

A Disavowal of Fatal Attractions

A spurious reenactment of these events can be seen in the tabloid television show, *Fatal Attractions*, appearing on the Animal Planet channel. The degree to which the producers have taken liberties with the truth in order to sensationalize the practice of snake-keeping and push the political (Animal Rights) agenda of their sponsors, can clearly be seen by comparing the aired product with this, their factual source. Through not-so skillful editing out-of-context, an absolutely erroneous narration, and the groundless commentary of a hired, in-house pundit claiming a familiarity with the Dean Ripa he does not have, the producers fabricate controversy where none existed before these TV ambulance chaser's arrived. The result is sheer propaganda. As this article written two years earlier shows, the facts are more interesting than their fantasy. To cite: Mertens, R. 2009. *The First Ten Minutes*, in *The Bushmaster* (Genus *Lachesis* Daudin 1803); Silent Fate of the American Tropics. Cape Fear Serpentarium. Wilmington, NC.

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 by a South American bushmaster (*L. muta muta*), that left incapacitated within four minutes. 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

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 an envenomation? Dean Ripa, "the most bushmaster bitten person of all time," talks about his latest harrowing experience at the fangs-end of a large 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 up with antivenom.

DEAN RIPA'S SEVENTH bushmaster envenoming was potentially the most serious of them all. Bitten by a large adult specimen with huge fangs and a massive quantity of venom, he was "knocked down" literally, almost on the spot, 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 didn't give him that long. He survived thanks to his 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* (pro-

duced 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 bitten). 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 while in ICU). While this method risked anaphylaxis, the obvious gravity of the case war-



anted great urgency. Lacking this most 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

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.

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 *Lachesis muta* bite, as it took place in the "backstage" area of the Cape Fear Serpentarium. It concludes, dismally, on the floor of the office bathroom upstairs of the building, where the first vials of antivenom were rapidly administered, and where, in effect, his life was actually saved. 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.

And now the interview.

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, while my arm was extended, at roughly the height of my shoulder, just over the margin of the open door of the cage. This allowed me about a meter's distance from the snake. Not enough, apparently . . . Not nearly enough! I had been removing soiled newspaper, 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 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 en-

tirety. As the mouth clamped down, I could see the lip shields spreading outward like wings on my skin, the eyes buried beneath. My arm was neatly skewered, and for a brief second, held helpless.

“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 grip as of iron tongs; followed by a second, confirming grasp, as the mouth tightened to squeeze off the second and larger of the double pulses of venom. It had the feeling of 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 not all that far from my heart. Scant inches for the poison to travel . . . The warm wet blood welling up through my fingers as I clutched the wounds reactively, confirmed its depth. 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 venom 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 permitting a *downward* thrust of the jaws; the impact with the soft, susceptible, blood-filled target, followed by an instantaneous mandibular clinching, embedding the fangs to the hilt, and 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 seconds.

“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, and in less time. At least one 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 foot one, and 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—a real company girl! 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. Miss Muta had plenty of venom 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.¹ 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. Period. And that I would probably 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

¹ 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 3. The gigantic fangs of an adult Central American bushmaster. Photo R. Mertens. Cape Fear Serpentarium.

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 felt 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 necessary to kill me. Probably between 4 and 6 lethal doses for a man my size. (Chapter 25).

“The legendary speed with which bushmaster bite kills its victims is partly due to the great depth of the inoculation, made possible by the long, stout fangs. The Ditmars’ record of a man pronounced dead in ten minutes after being bitten on the thigh by a bushmaster is one of the all time records for a death from snakebite; save from anaphylactic shock, such things rarely happen no matter how venomous the snake. And yet bushmaster shock-death can follow this very same pattern without recourse to allergic trauma. The combination of kallikrein and kallikrein-like toxins, which the snake uses for killing its prey, is designed to do just that—through smashing the blood pressure of the prey animal. Dump that kind of venom directly into a human vein and you get much the same thing. 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. I doubted even the standard procedure of ‘dripping in’ the diluted serum by IV line would get it in 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 study of bushmaster bite, three out of four victims died despite antivenom. A case in Colombia had followed the



same tragic course. Horrible, lingering deaths where treatment 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 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*, 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 substitute other species like *Bothrops* on the extraction line, trying to cobble together a substitute product. Don’t count on it to work—although it might if you pray hard. 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, with the result that, last time I tried to buy some antivenom from them, there was none to be had. ‘Right now there is no antivenom for *Lachesis* in all of Brazil,’ the director told me.

