

THE FIRST TEN MINUTES MEMOIR OF A DEADLY SNAKEBITE: AN INTERVIEW WITH DEAN RIPA



Long hours of suffering before pulling through, Dean Ripa after a near-fatal envenoming from a South American bushmaster. Ripa collapsed within four minutes of the bite, and within ten minutes was totally incapacitated. Photo Regina Ripa, in the Intensive Care Unit at New Hanover Regional Medical Center, Wilmington, N.C.

THE FIRST TEN MINUTES

WHAT'S IT LIKE TO GET BITTEN BY A BUSHMASTER?

MEMOIR OF A DEADLY SNAKEBITE: AN INTERVIEW WITH DEAN RIPA

BY R. MERTENS © 2009

When you are given a full dose of venom from a large bushmaster, it is not a question of whether you are going to die, it is a question of how much longer you are going to live. Much has been written about the physical effects of snakebite, but what about the psychological effects? What are the victim's feelings and impressions within the first minutes of this kind of serious envenomation? Dean Ripa, "the most bushmaster bitten human of all time," talks about his latest harrowing experience at the fangs-end of an adult South American bushmaster, giving us an up-close view of what it means to be envenomed by a truly deadly snake. Reported by R. Mertens, on the scene shortly after the accident and the first person to start filling Dean's veins with antivenom.

DEAN RIPA'S SEVENTH bushmaster envenoming was potentially the most serious of them all. Bitten by a large adult specimen injecting massive quantities of venom, he was "knocked down" literally, on the spot, and within three minutes exhibiting symptoms of full blown systemic poisoning. He had, in his words, "about an hour to live." Observing his rapid decline, I thought that was optimistic. He survived thanks to having large amounts of specific antivenom on hand, and by the swift action of the Serpentarium staff.

The bite was a feeding response from an adult South American bushmaster (*L. muta muta*) of approximately 2 meters body length. An exceptionally deep, copious envenoming, the snake struck his left forearm about 11 centimeters below the elbow, embedding both 2.5 cm long fangs into the muscular part of the upper forearm. Effects were immediate and devastating. Within one minute he could not move his fingers, the tendons "hamstrung" (the venom had been injected into the flexor muscles that control movement of the hand). Within four minutes he had collapsed on the floor, unable to stand, raise his head or torso. He felt a great rigidity spreading throughout his limbs. Speaking became difficult. His skin turned an almost luminous yellow-green color, shocking to behold. Local pain was agonizing: "like being skewered with a red hot dagger turned back and forth across the bone." His teeth chattered uncontrollably, like a man freezing to death. This was from sheer pain, which would reach Level 10.

At Dean's request, I started intravenous antivenom within 4 - 5 minutes of the bite. This consisted of Costa Rican type *Anti-Botropico*, *Crotalico*, *Laquesico* (produced by Instituto Clodomiro Picado, San Jose, Costa Rica). I injected the antivenom directly into the median cephalic vein of the right arm (opposite to the arm bit-



ten). As per Dean's hastily given instructions, I injected it *without infusion*, undiluted, one vial following on the other until reaching 10 ampules (an additional 8 vials would later be infused with saline later on while in ICU). While this method risked anaphylaxis, the obvious gravity of the case warranted great urgency. Lacking this most

Figure 1. Enormous fang spread on Dean Ripa's forearm, approximately 2 inches across in this deeply embedded, intramuscular bite.



Figure 2. Eyes rolling with unbearable pain, Dean Ripa 30 minutes after the bite of a 2 meter long adult South American bushmaster. Photographed in the Intensive Care Unit at New Hanover Regional Medical Center, Wilmington, NC.

immediate action, I do not believe he would have survived to reach the hospital.

Dean Ripa has seen and treated more bushmaster bites than anyone in medical history—and all on his own person. During the weeks that followed I recorded Dean’s impressions while he was still in the sick bed, taking notes from our conversations and assembling them into a cohesive form. The following, amassed from hours of separate interviews, records Dean’s own thoughts and experiences just prior to, and after the bite. It begins in the “backstage” area of the Cape Fear Serpentarium, where the accident occurred, and concludes, dismally, on the floor of the office bathroom upstairs of the building, where the first vials of antivenom were rapidly administered; where, in effect, his life was actually saved. The interview itself took place while recovering in the hospital, days later. For descriptions of Dean’s previous bites—and the horrific symptoms of bushmaster bite in general—refer to his paper, *Six New Cases of Bushmaster Envenoming* (2003; Chapter 22), which provides the

only victim’s eye-view accounts of bushmaster bite symptoms in the literature. His *Ontogeny of the Shock Death in Bushmaster Bite* (2007; Chapter 26) offers a brand new perspective on the composition of bushmaster venom, and what makes it particularly lethal to humans.

My interview begins several days after the life-or-death crisis has passed, while Dean is still bedridden and recovering. He is in a reflective mood, his tongue loosened by the heavy painkillers. An excellent time for the work ahead of me, for he literally cannot escape me. I asked him first how he received this, his seventh bushmaster bite.

Dean Ripa: “The tall, quad-leveled cage was rowed in tiers, with the one that contained the big *Lachesis muta* female, on top. This put the substrate on a level with my chest. The snake’s head, then, was just below eye level. My arm was extended at roughly the height of my shoulder, just over the margin of the open door of the cage.

Figure 3. The gigantic fangs of an adult Central American bush-master. Photo R. Mertens. Cape Fear Serpentarium.

This allowed me about a meter's distance from the snake. Not enough, apparently—not nearly enough! I had been removing soiled newspaper at the time, rolling it up inch by inch while keeping my eye on the snake's head

“My eye wandered—but the snake's eye didn't! If my arm had not been where it was I think she might have grabbed my face instead, so far did she leap across the cage floor to snag her misbegotten dinner. From the standpoint of susceptibility, I was the perfect target. Perfectly aligned, perfectly stupid, a daydreaming human. The fat round muscle in my forearm was as supple and yielding as any rodent she ever had the pleasure of, a most excellently conformed landing pad for her inch-long teeth! No bones to deflect them—as happens in some dry or errant bites—the fangs were swallowed up in their entirety within the flesh and muscle of my arm. As the mouth clamped down, I could see the lip shields spreading outward like wings on my skin, the eyes buried into them. My arm was neatly skewered, and for a brief second, held helpless, as on the end of tongs.

“Snakes were the original masters of trajectory science, the art of the catapult. A striking viper is a living harpoon, hurling its head out like a spear loosely attached to the tense ‘rope’ of its own body—the ‘tip’ explodes with a venomous charge. The angle of attack could not have been more perfectly choreographed, to land with mathematical exactitude on the fattest—and one might suppose *warmest*—part of my arm. I felt a vice-like grip, followed by a second, confirming grasp, as the mouth tightened to squeeze off the second and larger of the double pulses of venom. It was like a quick, firm handshake—a *departing* handshake, I should say . . . I mean that literally. Evolution has given its creatures certain expectations of success. A snake knows when it has done the job on you.

“The inoculation site was not all that far from my heart. Scant inches for the poison to travel . . . As I



clutched the wounds reactively, the warm wet blood welling up through my fingers confirmed the fangs deep penetration. The tense inner pressure—the sensation of a fire building deep inside—were proving signs of a massive envenoming. My arm was suddenly a boiling, overflowing cauldron.

“There are severe bites—ones where you have a fighting chance and antivenom can be somewhat delayed—and then there are bites like this one, where only the most immediate action can save you. I have experienced too many snakebites by now not to know the difference. Each envenoming has its own signature, its own story to tell. I had no happy illusions about where this bite was taking me. It was not going to be ‘dry’ or minimal; it was going to be grandiose and awful, and probably end up in a mortuary drawer. Every condition was right for that: the position of my arm relative to the snake's head, permitted a *downward* thrust of the jaws, exactly as in a predatory strike; the impact with the soft, blood-filled target, followed by an instantaneous mandibular clinching, embedding the fangs to the hilt, and with this movement, rotating the fangs outward, so as to expel more venom. . . it was a profound and I daresay even beautiful articulation. If you will grant that killing something efficiently has qualities of beauty . . . Even the snake's bearing and attitude afterwards told me it had been successful. No fear, no recoil into the defense posture, rather just hovering over me with a sort of eerie confidence, peering down over its chin at what it had

achieved with so little effort. It knew I would not be coming back for more.

“A snake’s size is nearly everything in a snakebite. Bigger snake, more venom, longer fangs. . . Not that small snakes don’t kill people too. The krait that ended Joe Slowinsky’s life had been no more than about 10 inches long (25 cm). A Gaboon viper not much larger than that killed snakekeeper Anita Finch. A baby bushmaster of 22 inches (57 cm) had given me a fair tour through hell; while another, 4-footer (120 cm), nearly destroyed me in half an hour. The present specimen, 7 feet long (2 meters) and weighing about 12 lbs (5 kg), had 6 times the mass of the 4 footer, with about 6 times more venom. A stout, breeder female with a large head, Miss Muta had proved herself a reliable donor on the venom extraction line. The wealth of poison she contributed had done much to feed the mouths of her lesser brethren at the Serpentarium. She had even paid the light bills, some months. So voluminous a producer might have killed me again tomorrow, and the day after, and still saved some for my staff members. She had plenty to spare for a little rat like me!

“A strong, undiscerning biter in the *Thermal Targeting* arena, I had always appreciated her efforts to ‘kill’ the rubber decoy as thoroughly as possible.* My soft, live arm ought to have been a welcome change from the stiff latex bulbs she had been accustomed to attacking! Now she had gratefully returned the favor and given me a rich, full dose worth a good sum of money on the venom market! In less personal circumstances I might have been pleased!

Mertens: What was your first thought when you realized you had been given this kind of full envenoming?

Dean Ripa: That I would die. And that I would die very quickly. Long hours presenting warm doggy-toys to hungry snakes at susceptible angles to striking snakes had done more than make a mess of my nerves; it had given me a thorough insight into the amount of venom bushmasters inject in a bite, and the kind of bite/presentation that makes the most venom happen. I knew, almost to the exact milligram, how much venom I had

received. By my calculations, and based on the symptoms I had experienced in the bites of vastly smaller specimens, I concluded that I had received several times the amount of poison necessary to kill me. Between four and six lethal doses for a man my size. (Chapter 25).

“The legendary speed with which this snake’s bite kills the victim is partly due to the great depth of the inoculation. The fangs are some of the world’s longest, and a 12 ft specimen, did any actually exist, would probably have the longest fangs in the world (Chapter 11). Ditmars records a man pronounced dead in ten minutes after being bitten on the thigh, one of the all time records for a death from snakebite. Save from anaphylactic shock, such things rarely happen from sheer venom alone, no matter what species; and yet the bushmaster shock-death can follow the very same pattern, its what the venom is designed to do. The kallikrein and kallikrein-like proteins, which the snake uses for killing its prey, attack the blood pressure of the prey animal and send it quickly into shock. Dump that kind of venom directly into a human vein and a deadly syndrome is the result. I knew that man’s thigh-bite could not have been any more consummately delivered than mine was, into the stout, vein-filled muscles of my forearm.

“I recognized all this immediately and it shook me to the core. If antivenom was to save me, it would have to be administered with a speed comparable to the spread of the poison. There would be no waiting on emergency care. I would not last that long. Even the standard procedure of ‘dripping in’ the diluted serum through an IV line would not get the stuff into me fast enough. The only choice I saw was to inject massive quantities of antivenom instantly, undiluted into the veins. This risked serum anaphylaxis, but it seemed the lesser of the two evils I was facing.

“There was, of course, no guarantee that the antivenom would work. In Bolaños’ (1984) famous review of bushmaster bites, three out of four victims died anyway. A case in Colombia had followed the same tragic course. Horrible, lingering deaths where the serum did nothing to save them . . . Now the story had begun circulating among authorities that antivenom did not really ‘work’ for bushmasters. Well, why should it, when you

* Thermal Targeting is a technique Dean pioneered for bushmasters, to extract their venom in as natural a way as possible without harming them (Chapter 20 - 21). Rather than being overpowered, strangled and milked, the donor is encouraged to strike-bite a soft, heated, rubber decoy, such as a doggy toy, and deliver its venom into the hollow interior (Chapter 20; 26). The venom is then removed by cutting the decoy open and pouring it out; any remainder can be sucked out with a syringe. “An exacting, somewhat dangerous technique for the operator,” says Ripa, “it puts you in close quarters with a lot of hungry, striking, heat-reactive snakes; and yet it remains the only good way of harvesting bushmaster venom without eventually killing them. There is the added advantage of observing first hand just how much venom is injected in the bushmaster bite, what bite-styles induce the greatest yields and how to make those bites happen, by presenting the target object accordingly.”

Figure 4. December 11, room 11, a live one over from Cape Fear Serpentarium. 12 hours after the bite, the pain is beginning to recede thanks to dilaudid given by IV at intervals of 10 minutes; but the arm and hand is growing ever more massively swollen and stiff, reaching even into the torso.

think about it? It's not even made from bushmaster venom! Most of the time it is merely synthesized from other, more common species, like *Bothrops asper* or *atrox*, to which bushmasters bear little phylogenetic relationship. Bushmasters are frail, temperamental animals and do not long survive conventional extraction methods. The technicians milk them for a few weeks, each time getting less and less venom, and within a month or so their donor is dead. It might be six months before another specimen is brought in. This is why bushmaster venom is so extremely expensive to buy—around \$2500 a gram! So they use other species like *Bothrops* and *Crotalus* on the extraction line, trying to cobble together a substitute. Even when actual bushmaster venom is used there have been difficulties. At Butantan, for example, it was discovered that the horses (from whose blood the antivenom is made) weren't developing an antigenic response. 'Right now there is no true antivenom for *Lachesis* in all of Brazil,' the director told me last time I was there.

"Well all this found its way into the snakevine uh grapevine and there was some bad talk going around. Did antivenom really work for bushmasters? Had it ever? People seemed to be dying regardless. To make matters worse, the antivenom I had in my fridge was for the wrong species of snake. Mine was a polyvalent serum for the bites of Costa Rican snakes, including *Lachesis stenophrys*. The snake that bit me was *Lachesis muta*, from Suriname, thousands of miles away! Her venom had a very different profile, as our UPLC analyses here at the Serpentarium had confirmed. Those differences were actual and not merely statistical; Miss Muta had been one of the primary donors in those tests! There were other considerations. Antivenom is temperature sensitive. My stock had knocked around for several weeks in my provider's handbag before finding its way into our refrigerator . . . Had it overheated? It was five years past the date of expiration.

"It was on the hooves of this unhappy insight that I saw the pale rider coming, and dropped gloomily against the wall where I was standing, my eyes still frozen on



the snake that had just killed me. The dizziness, faintness and weakness—the numbing of the lips and fingers—the tightness of the throat and difficulty swallowing—the familiar signposts of an already altering blood distribution, apparent only to one who had been bitten multiple times before . . . The fire building in my arm was already starting its pressure-boil, my fingers spasmodically shriveling into my palm; it was as though the tendons had been cleanly snipped with a knife. Clutching the erupting puncture wounds, the blood geysering between my fingers—appalled at the confidently hovering snake with her 'what's keeping you?' expression—a feeling of cold dread overwhelmed me. My trick (antivenom) was not going to work this time! I had reached my 9th life! And what would the remains of that life consist of? The fire in the wound was only a foretaste of worse things to come.

"Weighing the minutes I had left against these miserable certainties, and the hectic and painful treatment maneuvers I knew I must soon initiate, but in which could not participate except passively—for I would soon be as helpless as a baby!—I had only seconds to rouse the Serpentarium staff, while I was still sentient enough to communicate my instructions, on the course of treatment that had the best chance of saving me. I knew I would soon lose the ability, or at least desire, to speak. Projectile vomiting, evacuating bowels, the smooth muscles of my abdomen convulsing with electric jolts, my jaws chattering uncontrollably, my throat tightening from angioedema, I would make a poor medical advisor. My heart pooling blood away from my limbs, I would soon

be unable to move, and, lying there, mindbombed, the prospects of living growing gradually more undesirable. . . You give up after a point; you begin sinking away. And yet my own input would mean everything toward keeping me alive.”

At this point Dean confesses he is too weak to go on, and we break off for the day.

Second interview.

Mertens: “You have been bitten fourteen by various vipers, including six previous bites by three species of bushmaster. What were some of the other kinds?”

Dean Ripa (counting off): “Water moccasin, stiletto snake, night adder, hognose viper, fer-de-lance, white-tailed pitviper, eyelash viper”

Mertens: “Do you think all these bites have helped you develop any immunity?”

Dean Ripa: “I would be happy if they had! My gut feeling is, *yes*. But to what degree, enough to save my life? I have friends missing fingers, even whole limbs from similar bites that I have, comparatively speaking, sailed through—even though I had similar initial symptoms to theirs. I was bitten the first time at age 13 . . . a very serious bite requiring two weeks hospitalization. So you might say I have grown up with venom in me. Since then I have been bitten every few years or so, to my present age of 52. In a sense, my life has been a long series of venomous booster shots”

Mertens: “How often have you used antivenom?”

