FOREWORD by Garrett White

Long, long ago, when I saw what the produce dealers did, and what the engineers with their swindle sheets were doing, I knew that the world was going to end.

— A. I. Bezzerides, 1996

Best known for his free-form adaptation of Mickey Spillane's crime thriller *Kiss Me Deadly*, the apocalyptic film noir masterpiece directed by Robert Aldrich, Albert Isaac "Buzz" Bezzerides published three novels: *Long Haul* (1938), filmed by Warner Bros. as *They Drive By Night*, starring George Raft, Humphrey Bogart, and Ida Lupino; *There Is A Happy Land* (1942), about a family of rural drifters; and *Thieves' Market* (1949), which Bezzerides scripted for 20th-Century Fox as *Thieves' Highway*, directed by Jules Dassin and starring Richard Conte, Lee J. Cobb, Valentina Cortesa, and Millard Mitchell.

Despite notices in *Time* magazine and elsewhere, the first novel, which he had begun to write in 1932, sold modestly, as did the second. But by the time Scribner's published *Thieves' Market* in 1949, Bezzerides was a highly paid screenwriter working free-lance for all of the major studios. He had spent five years during the war as a contract writer in the Warners stable, where he became one of William Faulkner's closest friends in Hollywood, and had earned a reputation as a writer of tough, gritty action pictures. The novel was widely reviewed: "Harrowing . . . appalling!" —*San Francisco Chronicle*. "Taut, fast-paced . . . violence, sex, intensity." —*New York Times*. "Full of violence and suspense, definitely not for the squeamish . . ." —*Book-of-the-Month Club News*. "Crude and elemen-

tary . . ." —*New York Herald Tribune*. "Hard-boiled! Crackling! Races like a truck going downgrade!" —*Saturday Review*.

Records in the Scribner's archive at Princeton University indicate that the first edition sold out within several weeks, and two mass-market paperback editions followed. Warner Bros. offered \$100,000 for the motion picture rights, but Bezzerides's agent had already agreed to sell the book to Fox for \$80,000—a small fortune in 1948, when the rights were sold. Lasting success couldn't be far away.

Bezzarides was born in Samsun, Turkey, on August 9, 1908, to an Armenian mother educated by Presbyterian missionaries and a Turkish-speaking Greek father, a merchant twenty years her senior with his own train of donkeys. As an infant in 1909, he was brought into the large Armenian community in Fresno, California, where his father worked first in agriculture, then as a trucker hauling produce. The richness of the drama in Bezzerides's extended immigrant family has always been the source of his creative life. As he tells it,

They came straight to Fresno because my mother had relatives there. My grandmother had been widowed with five daughters, and she had to marry them all off. My mother's marriage to my father had been arranged in Turkey, but my mother's sister, my aunt, had been sent here to marry a guy she had never even seen before, a runty Armenian with red hair and green eyes. Not only that, but the man with whom my mother was really in love had moved here. He had moved here before the turn of the century and had a six-hundred-acre plot of land. She had grown up with him. He was her age. A handsome guy. He wrote a letter to her saying, "I've got a piece of land in California. Leave your husband and come here. You can get a divorce and we'll get married," but she couldn't go. She was pregnant with me.¹

Bezzarides began to write while still a student at the University of California, Berkeley, taking literature courses on the side and planning a career in Communications Engineering. His first pub-

lished story, "Passage Into Eternity," about a prank for which his grandmother never forgave him, appeared in the February 1935 issue of *Story* magazine. Others were published in *Scribner's*, *Esquire*, and *Harper's*. When *Long Haul* was published by Carrick & Evans in New York in 1938, Bezzerides was living in Hollywood with his first wife, Yvonne, and working for the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power. The couple had moved to Hollywood when Bezzerides was given a job at Electrical Research Products, a division of Western Electric for which he had worked in San Francisco. He had quit in disgust over what he viewed as unethical conduct at the company, and was about to do the same at the Department of Water and Power. He had already been through a string of odd jobs: sound mixer, installer of public address systems, electrical engineer for Mitchell Camera.

