

# marvin bell

## THE BOOK OF THE DEAD MAN (HIS WHISTLING)

*Live as if you were already dead.*

— Zen admonition

### *1. About the Dead Man and His Whistling*

May it be apt for the dead man to explain himself.

There was carefree whistling, whistling to hoot at the inept toreador, whistling in appreciation, whistling past the graveyard.

The dead man's whistling was born in youth of oblivious joy, the pathway ahead, and somewhere to get to or not, all in good time.

It was not the summons of a tight lip tweet, nor a two-fingers-in-the-mouth heads-up, nor the trilling of a bird.

He was not calling, nor keeping the day at bay, nor was he more ambitious than the insensible sole of his shoe.

His whistling was music for the cloud parade and the light pressure of rain, for he walked out whatever the time or weather.

Like the undertaker who whistles while he works, he was doubly engaged.

The funeral home was next to the grade school.

The camera store kept its window lit all night.

They were playing cards at the firehouse, the hoses curled in sleep.

## *2. More About the Dead Man and His Whistling*

How different were he one of them, who rode the bumpers to fires, who closed late  
the hardware store, who polished the coffins.

The young man did not have to be more.

A life of if and when.

The whistle in a squeal of delight, the screech of wet brakes and edgy  
downshifting, the kettle's high register — to come awake in the youthful  
miasma.

Past midnight, turning the beat frequency oscillator dial to find a signal between  
the static and whistles.

The slide whistle of comedy, the wooden ball bobbing in the plastic toy whistle,  
the highs of singer Yma Sumac and trumpeter Maynard Ferguson, the  
crystal-breaking scores of the Kenton band, were reaching beyond the  
death rattle.

If it strained ears — well, lifting the future from the past, the hinge squeaks.

It may seem absurd to others that the dead man is alive.

Somewhere in the past, the footsteps of The Whistler, that omniscient radio host  
of crime and fate.

No words to lessen the feeling.