Dean Ripa: “Six times . . . and unnecessarily, I believe, at least twice—meaning I could have got through it on my own. The other eight or so bites I chose not to use it. Sometimes the venom is less terrible than dealing with the serum sickness, an ordeal in itself. You try to avoid antivenom if at all possible . . . If you are in the snake business, and repeatedly at risk, you are going to really need it someday, and you don’t want to spoil your chances of using it in a serious bite.”

Mertens: “And why would that be?”

Dean Ripa: “You develop a sensitivity, which makes it more dangerous to use—and dramatically more unpleasant getting over it . . . Head to toe hives, chills, vomiting, fainting. . . to say nothing of what is going on in your kidneys, which are filling up with dead cellular debris. The serum sickness gets worse each time and the onset earlier. At first it’s three to four days after the

treatment; next thing you are getting hives within minutes of the injection—which means you have two battles on your hands, one from the venom, the other the cure. So, if you can avoid antivenom, you are better off. Of my many bites. . . h’mmm . . . I would say that in no more than about three or four cases would I have certainly died without it. On the other hand, I might have endured severe tissue damage in several of them had I not taken it early. So you have to weigh these things out, consider the capabilities of the snake, observe how the bite is affecting you, and so forth, and take your cues from there. Naturally this decision is easier to make after you have had a little experience. The first time you are bitten you have absolutely no idea what to expect, so it’s all a terrific panic. But you get better at it.”

Mertens: “Better at being bitten . . . ?”

Dean Ripa: “Uh . . . ye-es. You become a better victim—or fool, as the case is. Hah, hah! What I mean is, you get better at predicting the outcome.”

Mertens: “Does using antivenom hurt any personal immunity you might otherwise acquire?”

Dean Ripa: “That’s a good point and I would have to guess that it does. You don’t build up any resistance because the antivenom does it for you. And if you go a long time without getting a bite, your antigenic memory starts to forget. But once again, let me make this clear—I am not certain I have any immunity at all. Tolerance is probably a better word, in my case.”

Mertens: “Would one become more immune from not using antivenom?”

Dean Ripa: “If you are going to develop any resistance to a poison you are better off not taking the antidote, *yes* that’s right. Building antibodies takes time and antivenom subverts that process. Your body has to ‘learn’ how to fight the invader, and on its own dime. Consider the heroin addiction. Now heroin is a very poisonous substance, about as toxic as copperhead venom. Yet an addict will build up a tolerance over time, till he is taking ten times the lethal dose of a nonuser. I remember William Burroughs would give me a little nip of his methadone from time to time—but just a little, about 5 - 7 mg. He was taking 60 or 70 mg! Takes years to get to that stage.

“Now a tolerance is best built up incrementally, with small doses. If the dose is too great you simply die without becoming educated in time. If it is less and you recover, you are immunologically stronger than you were. The next time you are envenomed, the delay before anti-

body response will be shortened. This factor could be critical in a severe bite.”

“You see, proteolytic venoms do not do all their work in the first hours. Unneutralized, they continue eating you up for days on end. If your body did not learn to fight this process, the venom would eventually overwhelm you . . . Say you have been bitten by a small *Bothrops*, and you have decided to tough it out, no antivenom. Massive swelling, blisters, mucosal bleeding, hemorrhagic-necrotic patches, horrible burning pain—and persisting for about six weeks before it begins to subside. Plenty of time for your adaptive immune system to figure out what the toxin is and how to neutralize it. Now the next time you are bitten, you have a head-start on all that. I have been through a number of such bites, massively swollen for a month or more . . . long grueling affairs just waiting it out. . . You are getting your education, learning a little more about being poisoned with each bite. Next time, your body will react defensively, earlier. Earlier than it *would have*, I mean, if it were all new to you.

“Not quite like immunizing against a virus, of course, where one inoculation can last a lifetime. It is easy to see why this is so. A virus starts out small, with just a few particles and then proliferates until eventually overwhelming the host. During the period of replication, your body has time to get educated, and step in at the last minute to halt the invader. When reinfection recurs, again the lag time while the virus replicates—only now your body is lying in wait for it, having already learned how to defend itself. But this is quite the reverse of what happens with an envenomation. In an envenomation the inoculation is massive from the very start. The immune system is confronted with an already lethal amount, and has to work a whole lot harder, right away; it might still fail to react in time if the dose is large enough. As such there is no perfect immunity to any poison—which remains to the very end, dose dependent. Bill Haast, though basically immune to the bites of most cobras, was nearly killed by his king cobra bite, where the dose of venom was vastly greater.

Mertens: “Is the way tolerance is built up different from say, cobras to vipers?”

Dean Ripa: “Yes, that’s a good point . . . Being bitten intermittently rather than by a routine injection program like Bill Haast’s, would not work as well for elapids. With these fast acting toxins, the victim never learns the script in time. He dies straight off from the poison, or the toxin is cleared so rapidly by the kidneys that he survives, without, however, developing any resistance, either. You don’t have the month long recovery period to go through, to get your schoolin’. The religious snake-

handlers, bitten by crotaline snakes exclusively, are slowly and painfully immunizing themselves to the venom of the hemotoxic species they use in their services. Thus you see Dewey Chafin surviving 118 pitviper bites—and not just copperheads, either, a lot of them timber rattlesnakes—and he is getting a little tougher each time. His colleague, John Wayne ‘Punkin’ Brown, didn’t make it through the academy fast enough. He died in 10 minutes after his 22nd bite. He reacted oppositely to Chafin, developing a sensitivity to the venom rather than an immunity. He probably died from allergic shock.

Mertens: “Why have you never deliberately tried to immunize yourself with bushmasters, as Haast and some others have done with cobras?”

Dean Ripa: “Would take all the fun out of it, wouldn’t it? I might as well be handling corn snakes or boas! Just joking—or am I? . . . I am not er-uh philosophically opposed to the idea, but I don’t know that it is . . . part of my particular quest. I enjoy venomous snakes precisely because they are venomous, and to make them less so . . . well, one could de venomize them as well, I suppose, to the same result. It’s like owning a gun that won’t shoot—what’s the point of it? From my perspective, it would take all the fun and skill out of snakehandling, as well as my fascination for the snakes themselves. I am not attracted to them because they are harmless.

“Then there are the physical difficulties of the thing; immunizing yourself is a lot of trouble and potentially very painful to do . . . I don’t mean with cobras, that’s doable, but with vipers it’s a deeper matter—and vipers are my main interest. Imagine injecting yourself twice a week with a substance that causes intense pain and swelling and necrosis too! Can’t be a very pleasant hobby. And then what, just so you can handle the snake’s more carelessly? Well, snakes don’t like to be handled in the first place! The whole thing smacks of disrespect. Then too, vipers still have those terribly long fangs . . .

“No, viper venoms make a mess of you, even when they don’t kill you. Even the donor horses on the anti-venom lines suffer from sloughing ulcers at the injection sites . . . Renal problems too. Some examples fail to become immune at all, as I mentioned in the cases at Butantan. So Haast and his followers stuck to certain Asian cobras having predominately nerve-synapse affecting venoms that were only mildly tissue destructive. Even so, look at Bill’s hands. They are still a twisted wreck from the tissue destructive fractions in those otherwise neurotoxic venoms. All in all, I would say his hands don’t look much better than Dewey Chafin’s . . . Which says something for faith, I suppose.



Figure 5. At 6 days the hand, shoulder, chest and back remain gigantically swollen though the injection site is quite far away, on the upper forearm near the elbow. The almost instantaneous immunotherapy has done little to halt the swelling which continues day after day. One wonders what this bite would have been like without the quick antivenom? Answer: hardly any swelling at all, Dean Ripa would be dead. Photo R. Mertens. Cape Fear Serpentarium.

Mertens: “Now let’s talk about *your* religion . . . Or do you have one?”

Dean Ripa (squirming): “For some reason people always want to talk to me about God.”

Mertens: “It’s because you’re getting closer to Him. In your treatise, *The Mysticism of Snakehandling*, you propose that all religious systems began as an outgrowth of snakebite?”

Dean Ripa: “Ye-es . . . with the false-positive result of an unexpected survival leading to a belief in mystical intervention. Snakes attained a godlike status as arbiters of human destiny. This was compounded by the belief that snakes were immortal, through their habit of shedding the skin and renewing themselves. It was believed to be a form of rebirth. The circumcision ritual in many religions is an attempt to emulate this rebirth and as a consequence is often delayed till puberty, when the child is reborn as an adult member of the tribe.”

Mertens: “And so snakes were the very first gods.”

Dean Ripa: “Roughly speaking, probably. There is some evidence to that effect.”

Mertens: “And you conclude that all modern snake fanciers and handlers are simply exhibiting tendencies of ophiolatry—snake worship. Yourself included?”

Dean Ripa: “I don’t see any way around it.”

Mertens: “I noticed as I read that you seem to have a particular affection for the *religious* snake handlers of the Appalachian Holiness Churches. You speak of them glowingly, and often. I would say you almost seem to identify with them in some way . . . though you claim you are not religious yourself. I am just wondering if, after all your near-death experiences, you come to feel any twinges of—*faith*.”

Dean Ripa (laughing): “I need some more dilaudid, I am starting to understand you.”

Mertens: “After reading your devilish treatise, I am certain you should be saved.

Dean Ripa: “I really would like some dilaudid before this pain comes back”

Mertens: “My readers might like to know it.”

Dean Ripa: “Don’t be too charitable with them. A lot of them are only after the blood and gore. Now the religious snake handlers, ur-uhm . . . are an admirable bunch of people. I am not God but I would say that an ounce of their faith must be worth about a pound of the Pope’s or the President’s. They stand behind their faith.”

Mertens: “And does it work, their faith? As you say, they survive an inordinate number of snakebites—probably a greater number, even, than those who seek medical treatment.”

Dean Ripa: “That’s only because medical treatment is so bad. My book is a study of the false-positive and the effect it has had on human society. In modern times, we rely on a new faith, that of Hippocrates, and a new

Figure 6. At 2-meters body length a bushmaster has fangs measuring more than an inch long (2.5 cm), maximizing the potential to strike veins and arteries where the deadly toxin is rapidly absorbed and carried to the target centers. Photo R. Mertens. Cape Fear Serpentarium.

devil to go with it—being the chemical breakdown of the venom itself. The devil has just changed his stage name. He has become technofied. Depending on your definition of god, if you believe in such a conundrum, you could say that the Jesus God is protecting his flock of snakehandlers through enhancing their immune systems, a natural and inevitable consequence of what they do . . . Loosely speaking, their faith is making them stronger . . . more immune.

“They are some pretty brave people, you’ve got to hand it to them. Some of the bites they take are bad, bad—bad. Enough to kill them. Sometimes it does kill them. Which means the whole weight of the thing lies on their own integrity, their own will to keep believing . . . They have to get through the whole thing on their own—or not. Meaning they will die. In archaic times this process of healing and improvement would be perceived as God’s intervention—and it is so today among the snakehandlers. The folkloric treatment is much the same; a belief in the false-positive of getting well after having consumed special leaves or drinking a bottle of whiskey, et cetera, verifies the cure, disregarding the fact that the bite might have been dry, or sublethal, or even that of a harmless snake. All that aside, the religious handlers do seem to have the Antibody God working for them. It would probably take more venom to kill scrawny, grizzled old Dewey Chafin than it would take to kill—oh, who is the fittest person you know?—Mister Universe, say. I dare say Mister Universe would go down a whole lot quicker, all those health drinks under his belt! I don’t want to tempt fate, but I think the amount of venom necessary to kill me or Dewey is probably a bit higher than to kill that Jewish doctor coming down the hall over there . . .”

Mertens: “Shhhh! He may hear you!”



Dean Ripa: “You think he has any faith in Jesus? His people had more sense than that. Put Christ in a bottle, however, and he would find a goy to sell it to. It’s all about packaging, nowadays. Not a damn thing has really changed. The atheist is worse than the zealot. Having no ass to kiss in heaven, he searches for it on earth instead . . . Stalin, Mao, the English Queen, George Bush—and of course the European banking money that backs them all. Hence modern civilization is just a search for worldly Utopia . . . Which is the source of nearly all the world’s political horrors. Dig down deep enough beneath war, and under the dead bodies you will find Utopia grinning up at you. It’s a Judean thing.

“Now the truth is that there is no uniformly identical lethal dose of any poison for any human, or any animal either. Even the lethality tests on mice are only intended to kill *half* the colony. As with mice, so with men—there is no truly *human* lethal dose, only a *personal lethal dose*. Different people will always be more or less susceptible to poisons than others, and this can vary by many times. It is seen in rodents, and not only in different species of rodents but in different test groups. Even the sex of an animal can alter its susceptibility. Now it would be interesting to study the effects of venom on different races of people . . . Straightforward Darwinian evolution predicts that Negroes should be more resistant

to snakebite than white Caucasians—Africans already have inbuilt defenses against malaria, so why not to snakes? The African snakes are much more venomous than the European ones, besides being more numerous. The South American Indians ought to be more resistant to the snakes living within their range . . . *etceteros*. White Caucasians should be the least resistant of all, being rarely ever bitten. It seems certain that lethal doses must vary, perhaps enormously, from individual to individual, race to race. But this has not been pursued.”

Mertens: “Politically incorrect, I would say. Are there any instances of personal susceptibility among individuals you have known personally?”

Dean Ripa: “Rodney Miller. I just wrote up his case. Devastated by what could only have been a modest amount of bushmaster venom (Chapter 22), he nearly died despite very quick treatment. Obviously, a lethal dose—for him. I am not sure it would have been for me. Some bites I have had—say, my fourth bushmaster bite, where I chose not to take treatment so as to observe the effects unaltered—might have killed Rodney straight away. Now it was Rodney’s first snakebite, I believe—and a bushmaster is a bad way to start out! So we can say that he was immunologically *naïve*, if that means anything. Now I had already had three bushmaster bites before, plus assorted other viper bites over a course of 20 years. . . This gave me an edge. But my having an edge on Rodney or you wouldn’t matter much, once the typical lethal dose was exceeded. This a bushmaster can easily do, and did do, in my last bite.”

Mertens: “I have read that antivenom can’t stop tissue damage in snakebite.”

Dean Ripa: “That’s not true. Now, if the damage has already been done, of course not; but it can do quite a lot to prevent that damage increasing much beyond the administration time—or absorption time of the venom, I should say. Proteolytic effects continue and even accelerate for many days after the bite. The sooner you get antivenom, the less damage you will have, for this locally present venom can be neutralized. I have observed this in my own envenomings, by using antivenom and/or foregoing it in other similar bites. And you can see it clinically in many kinds of snakebites. Necrosis, by no means instantaneous, is rather a developing process. And there are various kinds of necrosis, having different origins, something the medical industry has not got around to categorizing yet, but which I have . . . well . . . made some hasty attempts to define, I think for the first time (Chapter 23). With quick antivenom you can head a lot of this off. Naturally, you may not be successful at the actual site of the envenomation. The fang wounds them-

selves are going to necrotize, if it is that kind of venom. But some of this is simply trauma from hemorrhage, which is but one of several ways that venom causes necrosis. Now in all my bushmaster bites I have never developed any skin necrosis whatsoever . . . Quite the opposite of my experience with *Bothrops* . . . Of course, I don’t know what might have happened deep down in the muscle in some of these . . . And my arm now,” he indicates his wound, “deep down where the fangs actually emptied themselves. There is likely going to be something messed up.

Mertens: “I have noticed visitors to the Serpentarium cornering you and asking about your bites”

Dean Ripa: “Yes, they read about my bushmaster bite on the plaque, just can’t wait to meet the walking dead man. I have become a sort of standing exhibit. They all have the same idea about me, and once confirming that I am indeed the phenomenal survivor/proprietor, their eyes dart down instantly to my hands. They want to count my fingers, you see. They are looking for hideous scars, but would be more gratified with amputations. I keep one hand hidden in my pocket as I talk to them. It teases them. I am like the hermaphrodite at the fair, you have to pay extra to see it naked.”

“It’s the same with writers and photographers. Recently a woman wanted some photos of me for an article she was writing on bushmaster bite. She was disappointed with the images I sent her. She wanted rotting flesh such as you would see in *Crotalus* or *Bothrops* . . . My massive swelling was not good enough for her, but then, three-dimensional swelling doesn’t translate well to two-dimensional photography. I had fallen short of her expectations . . . She thought, ‘world’s most deadly viper should look deadly on the outside as well.’ It is like expecting tissue damage from a mamba or a spectacled cobra bite. You’re going to have a fairly decent looking cadaver at the end, only a little shitty and covered with vomit.

“So this is one of the misconceptions I counter in the book. Whereas most vipers kill you by destroying your blood quality, bushmaster bite kills you first, *then* fucks up your blood quality—or rather doesn’t because you’re dead. Only if it fails on the first mission does the slower tissue-destructive effect go to work on you—but that would mean no antivenom, or late antivenom, and would likely also mean a sublethal dose. In these cases you will see the classic derangement of the blood and tissue. Normally, however, it skips all that ceremony and goes straight for the blood pressure . . . The first few hours are critical.