On March 20, 1940, Bezzerides signed a contract giving Warner Bros. Studios the right to make a motion picture from *Long Haul*, a bleak, fast-moving story about two independent truckers trading crops for their share of the American Dream. The agreement gave the writer \$2,000 for the rights to his novel, enough at the time to make a down payment on a decent house. The original contract for the deal is preserved in the Warners archive at the University of Southern California, along with the official budget for the film: Screenwriters Jerry Wald and Richard Macaulay: \$11,167; Director Raoul Walsh: \$17,500; George Raft: \$55,000; Humphrey Bogart: \$11,200; Ida Lupino: \$10,000; Alan Hale: \$10,000; Ann Sheridan: \$6,000.

Ever since signing the contract, Bezzerides has claimed that when he first walked into producer Mark Hellinger's office, Hellinger covered a script on his desk titled *They Drive By Night*. Although much else has been lost, one internal memo survives in the archive with the contract, a brief note from Warner Bros. producer Hal B. Wallis to Walsh green-lighting Walsh's request to begin shooting a few road shots for the film when the weather is right. The memo is dated March 15, 1940.

Bezzerrides had already been involved in one questionable Hollywood transaction. He was standing in front of Stanley Rose's bookshop on Hollywood Boulevard, marveling at his own book in the

window, when a man who had seen his picture on the book jacket stepped up and asked, "How much of an advance did you get?" Bezzerides told him. "Could you loan it to me?" Always generous to a fault, Bezzerides gave it to him. Months later, after many promises and in need of the money, Bezzerides reluctantly went to the man's wife. She was surprised and angry, since she had already given that amount to her husband on at least a couple of occasions to cover the debt, but she paid him immediately. The debtor was novelist John Fante, who became a lifelong, if difficult, friend and sometimes collaborator.

Sensing a talented source of authentic material—and, as Bezzerides sees it, attempting to placate him after stealing his book—Warners hired him into its stable of contract writers, paying him \$300 per week, more than four times his salary as an engineer at the Department of Water and Power. His first assignment was *Juke Girl*, a long-buried film in which Ronald Reagan and Richard Whorf play Florida drifters who become involved in a dispute between packing plant owner Gene Lockhart and grower George Tobias. The liberal Reagan character sides with the growers, his hawkish former friend with the packers. In a scene that will be echoed years later in the spectacular truck crash in *Thieves' Highway* as a metaphor for wasted labor, the savagery of capitalism, and the general stupidity of the human race, packing plant scabs destroy tons of tomatoes. The film did well, and Bezzerides kept writing.

Bezzerrides lives in a magnificent, decaying Rudolf Schindler house at the western end of the San Fernando Valley. Since 1955, when he bought the house from actor Albert Dekker, he has lived here with his second wife, Silvia Richards, a screenwriter (*Ruby Gentry*, *Possessed*, *Rancho Notorious*) who worked closely with Fritz Lang and King Vidor. Accessible by a short, steep dirt road, and partly hidden by massive eucalyptus trees, the house sits atop a hill that once overlooked vast orange groves. Surrounded by abandoned cars and rusting machinery, it seems a monument to the entropy in the film noir universe that has been the subject of his life's work. ("A house should age with its owners," Schindler told him.)

For the past ten years, we have been meeting in coffee shops on Ventura Boulevard. We met first at Ryons, a '50s diner where he

used to sit and write in a corner booth at all hours of the day and night. When it was closed and remodeled under new management as a garish retro '50s diner, we moved down the street to Denny's. "[Bezzetides] converses like a force of nature," Lee Server once wrote, and there's no better way to say it. He is tough, blunt, often emphatically profane, deeply pessimistic as to human nature and the future of humankind, yet also amazingly sensitive and trusting.

His conversation ranges over the topics that have obsessed him since he first sat down to write nearly seventy years ago: man's self-destructive programming ("tragedy is etched into the genes"); the destruction of nature; the mystery and superiority of women; the exploitation of labor; education; addiction as a metaphor for American consumer culture; the "sanity of the insane and the insanity of the sane." He has spent a lifetime figuring out who he is, what happened in his family, why people do what they do. Except about Faulkner, to whom Bezzetides has an abiding attachment (he wrote a feature documentary, *William Faulkner: A Life On Paper*, for PBS in the late '70s, and appears in all of the Faulkner biographies), he rarely reminisces, about family or film, unless it's to make a point about the present.

"Boy, what a business, I'll tell you! Producers!," he says, sitting in a booth at Denny's one afternoon. "They think they understand writing. But there's nothing, no picture, until a writer, even a bad writer, sits down and writes a story, beginning with the first letter of the first word."

