or she will experience both plodding and fluid composition.

Quotes

these punks
these cowards
these champions
these mad dogs of glory
moving this little bit of light toward
us
impossibly.
beasts bounding through time—, pp. 21-22.

...I thought, if being a bum is to be the
opposite of what this son-of-a-bitch
is, then that's what I'm going to
be.
and it's too bad he's been dead
so long
for now he can't see
how beautifully I've succeeded
at
that.
my non-ambitious ambition, p. 28.

now
they are celebrating my demise
in taverns I no longer
frequent ...
now
my once-promise
dwindling
dwindling
cornered, pp. 42-43.

the problem that I've found with
most poets that I've known is that
they've never had an 8 hour job
termites of the page, p. 48.

looking upward at the ceiling
I get what many will consider an
obnoxious thought:
it's still nice to be
Bukowski.
well, that's just the way it is ..., p. 65.

we were all alkies and none of us had jobs, all we had
was each other.
bad times at the 3rd and Vermont hotel, p. 93.

the freeway is a circus of cheap and petty emotions, it's
humanity on the move, most of them coming from some place they
hated and going to another they hate just as much or more.
the freeways are a lesson in what we have become...
drive through hell, p. 122.

for those readers now
sick at heart
believing that I'm a contented
man-
please have some
cheer: agony sometimes changes
form
but
it never ceases for
anybody.
for the concerned:, p. 123.

the price of creation
is never
too high.
the price of living
with other people
always
is.
final story, p. 138.

as long as there are
human beings about
there is never going to be
any peace.
relentless as the tarantula, pp. 195-196.

well, I don't miss the
whores
although now and then one or another makes an
attempt to locate
me.
I don't know if they miss all the booze and
the bit of money I gave them
or if they are enthralled at the way
I've immortalized them in

literature.
thank you, p. 229.

the movies are worse than ever
and the dead books of the dead men read dead.
the white rats run the treadmill.
the bars stink in swampland darkness
as the lonely unfulfill the lonely.
there's no clarity.
the was never meant to be clarity.
fractional note, p. 256.

let's let the bombs go
I'm tired of waiting
I've put away my toys
folded the road maps
canceled my subscription to Time
kissed Disneyland goodbye
let 'em go, p. 270.

sometimes getting started
in the big time
is tantamount to
trying to raise an erection
in a tornado
and even if you do
nobody has the time
to notice.
trying to make it, p. 273.

being drunk at this typer beats being with any woman
I've ever seen or
known.
this, p. 280.

what matters most is
how well you
walk through the
fire.
how is your heart?, p. 305.

Topics for Discussion

You Get So Alone ... is clearly written by a man entering his autumn years. How does the author reconcile his current life with the mad affairs of his youth? Does he apologize either for his destructive days or his current domesticity?

Discuss the American Dream. Does Chinaski believe that it actually exists? If he does, does he think it is available to all people? Compare Chinaski's idea of success to his father's.

Chinaski has excised many vices of his youth from his middle age. He makes it clear throughout the collection that he will always be a drinker. What does drinking do for him? How has it become an inextricable part of his art?

Bukowski is rightly considered a misogynist in his writing. Discuss his attitude toward women in this collection. Are there any to whom he shows respect?

Charles Bukowski clearly draws a connection between good art and working a real job. How do you think these two things are connected? Do you think that a hard life is necessary to be a good artist? Do you agree with him that the work of the Lost Generation is missing something because it was written by wealthy artists?

The race track plays a prominent role in many of the poems in You Get So Alone ... Besides being one of Chinaski's favorite haunts, what does the Track represent to the poet? What does it represent to the gamblers? The jockeys?

The author spends much of the collection criticizing the state of America. Discuss the social landscape of America in the 1980s. How does Bukowski feel about the way of the world at this time?

From many of the poems of You Get So Alone... one can divine the nature of criticism regarding Bukowski's work. What specific charges does the poet answer in this collection? Do you think there is legitimacy to these criticisms?

Discuss solitude. How does the poet feel about being alone? Do you agree with him that it fosters contentment? Why do you think Bukowski has taken this attitude toward solitude?