Figure 7. The face of constant, unrelenting and extreme pain. One week after the bite, ragged but communicating, Dean still has a gigantic, unbendable, sweltering arm and hand. The rapid anti-venom did little to control the swelling, though it prevented a whole lot worse! Says Dean: “Anti-venom does not control edema because it is not the venom that is causing edema in the first place! Edema is the body’s *reaction* to the venom . . . The body’s means of diluting the toxin. The more swelling you have, the better off you will be. This is something medicine has not yet come to grips with, but needs to, because right now they are mutilating and even killing people with surgery in their effort to control swelling!”

is like the elapid in this regard; however, the effects are not classically neurotoxic. One does not suffocate to death from synapse blockage. One suffocates to death because there is no blood in your heart. A photograph of such an individual might not look particularly gruesome or impressive. A bit bluish at the extremities and a little green around gills. ‘He looks like a bad drunk.’

Mertens: “What’s it like to know that you have been lethally envenomed, and does this affect your ability to make decisions regarding your own treatment? I notice that calling for medical help is not usually the first thing you do. What runs through your mind?”

Dean Ripa: “Invariably, I think of Brian West, who has become quite a phantom for me . . . He died in five minutes after his cobra bite while his wife, a registered nurse, tried to raise a vein in his arm in order to

“With the *Bothrops* bite you die slowly, ‘watching yourself become a corpse, bit by bit,’ as Picado says. But with a bushmaster bite there is no time for watching anything, and nothing to see except the rim of the toilet bowl and your own reflection in it, while you are puking your guts up . . . Then, when the little man gets into your stomach and starts clubbing you from the inside out, you quit bothering with sanitation. You can’t hold onto that ol’ toilet bowl! You just flop over, spouting vomit all over your face, your body jerking like the vibrating bed in a cheap motel room. It’s all a great bleary-eyed blur, and then the room starts shrinking away, like peering through a little pinhole. Meanwhile, the little man inside you goes toiling on. He is beating you to death and leaving no visible scars. Bushmaster bite makes a prettier corpse, but it is a corpse more quickly made. It

inject the lifesaving antivenom they had right on hand . . . But he was dead before she could get the first needle in him. Like West, I knew I had been given the works. I probably had less than an hour to live. It was that kind of bite. What killed West? Cardiac arrest, secondary to blood pressure loss . . . The same thing that kills you in a bushmaster bite. The shock effect is the most dangerous of all effects in snakebite, because it supersedes all other symptoms. It is much faster than the heaviest neurotoxicity. Quite a lot of deaths that have been blamed on neurotoxicity were, I suspect, simply from venom induced shock. But not *allergic* shock, I must underline.”

“Shock being the predominating effect, and with the components that produce shock, in greater proportion

in bushmaster venom than in other venoms (Chapter 26), there was a distinct possibility that, like West, I would just drop down dead on the spot. Ditmars' famous case of 'death in ten minutes' from bushmaster bite probably followed this pattern. Other cases of bushmaster shock-death have occurred right in the treatment room, despite early presentation. Slow, creeping affairs taking days, quite unexpected after the patients seemed to be rallying. Once crossing a certain line there are, apparently, no sudden recoveries. Your blood pressure can only get so low and there is no bringing it back. You can't restart a heart that has no blood in it. Pour in all the serum you want, you're a bucket full of holes. This line can be reached very quickly in a bushmaster bite."

Mertens: "It must take a great deal of willpower to get through such an envenoming, entirely at home and without medical help"

Dean Ripa: "Bad no matter where you are. But of course, much worse to do it lying alone in the mud of the jungle."

"Several of my bushmaster bites I simply went through without antivenom, just to observe the effects—and because, as I have said before, antivenom becomes increasingly dangerous to use. There was one particular time, where I was really quite a mess, and probably should have taken it. My poor ex-wife Michelle. . . She really was a saint now that I look back on it . . . And I pushed her saintliness to the very limit. Had she stayed with me, I might have tried her saintliness a little more. Who knows, she might have become a god by now." (Laughing.)

"But yes, your *will* . . . the most important natural defense you have. Purely a survival instinct or attitude, I suppose. A desire to hang on. Unfortunately, the envenoming can blunt that desire to the vanishing point . . . Like being put in a torture chamber and told to confess, which I equate with giving in and calling the hospital. There was one bite where I simply gave up trying to treat myself because it was too much trouble! I preferred simply to lapse out and not wake up from it, to any more struggling for life. My wife had to keep rousing me up because I had this tendency to drift away. You have to act quickly on your own behalf, because holding on gets more and more difficult to do as the minutes tick by and the symptoms become more un-manning. Soon there is not enough left of you to make the effort to survive; you cannot even conceive of what effort should be. You are being broken down physically . . . mentally . . . with unbelievable rapidity . . . The pain is staggering . . . You are dizzy and intermittently fainting and falling down . . . You can't walk, even sit up . . . You are writhing around with spasmodic chest and stomach

pains, a human punching-bag . . . You are vomiting and shitting all over yourself . . . The world is reeling around you . . . a mad, horrible delirium The temptation is to just give up . . . to quit fighting seems the easiest thing. If you've been through a few such envenomings, you know the scenery. There comes a point when will-power is not enough, you can't see your way through it . . . This is the turning point . . . the *down*-turning point, I should say. There is nothing more you can do for yourself, it's out of your hands. That's when you break down and call the ambulance. Or somebody else does—because chances are you will just be lying there in the floor in your own shit, too stunned to reach for the telephone.

"If you are lucky enough to have an ambulance to call. I was in the Costa Rican jungle, miles from anywhere, and took antivenom right there in the forest . . . I had been bitten by a mere *Porthidium* species [hognose viper] . . . A knuckle bite. Nothing to it. Had I been home, I might have just taken pain killers and gone to bed—the chances would have been very good I would have woke up in the morning (and many, many times in the night!). As it was, I was two hours walk into the mountains from the little coastal residence where I had been staying, and ten miles by sea to the nearest one-horse town . . . Osa Peninsula . . . No roads in those days, only random fishing boats. No getting to a hospital. So I am trying to walk down out of the woods back to the coast. But the strangest thing starts happening to me. I begin sneezing. Convulsive sneezing attacks. Cannot stop. An endless staccato of sneezes, one on top of the next. *Achoo! - achoo! - achoo!* It feels like my eyeballs are jumping out. And can't see a foot in front of me for the water filling my eyes. Well, it's some sort of histamine reaction I'm thinking—and I have not been smart enough to put Benadryl in my pack. Now I am getting too dizzy to stay on the path—what little I can see of it. Reeling, swaying, I am stumbling off into the bushes, stepping into holes. I look like a drunken man in Central Park. But it's not Central Park, it is Costa Rica's version of the Amazon and this is no casual stroll. There are deep ravines bridged by fallen timbers and I am trying to cross over them. Can't make it. Several times I nearly fall to my death. And I am still sneezing like a loon! To round it all off nicely, the sky has commenced an insipid drizzling—boding a heavier rain to come.

"These steep mountains are a tough hike even in the best of health. Getting out of there is looking more and more hopeless. My native assistant, a 14-year-old farm boy weighing all of ninety-nine pounds, can't carry me. And with me still sneezing, and my hand blowing up

bigger and bigger, we decide to inject the antivenom. Five vials into the hip muscles.

“Of course I am lying down by now. The boy has spread out some palm leaves for me, and for the next hours this will be my hospital bed. That little bit of serum in my bloodstream doesn’t change things much—and wouldn’t anyway, in the muscle like that, it should have been done in the vein. But it makes us feel like doctors, hey?—and gives me a warm fuzzy feeling. Very productive. So I am lying on the leaves, my hand is getting fatter and stiffer, and I am getting madder and sadder because I know I am going to lose at least two weeks recovering in some backwoods camp somewhere, which means no more snake hunting . . . My trip to the Osa jungle is spoiled—no chance of finding a bushmaster now! And all on account of a little hognose viper! Might as well have been a scorpion! No talking myself out of it; it’s a real wet bite, a definite envenoming, and I am in for the whole long ride.

“Well we can’t stay out here all day just squatting in the rain, looking at each other and telling each other how wet and cold it is, counting mosquitoes and practicing my six words of Spanish. The storm is mounting and sooner or later it’s going to get dark—then what? So my young guide hits upon an idea: he will go down the mountain to fetch a horse. *Horse? What horse—where?* I never saw any horses around here! Not even a farm! It’s just jungle, miles and miles of jungle! Is he kidding? Oh no, he knows where a horse is all right. *Un rancho, muy circa!* His friend’s friend has got lots of farm animals . . .

“Now my six words of Spanish cannot firm up many details as to time required, and space to travel. If said animal really exists, I get the idea it’s miles away, hours away, days away even, perhaps on another continent. And that he doesn’t know with genuine certainty if his friend’s friend still has his friend’s horse, or if he might not have traded it for a pig. Lots of farm animals. Perhaps he will bring back a chicken.

“And so the boy takes off to go horse rustling, leaving me on my mat of palm leaves in the rain. Hours pass, timed by the gonging of my fire-filled hand. The sky opens up, and soon it’s a real downpour. The wind is roaring and gigantic tree limbs, weighted with rain, are barreling down. The ground is ankle deep with water and my mat is covering over. Freezing cold but my hand is on fire—and the size of a catcher’s mitt. Where’s the kid? Has he forgotten me? Run off with a mariachi

band? Guides will do that sometimes, especially farm boys who don’t know what they are getting into with snake-business. Maybe his father has caught up with him. ‘No! No! NO MORE SNAKES!’ he is telling him, and sending him off to do the chores he has been neglecting. ‘But Papa, I have left a *gringo* dying in the forest!’ ‘*Gringo*, bah! When have *you* ever known a *gringo*? How would *you* ever meet a *gringo*?’ ‘He is dying, papa!’ ‘Dying! Such a man deserves to die! *Culebras!* What does a *gringo* care for *culebras!* Is it a liar I have sired? Or a fool? Get back to work!’

“Now the kid was actually doing the best he could by me, going to this farm and that, looking for a horse . . . Nobody had a horse! But I am spared all that suspense, lying in my mud-puddle. All I know is downpour, wilderness, snakebite, pain—and waiting. My arm is a fat pork sausage and the rain is lashing down on into my eyes. The slopes have converted into dozens of little rivers and my little island of palm leaves is shrinking away. Meanwhile, a cyclone is ripping through the canopy. Huge trees are crashing down with sounds like wailing freight trains and the mud ground is quivering with their thunder. It’s a vegetable avalanche. And the kid? Where is he? Has he gotten lost? Has he deserted me? The venom won’t get *time* to kill me, I will be drowned before he gets back!

“Suddenly he is standing over me, his face cascading with water. He couldn’t get a horse. All he could get was a little mule.

“Little but strong,” says he; and straps me over its back like a sack of hams. Now I am hanging upside down, my bloated hand swinging back and forth, banging on that drenched mule’s ass. We start down the slopes, the animal skating on its hooves through mud . . . The beast resents my presence the whole way, kicking and bucking and trying to dislodge me; rubbing himself against jagged boulders and deliberately squeezing in between close-lying trees. I am like a big fat tick itching him and he wants rid of me almost as much I want rid of him. Well it was a lo-ong ride down that mountain!

“I hope that mule burns in hell!

“Of course your first-time envenomee is not going to know these things, when to pack it in, when to say, ‘that’s it, I’ve had it! I need antivenom!’ with any real accuracy. He’s got a deadly poison running in him and hasn’t a clue what to make of the idea. It’s all a big new horrifying world. And when the fear hits him good, he is going to get even more confused . . . Just as I was

getting, panicking, taking antivenom when I didn't need it. . . A mere hognose viper! Imagine! I can do hognose vipers two at a time! Antihistamines were all I needed, and a dry bed to lie down in. . . . But I panicked and took the antivenom. Three days later I would get the worst serum sickness of my life, and nearly die in that remote little *residencia* so far from a hospital. Head to toe hives, vomiting, unconsciousness. . . . And not a drop of Benadryl on hand. When I got home I had lost twenty pounds and looked like a walking corpse. That's antivenom for you!

“Now, as for decisions, decisions to accept or decline treatment, decisions as to what kind of treatment to accept, these have to do with knowing the venom, what to expect from it, and how to stand ready to counter those expectations in a way that it is not even more destructive than the venom itself. The doctors are yet another hurdle. Remember, they probably know next to nothing about snakebite. They treat one bite about every four or five years and usually it's not a serious one. If they botch it up, it's the snake's fault, not theirs. All their fabulous tests and techniques mean damn near nothing as far as your health is concerned—except a higher price tag. Your platelets are down, says your doctor. Well, it's a goddamn *Bothrops*, what do you think! Twenty-thousand dollars in blood tests just to tell me what I already know! Just gimme some whole blood to start with, goddammit, you are going to anyway! A penny arcade, the hospital; every kind of gyp-trick to get more money out of you—just put a coin in and see what happens to it. A great, wondrous machine, modern medicine—but also blundering and blind. Powerful, if guided properly, otherwise, clumsy and crushing everything in front of it. You are going to have to guide these healers along, because they are not going to know what to do about saving you. If you expect miracles, they are subject to act rashly on your behalf and do you great harm. They will try to cure you right away, as they would cure blunt trauma or a broken leg. They think you expect an immediate recovery and they want to get a good grade. Trouble is, envenoming doesn't go like that. What antivenom can't do, nothing else can. No quick recovery, just a long slow decline before things start turning up again. Your gigantic arm or leg. . . . They will want to alter this very natural course and restore your limb to normal dimensions right away. They are jumping up and down shouting ‘compartment syndrome! compartment syndrome!’ because they have read about this monster in a text book. Now they want to give you surgery! Surgery on a man who is already bleeding to death, whose blood vessels are decompressing, and now they want to bleed you out even more! And so you will follow the example of many

of the dead people I describe in my book, on account of some mythological demon they have read about and BELIEVE in. Yes, you will want to keep these doctors in check, all right, because if the venom doesn't kill you, they will.”

Mertens: “You have written that surgery is the worst thing you can do in a snakebite case; that compartment syndrome is a hoax and that edema should be encouraged rather than minimized.”

Dean Ripa: “The dread *compartment syndrome!* I shrink even to pronounce the stupid words! If edema alone has ever contributed to anybody's death in a snakebite, it was probably aggravated by the use of a tourniquet. *There* is where your compartment syndrome legend originated, with the doctors themselves. . . . because you see—and they don't like to take credit for this—it was their early propaganda that sold the tourniquet idea to the people to begin with! Perhaps hoax is not quite the right word. . . . Is a superstition a hoax? Voodoo makes money for its priests, but that doesn't mean they don't also devoutly believe in what they do. Now a doctor is a kind of priest. . . . A priest pretending to be a scientist. Which is yet another kind of priest, pushing a different drug. . . . Some people have read my articles and said I am being too hard on the medical worker, that they are only doing the best they can, sincerely trying to help, et cetera. A quack is still a quack, and whether he knows he's a quack or not, he is still quacking. The mistake people make is in thinking that quack doctors are deliberately malicious, determined shysters. They rarely are. J. R. Brinkley, probably the most celebrated quack in American history, used to sew pieces of goat testicles into men's scrotums and got rich doing it. Till the day he died he believed in what he was doing. He killed dozens of people. And yet the majority of his customers believed in him, and swore by him. Such is the power of faith.

“So the quack thinks edema is ‘bad’ and must be controlled. It is *not* bad and should *not* be controlled. Look at necrosis. It is in the cases of low edema that you find the worst necrosis. In bites by *Naja nigricollis* or *Naja kaouthia*, where the edema is low, the necrosis is yet very high. . . . Or in *Bothrops*, where free bleeding through the tissues spontaneously reduces the edema, by rupturing the fascia. . . . Surgical attempts to reduce edema, in short, *fasciotomy*, always lead to more necrosis than you would otherwise have. You want a certain amount of swelling. Swelling is good. Swelling is your body's way of diluting the toxin. The medical myth is that venoms have evolved to *cause* edema. ‘Edema causing proteins and enzymes,’ they call them. Now making a prey animal swell up is something that can be of no possible advantage to a snake that swallows its food

whole. So it follows, and it is a near certainty, that venom does not *cause* edema, rather, edema is the body's own protective response to the toxic invader."

Mertens: "You have suggested in your book that many treatments for snakebite have evolved from psychological rather than strictly scientific motives . . . That it is a sort of devil's bargain between the patient and the doctor, formed from their expectations of one another."

Dean Ripa: "Devil's bargain, Christian's bargain, Jew's bargain . . . So many religious deals going on. The patient goes to the hospital expecting to get cured ASAP and the doctor knows that, so he feels he must do something to appease that expectation . . . He will lose a client if he does not. The greater the patient's panic, the more urgent his desire for relief, the more elaborate the doctor's method to exorcise the perceived evil of the affliction. A sort of religious consensus is working between them.

"Of course it is all unconscious. And if there is one thing Man is, it's unconscious . . . Doctors, just one step up from apes like everybody else, have their own little monkey to feed before they get around to our bananas. Their minds are as muddled as those of their customers, still swarming with the mythological repercussions of their primal experience, which lasted for millions of years and is not all that far off in terms of generations. You don't get rid of all that response-sequence-integration hardware from just cracking a text book—the text book being only a cleaner, modern surrogate for that same inherited baggage. Their approximations of external 'fact' are swept around by those same old mental storms. Medicine is at best a compromise with some pretty old gear. A million years in the wilderness, cued by imitative signaling in ape troops, of worshipping at blood drenched shrines, of drawing lines between the stars . . . it has all left some deep scars, who can doubt it? Patterns of behavior, both for doctors and their patients to fall cheerfully into, and getting a warm fuzzy feeling from it too, above the stench of gangrene and amputations. A symbiotic relationship born of age old expectations of what the witchdoctor can do for you, and things the patient can do, to make the witch magic work better . . . Put them together and bad things start to happen. Primitive impulses rise to the fore, mystical atavisms they do not understand; and tell themselves they don't believe in, either, which only entrenches it further, because deep down in their hearts, safe from the truth where the prying eyes of their ancient gods still prompt them, they really *do* believe . . .