Bezzetides likes to pretend that he disdains his writing for film, but this has less to do with his view of the craft than with a subject dear to all screenwriters: the way good writing can be ruined by the process of filmmaking. Behind even his most respected films there are many stories of what might have been. In an interview by Lee Server, Bezzetides recalls,

These non-writers think they can do what they want to a carefully constructed script and it won't turn into a piece of crap. They're wrong. But nobody tells them that. Fox bought . . . *Thieves' Market*. They didn't want to use the original title because "San Francisco objects to it." So, *Thieves' Highway*. So

who cares? I said okay. Then the director, Julie Dassin, says, "For the prostitute, I want Valentina Cortesa, so rewrite it for her." He was going with her. We were going to have Shelley Winters, who would have been perfect. This Italian, Cortesa, what would she be doing in this story? I said, "But . . . Julie! But I rewrote it. And we go to the meeting with Zanuck—and already the picture is getting fucked up before that . . .

Now in my story the father is dead at the beginning. The kid starts trucking because he's trying to make his father's life valid. The first thing Zanuck says is, "I want a new beginning. I want the father still alive. He's crippled, that's why the kid's trucking." It was bullshit. But I said, "Yes, Mr. Zanuck." I write another beginning, this revenge business. The picture didn't do real well. There were good things in it, but it wasn't the picture I wanted to do, it wasn't the story I wanted to do. I had the producer's chickenshit changes, the director's girlfriend, and Zanuck's ideas. I only knew that story from my life, my book, my script. But that didn't matter. Oh, I tell you, once you give in a little bit you're finished.²

Filming of *Thieves' Highway* began on November 8, 1948. As for *On Dangerous Ground* and *Kiss Me Deadly*, Bezzerides was on the set during the entire shoot and personally scouted all of the locations, which included Highway 99, San Francisco, Oakland, Sebastopol, Calistoga, Santa Rosa, Hueneme, and Oxnard. At the time, Richard Conte was one of Fox's most dependable actors and had just been awarded a new seven-year contract after the success of *Cry of the City* and *Call Northside 777*. (On March 3, 1948, the *Los Angeles Times* had announced that Victor Mature would star in the role.) National and local reviews were favorable: "A gripping presentation of stark, heavy drama," *Fortnight*, September 30, 1940. A reviewer for *Cue* wrote, in what now seems a forced nod to Dassin's documentarist style, "Filmed with astonishing realism . . . *Thieves' Highway* comes close to being—in addition to whopping good melodrama—one of the best documentaries about food distribution ever filmed." The *L.A. Examiner*, in a review published September 21, 1949, noted the "triteness of the bad girl with the heart of gold"—

failing to grasp the novelty of the hero's decision to leave his bourgeois fiancée and remain with the prostitute—but went on to call the film “a slice of life cut cleanly on all sides and pinned on the screen with unrelenting realism.”

Thieves' Highway grossed \$1.5 million in domestic rentals, placing it 89th for the year—a fair showing, given that the average take for all but the top twenty was just over \$2 million. The top grosser for the year was *Jolson Sings Again*, at \$5,500,000, followed by *Pinky* and *I Was A Male War Bride*. The top-grossing actress in 1949 was Jeanne Crain.

Hovering always above the consuming work of supporting his family by writing screenplays was Bezzerides's yearning to write fiction, but family obligations kept him busy into the television era, and he has not published another novel since *Thieves' Market*. In the '40s and '50s, he wrote fourteen produced screenplays. Included in that number are four pictures for which he is sometimes given partial credit or to which he made substantial uncredited contributions: *Action in the North Atlantic* (1943), a film credited, after arbitration, to the more powerful John Howard Lawson; *Northern Pursuit* (1943) and *Background to Danger* (1943), both credited at times to either Bezzerides or to W. R. Burnett; and *Desert Fury* (1947), credited to Robert Rossen.

Bezzerrides's big break in television came in the mid-1960s, when he created the series “The Big Valley” for Barbara Stanwyck. As an antidote to “Bonanza,” he developed a role for the main character's daughter, and as he originally conceived it, the series would have included many stories about immigrants in the Central Valley. In another common Hollywood transaction, the producers saw to it that the series—one of the most popular syndicated shows in history—never turned a profit on paper, and Bezzerides was denied a share in what had certainly been a lucrative four-year run and a successful launch into syndication. (According to Bezzerides, Stanwyck threatened to sue for her share of the profits—an option Bezzerides could not afford at the time—and received a settlement out of court.)