“Now there was talk going around among medical people that antisera didn’t really work for bushmasters—and never had! It didn’t seem to be saving lives—far from it. To make matters worse, my antivenom was a polyvalent serum from Costa Rica, intended to treat the bites of the Costa Rican snakes. Miss Muta had never

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.

set foot in Costa Rica; she came from Suriname, thousands of miles away! A totally different species, and thus her venom had a different profile. Our UPLC analyses here at the Serpentarium had confirmed those differences to be 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, acquired while in the tropics, had knocked around for several weeks in my provider's handbag before finding its way into our refrigerator . . . Had it overheated? To make matters worse, it was five years past date of the expiration!

“It was on the hooves of this unhappy insight that I saw the pale rider coming. 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 with my other hand, 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? I knew it too well already—although doubtless this time it should be much amplified . . . The fire in the wound was only a foretaste of bigger things to come.

“Weighing the remains of my life 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 to rouse staff members quickly, while I was still sentient enough to instruct them 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, my bowels evacuating in tandem, the smooth muscles of my abdomen convulsing with electric jolts, my jaws chattering uncontrollably, I would not be a pretty patient for them to practice medicine on. A wretched, writhing heap covered with shit and puke, my heart pooling blood away from my limbs, I would soon be unable to move, and, lying there, mindbombed, the prospects of living would grow gradually more undesirable while death began to seem a positive relief. You give up very quickly after that point; you begin sinking away. My throat would become so swollen (from angioedema) that I would be unable to talk; 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 14 times by various pitvipers, including six previous bites by three species of bushmaster. Do you remember what other kinds?”

Dean Ripa: “Water moccasin, stiletto snake, night adder, hognose viper, fer-de-lance, white-tailed pitviper, eyelash viper. . . I am losing count.”

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*. Inevitably, there must be some antigenic memory. 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. You see, 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. You don’t want to spoil your chances of using it in a serious bite. You want to save yourself for the right girl.”

Mertens: “But why would using it . . . spoil your chances of using it?”

Dean Ripa: “You develop a sensitivity, which makes it more dangerous to use—and dramatically more unpleasant . . . Head to toe hives, chills, vomiting, fainting. . . to say nothing of what is going on in your kidneys, which are filling up with dead antigens, cellular debris. Serum sickness gets worse each time and the onset earlier. At first it’s three to four days after the treatment; next you are getting hives within minutes of the injection . . . Now you have two battles on your hands, not only from the venom, but the cure. So, if you can avoid antivenom, you are better off. Of my 14 overall bites. . . h’mm . . . I would say that in no more than about three cases would I have certainly died without it. On the other hand, I might have endured severe tissue damage, in several of the others had I not taken it. 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 have been bitten you have absolutely no idea what to expect. It’s all a terrific panic. But you get better at it.”

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

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

Mertens: “Does using antivenom affect 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.”

Mertens: “Have you become more immune from not using antivenom?”

Dean Ripa: “Let’s use the word tolerance, immunity is probably too strong a thing in my case. But, yes, you are right, if you are going to develop any resistance to a poison you are better off not taking the antidote, just going through it on your own. Building antibodies takes time and antivenom subverts that process. Your body has to learn how to fight the invader on its own dime. Consider the heroin addict. Now heroin is a quite 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.

“Now a tolerance is best built 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 antibody response will be lessened. This factor could be critical in a severe bite.