"Forty years ago, before Judaism displaced Christianity as the dominant tribal order in modern medicine—when there were more Christians than Jews in the medical field—doctors were fond of cutting little *crucifixes* onto you, over the puncture wounds left by the snake's fangs! Get it? The Devil had a different henbane, a different garlic, in those days. Now they had all sorts of good and reasonable explanations for this hoodoo but it was hoodoo all the same—a *cross* to banish the poison of the inauspiciously placed *Satanic* snake who had bitten you because you were a sinner! Now I have some of these cute little incisions on my own hands, dating back to the 1960s, makes me look kinda fundamentalist. They were carved into me by a reputable surgeon, right there in the emergency room. No backwoods clinic, no torch lights and whisky—this was modern treatment! *What are those little crosses on your hands?* people ask me, taking me for a religious zealot. *Witchcraft*, I tell them. And I am not far from the mark. Trouble was, those little crosses didn't make the medical establishment much money. Crosses were something *anybody* could do. And they were. They were starting to sell these little cut-and-suck kits in the sportsman's shops, replete with instructions. Didn't seem quite like higher medicine, something you could get for five bucks. Need to be more creative—more technical—than that!

"In response came the more elaborate and expensive version of all this nonsense—*fasciotomy*. Fasciotomy rose to the fore in the 1970s—replacing the old cut-and-suck method that was being pooh-poohed at that time, since anybody could do it, even a duck hunter or fisherman. Can't have the proletariat getting in on our grift, can we! Ah, but *fasciotomy*—now that took skill! You couldn't do *that* on a picnic bench!"

Mertens: "That's incredible! I would never have thought it came about from something so . . . stupid."

Dean Ripa: "The whole of civilization, my dear, crystallized in just this way! From the phony moon landings to the phony atom bomb! It's what you call innervation, I mean, innovation. You can't just kick surgery out of snakebite treatment, there will be a profit loss. And when cut-and-suck fell off, and tourniquets were out, and people were actually starting to show some improvement—well, you had to strike a balance. Snakes are devils, and congress with devils—even unintentional congress—must be punished with blood. Already there were rumors in the literature of a demon named *Compartment Syndrome* . . . And to exorcise this demon, somebody hit upon the bright idea of splitting the whole limb open and removing the fascia! They even came up with a little hymn or jingle to sing to it, which they called the 'five P's'. *Pain* out of proportion to what is expected (what

the hell did they *expect* snakebite to feel like, a foot massage?) . . . Paresthesia, pallor, paralysis, pulselessness; and sometimes a sixth, for good measure, *polar/poikilothermia*—failure to thermoregulate. Now after this beautiful limerick, they remind you that only the first two are reliable symptoms of the demon’s habits BUT, scared to have made some too obviously ridiculous claim about their monster, they wax equivocal, claiming that p-p-paraesthesia is only a late symptom—*which leaves only p-p-ain to characterize their demons habits!* Hee-hee. Well, I fairly think they left out the most important *P* of all . . . Profit!

“How the *goyim* must tremble when they hear those dreaded *P*’s enunciated on the lips of medical authority, and going blind from shock at the even more dreadful crescendo—*Compartment Syndrome!* How soft and soothing by comparison, *fasciotomy*, breathed to them hopefully across the anaesthesia machine lest they pass out from sheer horror at the sight of their limb afterwards, not to mention the price tag. It’s not all that technical, really, your local butcher could do it—oh, but *he*’s got morals . . . You need a board certified surgeon for this job! Somebody from the AMA! Of course it’s incredibly hideous and demands a strong stomach too. Like splitting a banana down the middle and watching the insides fall out—only its your arm or leg. Just cut on the dotted line, from finger to shoulder, or big toe to thigh, depending on the ol’ Doc’s mood. The pain is said to be unbelievable! Meantime, it makes a lot of house payments for the surgeons, almost its own niche industry. A lot more than just splitting you open, you see, it’s all the skin grafts that go with it to make you look halfway horrible again. Turns an overnight stay in the hospital from a copperhead bite into a six month ordeal! Surgeons *love* snakebite! As with the unnecessary hysterectomies and tonsillectomies of the 1950s-60s, it has made a whole lot of people a whole lot of money—and will continue to do so as long as there are scared victims to be taken advantage of, and plenty of parrots hurrying through medical school on the way to the golf course. One herpetologist friend of mine has had so many fasciotomies his arms look like a pair of noodles. No muscles left, just these dangling-wiggling things hanging from his shoulders! ‘You look like two miles of bad railroad track,’ I tell him. ‘Like you were sent over from Frankenstein’s castle! Why didn’t you get them to put a brain in you while they were at it?’ Four times they got him on the meat hooks, and I guess he’ll be back for a fifth, the next time, till they get his foreskin too—why break with tradition? George Went Hensley *bitten four hundred times* was buried with less damage than this guy. Now the quacks have all kinds of styles to choose from. My favorite is the *spiral* . . .

They peel your whole arm round and round like the lemons in old Dutch still life paintings. Makes for a fantastic scar!

“The smart snakebite victim will get up and walk out of the hospital if he even hears the word *fasciotomy* . . . But if you are so doped up on painkillers you can’t protest, then they’ve got you where they want you. Sort of like the American people after a night of TV viewing. I will tell you what *compartment syndrome* really means: it means *live one!* Not a single fact of evidence supports its existence, and the cure for it, fasciotomy, kills snakebite victims like flies. You will find it used in nearly every hospital in the world, wherever snakes bite people. The very concept of it is insane. Imagine, operating on somebody who is already bleeding to death, or in shock, or on the verge of shock! ‘Send him down to surgery,’ Little Dorrit says, getting rid of what promises to be a troublesome case.

“It’s like globalism or central banking or nuclear power or the drug war, there is simply too much money in it to let it go. Now your doctors will swear on a stack of Talmuds that it is good for you and necessary and I sincerely believe they think so. I also believe they have become bewitched by the dollar signs reflecting on their own scalpels. They are riding on a very old bandwagon whose origins began with circumcision.”

Mertens: “Circumcision? You mentioned that before . . .”

Dean Ripa: “Probably the world’s first surgery. And do you know what it was done for? To immortalize you, protect you from the bites of snakes. . . Just remember that when your *Jewish* doctor is splitting open your snakebitten arm and telling you it is good for you! He is banishing the ancient devil from the garden. See that fellow with the stethoscope over there, hovering like a vulture beside the speculums? He is waiting for me to pass out.”

Mertens: “You think he wants to give you a fasciotomy?”

Dean Ripa: “It ain’t a *brit malah* he’s waiting to perform—they got me on the way in!”

Mertens (giggling): “Don’t worry, I’ll protect you.”

Dean Ripa: “You never know with modern practitioners. They have primal impulses.”

Third Interview

Mertens: “You say you knew from the character of the bite that it was a lethal one. What were some of the telling signs?”

Dean Ripa: “Each snakebite is its own secret education. After six bushmaster bites, I had learned my bed of nails the hard way. This was the death bite, the bite I would not be coming back from. I knew it because I had collected gobs of venom from bushmasters in strike sequences that mirrored this bite identically—thus I knew how much venom I had received. I knew it in the devouring, pressure-boiling pain I felt within seconds of the injection. I knew it in the strange stiffness invading my back and limbs and a sudden, not unpleasant weakness, as though I had just stood up after having had too many cocktails. I knew it in a cold feeling coming all over me, as though I had been bathed with death’s own hands. I knew it when my skin turned bright green. I knew it when I flopped down in the floor and couldn’t get up again—the feeling of my whole body turning to wood. I was going to die on the floor of that office bathroom, and I saw no way out of getting out of a hospital bill. But I made damn sure you had put the antivenom in me, first, just in case they wouldn’t give it to me”

Mertens: “Why wouldn’t they?”

Dean Ripa: “Because they didn’t sell it to us. It didn’t come from their pharmacy. It was, in a few words, a *suspicious foreign drug* and they might not want the re-

sponsibility. I have heard of physicians letting a patient die rather than giving them a product they didn’t trust, simply from being unfamiliar with it, and for which they might get sued using it.”

Mertens: “You mention several other indicators besides symptoms, and this had to do with the way in which the bite was landed—the manner of attack.”

Dean Ripa: “The bite contact, ye-es. It was the most exemplary inoculation possible; the full embedding of two inch-long fangs into the crowded capillary beds of deep muscle, just millimeters from the bone. A second, mandibular clench, holding on just a second longer than was needed, completed the dance. That is the way of *Lachesis muta*.^{*} A rattlesnake bite is a quick stab—the contact happens all in a flash. But a South American bushmaster even when it strike-releases, holds on for that all important extra second, to give the venom time to surpass the long ducts and fangs. And so this bite, with its extra, second-long clenching hold—gave me time to appreciate what happened. In short, I got to see the head hanging on! An impeccable delivery, one a man can’t live through. She should have gotten an award for it. If not the Nobel Prize, then something from the Humane Society.”

Mertens: “But killing your own keeper is equivalent to suicide”

Dean Ripa: “She was sacrificing for science.”

Mertens: “You say the bite was into deep muscle. Why is this *better*—my god, you’ve got me talking like you

^{*}“It is a habit of *L. muta* to strike-release prey about as often as it holds onto it, quite different from the two Central American forms. Had this been *L. stenophrys* or *L. melanocephala* that had bitten me, I might have had to coax it into letting go (Figure 3, Chapter 20). These two Northern forms will strike-hold much larger items. Thus I had been bitten by *L. muta* in characteristic fashion.

“One should not confuse the duration of the bite contact with the amount of venom delivered. Venom is injected in pulses, and not by a continuous flow. In the strike-release bite the bushmaster compensates by giving the prey an extra heavy dose, all in a blast. On experiment, I have noted that in some strike-release bites even more venom was delivered than in strike-hold! Quite the reverse of expectations. There are sound strategies for this. In strike-hold, the snake relies on its long fangs—which can even penetrate the prey’s organs—jaw strength and constriction to crush and suffocate the animal. In these conditions it will not need much venom to get the job done. Here the size of the prey and its resistance to being overpowered determines the amount of venom the snake injects. The harder the animal resists, the harder the snake bites down; its grip failing, it re-embeds the fangs until a good hold is obtained. The snake appears to be walking its great fangs over the animal, stabbing repeatedly as it goes. Depending on the maxillary protraction, and the pressure exerted by the muscles on the glands, a gratuitous pulse of venom may be inspired with each new spasm of the jaws. But in what I call ‘single-grab’ strike-hold, where the prey is successfully seized one good time and then held onto, without need to adjust or re-embed the fangs, less venom is delivered. Hence it is in the multiple-grab bites, where the fangs appear to ‘walk’ over the bolus, that we obtain the greater yield. As such, I have learned to let the snake fight the rubber collecting toy, shaking it with the forceps, thus causing it to lose its grip slightly and re-embed.

“In the single-grab strike-holds, where little or no resistance is encountered, the merest amount of venom is necessary to subdue the prey, which has already been immobilized by the powerful jaws and fangs. In these cases, such venom as finds its way into the animal’s bloodstream, while quite enough to kill it, is perhaps less than enough to kill a large animal like a human being. I was once bitten in this way by a young adult snake (ca. 5 ft long), and escaped with only a sore, swollen hand (Bite 2, Chapter 22). This miserly approach to injecting venom has nothing to do with the “saving venom for later” myth popularly circulated in herpetology to account for the dry or sublethal envenomings of snakes. It has no high survival purpose. It is simply natural selection answering to its least level of necessity. It works, why do more?”

do!—I mean, *more deadly*, than an injection into the skin?”

Dean Ripa: “In rats and mice, bushmaster venom injected into muscle enjoys a ‘toxic boost’ as much as seven times higher than when injected subcutaneously—if we believe in the tests on mice. All part of the hunting strategy. Now this works quite well on the small mammals that bushmasters eat. The gigantic fangs blast their poison directly into the organs of the prey animal, bypassing the skin entirely. Note, however, that in predation there are no merely cutaneous envenomings, unless something has gone wrong with the delivery. The fangs are too long. The sheer power of the jaws, which often squeeze the prey to death, if it is small, drive the fangs nearly through the animal’s body. This has implications for the also ‘squeezeably soft’ human victim. In meaty areas of the body, the compression exerted by the jaws can as much as double the fang penetration.”

Mertens: “In your case, you said the fangs reached a depth of about 5 cm (2 inches). . . even though the fangs were only half that length.”

Dean Ripa: “Grab a hunk of flesh on your upper forearm, now press in between your fingers . . . See what I mean? You have already doubled the depth. With viper bite, deeper is better, which is one reason why vipers have evolved such extremely long fangs. A bite to deep muscle is nearly as potent as when put straight into the vein. Miss Muta had lived up to every expectation. No more perfect, death dealing delivery into an extremity was possible, save directly into a large vein or artery.”

Mertens: “But you could not dismiss the idea that a vein or artery had not actually been punctured . . .”

Dean Ripa: “It was safe to assume it might. One thing I observed immediately was the effect on my fingers. Although the bite was not to the hand, and well at the upper end of my forearm, my three fingers lost all control almost instantly, clenching my palm spastically, just as if the tendons had been severed. The long fangs had unloaded their poison into the *flexor digitorum profundus*, which controls the fingers; but to do this, they had to penetrate the *flexor carpi ulnaris*. Now my arm is fairly muscular and the *carpi ulnaris* lies at significant depth. Only the gigantic fangs of a bushmaster or other large forest viper could have achieved this. Within twenty seconds or so I could not make my fingers move. I watched them literally shrivel up into my palm. It was as though someone had literally *snipped* the tendons in my arm with a knife. My hand fell completely apart.

“My first thoughts were of the sheer magnitude of the poison I must have received. The extreme depth of the inoculation made removing even a milligram of it impossible. No point in fooling around with futile suction devices, useful, if at all, only in the shallow envenomings of less formidably toothed species. I have seen the bodies of feeder-rodents pierced completely through, the venom welling up in a little pool on the cage floor beneath the snake’s jowls. Now the capillary bed in deep muscle is a literal sponge, full of minute perfusion routes, and short of amputating the limb instantly, blocking the spread of the venom is virtually impossible. Pressure bandages and tourniquets, while effective in retarding the merely subcutaneous envenomings of elapine snakes, wastes precious time when a snake has fangs the size of hat pins. This gob of specialized proteins mixing into my bloodstream was mine for keeps—or until replaced with embalming fluid.

“Now these were quite miserable ponderings while I stood there, clutching my bloodied forearm and looking up at my serene executioner, smiling down on me from the upper cage rows. My arm was pumping up before my eyes; I felt a strange stiffness radiating throughout my whole being, as though I had been struck a blow to the back of my neck. Big chunks of me were turning into stone. These were the first tinges of a kind of circulatory paralysis—one that had nothing to do with fear or nerves, and everything to do with the K-complex of toxins (Chapter 26).

“Could I have imagined it, half-a-century ago, a child awestruck at the sight of my first red rat snake gliding like liquid fire over the lawn—feet rooted to the ground, tongue clamped to the roof of my mouth, stark-staring as though stricken by an electric current—could I have imagined that I would someday stand again before that same brink, at the final end of my life, looking off, petrified and dumb of speech? My whole life since then had been a search for that same electric thrill. I had forged through the greatest jungles of the earth, trying to get back to it, to repeat that one great sensation, feel the heat of it, the blinding darkness of that heart. . . and now life had led me back here, to that first shrine, the place where it all started, to give me a last fatal glimpse of what thing I had been worshipping. How weird the mires of Fate, that all of life, with its twists and turns, false starts, detours and plain dead ends, should break off right here, in a moment of revisitation, my feet frozen to the ground just as before, my life gone full circle! Was it Death I had been searching for all those years? That Serpent most subtle had transformed itself many times, through many embodiments, and now freezing me with its ancient gaze, its tongue fired after me like an evil dowser’s wand, sticky for souls like mine, congratulating me on

having followed all the right paths! ‘And thank you,’ I felt like saying, ‘for an interesting journey I could have gotten nowhere else!’ You have these options of perspective at The End. Probably at no other time in your life are you so free. The world is finally your oyster.”

Alternately pious and Satanic, smiling grimly through his tubes and wires, gritting his teeth with pain and pumping his dilaudid, his massive arm leaking on the pillow, Dean speaks with the clarity of overview, of somebody who is already dead—and who has grown weary with contemplating life’s feeble flame. Incurable mystic, his brain lit up with poisons and opiates, he weaves the technical aspects of snakebite with spiritual discovery as though they were part of the same process, and yet remains, for all his anarchy, his mistrust of authority, somehow deeply faithful. I find it a strange medley.

Fourth Interview

Mertens: “As much a philosophical process as a physical one, your snakebites.”

