“Why Does a Hearse Horse Snicker…”

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Although Shakespeare may have been paying tribute to attorneys by his gentle remarks in Henry VI — “The first thing we do, let’s kill all the lawyers”? — others have not been so kind.

Consider these examples: “I don’t like lawyers, nan-nie.” “No one likes lawyers, little boy.” J. P. Donleavy, The Beastly Beatitudes of Balthazar B. . . . “Our politics is rotten because it is almost exclusively made up of lawyers.” Jimmy Breslin, New York Magazine (1970). . . . “Keynes did not like lawyers. He thought the United States a ‘lawyer-ridden land’ and believed that ‘the May-flower, when she sailed from Plymouth, must have been entirely filled with lawyers.’” Dean Acheson, Present At the Creation.4 Or perhaps Art Buchwald’s remarks about the delivery of legal services in his address to the 1979 graduating class of Tulane Law School:

“. . . It is an honorable calling that you have chosen. Some of you will soon be defending poor, helpless insurance companies who are constantly being sued by greedy, vicious widows and orphans trying to collect on their policies. Others will work tirelessly to protect frightened, beleaguered oil companies from being attacked by depraved consumer groups. A few of you will devote your lives to suing doctors, while many of you will choose to sue the patients. As lawyers you will take an oath that whether you represent General Motors, Coca-Cola, or the telephone company, you’ll see that the little fellow has his day in court.”

But the most devastating and poetic criticism of all — one which captures the spirit of public opinion reflected in various surveys and polls — is “The Lawyers Know Too Much,” by Carl Sandburg:

“The lawyers, Bob, know too much.
They are chums of the books of old John Marshall.
They know it all, what a dead hand wrote,
A stiff dead hand and its knuckles crumbling,
The bones of the fingers a thin white ash.
The lawyers know a dead man’s thoughts too well.

In the heels of the higgling lawyers, Bob,
Too many slippery ifs and buts and howevers,
Too much hereinbefore provided whereas,
Too many doors to go in and out of.

When the lawyers are through
What is there left, Bob?
Can a mouse nibble at it
And find enough to fasten a tooth in?

Why is there always a secret singing
When a lawyer cashes in?
Why does a hearse horse snicker
Hauling a lawyer away?

The work of a bricklayer goes to the blue.
The knack of a mason outlasts a moon.
The hands of a plasterer hold a room together.
The land of a farmer wishes him back again.
Singers of songs and dreamers of plays
Build a house no wind blows over.
The lawyers — tell me why a hearse horse snickers hauling a lawyer’s bones.”

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