“It all has to do with the kind of venom. Proteolytic venoms, for example, do not do all their work in the first hours. Unneutralized, they continue eating you up for days, weeks, 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. 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 till 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, there is again this lag time while the virus replicates—only now your body is lying in wait for it, having learned how to defend itself from before. 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; even if it has already been educated, 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. Somebody like Bill Haast, though basically immune to the bites of most cobras, could still be killed by a king cobra, where the dose of venom is so much greater.

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

Dean Ripa: “Yes . . . 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’*—being the time necessary to get educated to the disease. The religious snakehandlers, 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 on his 22nd bite . . . Probably went the other way for Punkin, he developed a sensitivity to the venom and expired directly 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! While I am not philosophically opposed to the idea, 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

devenomize them as well, to the same result. It’s like owning a gun that won’t shoot—what’s the point? From my perspective, it would take all the fun and skill out of snakehandling, as well as my fascination for the snakes themselves. I wasn’t attracted to them because they were harmless . . . Okay, I have had some bad experiences; but much was learned. Had I been immune, whole chapters of my book could never have been written! Nothing to write *about*. Then there are 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 another 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 boast your immunity, and handle the snake’s carelessly—when the snakes don’t like to be handled in the first place; and in the second, they still have those terrible long fangs . . . Look at what the venom does to your skin. Even the horses on the antivenom line often suffer from sloughing ulcers at the injection sites . . . Renal problems too. Some of the horses fail to become immune at all, as I mentioned in the cases at Butantan. So Haast and his followers stuck to nerve venoms, especially those of certain Asian cobras whose venoms are 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.

Mertens: “Let’s talk about religion, since you don’t evidently have one. . .”

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

Mertens: “It’s because you’re getting so close to Him . . .”

Dean Ripa: “Or the Devil.”

Mertens: “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 immortals, through their habit of shedding the skin . . .”



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: “After reading your devilish treatise, I am certain I should be. But I think some of your readers might be—concerned. They will want to know if you have found god out there in near-death land.”

Dean Ripa: “Don’t be too charitable with them . . . A lot of them are just looking for grisly photography. I know I would be.”

Mertens: “The religious snake handlers exert a similar fascination, I suspect for yourself, as well. You seem to admire them in some perverse way. . . . Is it for their willingness to stand behind their faith?”

Dean Ripa: “Well, they *do* that.”

Mertens: “You jokingly credit them with having greater faith than the Pope!”

Dean Ripa: “I don’t think that amounts to much! You know, faith is not the first thing that comes to my mind when I think of the Pope. Power, maybe; or *front man*.”

Mertens: “And the faith of the snake handlers, does it work? You note that they survive an inordinate number of snakebites—probably a greater number than those who seek medical treatment.”

Dean Ripa: “That’s only because medical treatment is so bad. My book is a study of false-positives and that would be another example, for here we have only introduced a new faith, that of Hippocrates, and a new devil to go with it, one called *poison*. . . . 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 . . . immune.

“But 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. Which means the whole weight of the thing lies on their own integrity, their own

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

Dean Ripa: “Roughly, yes.”

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.”

Dean Ripa (laughing): “What are you driving at, that I am on some kinda religious quest?”

Mertens: “Nothing so complex. I am just wondering if, after your near-death experiences with snakes, have you come to feel any twinges of *faith*?”

Dean Ripa: “You are worried for my soul! Ah-ha!”

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.

willpower 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 probably be perceived as God’s intervention—and it is so today among the snakehandlers. Just as in folklore, the false-positive of getting well after having consumed special leaves or drinking a bottle of whiskey, 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. Yes, I dare say Mister Universe would go down quickly, 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 . . . Hence modern civilization is just a search for worldly Utopia . . . This search is the source for nearly all the world’s horrors. Dig down deep enough beneath war, and under the dead bodies you will Utopia grinning up at you.