Dean Ripa: “It comes with the territory. You can’t help it. You look down into the pit once too often, you are forced to take certain special reckonings. The whole world starts looking like the same snake pit, and life, only the long slow wait for an unknown poison to reach your heart. Life becomes an endless rehearsal for dying.”

Mertens: “When one is seriously bitten, and preparing oneself mentally for the end, and then pulls through, only to go through it again a few months later, or a year later, and then again, round and round, as you have, you must begin to change”

Dean Ripa: “Only don’t get the idea it is an exciting change! There is little room for exhilaration. You are too sick for exhilaration. It is flat, gray, painful and depressing, like the sight of a crowd of people in front of a funeral home. I am reminded of Graham Greene’s comments about Russian roulette, a game he apparently played to excess when he was young, to escape the boredom of his life. He said that ‘it got to be no more exciting than taking an aspirin for a headache.’ Conrad’s view of death comes to mind, and it is so close to my own view that I have committed it to memory. ‘I have wrestled with death,’ he said. ‘It is the most unexciting contest you can imagine. It takes place in an impalpable grayness, with nothing underfoot, with nothing around, without spectators, without clamor, without glory, without the great desire of victory, without the great fear of defeat.’ Pretty much what I have experienced so far. The

dreary dreadfulness of surviving snakebite is only exceeded by the dreadfulness of not making it through.”

Mertens: “Does one’s life ‘pass before one’s eyes,’ as they say?”

Dean Ripa: “Not if you are still hanging onto it. You may picture a mile high guillotine and you are laying under it. You know the blade is coming down but you can’t see it, you’re facing the ground, just waiting for a hissing sound, then a thump. By the time you hear it, it’s over. They say the head stays alive for a few seconds in the basket, can even see and hear. My life review was still voluntary and conscious; bitter sweet sentiments before quitting my post at the Company. There is a point where resignation surpasses your desire to survive and a sweet sadness supervenes. You feel nothing but love for what you have already lived and know you are now about to lose. And almost a pity for those who have to go on living. They don’t quite know what’s up ahead, and how easy it is to just leave. Something suicides probably understand best.”

Mertens: “You told me once that all your bites *could* have been avoided, had you only taken certain basic precautions. Were you ever *deliberately* careless? In some sense, suicidal?”

Dean Ripa: “The curiosity and rebelliousness that made me want to play with snakes in the first place, when I was a boy, also made me want to get bitten by them. This feeling never left me as I matured, and even today, ripe and rotting after fourteen snakebites, I find I can’t put it away. Snakebite remains one of the most exciting things I can think of, and a most precious temptation. As such, I have found myself letting my guard down more often than I should, taking chances for the secret reward that comes from not being quick enough. The chance, then, became not that I would be bitten, but that I might not be; the gamble was not that I would not be bitten, but the secret hope that I would be and yet would survive! I was playing two ends against the middle, against myself.

“Can this be viewed as suicidal? In the sense of a kind of possession, yes. A kind of religious or even demonic possession, communicated to me through ‘the Devil’ that is in snakes. The Devil is, of course, the Tempter . . . *Who can resist Temptation?* And perhaps too, I have not wholly accepted the idea that death is the End. Like the religious snakehandler testing his faith in his personal god, hoping He will show Himself, intervene and save him, out of love or whatever. That’s putting a lot of responsibility on God to save a fool! And yet a triumph over the Devil, over the very *seductive*

Devil, if you live through it. The very material reward, besides life and the affirmation of faith, is the scientific one, the reward given to explorers who have mapped some uncharted new area. My writing contains the first, very first, firsthand accounts of bushmaster bite in the literature. Through my seven envenomings I have recorded every stage of it, from the effects of the neonate venom, to the subadult, and now, with this one, the full adult—although admittedly, this last data was thwarted by antivenom. Short of dying there is nothing more I can do. My writing has gained immeasurably from these experiences—how much poorer my bushmaster book would be without my ‘carelessness’?

“But there is a darker, less positive side, I must confess. I feel I have been, at times, possessed by another temptation, what I can only call a desire . . . to quit this place and move on. I have been looking for an escape clause in the life-contract. An ‘accident,’ but one secretly, deliberately engineered . . . Now, what is *suicide*? Or and beyond its intentions, I mean. Well, it is the act of killing yourself. Obvious enough. But think about that sentence for a minute, and think of the words . . . ‘killing yourself.’ Who is this *self* you are killing and how has it become detached from the ‘you’ that is taking the life? . . . See what I mean? We have two distinct personalities here, one against the other. When a man puts a gun to his head *whose finger* is pulling the trigger? Does the hand that loads the gun expect to survive the bullet he is fitting into the chamber? There are always *two parties* involved . . . One of them thinks he is immortal, and wants to get rid of the other that is not. The latter has become quite a strain, dragging him around, and the other one wants to get rid of him. A strange psychic battle against an illusive, unknown enemy . . . The ultimate survival game.

“And so I have always thought of suicide as a form of murder. Perhaps that is why the Catholics consider it the ultimate crime. It is the one murder that you cannot repent from having committed. By the way, I have known quite a number of suicides. At least half of my friends that have died over the years, have done so by killing themselves. Is that statistically *normal*? Is it unhealthy to know me? What dark little indigestible message did I leave these people with? How did I contribute, what special negativity, did I leave behind, latently, that when the end came for these poor souls, they chose the dark road? Perhaps each of us harbors something like that, and we turn our backs on it, don’t want to see it. But the question is haunting, no?

“Now I had just been murdered by this snake and wanted an explanation. I felt this explanation must lurk somewhere deeper than in the meager cause-effect cir-

cumstance I had just witnessed. I had fallen through a trap door and was looking for causes, switches that had been tripped without my knowledge. And some that I had willingly tripped too, as though I were secretly aware of where the trap door was leading, and had wanted that. . . . Impossible to predict, the final end—that goes without saying. Read your Bible. ‘No man knows the hour of his own death.’ Not even the suicide, taking the matter into his own hands and appearing to be in control of his own final destiny, can predict accurately *where* his story breaks off, on what final heartbeat, what thought, dream, *et cetera*. I wanted explanations. I wanted to find meaning in what had happened to me. A meaning that would, perhaps, persevere, outlast me! Immortal! It is the business of brains, even dying ones, to look for meanings in things; probably the saddest thing about death is to think that it has none

“And so I had been lethally envenomed. This momentous thing had just happened to me; but trumpets were not going to sound, no booming-voice was going to come down from the clouds and give me any special last insight to take-with. Instead, it was a small, quiet voice I heard—almost a whisper . . . *You are going to die!* That was it. A little voice imparts this message, and there is no more to it! You may not believe the Voice—can pretend or whatever—but it is there all the same, lurking behind all the survival details—your not-so-silent partner hedging his bets against your collateral of bones. That voice transforms you; and when you have heard that voice many times, from having had many such injections of Truth, you are not the same person anymore. You change.

Mertens: “For the better?”

Dean Ripa: “Death allows these little betterments in you. He’s getting more for his money, that ol’ Serpent! He panders you! Lets you think you have gotten away from Him—and that you will yet again! Which inspires an even more dangerous confidence. Plenty more where you came from, and all as easily discarded as the bag you came in. He is a *collector*, you see. *His* house is full of survivors like you—all strangely transparent . . . They gather round you at the door, their mouths moving, praising your timely improvement. How nice and fat you have become since last time, bloated on your new vanity! He meets you outside on the landing, offers you his card. You’ll be back, oh, you’ll be back!”

Mertens: “So one is only putting off Death”

Dean Ripa: “Or He is putting you off, till His pig is ripe. It’s rather like being harvested—and all the world a farm.”

Mertens: “Does one snakebite lead to another?”

Dean Ripa: “Where else could it lead, short of a firm refusal to quit playing with snakes? Look at the Pentecostal snakehandlers, who have been bitten time and again and keep coming back for more. Then there are the Indian snake charmers—not all of them are fakes. Then there are the really serious professionals, who can no more stop handling snakes than an addict can quit heroin. No matter how many fingers it costs Jim Harrison, he will be back at work the very first day he can close his hands—milking snakes. *He loves it!* A member of the snakebite club is a member for life. You keep coming back for new initiations, scaling an invisible pyramid toward—who knows? Note this fact: while there are many snakepeople out there in the world who have never been bitten even one single time by a snake, of those who have, you will almost never find one who hasn’t come back for more! *Twice bitten—twice again!*”

“Poe’s short story, *The Imp of the Perverse*. The character can’t resist doing things he knows he shouldn’t, simply because he shouldn’t, till it becomes his final undoing. He commits a murder not from any malice but because he knows he shouldn’t. He even confesses to the crime because he knows he shouldn’t! I can identify with that character. Surviving a snakebite is quite dangerous, actually. It’s like a medal that is not deserved. You’ll be the first one to stand up and catch the next bullet, right where your little medal is hanging. Our talk about *immunity* has made me more nervous than many snakes have. One is easily seduced! Why, the actual Tempter in Genesis is speaking through us today . . . *More subtle than any beast of the field!*”

Mertens: “But wouldn’t the terrors of dying and all the agony snakebite entails be enough to keep you away from it, no matter what secret desires you nursed?”

Dean Ripa: “I don’t find the word ‘terror’ very useful. It leaves out all the quiet parts, the sense of finality and the glimpse of meaning, the near comprehension of the Eternal, and the sorrow too. Terror is really a very shallow word, flat and two dimensional. One pictures only panic and running and clawing for life . . . All that self-preservation stuff. I think I have rarely felt that kind of cheap terror in my life, except when I was very young. I have always been too willing to leave this world. The battle for me has been just the opposite—to try to remain terrified long enough, so as to keep on living!”

“What I was dreading, more than anything, were the awful machinations of the body as it went through its gasping last rituals . . . The final rupture of the carnal envelope. The sad last glimpse of the world left behind

. . . Like Thomas Browne says in *Urn Burial*, ‘The heaviest stone that melancholy can throw at a man, is to tell him he is at the end of his meaning.’ Well, that ‘end to meaning’ it is most mournful idea you can ever contemplate—you can hardly look at it without bursting into tears. The snake struck me, and the first shock of this *knowing* hit me like a blow to the stomach. I staggered backwards with a feeling of absolute forlornness; with a kind of horrible knowledge of an edge I could too easily predict, having been nearly there before. And now I must climb right on over. A dark bell tolled in a distant tower. I waited for a moment, unbelieving. Then I listened for a second tone, to confirm the first. I think I might have been half-smiling . . .

“Well, in real time, it had just turned five o’clock and the tolling I was hearing was from the court house tower a few blocks away! It sounds every day that time . . . Who ever notices it? Yet that’s how it is, isn’t it, the hour of your death always in the background. You don’t hear it, but it’s there. My assassin didn’t have much to say about it—couldn’t even hear it. Meanings are your own, and you work all your life building them up against the unmeaningness of the great *out there* . . . They are your only defense against the emptiness.”

Mertens: “Were you looking for meaning in snakebite?”

Dean Ripa (shrugging): “The argument could reasonably be made that all my accidents with snakes were in some way deliberate. Only by acts of deliberate self-destructiveness could I have put myself, so many times, in fang’s way of creatures that I was never less than aware had the power to kill me. A question better answered by a priest than a psychologist. A reenactment of the same impulse that guides the hand of the religious snake handler, or the African sorcerer, to take up serpents. And yet I can’t help thinking it has a more common and widespread source in Evolution, than in either. Men and snakes go way, way back, to a time when the men must have felt the need to dominate snakes, even to the exclusion of considering his own safety. The moralist’s squabbling about whether people should or should not be allowed to keep snakes and other dangerous creatures, will need to take that atavism into account. It has a lot to do with our being human. Snakeworship is very old, the oldest of all religions. Even Moses was a snakehandler.

“Now why people get bit by snakes is of little interest to toxicology, whose gold lies in the case histories—and of this gold, science can never get enough. Without my occasional lapses in the er-uh self-preserving instinct,

how much poorer our knowledge of bushmaster venom would be! And how much poorer your knowledge if, through interviewing me, I had nothing to say! The bushmaster bite chapters in my book would only be more copycatting, like so many other articles before it; secondhand or thirdhand records of other people's experiences, filled with all the errors that mar secondhand accounts of every kind. My rat's eye view allows me a special insight these writings do not have. In an advancing collectivist society where safety seems to be the only thing on everyone's virtual, pleasure seeking minds, I am rather more pleased by the thoughts of having had my bites, than not. I would not trade them for an hour's safety in the cocktail lounge, held up at a stoplight in high traffic, or enduring the ten-minute hate ritual in front of the television screen controlled by our guilt-slinging Judean masters, mesmerized by the gore and violence of public stonings that are not my own. To those nanny-yackers who find me unregenerate, unapologetic for my perceived misfortunes, or who think my experiences sad or unenviable, the human guinea-pig grunts *yes!* not *no!* Pig treasures his wounds, not only for having survived them (which is by the grace of the monster, God), but from having seen more deeply inside the fangs he has injected so much of his own life's blood into studying. Pig is pleased by those gifts given, and for having looked a little deeper inside himself as he lay dying, a voyage which . . . my critics too must follow, eventually, in their own sad way, and I—yet again. The snake's jaws yawn for us all! Now or later, we will all meet there, on that same rugged cross. The psychologists, the scientists, the priests. And the pigs, too, on which all those pillars of society have experimented!"

At this time a nurse enters to take Dean's blood. He waves her away grumpily: "No more blood tests, young lady! You think I am Baron de Rothschild, I can pay for your education? I'll be walking out of here, soon . . ." She runs off to get the doctor.

Fifth interview:

Mertens: "In what way is a feeding response bite more dangerous than a defense bite?"

Dean Ripa: "Because the intention is to kill, not scare away. Or so it is presumed."

Mertens: "And your bite . . . ?"

Dean Ripa: "The kind every snakehandler most dreads: the infallibly directed, perfectly coordinated strike-and-bite calculated to immobilize its food—which, of course,

the snake thought I was. Not the haphazard, grudging bite you get in some defense encounters, the jaws were landed with mathematical exactitude, at the precise angle of incidence necessary to produce the greatest maxillary protraction, and thus exert the greatest pressure on the glands and ducts, to expel the most venom possible through the two fangs. The soft, rounded girth of my forearm was ideally contoured for the mouth at half-gape, offering optimal resistance for the inverse rotation of the maxillae. When the snake bit down, it was as though a plunger had been pulled—the venom exploded, and nowhere else for the charge to go but into me! In such circumstances a snake can no more halt the expulsion of its venom than you can voluntarily stop yourself from vomiting when your gag reflex is touched off. The myth of snakes controlling their venom, as though it were some magical process not governed by these very basic mechanics, ignores the very means by which venom is expending in the first place (Chapter 24 - 25). It is all pure hydraulics. The snake is not controlling its venom, per se, it is controlling *its bite*—and the way it approaches biting. Envenomation is a by-product of bite-contact, nothing more. If the snake exerts any willful control over the matter, it is in the act of biting. I am aware that many scientists will disagree with me on this and show me all manner of wonderful charts, graphs, and tests to say it isn't so. What it all comes down to is that they are not accurately measuring the protraction itself, and have been content with portraying bite contact, which is not the same thing at all. Venom metering results from a willingness to bite fully—or not. Activate the protraction mechanism, and you can get as much venom out of a dead snake as a living one. Once triggering these mechanisms, Miss Muta could not have avoided killing me even had she wanted to.

"The bite was a predatory assignment. There was no anger in it, only ferocity and hunger—and a desire to dispatch prey with minimal danger to itself. The bushmaster takes a unique approach to prey handling, and this was mirrored in the attack on me. A dweller in wet, lowland rainforest, bushmasters have one big problem with food getting. The terrain is flooded half the time, and chemical clues don't last very long in the rain. This makes the trailing of prey very hard to do. To compensate, bushmasters have evolved special striking and biting strategies to keep the prey from escaping to distances where it cannot be recovered (Chapters 7 - 9). These strategies boil down to two choices: either hold onto the animal after biting it—dangerous for the snake (the prey can retaliate)—or kill it immediately by delivering a heavy payload, in a rapid strike-release. Smaller prey can be strike-held, killed with a more leisurely approach in the powerful jaws . . . much like a cobra's jaws, by the way,

in their rigid, muscular construction, and quite different from the rattlesnakes or lancevipers, whose heads are as flimsy as kites by comparison. But when the prey is large—as say, the girth of my arm—strike-hold won't work and *strike-release* is the best option. Here the bushmaster does not spare its venom at all, but injects it to overkill, delivering the most massive assault it can, to compensate for its failure to strike-hold. Quite the reverse of expectations, since we equate *strike-hold time*—the period while the mouth holds on—with venom flow. We assume the strike-hold bite to be the more virulent of the two methods. But this is not necessarily the case. I have seen rats impaled in a bushmaster's jaws for ten minutes while the snake seemingly just tortured the animal to death, eventually suffocating it rather than envenoming it. Equally, I have seen rats snatch-bitten and released, only to fall over dead as though shot with a gun.

“Miss Muta had treated my arm much as she would have treated any other overly large prey—she gave it everything she had. She knew on sight (thermally) that the rat (arm) would be too big for her to hold onto—a second, instantaneous appraisal at the moment of bite contact would confirm this (Chapter 7). Her best chance was to annihilate the rodent/arm instantly, with an exorbitant injection it could not possibly survive, averting any possible retaliation or escape. There was no ambivalence in her approach, only the natural perfection of a mechanism brought to bear upon an object of susceptible proportion, shape and texture, to drop the animal dead in its tracks.