Three of Bezzerides's films are included in nearly all of the film noir anthologies: *Thieves' Highway*, *On Dangerous Ground* (1951), di-

rected by Nicholas Ray and starring Robert Ryan and Ida Lupino, and *Kiss Me Deadly*. All three were made by directors who have received a great deal of attention, with the result that Bezzerides's contributions to many aspects of each film have often been overlooked. Although the latter two were based on popular novels (*On Dangerous Ground* was written from Gerald Butler's *Mad With Much Heart*), each has the unmistakable stamp of his interests, from car culture to the psychology of male violence. The most personal of his films—including *Thieves' Highway*, which though based on his own material was nevertheless restricted to a very specific milieu—is *Kiss Me Deadly*, one of the most influential American films in the postwar era. Sitting at his typewriter at home, bored with the formulaic motivations for murder in Spillane's novel—money, drugs—he simply set the book aside and invented a movie out of his own thoroughgoing revulsion at humanity's race toward annihilation.

With *Kiss Me Deadly*, as with many of the films that now form the permanent center of the otherwise fluid film noir canon, French critics hit the mark from the beginning. In a review of *Kiss Me Deadly* in Jean-Jacques Pauvert and Michel Laclos's surrealist literary revue *Bizzare*, Louis Seguin wrote:

The hero of a film must always, as certain "moralists" argue, meet with our sympathy, if not our esteem. Mike Hammer is no exception, not because he will be saved by the action of a mysterious grace that happily is rigorously absent from *Kiss Me Deadly*, and not by his final submission to a police force that has no idea what to do apart from spew insults and whose least reprehensible representative is a self-righteous homosexual, but because, while everything collapses around him at the death of Va-Va-Voom, he finds the sympathy of a barman and a wonderful singer, both of them black. The single fact, moreover, that in an American film the only human characters are a Greek, therefore a "greaseball," and "negroes" should give pause to those who are so quick to scream sadism and immorality against it matters not what film noir, this one of Aldrich's included. This choice of characters is far preferable

to the ethic, standard in such films, of the weak-man-victimized-by-the-evil-woman.

I might also add, in favor of its ethic, that Aldrich's film is profoundly feminist. The tortured Christina dies without divulging her secret; Velda, her face wet with perspiration, sacrifices herself in a way that is altogether rare to find; and who could forget the ravaged voice with which [Lili] Carver murmurs, before killing and dying, "Kiss me, Mike."³

What Seguin was saying—to conservative French critics—is that the film is profoundly moral. Behind everything Bezzerides writes is an apprehension of what the world could be but isn't. In the moral universe of the film, everyone is degraded, men and women, but also empowered to carry their prescribed roles to extremes. Lili Carver, of her own will—the only freedom allowed in the film—chooses, like all of the men, including Hammer, to pursue the Great Whatsit. Beneath the shockingly brutal misogyny apparent on the film's surface, a seeming hatred of women that is all too undeniably genuine in most films of this kind, is Bezzerides's belief that the system we have created is an equal opportunity destroyer. There are no *femmes fatales* in *Kiss Me Deadly*, just as there are no heroes. The only people in the film outside of this loop of destruction, and the only ones to show kindness, are the servants—immigrants and the descendants of slaves.

Shortly before he died, Aldrich phoned Bezzerides. "He wanted to tell me," Bezzerides recalls, "that he had just reread my script for *Kiss Me Deadly*." When Bezzerides asked why, Aldrich replied, "I wanted to see how I could've shot it in three weeks. You know what? It was all there."