“I felt a jolting stab and saw the snake's head hanging on my arm as though I had just sprouted a long, gnawing vine. A slow motion film might have told a better story. The snake unfurling like a lashing whip, the mouth agape, the mandibles colliding with the soft under part of my forearm, attaching themselves with the thin, short mandibular teeth and then seizing me with a vice-like grasp against the enormous opposingly positioned front fangs. Quite different from the flash-grab of the *Crotalus* or *Bothrops*, which is over with before you can even comprehend it. This bite lingered for that meaningful second, giving me enough time to grasp what was happening, even if I could do nothing to stop it. The snake's lips impressed into my skin, buried in crescent smile; the labial shields kicked up like wings over the eyes and heat receptors which had disappeared into the snake's own face as it pinched down. The daggers plunging home—submerged to the hilt—the soft, flexible head contracted like a rubber syringe into the contracting flesh—the fleeting, unasked for, extra grab—and the deed was done, the 'gift' imparted. I heard the fangs disengage with a prickling noise and then the

snake's head rose up and looked down at me—*looked down* from its height in the upper cage rows, rather, as a farmer looks down on a chicken he has just beheaded, wondering why it is still running around in circles.

“I glared back at my assassin through a neural curtain of horror and astonishment, protected by the sheer unreality of what I knew could not be happening—for to admit it *was* happening was to acknowledge that my life was over. The miles of shocked nerves communicating eye to brain detoured me through a maze of doubt first, before the final blow to my senses hit home, and left me stunned, spinning in place, spellbound by the factual announcement that I was done for. I felt like a spectator to somebody else's life passing away before my eyes, a man I pitied but could in no way aid. I might have been watching a stranger through a telescope; there was a sense of immense distance between me and this woeful character whose fate I understood perfectly. The image got progressively more blurred till at length it all reversed and we came together again sensibly. I was that man!

“The postponed truth was that I had just been murdered. If I was still capably thinking about it, of breathing and swallowing and blinking my eyes, and with a heart still thumping in my chest, it was due to another kind of inertia, that of venom absorption. The bullet had been fired and was heading straight toward my heart, but it was doing all sorts of other things along the way, like dilating my blood vessels, so that I felt flushed and giddy. This bullet was moving at such reduced speed that I could have reached up and caught it in my fist, yet it was too diffuse a thing to restrain or hold on to, and would have spilled on toward its fatal destination anyway, through the cracks in my fingers; not a chunk of lead fired from a gun, but a blob of proteins spreading through a million blood vessels at once, rocketing wildly through all my limbs, and yet converging on that same target, inexorably, and with mounting force. The fire in the wound was only the foreshock of a stronger concussion to come.

“I had seen rats given the 'mortal sting,' then scamper mindlessly away as though nothing had happened. Their bodies were only waiting for their deaths to catch up with them. Two seconds later they were flipping somersaults in the air—then crashing down, as if flash frozen, only their mouths opening and closing mechanically as they gasped their last breaths. I was waiting on my own last breaths, no less certainly, but I was given more notice thanks to my larger body mass. My somersaults, when they started, would be measured in terms of what a 52 year-old zoo owner would be capable of; gymnastics of a rather bizarre nature that I was not looking forward to, resembling convulsions, blunt trauma,

stomach poisoning and being set on fire—if you can imagine this combination—and going on for about a half an hour or so till I quit moving. I would have preferred a more punctilious oblivion, to so much malingering about; less vomiting and diarrhea, less clenching pains in the abdomen, less fire and knives in the wound, less feeling of suffocation as my blood, ebbing in the veins, moved less and less through my failing heart. A very impractical desire considering that I was the one best qualified to tell my saviors what to do about preventing it.

“Do not think deadly snakebite is all about panic. The terror of knowing Death has crept into your veins is soon diluted by an even more virulent remorse. A bleary landscape of ‘what ifs—?’ rises up from behind the tombstones to plague you. All the happier paths you might have taken, toward the cherished goal of dying in your sleep, which seems to be everyone’s hope. My fear of death was checked by a bitter and mournful regret: I was leaving life half finished, a failure. The pages of the book I had spent years working on would never be read. My novels and short stories, still in manuscript form in my files and drawers, would rot in some one else’s attic until tossed out, gobs of nothing distilled from a nothing-life. I had been chased by a phantom all my life and now it had finally caught up with me, was clawing its way up my bloodstream, groping after the Cracker-Jack’s prize I had deliberately saved for last, at the bottom of the box of lies I had told myself, so as to keep on going anyway, no matter what. . . . Now that crooked shadow gliding on my backyard lawn, had found its secret way inside the older man I had overnight become, into my dissipated blood and heart and brain. . . . It had been with me all the time, casting down across the wounded ages of my vanished youth, reflected through a cloud from this bitter hereafter where I stood now, leaking out through two little holes, looking backwards and yet ahead into that old familiar crack in the ground He was steadily piloting me toward. Fed and watered on my dreams, nourished on my best years, juggernaut and deceiver, as you like, hitching a ride in my boyhood fancies, he was mine by choice, and I knew tragically that I could not have asked for a better one. His name was Death and I had shaped him into the aspect of a snake, the better to keep an eye on him, and to idolize him too, in my spare time, for his sensuous qualities, an artist in his service, striving to bring him forth, real and palpable, as a sculptor strives to render a beloved image in clay. *Death by bushmaster! Fancy that! Now that would be worth a man’s salt!* Boyhood is an incorrigibly brave place; it always fancies there will be a way out of whatever trouble it invents for itself. The world is a paper globe to be turned in life’s hands; he can spin it on his nose, choose the places he will visit, live in, and even where he will

die. He doesn’t count on things like dreams giving up, or on a Dreamer simply too tired to go on dreaming His creations. Now I had aged and the *thing* that had made me dream had become the stronger of the two of us. I could enter into a race with Him one last time—or lie down and go with Him, wherever He was taking me, up whatever sunny hedgerow into what cool shadows beckoning. . . metaphor for an unknown grave.

“The bite held that much supernatural meaning to me; a fit ending to my holiday among the living; the quick left hand of a disappearing act to banish me from that lost Garden! Now I would just drop down, another among the billions of monkey bones piling up. Nothing gained, only another trinket for the fossil record. All my life I had been beaten back and forth between the two hard walls of my self-invented cage. And it was a snake-pit, this cage—I had insisted on it. I had chosen my company well, and my destiny fell right in behind me. I had bet against myself the whole time, and nobody was more surprised than I was when I kept on getting winning tickets. Getting bit, pulling through, getting bit, pulling though . . . I got up each day, tending the deadly worms in my coffin, worshipping my own grinning skull on its high pole, over-crawling with the evil life I had given rise to. That beautiful, perfect death I had made for my own. I had pictured it in every conceivable position . . . Naked and fungal in the wet undergrowth of a rotting forest, staring speechless through calculating vines and clicking katydids, pate alive with creeping blowflies—and immune to every accusation that I had not been brave. Not fat on a paper pillow in some satin-lined box underground, not some haggard old ghoul in a three-piece suit who had sucked all the life out of the world and finally himself! Not for me! I was going to go out with that bang they are always talking about, the one that makes headlines! You may think what you want to about life, but what you think about most in life, is death. Your death. Even when you put your mind off from it, you are only mounting thoughts against it; building your little shrine of life to keep out Death; and whether staring in disbelief that such a thing could really be; or disregarding it; or putting the burden on a secret god who has a better purpose for you than bones, you’ve got your foot stuck in the muck, all the same. I had decided to avoid all those dodges and go straight for the gusto! Live inside my box of death, in the company with the vipers that would put me there! . . . I put up a big sign—*Cape Fear Serpentarium! World’s Deadliest Snakes!* How many of us get to charge people to see their own deaths in the making? How many get to do that with their lives uh deaths? Opportunity only knocks once, *they say*—

and yet how Death's bony knuckles must sting him sometimes, when he has to keep coming back again and again to the same old door till he gets it right! And if that *pretender* of life refuses to hear, or even greet him at the threshold, only goes on stalking about on two hind legs on the muddy upper ground, a *man of the world* as he styles himself—goes on toiling under the rising castles of his vanity, giving token allegiance to a nameless dread he has styled worthy of him, giving form and substance to the beloved brand of darkness he most fancies, shaping it as he chooses, that he might remain more terrified of it, stay out of the meshing gears and keep toiling for that hidden master in whom he does not actually *believe*, but will, in time, come to affirm, by God, as plain as the skull behind his face—well, why should one run behind him with the bucket for the shit? Let him piss his pants at the sight, like he's supposed to! What, me worry? Death's darkness is far cozier and lasts far longer than that desperate little cubbyhole!

“That snake had been born for the sheer purpose of ending my life. . . I was the other half of her mission on earth. My death was the other end of her meaning, part of an age old bargain, a terrible continuance. A long, grueling process for the both of us, getting me into those headlines—and her into a jug of formaldehyde, for a reward. State's evidence! Given a choice, wouldn't she rather have escaped me? Why then, hadn't I escaped her? We were drawn together, keeper and kept. And the line drawn between us had gotten thinner with each new drop of poison seeped into my bloodstream, till there was no measurable separation between us—we had merged. The moving hand had risen and appeared, writing undulating shadow language on the wall of the garden-prison, waited till the stars were right and my reflexes slower, to stir from its ageless sleep. And now I saw the meaning it held. I had deciphered its message; touched the sticky substance in which was spelled out my name.

“Of this secret deal I had made with a childhood devil, I was not entirely naive . . . somehow I always knew it would be fatal.”

Sixth Interview

Mertens: “So it was Death all along you were chasing, however in the form of a snake.”

Dean Ripa: “I am forced to that conclusion, yes. My life had been one long search for the perfect way out.”

Mertens: “It seems to be a distinctly boyish thing, the chasing of snakes and frogs and turtles and other little animals. Live things . . . *living* things. But at some

point in your life your boyish chase seems to have turned morbid and was substituted with a fascination with dark things instead. It was only the snakes that could kill you that you came to really care about.”

Dean Ripa: “And still, now. The *venomous* snakes. The true baby demons of the greater Devil. I was trying to make some sort of Deal. Russian roulette . . . a game, you will note, played primarily by teenage boys. A game I would never even consider playing, by the way. There is an emptiness, a pointlessness about it that is almost more depressing than losing. No chance of winning against Death. No one ever has.”

Mertens: “Nevertheless, you seem to have been in some sort of competition. As you grew up, the snakes got more venomous and the calls closer, and the countries you had to retrieve them from, got farther and farther away. The missions were getting more and more dangerous.”

Dean Ripa: “An object is valuable for one reason: nobody else has it. When a snake is rare, and dangerous to catch, and lives in a remote, dangerous place, it fetches a good price. And so I went out into the world looking for just these kinds. Young men have this thing of having to prove themselves . . . It is a necessary process for male development. If they don't do it they end up hating themselves for the rest of their lives. They have the feeling of having missed something. The real truth is you don't have to go out looking; your death is always with you. But youth is blind to that. Read *Lord Jim*.”

Mertens: “And so you made your death-deal with the snake?”

Dean Ripa: “With the archetypal snake-symbol of Death and, I suppose, with the Devil too. The primal haunter that fills the human heart with terror at the thought—of snakes, of *snakeness*, of what a snake is—became the measure of its value to me. The terror that *is* snakes and that people loathe and fear whether they have been taught the fear or not. The great invisible Snake that lives in every primal scream, inhabits all men's nerves. The Snake even monkeys are afraid of, so that they hoot and howl at that sight of one on the jungle floor . . . That aspect of *snakeness* that makes birds encircle them, shrieking out their warning to other birds, even those not of their own species, and yet both understanding the message . . . Isn't that strange, this shared Knowledge and complicity among creatures cooperating against a single enemy known to all? The *shapes* of things were the first writing in man's mind; and not limited to early humans. All animals learned to read that writing—failing, they perished. They had to learn to break the code

of camouflage and *see* snakes against the tangled background of the forest floor; if they did not, they would be bitten. They were under this onus. Now the signs and signals we read in life are but an abbreviation of that ancient language read by the nerves and played on the soul. Each one of us carry this primal dictionary inside us. And so the snake-shape, the Great Snake of All Snakes living in our very DNA, is a genetic memory. It is the ghost of survival itself.

“So I was trying to find meaning in these swirling symbols, and lost in the memories of youth, while I stood there, vacillating like a ghost myself, looking into the hard little elliptical eyes of the snake-shape that had just killed me . . . I was trying to bring the knot back together, from all the loops of string lying in pieces everywhere about my life, from childhood to the present—following back the bread crumbs that led through the haunted forest. The coincidences we encounter each day, and would encounter every second of our lives if our minds did not work even harder to shut them out, form a vast webwork within us, surmounted by a single spider we strain our eyes not to see. As H. P. Lovecraft says, ‘The most merciful thing in the world is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents.’ And yet we can’t help glimpsing that web sometimes—touching the edge of that Fate. Then, like a circling bird screaming at the sight of a snake, we are find ourselves crying out too, in that ageless voice, in a tongue understood by all creatures. For all the beasts are running from the same thing. All animals understand The Scream.

“Human culture to date has been nothing more than a systematic effort by billions of deceased contributors to shut that scream out. And we have done it so well that we have become illiterate. We cannot read the signs. The cities of the world are dying and we can’t survive in the forest anymore. Even snakes know better how to live than we do! And the irony is, that when man is finally abolished from the Garden he has destroyed—has proved himself another evolutionary flash in the pan—the Serpent will go on. Lucifer wins! Long live Lucifer!”

Mertens: “You write in one chapter that people have become ‘inefficient animals’ and that is why they are bitten by snakes.”

Dean Ripa: “The Biblical enmity between man and serpent was an enmity of human ineptitude and ignorance in the face of something greater and more perfected than itself. The role of snakes in human history were but many factors ‘put here’ to weed men out! Naturally evolved, genetically specific bio-weapons that more than any other creature save biting insects, literally drove man

out of the forest and into settlements, towns and cities. The snake world was saying: Either get along *with* us, or get out of our forest! Well, we know what happened—man ran away! Thus the Biblical *enmity* that came between man and serpent. Man’s whole enterprise since then has been to subvert Nature, abolish it ad hoc, and in the ruins, create an artificial world of pleasure for himself—one he can dominate and control. But what has his virtual reality really done for him? All his technological advancements? A million crutches for his *failings* as an animal. Every new invention or innovation just another way to keep him out of the dirt he came from, and shelter himself within the bigger and shinier bubble of his dystopia. He is getting weaker in his precious bubble and he knows it; and now, as his bubble starts to burst, he is grasping straw after straw. He’s *had it*, and he knows it, and yet he can’t go back the way he came, he isn’t fit enough. And so the threads are showing in his extinction narrative. At this place in time, man’s destiny seems tending toward one of two evolutionary pathways: either all-out chaos and social breakdown leading to a return to a primal state; or, through increased organization falling to a level of cybernetic dependency, becoming something like a communal insect. In either case, *homo sapiens* as you know him will be erased from the books. I am glad personally to have come from an older catalogue. It’s not something I want to be around to see.

“When man began myth-making in order to help him explain Nature in socialized terms, he was already on the road to doom. With each new story he told himself he lost some essential touchstone with Nature. Myths and legends were a social shorthand for things that Nature had already laid out for him, and very distinctly, in a more direct language that you might call ‘instinct’ but was really just jungle programming. He gravitated to larger and larger packs (called *nations*) where these instincts relaxed and were submerged, perishing at the expense of his growing cerebral cortex, and his need for self-deception becoming the brain’s primary function—how to shut the horror out. The inner Voice that had guided him for millions of years was becoming harder to hear, and arising in its place, the God-cults of religion, invented sin, social guilt . . . to try to bring some sense back to the Natural Order. But all the myth-spinners succeeded in doing was to deaden the Voice further, and in place of the old feelings, bring categorization and hierarchy, dragging the wild children of Nature farther and farther away from the Source. I believe this is the real meaning of Original Sin. The great *disconnect*. The forbidden fruit,

which, when man eats it, his eyes are opened and he becomes no longer fit to live in the Garden . . . was the birth of the great *separateness*, the great *without*. That fruit of sin was eaten a long time ago. Man knows he is naked and dying and he tries to hide it—not behind a fig leaf, but behind a newspaper, a TV guide, a political program, a bill in congress, a scientific tract, a piece of beautiful music or artwork, or a movie so lovely and thought-provoking, so total and virtual an experience, that it makes him forget temporarily that he is being herded into a prison camp. The garden has ceased being a place of sustenance and become the enemy. Man has been cast out and forbidden to return. He has no choice now but to die—or to become the God he set out to be, breaking out of the equation. Well, it appears he is probably not going to be able to break out of the equation.

“But you never know with gods . . .”

Mertens: “And the failing relationship man has with snakes, is it representative of that ancient breakdown?”

Dean Ripa: (grunting and laughing and holding up his massive, leaking arm). “Henh, henh . . . Henh, henh.”

Seventh Interview

Dean Ripa: “Want to know how primitive the human race still is? Just say the word ‘snake’ in a crowd and watch what happens to everybody. All sense of logic or proportion is lost; otherwise intelligent people regress to a childlike state where the impossible becomes commonplace. Snakes can leap extraordinary distances, pass through walls, break through thick glass, outrun horses, break legs, burst tires, tie people up and whip them to death, roll down hills like hoops, hypnotize you with their eyes . . . Snakes are not merely animals, they are supernatural beings. What happened? Evolution didn’t fill in the blank for human beings on the subject of snakes; didn’t program them to ‘think’ about them—rather only to react to them. *Avoidance* was more important than analysis. And if that avoidance meant avoiding getting close enough to them, even as to study them, so be it. In the small wandering bands inhabited by our remote ancestors, reacting instantly to avoid snakes was a survival advantage. Thinking about them afterwards, profited you nothing.

“Men’s beliefs are cultural decisions, and rarely analyzed—I would say almost never analyzed—reliant on the voice of authority to supply the answers for them, which they greedily parrot to earn social acceptance. Hence it is an *American* belief that once, a very long time ago, men landed on the moon, when the whole event

defies the laws of physics—the truth silenced however, by patriotism. America first, America best! You will find that in other countries people are less easily persuaded by that tall tale, and when it is explained to them, how the government and the NASA investors, with their ties to the Media, made people believe it, have no trouble understanding you. Not so an America, it is like trying to explain to Christian that there is no god. They will block you, even attack you, but what they will never do is analyze the facts for themselves. It’s an avoidance strategy, from what they see as a social taboo. In 1945 we were told to believe in a new superweapon, the atom bomb, and America accepted it whole cloth for exactly the same reason, because it was unpatriotic not to. Again the truth was silenced, on one hand to scare our enemies into a belief in American supremacy, and on the other by a growing industry to produce and test such weapons, where billions of tax dollars were raked into the boondoggler’s pockets, none of which devices worked and all had to be masked with vast amounts of conventional explosives, mostly simple TNT. Years later, this same congame was exported to the rest of the world, where it still drains money from every atomic signatory. The atomic race, like the race to the moon, was won in the newspapers, and in newsreels, where cheesy special-effects films gave uncritical minded patriotic chest-thumpers an illusion of vast American power. Physically speaking, atomic chain reactions ending in gigantic explosions are impossible. ‘Critical mass’ can never be attained, because the atoms cannot all be put in contact with each other simultaneously; even so, the initial fissile reaction would reduce the mass of the purported ‘critically massed’ isotope to an abruptly noncritical level. You get at best a hot, radioactive fizzle, such as is suitable for power plants—you can boil water with it, but you can’t make bombs, although you can dirty-up conventional bombs, as they spent a great deal of time doing, telling the world they were atomic. Hiroshima and Nagasaki were simply fire-bombed like the rest of Japan, with millions of leaflets raining down on napalm-burned Japanese heads telling them how they had endured some mysterious new force called an ‘atomic attack.’ The usual ‘eyewitnesses’ popped up afterwards to support the story; the same type of loud personality that repeatedly sees UFOs. Amidst all the panic, and with half the country already burned to the ground from the hundreds of thousands gasoline bombs, the shocked people fell right in. Half a world away in America, millions of newspapers spread the same story, courtesy the war department, and a complicit Media, whose directors owned the Military Industrial Complex that built the weapons on the tax payer’s dime. The ignorant newsparrots printed everything the government told them, and those who didn’t get sacked—natural selection. Over the next three decades,

the government's press agents told us how more than 700 of these superweapons, 'hundreds of times more powerful' than what was purported to have been detonated at Trinity, were exploded only 60 miles outside of Reno, Nevada. Did any one journalist sit up and say, 'Hey, this isn't logical! How can that be?' If he said it he wasn't published; and if a physicist dared croak the real truth about nuclear fission, he lost his job or was branded a communist infiltrator—hence Oppenheimer, who later discovered that he had been made a fool of by the technical department, was replaced by Teller who was more willing to play the game. Today the old firing range in Nevada has been made into a national park, with bus tours escorting hundreds of tourists out there on the hour; what ought to be a radioactive wasteland, uninhabitable by animals or people, is healthier than Yellow Stone Park, and hiked by millions of patriotic Americans from a sense of national pride. The legend lives on after the testing has stopped, and money is still flowing to see the boondoggles that were never exploded there. The same tourists that pilgrimage to NASA, by the way. America first, America best! Meanwhile, the truly *legendary* Neil Armstrong, whose giant leap for mankind landed him on a Hollywood stage set, is a depressed, self-hating fraud; and all the rest of his astro-comen live in pure terror. This is old business for the human race, who only just stopped believing in demons a few centuries ago, after they ran out of witches to burn. As for this new century we are just starting out in, don't expect any drastic improvement among the believers in manifest destinies. They love this sort of thing. Not so long ago planet earth was the center of the universe, and anything else was heresy. The world was a flatter place then, too. Religion—and culture is the deepest from of religion—dictates men's thinking. Put the right fuel (incentives) into the belief engine, and men will believe whatever you want them to. Once these systems find their way into the cultural fabric, the intellectual provenance of a whole nation becomes dependent on it. After that, no fact or proof against can ever dislodge them from the mesh. Today the nuclear boondoggle has been exported to about a dozen countries, each of them spending billions to keep the Emperor in clothes.

“And so with snakes, ever and anon. In the distant past, recognition of the concept *Snake* was more important than its identification as an animal. Thus it was not until a few hundred years ago that a single individual, Francisco Redi, out of all the billions of humans that had ever been, and all the millions that were even then alive upon the earth, discovered why and how snakes have the power to kill. And yet still the majority of the people in the world do not understand it, leaning on a religious

or superstitious explanations. These people don't make distinctions between harmless and dangerous snakes. It goes too far against the grain of total avoidance. Snakes are a taboo subject. There is a social penalty attached to them. The mind is not allowed to 'go there', and if your mind *is* going there, you are probably a devil worshiper! Society needs the fear-factor of snakes to herd the sheep and if you start to figure things out about snakes then you might start figuring out a whole lot of other things too about your dull-witted neighbors, not to say the shepherds themselves. And then the herd might lose you—a very bad precedent, if others follow you off into independent life-styles. In Evolutionary terms, it means the end of the social structure, of civilization itself, which is held together by lies. But fear of snakes could keep a small band of catarrhine monkeys together, if group signalling could serve as a warning when a snake was near. And this trait stuck, carried on to that most distant branching, the human being. Only the name has changed to suit the social construct.”

Mertens: “Changed its name?”

Dean Ripa: “The Devil seems to be its most recent embodiment. But behind the Bible and Genesis, it's still the same old serpent in the tree. Father of Lies . . . What they mean, you see, is *camouflage*.”

Mertens: “Camouflage?”

Dean Ripa: “That was the first great lie. The trick to get you to step on Him, or pick Him up . . . the Forbidden Fruit. Snakes appeared to be in a conspiracy against human beings, hence demons. You must understand that human ancestors would have eaten a wide variety of small animals, and among them snakes. And they would have eaten them alive, not cooked. And those who did—who picked up the wrong species and gotten bitten—would have *surely died* . . . just as God's command in Genesis against it.

“Taking a hard look at snakes is a very revolutionary idea—a very recent idea. And it has been completely forbidden until the last hundred years or so. The imitativeness, the gregariousness of human society needed snakes to stay vague and phantasmal—esoteric. And so it remains. People can't handle it when you go there, to *snakes*. They are on their own with snakes and they can't deal with it. They feel they are losing touch with the group. And since these monkey-humans can't think without first consulting the signaling expressions of their fellows, their silver-back leader, their brains go haywire and you have superstition

“Man’s relationship to snakes is identical to his relationship with devils and demons. He invents the attributes most needed of them for the purpose required. And that purpose is to herd the sheep.

“It lives in the archetype—or *meme*, as they are calling it nowadays. The hidden ‘snake’ inhabiting the human wiring. Snakes were the first gods, the dark, evil, angry gods that need to be appeased with sacrifices. And gods have no limits, can do anything. Thus snakes. The supernatural qualities given to snakes are no mere folklore, though that is the place where we most often interface with them. It is written in Man’s own hardware, in programs older and more integrated than our abilities to refute them. Snakes evade the critical sense entirely. Your modern technocrat, accustomed to manipulating extremely sophisticated and complex systems—he can fly an airplane, fix a computer—is as susceptible to ‘snake-madness’ as any jungle man or backwoods hick. Mention snakes to him and he will demonstrate a degree of gullibility almost shocking to behold. He might be or a lawyer or a mathematician or an engineer, able to work out very complex problems. Mentions snakes and watch him turn into an infant—a drooling idiot. In primal days man lived in such terror of snakes, and for so many millions of years that it all got all stored up that way in his cerebral hardware. And this is the hardware we still have. Consider how late we were getting around to an understanding of even the basic means by which snake-bite poisons us. But even after Redi, it remained esoteric knowledge, known to just a few specialists. The rest of the planet thought snakes harmed you through implanting a devil or by some other supernatural means—and probably a good three-quarters of the world population still believes this. So you have about a century of real knowledge on this subject, and *several million years* unaccounted for. During that time Man just slugged along, believing whatever he wanted, and imitating whatever his herd leaders told him, if he heard anything, since a good portion of this time probably predates verbal communication. How many more millions of years must have passed while man’s earlier ancestors, smaller primates that could be eaten by snakes, lived hourly with the traumatic possibility not only of being snake bitten but also of being consumed. You don’t get that kind of programming out of your head by praying to Jesus or reading science books.

“The rabbit hole is deeper than you think. Or snake hole, as it really is. Your ability ask me these questions, and mine to answer them . . . it all leads back to snakes.”

Mertens: “How do you mean?”

Dean Ripa: “Human communication arose from two distinct vocal branchings, both springing from loneliness and fear. There was sexual loneliness, which became the mating call—reproductive signaling—and the fear cry, which, once others were capable of recognizing its meaning, became the herding call. Sexual loneliness tended toward art, music, poetry, and even commercial advertising, all extensions of the mating cry. The warning cry led toward informational things, attempts to communicate important survival data intraspecifically. It was probably first detected as a wail or scream that others recognized as signifying a predator in their midst, and later, as this detection ability and vocal ability became more refined, the particular kind of predator could be discerned amidst the sounds, according to the level of fear detected. This was the beginning of words. In various birds this vocal warning can be interpreted even by other species. Sparrows calling to each other at the sight of a snake will alert blue jays, crows and many other bird species that have learned what the cry signifies, till soon a raucous mob of birds of many kinds surrounds the snake—all momentarily forgetting their differences. Probably the first informational utterance among prehumans originated with the appearance of a living serpent nearby, a cry of terror that other members of the group perceived when that exact kind of predator made a threatening appearance. Why snakes and not, say, big cats or even eagles? Well, these too we were all around us, and certainly a threat. But snakes were camouflaged and hard to see, requiring special visual skills to detect, and so the one threat for which signalling was most essential. Snakes are also quite deaf and the monkeys found they could shout at it all they wanted without arousing it, without increasing their chances of being eaten. And because snakes are ambush predators, a warning cry heard in the nick of time could make all the difference to a young primate who had not yet mastered the art of separating complex visual patterns from the tangled background of the forest floor. But the ones who had the talent, *the ones who could see them* . . . they became the Snakemen, the guides. And that is all a Snakeman is, you see. A guide. A pilot. And these pilots were valuable to the first ape troops, to get them back and forth safely from the feeding trees; valuable enough that the talent was selected for, and preserved, even as it became venerated by the first evolving cultures. From there the responsibilities of these snakemen developed further, into divination—for it looked like divination to the early humans. As though the guides were not merely finding the snakes, but magically revealing them, summoning them. And they began to claim power over these demons they could summon, and even to send snakes to bite their enemies—for of course the Snakeman would not point the snakes out to those he didn’t like. And so you can

see how it went along, with these Snakemen becoming the first priests. And the snakes, what did they become? It's obvious. The devils. Or the gods, depending on your tribe. Which ought to answer your question about my religion.

“And so when a snake was detected in the forest, the monkeys got together much as birds do, and made such a fuss that, if you were a monkey, you knew just what the shouting meant. That branching of catarrhine human ancestors has reached modern man with these very tendencies unchanged. Such human communication that is not poetic or commercial—derived from mating advertisements—in other words, the kind that is instructional or oracular, was derived from just these early signaling warnings about snakes. Man owes snakes a considerable debt, since without them he would probably not have evolved the very elaborate communication abilities he has today. He would not have risen up from simple bands of monkey-like creatures he came from, to dominate his environment. Snakes evolved side by side with human beings. Their influence upon us—psychologically and even physiologically—is profound. There is one theory that avoidance of snakes in primal times was the evolutionary impetus that led not only to stereoscopic vision in primates, but the pattern recognition skills in humans that led to art, science, mathematics and all technology.* Had there never been snakes—especially venomous snakes—man would never have got past the monkey-stage. Consider that snake worship was probably the first of all religious impulses . . . The question: why do some very rare individuals, such as myself, become so obsessed with snakes as to devote his whole life to them? The answer goes back millions of years. It's an obsession lying dormant within all of us. We are the Snakemen.

“So, Man is a creation of snakes! A strange thought, isn't it? But you can see the essential truth lurking in the Garden of Eden myth, which was derived simply from an earlier cautionary tale to make children not touch snakes. The fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, eaten thanks to the serpent, sent man on a whole new direction on the evolutionary tree! Even this interview you are conducting originated with the cry of 'snake!'—which, when you think about it, brings evolution full circle, doesn't it! The pattern recognitions that allow you to read a page, to reconstruct images from the words and sentences on it, were paid for in primal blood and venom. Snakes live very deep inside us, are as old as the startle-reflex, born of a terror shared by all creatures, and out of which terrors grew the pattern recognition skills we needed to

detect them and not get bitten by them, and later the mythologies and religions meant to protect us from what they meant to us symbolically. Lucifer, the Devil, et cetera.

“When a snake attacks us, there is something supernatural in it. Something ghostly and inconceivable, such is the horror produced. Having just been struck by Miss Muta, my own impressions were much the same. It was as if a hand had reached down from another world, to snatch me up into Death's jaws. The way it just pounced on me was too unreal, too unlike what I knew of snakes or had ever seen them do before. The head seemed to launch out from a vast unseen space, part of an endless thread connected to——? Something not of this world. An idea old—older than I was by millions of years, rooted in a terror stemming from a time when snakes were the first predators of the crown-group placental mammals that would, tens of millions of years later, write the Bible and stock the Catholic Church with pictures of Satan got up as reptile.

“The African juju men have an alleged power to 'send' snakes out to kill their enemies. By promoting this idea they take credit for every accident that comes along. It's sheer intimidation, occult chest thumping. Their power grows with each new victim. Sleek black shadows roll out along the jungle paths at night, projecting from under every bush and stump hole, conveying the ancient grudges, the psychic originators of the very idea of *curse* . . . men who have tapped into the universal whammy and can summon it up, and more, direct it where they will. The tribes people live in terror of these men. They are completely dominated by them. Something bad happens—*who sent it?* That is the first course of action, to discover the source of the curse. Well, to find that out you have to pay another witchdoctor. Your oracle.

“So I am standing there, the blood running out of my arm, and I am thinking, who *sent* this? My curse . . . must have begun snowballing a long time ago . . . as far back as I can remember . . . a child sensitive . . . well aware of such things shaping beneath the furniture, in the cracks on sidewalks, the spaces between the leaves of trees . . . there from birth itself, breaking free from the lining of the womb that held me, some evil blemish going with me for the long nightmare ride. I had spouted its litany on my own infantile breath, in the baby blowing snot and boogers in the crib—blowing a superfluous self-hex! I had prayed to possess it, the misbegotten utterance of an eight-year-old boy lying on the roof of his

* Lynne A. Isbell (2006). Snakes as agents of evolutionary change in primate brains. *Journal of Human Evolution*. 51: 1 - 35

house, looking up into the black field of stars and wishing for *wisdom*, of all things! What a foolish thing to wish for! I should have wished for innocence or bliss! I had not believed it was really real or I would have never dared ask for it. I was tempting *fate*!

“*Wish granted*: for who is wiser than Death? Death, the great speculator, having tasted both worlds and retreated, wandering soul, into the darker, calmer seas of sublime absence . . . Want Knowledge, perfect and true? Want absolute understanding? What makes you think you can stomach even one atom of it! *That* dream you cannot share, and must ever be the plaything of, perforce, against your will . . . The ancient contract grasping after the promised payment for that little glimpse of blue sky you were given, in exchange for lying forever in a hillock of dirt.

“I was ambushed. The snake popped out like an assassin. The curtain spread; a knife came plunging down; I staggered backwards, spouting blood. Pure sleight of hand. I had my eye on her the whole time, but she had gotten around me somehow. My mind blinked, time had been derailed, the film gone off track—the Devil had gotten ahead of me . . . Some subtle shift in the time-sequence, some important frame clipped out of the film, with the untoward insertion of a new frame, inaugurating a new program, had invaded and circumvented the old, and the result was an impossible chain reaction I was ill-equipped to deal with. The neurological ignition, the self-preserving impetus that governs retreat and escape, cannot stand before 50 million years of an Evolution determined to subvert it. God had decreed that snakes must exist and in existing, cannot be allowed to starve. They have to be a little bit ahead of their food!