All three of Bezzerides's novels have been called proletarian, although they do not appear in most of the literature on the subject. Given the writers he collaborated with over the years—Meyer Levin, John Howard Lawson, Alvah Bessie—and the salient themes of his writing, he would seem to have been an inevitable candidate for the Hollywood blacklist. *Thieves' Highway* was Jules Dassin's last film in America (preceded by *Brute Force* in 1947 and *The Naked City* in 1948) before he was blacklisted and moved to London,

where he made another noir classic, *Night and the City*, in 1950. Bezzerides did, in fact, narrowly escape the blacklist. In the late '40s, he was teaching at Hollywood's famous "Little Red Schoolhouse," where many Communist Party members taught. "I said to that whole class," he recalls, "if you think writing a story about a bunch of union workers going on a strike is a story, you're mistaken, because it's how you write, not the subject that you pick, that I'm interested in. And half of the class got up and walked out. They were Communists. I was left with about thirty students, and they stayed and had fun while I was teaching."⁴

Although not a Communist, as Bezzerides tells it, his name was placed on the blacklist merely for having taught at the school. In 1950, MGM was about to buy the film rights to an unpublished Bezzerides novel, *Not Too Big A Dream*, about his father's belief that he would get rich in America. When he showed up at the studio to sign the contract, he was notified by an MGM executive that his name was on the list, and that the film would not be purchased. Bezzerides told the executive what he had told his students, that he had never considered joining a party of any kind, Communist or otherwise. MGM bought the novel, and subsequently, although the picture was not made for other reasons, his name disappeared from the list, demonstrating once again the capriciousness and culpability of the studios in the imposition of the blacklist.

Like *Long Haul*, *Thieves' Market* was written directly from Bezzerides's experiences as a trucker with his father and in the fields and packing houses of California's Central Valley—the breadbasket of the world—and in the markets of Stockton, Oakland, San Francisco and Los Angeles. His personal experience of the unbridled cheating and brutality that characterize the novel is the basis for his politics, and for whatever resemblance his characters have to others in film noir.

A passage late in *Thieves' Market* provides a key to the bleak view of human relations that Bezzerides learned as a young man and that continues to inform his writing:

He had started so bravely, quitting his job and buying the

truck and venturing to find a load, but now it was all gone, all the fine bravery gone. You had to be hard and shrewd, very hard and shrewd, more shrewd than he could ever be. It was not buying and selling. It was standing toe to toe and slug-ging at each other in a combat of such ferocity that he knew he would never be able to beat anyone down, but would always be the first to drop his arms, more in awe than in defeat that his opponent could put up such a fight for money, just money, not much money, not more than hardly enough for a person to live decently, if one had the time to live at all . . . ⁵

Far more despairing than the film, which ends with the dramatic arrival of Cortesa with the police before Conte has a chance to finish beating Cobb and perhaps kill him, the novel opens with broken dreams, after the death of an immigrant father, seen through the eyes of an assimilated son who has yet to make good, and through the eyes of a disappointed immigrant mother who hated the father because of his failure to realize the American promise of wealth and prosperity. Family values have evaporated in the face of survival and greed, and mother and son have turned against one another, bickering not only over what's left—insurance money that has become the old man's only real accomplishment in the new world—but also over the memory of the father as a representative of old world honesty, which was his undoing.

For the mother, this is evidence of failure—the father had the dream and the talent, but wasn't cunning enough—and for the son, another kind of failure, because he knows that the new world is corrupt, that the ruthless succeed, and that old-world values are the values of weakness.

A. I. Bezzerides's *Thieves' Market* is a fitting addition to the University of California's valuable California Fiction series. Looking back, it is tempting, especially given Bezzerides's reputation as a screenwriter, to view the novel only in the tradition of hard-boiled fiction of the 1940s. In fact, it was an attempt by the author to explore his real experience as a young California trucker in a work of serious commercial fiction. His influences were those of many writ-

ers at the time: Hemingway, Faulkner (to whom Bezzerides once introduced himself in a Hollywood restaurant years before working in film), Katherine Mansfield. His themes—California as a land of opportunity, the clash of immigrant values with those of America and the resulting loss of innocence—are as current now as then.

Garrett White
Hollywood, January 1997

1. Taped interview with Garrett White, Woodland Hills, CA, 1995.
2. Lee Server, *Screenwriter: Words Become Pictures, Interviews with twelve screenwriters from the golden age of American movies* (Pittstown, New Jersey: The Main Street Press, 1987), 40–42.
3. Louis Seguin, "Kiss Me Mike," *Bizarre* (Paris, October 1955, No. II), 68–71, my translation.
4. Taped interview with Garrett White, Woodland Hills, CA, 1996.
5. P. 224, below.

THIEVES' MARKET