“Miss Muta sleeping peacefully in her great long casket of a cage, had exhibited the most profound disinterest in her caretaker. As I rolled up the soiled newspaper around her, inch by inch like a scroll, observing briefly the lies and obfuscations of the propaganda empire, I was careful not to touch or disturb her in any way, performing my tender work about a meter or so away from her head. Like an insect trying to steal food out of a spider’s web, I was mindful not to alert the monster inside! She lay tightly wound, her head tucked down between the lofty ridges of her coils. She could not see me. There were no rodent odors in the air—our frozen food stock was stored far away at the remote end of the Serpentarium.

“Thus no predatory interest *should* be sparked by my activities . . . The rule of freezing, in crypsis, to escape detection, should be followed to the end, and in a captive raised snake, well accustomed to the routine coming and

going of its human keepers, there was no reason for her to become angered either . . . Bushmasters give fair warning usually, in a series of threat signals easy to read, unless the sudden confrontation with your body heat catches them off guard, whereupon they go off like a gun—a violent convulsion of whipping, lashing coils, delivering their fangs and poison in a crashing, unexpected blow. . . But this should not happen; the all-important thermal-receptors were barricaded behind the tall, stacked folds of her body. . . I was invisible to her, both visually and thermally, her face as though buried beneath slabs of rope . . . And so I went about my tender work, as I had dozens of times before, with relative immunity, I thought, so long as I kept a close watch . . . Under the nose of the dragon, true, and close enough to have heard that dragon breathing, did it make any such sound. And thus working ever so gently, my fingers tiptoeing across the daily headlines, rolling up the carpet of newsprint that was all around her and on which she made her bed—but careful not to tamper with that bed!—my eyes watchful, my nerves on hair-trigger to make a swift retreat should any of sign of movement betray an active intent.

“Foolish man who tries to second guess a woman! Her bunched coils exploded and she was on me in a flash! She herself did not know what she was going to do until the death blow had been struck! She was like a stone coming to life, a landmine touched off, a piece of shrapnel flying out and landing with murderous precision on her impromptu target! My impression was of a chaotic happening, and yet it was all very organized and mathematical. I think—I am not sure—I glimpsed the crescent edge of an eye popping up. By the time I saw that, there was nothing more to be done. She was like a gyre unraveling, throwing off a deadly, spiraling harpoon! Guided by that infallible heat-seeking program that has worked so well for pitvipers since Cretaceous times, she defied my meager constructs of physics and levitated, then planted her death grip upon me. She clutched my arm with such force that her eyes rolled back in their sockets, and disappeared beneath the lip-shields fully covering her face—I saw only the rictus of the mouth submerged in my own yielding flesh. Submerged thus, a morbid tableau in my mental scrapbook, she might have been a new appendage forming, and very decorative too, to exhibit before my depraved maker! The fangs lingered for a second, no longer, imparting their synchronous gift to the bloodstream; the jaws relaxed and the needles ejected themselves, peppering the human cloth as they walked free; a last glimpse of the parted mouth, wet with blood, saliva and venom, where I observed two bent fangs peeking out from translucent pink shrouds. I gauged my situation instantly. I was a dead man. Any further reflection was pointless, the reconstructions of a

life reduced to a lingering aftershock. Yet it was there just the same, flash-frozen in my brain cells in that traumatic instant—a snapshot scene toiled over with the desperate insistence of a dream from which there was no awaking.

“Unfastening herself from me, she was more human suddenly, her head reeling drunkenly in midair. The sheer force of the blow had temporarily discombobulated her, and she lurched side to side. The clumsy maneuvers of her jaws realigning what the strike had thrown out of whack; the fangs wiggling like fins in their disrupted sheaths; the mouth fitting halfway closed and the tongue popping ritually out . . . She was like an innocent child blowing bubbles! Utterly unconcerned that I might retaliate, she only hovered there, picking her teeth with her own flexible gums. For her I was familiar territory.

“This exercise completed, now her posturing assumed an aspect of supreme confidence; the bearing of a winner who has just wiped out a larger opponent. Her boom-crane head, loomed above the place where my arm had been—under whatever ‘bush’ or ‘cave’ or ‘stump hole’ the open hatch door represented to her—she gathered her neck back up sinuously, to look down. In a human being you would have called it gloating but in a snake it was too dispassionate, too remote a thing to have resembled real satisfaction. Her little gargoyle’s eyes, shifting, vertically configured, watched the shadowy, overlarge victim for the predicted effect, waiting on her inner clock to buzz, to give her the Evolutionary clearance to move in and consume her trophy. Perhaps she was a little dismayed to see her food withdraw and run hastily away, cursing the devil’s luck and spraying blood on the wall; rush away from the divine dinner table toward some private funeral of its own, in the grass and weeds of human society, but to which so excellent a huntress, on account of some odd quirk of bipeds, must find herself uninvited. An idea ordained since ancient days had been reenacted in the flesh—and I was the quivering sacrifice. Nature had shown its stuff. Advantage had been taken. An eye had blinked, but a more watchful eye had remained attentive I was the logical extension of a natural order, and on a par with food animals.

“Thus instructing me on these finer points of Evolution, Miss Muta paused to see if her ‘good work’ should prove true to history and the warm, soft, ratlike thing she had kissed, flop over, a corpse. A simple girl, with simple needs, she was disconcerted to discover that her happy meal had been attached to something so ambiguously conformed, and too large to be edible. History, it is said, is written by the victors. She would not bother to chronicle this meager contretemps, and soon forget I

even existed. Her diary, had she kept one, might have read like this: “Nightfall . . . ten days since last skinshed Large rodent thing crossed by again . . . bit it good and hard . . . too big to restrain properly . . . bolted away into the forest. . . probably ceased moving now, but I’ll never find it. Fuck.”

“She had seen even less of her victim than I had of my slayer. Some fleeting movements outside the cage door, a warmish, ghost-white bobbing blob. She had taken a chance—dinner always came from that direction. *A girl gotta eat!* Besides, she was pregnant and growing eggs! She saw even less of me now as she perused the empty target zone; a hand-shape clutching a bleeding appendage, and something else falling over backwards to get away from her. *Why don’t they like me?* She busied herself with some pre-prandial preening: the plasmatic pulsing and straightening of her tongue, the intermittent realignment of her jaws and fangs. Perfectly permissible activities within the confines of snake etiquette. The white oval ‘face’ shape, stark-staring back at her, meant nothing. She could not have sympathized with its horror.

“Uniquely qualified among victims to understand what torments were in store for me, I fought mentally to envision the placement of my staff members, arranged like so many chess pieces on the board of hours and assignments about the building. I wanted to lose no time in locating them. Probably Mr. Murphy would put them everywhere but where they should be today, and I would search in vain! They would be out eating sub-sandwiches while I was flopping around in my shit. A montage of dead snake-keepers flickered across my mental screen: Anita Finch, bitten by a 12 inch long Gaboon viper in her home, scribbling out a note to authorities and dying before the ambulance arrived; Karl Schmidt, perishing from brain hemorrhage after a boomslang bite that ought not to have killed him; Michael Peterman, dying just minutes before the antivenom arrived by air, 18 hours after a baby rhino viper bit his thumb; Larry Moor, nipped by his pet Egyptian cobra, hailing people in the street who thought him a drunken man before dropping down dead on the sidewalk in front of amused passersby. Drunk, yes—dead drunk. I saw myself dancing the same death-jig before the shocked patrons of the Serpentarium. *Hi, there! I have a little problem . . . can you help me?* I knew that within a few minutes I would be too weak to walk on my own; after a few more minutes, unable to move at all. Spouting jets of vomit in their faces, shitting all over myself, abdominal convulsions like being stabbed with cattle-prods, my arm boiling with subterranean fire—yes, I would be a fine mess and too unappetizing for my staff to deal with! The office bathroom upstairs would be easier to mop up af-

terwards—a worthy goal attaining it. Vanishing blood pressure, the absence of radial pulse; an appearance of cyanosis as my extremities turned blue, became stiff and wooden and no longer responded to my commands—these were already counting down. And then I would begin sinking away.

“By that time antivenom could do nothing to save me. Veins collapsed like old party balloons, no blood to prop them up, can’t get a needle in . . . I would be a disappointing presentation for the tired 5 o’clock shift at Emergency! I recalled an old story where they injected the serum directly into a patient’s heart. He had perished anyway, but it had made for a bigger hospital bill.

“*When Death comes knocking*, goes the old cliché. How little these writers must have known Him personally. Death never knocks. There is no question of your answering the door. No room for remonstrance, nor negotiation, no talking things over, no long soliloquies for summing up—no, you will not find ‘closure.’ These are the dramas of fiction and theater, attempts to put lines in the mouths of characters that are no longer ‘there’—a means of stretching the slender thread a little further, to bring the story to an acceptable conclusion. The hale and hardy crowd for whom these productions are staged cannot relate to plays that end unfinished. Their *Death* is one of the bunch, an actor handing out autographs, laughing in cigar smoke and sharing jokes modeled on their own funny bones; a life’s loser like they are, hedging for advantage, gambling against the odds, trying like anything to win. Such a Death would never gain a single soul for His dark Kingdom; He would go home empty-handed every time! Death never knocks. The worn out old storyline stretches to a thread, then snaps without ostentation. You begin falling toward the canyon. Your prayers will not halt your trajectory down . . . I felt a sense of tragic loss as the snake stretched out its gigantic fangs—and yawned.

“Whatever profound things I had learned about snakes had not saved me from them. Discovering, to the nearest milligram, the amount of poison necessary to convert a living man of my same body weight into a corpse did not alter my circumstance after receiving it. My life’s work had proved my death’s work instead; it was my own lethal dose I had been calculating all along. My quiet assassin, eyes twinkling with dreamy thoughts of swallowing bulbous, hairy objects, could have cared less as it wiggled its jaws all around, preening its fangs.

“All this was quite a blow to my sensibilities as I hung, like Bierce’s bundle on the rope from the Owl Creek Bridge, suspended between two worlds—the one of action and the other of dream. Peyton Farquar, puzzled by

that strangely momentous noise he did not understand—a watch ticking?—a heartbeat?—the cracking of what might be wood splitting apart?—had nothing on me, as I stood there, harkening to thoughts that had quite carried my mind away from the disaster happening in my bloodstream. Lock-footed with the inertia of an ancient indecision, whether to turn and run and try to save myself, or to just lie down right there and go with the flow of the poison, I hung motionless, prevented from taking action through an incomplete reckoning with my Fate. Medusa’s eyes held me still, as in that child-garden long ago—and yet so simple a solution to the problem of living, of growing old and disappointed, of putting off till later this same pointless and inevitable exercise, for the sake of a few more years staring into the face of a skull . . . the answer was right there. It had all been handed to me on a platter. Why not just take it?

“The cracking of a trap door giving way seemed to jump-start my thoughts, reel me back from the edge—*it was the noise of the snake-hook, clattering down against the wall!* I was losing my senses, in a little while perhaps, a blithering vegetable! The words came to me in staccato fashion: *Move, goddammit, move! Don’t even risk shutting the cage door! Just run while you can still walk at all!*

“The venom was building its little fire in my arm; my fingers were convulsing spastically into my palm; I felt a weird dilation throughout my body, a feeling of expansiveness, almost of floating, and yet held on earth by an odd heaviness in my feet. The blood was leeching out of my veins, emptying from the pounding ventricles of my heart. I reeled, gripped the door frame. The clattering hook falling seemed several seconds delayed—as though it were still in motion. I could see that I might not make the long walk across the 10,000 square foot building, to meet my appointment with vomit, shit and death in an office bathroom upstairs. To drop down dying on the floor in front of the patrons would appear unseemly; publicity must be avoided at all costs. And yet I had to alert my wife and staff . . . Somehow I must enter among the crowd, fend off their questions and concerns for I was too obviously a very sick man.

“Life leaves you with a last sneaking kick in your ass. That is the only knock you ever will get from Death! Insulting to the very end! But you would be surprised the little boost you are given, from that sneaking foot, when the rest has been cashed in; as though Death offered, amidst all else He was taking away, a last burst of energy for the higher duty of getting things done. There is spunk yet in the dead! Beneath the quivering jelly, a spark still lives! A lifetime staring into the blank eyes of a skull had not been for nothing—I had had time to rest

up for the ordeal to come! I knew from past experience that within a very few minutes I would be helpless and dependent on those around me. Extending between Now and Death was a period of the most excruciating torture, from which relief I would be begging to pass away anyway. And yet the very definiteness with which that idea was resolved was very liberating, in its way, for it left no prospects for negotiation, no room for doubt, no appealing to uncertainty. An iron resolve, if not to live (for that was probably impossible), then to *do*, seized my animal mind. Whatever the speed of the rushing sewage dragging me away from this world, I knew I could still paddle. Even dying is *doing*—it requires work. There remains that much sense of participation.

“Clasping my arm from which the blood fairly spurted in two long jets, I bolted past several alarmed visitors, disguising my plight as best I could. “Are you *all right*?” cried a moon-faced man and his plaid associate, their lark among the crocodile disturbed by the sound of cursing and doors slamming behind me. A lurching, green faced man with a bloodied arm had just come plunging out of a hidden hallway behind them, and he did not look happy. “Fine!” I shouted at them and stumbled past. I was dragging myself away like a snakebitten rat, stunned, spinning in circles, hurrying to get back to my burrow before——?”

“I hid my bloodied arm as best I could as I worked through the aisles of exhibits, forcing a grin on my face—I must have looked very depraved. My hamstrung fingers contorted like a stroke victim’s, bent half up against my wrist. With this piece of shriveled meat attached to a bumbling joke arm, I would have been incapable of opening a package of potato chips much less the cartons of antivenom. The concentrated effort of loading the syringes, of tying up my arm and probing for a vein—impossible! Lurching across the main gallery, I found I couldn’t even get my hand into my hip pocket to retrieve my cell phone—which had begun ringing ominously.

“I nearly crashed into my assistant Scott McKenzie. He was dragging some long amorphous thing—a water hose, a snake?—across the black carpet in front of the stairs. My bleeding arm told him everything . . . ‘Bushmaster!!!’ I grunted and went on past him, moving at top speed, resolved to climb the stairs on my own before the venom overtook me. ‘A bad one! Meet me in the office! Hurry!’

“The phone went on with its idiotic tinkling while I reeled drunkenly over the landing. *Who* was it? A loved one magically granted a last good-bye? A wrong number to which I might impart some vain last words? The

news of some mundane business affair to which my acquiescence or refusal would be pointless now, involving commitments taking place in *future* time . . . ?

“What would I have said to my anonymous caller?

“ ‘Hallo . . . Just bitten by a bushmaster snake from South America . . . hard, full bite, certainly lethal . . . Sorry, no further business to discuss . . . Will be dead in a few minutes . . . Excuse my wincing, pain beyond endurance, like being skewered with a red-hot dagger . . . Lying down now, can no longer stand . . . total loss of motor control . . . Legs unusable, stiff as wood, no blood in them, rallying the emptying ventricles of my heart . . . They say my color has turned *bright green*! Sorry if I sound distracted I am preparing myself mentally for the little man . . . *My trainer*, if I may call him that. He ought to show up any minute now to work my stomach over with his stick. *Very sharp*, that stick of his . . . He keeps it that way, just for me. The *symptoms*, you understand . . .

“Can’t hear you, place is a madhouse suddenly, shadow figures scrambling everywhere. Sorry, so much vomiting and shit. . . Am purging myself of this life . . . Perhaps you can *smell* it from over there! My sins were very great. Pre-recorded too, along with this body . . . *Hold on a minute, please!* Frozen lips mumbling last words to my wife—financial affairs before dying—and love, love, love in slop buckets . . . Now they are pumping huge amounts of serum into what they consider to be a vein in my right forearm . . . Well, I wish them luck, it is not specific to this South American type . . . *Will somebody please answer that goddamn phone?!*

“The ringing went on in my head long after it had stopped in my pocket; ringing like the wheels of the gurneys I was ever rolling on, down white hospital corridors clutching vials of antivenom to my chest, could never get enough of it somehow. . . Sounds of glass breaking, rattle of death and fear, noises from another lifetime voiced through distant answering machines . . . *Who’s calling, please? And why just now when you know I can’t answer?* Smug operator creaking on the stairs, getting his noose ready, dialing in the circuits of forbidden space above the Owl Creek bridge. Old Charley eavesdropping in the lines, checking up to see how he has been doing all these years, arranging these circumstances, leading me here . . . Old Charley getting anxious.

“‘Still there?!—Sorry! I really must break off now . . . Pallbearers hauling me out into the rain, down cruel metal stairs slick with ice . . . Long ride over from Owl Creek—*remember me?* Cold ashen sky, rain touching

my face last I will ever feel. . . Averted eyes of sad porters hurrying this, my last luggage down, *down*, still inevitably, still unceasingly down . . . *Thanks again, really sorry for all this trouble! My apologies to all—this really is the last time!* Rain on my face swinging high above the world . . . Sections from an old film I dimly remember . . . vague misty gray sky . . . iron doors slamming shut . . . underway now . . . underway . . . dial tone . . . nobody there nobody there.

“Hallo? *Hallo?*”

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