“Now the truth is that there is no uniformly identical lethal dose of anything for any human, or any animal either, for that matter. 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 . . . Straight Darwinian evolution predicts that Negroes should be more resistant to snakebite than the white Caucasians—Africans already have inbuilt defenses against malaria, so why not to African snakes? The snakes are much more venomous in Africa than in Europe, besides being more numerous. South American Indians should be more resistant to the snakes living in their range . . . Etcetera. White Caucasians should be the least resistant of all, since the European snakes are not very venomous. 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.”

Dean Ripa (squirming): “I need more dilaudid. I am beginning to understand you.”

Mertens: “Are there any instances of personal susceptibilities among individuals you have known personally?”

Dean Ripa: “Rodney Miller might be such an example. . . I just wrote up his case. Physically devastated by what could only have been a modest amount of bushmaster venom (Chapter 22), he nearly died despite 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 Miller 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 two mild bushmaster bites before a third one nearly put an end to my pretensions, 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 lethal dose was grossly exceeded. This a bushmaster can easily do, and did do, in my last bite.”

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

Dean Ripa: “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, I should say. Proteolytic effects continue and even accelerate for days after the bite. The sooner you get antivenom, the less damage you will have. 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 . . . made some hasty attempts to define, I think for the first time. With quick antivenom you can head a lot of this off. Naturally, at the actual site of the envenomation, you may not be very successful. The fang wounds themselves 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 in the muscle in some of these . . . Or in this last one [he indicates his arm], an inch and half down or so, where the fangs actually emptied themselves.

“Visitors to the Serpentarium, reading about my bushmaster bites on the plaques, just can’t wait to meet Mister Ripa, or *Doctor Ripa*, as they wrongly assume. I have become a sort of walking 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, would be most gratified with amputations. I keep one hand hidden in my pocket as I talk to them. ‘That costs an extra dollar,’ I tell them, before plucking it out. It has a slightly carnal sound, doesn’t it. Like viewing the naked hermaphrodite at the fair.

“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 pictures I sent her. She wanted gory images of rotting flesh such as you would see in *Crotalus* or *Bothrops* . . . The massive swelling was not 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 . . . With a bushmaster bite you’re going to have a fairly decent looking cadaver at the end, only a little shitty and covered with vomit. You look like a bad drunk except that you’re quite dead.

“So this is one of the misconceptions and always has been. Whereas *Crotalus* and *Bothrops* kill you by destroying your blood quality, bushmaster bite kills you first then fucks up your blood quality . . . Only if it fails on that first mission does the second part go to work on you—and here the result has been, often than not, the classic derangement of the tissue. Normally, however, it skips all that ceremony and goes straight for the blood pressure . . . The first few hours are critical.

“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, into which you are throwing 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 on to that ol’ toilet bowl. You just lay there, spouting like a geyser over your own face, your body jerking like a cheap motel room vibrating bed. It’s all a great bleary-eyed blur, what little you can see, and the room starts shrinking away. Meanwhile, the little man 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



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!”

saving antivenom they had right on hand . . . 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.”

“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. The famous case of ‘death in ten minutes’ from bushmaster bite probably followed this pat-

tern. Other cases of bushmaster shock-death have occurred right in the treatment room—physicians seemingly helpless to save their patients despite early presentation. But these were slow, creeping affairs completely unexpected after the patients seemed 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: “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 inject the life-

tern. Other cases of bushmaster shock-death have occurred right in the treatment room—physicians seemingly helpless to save their patients despite early presentation. But these were slow, creeping affairs completely unexpected after the patients seemed 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, as you have done it, before now, entirely at home and without medical help . . .”

Dean Ripa: “Depends on which you fear most! 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. In one particular time I was really quite a mess, and probably should have taken it. . . My poor ex-wife . . . She really was a saint now that I look back on it . . . I pushed her to the very limit. But yes, your *will* . . . that is 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 unmaning. 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 it seems the easiest thing. If you’ve been through a few such envenomings, you know the scenery. There comes a point when willpower 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 call the ambulance. Or somebody else does—because chances are you will just be lying there in the floor in your own excrement, 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 . . . It was a mere *Porthidium* species [hognose viper] . . . A knuckle bite. Nothing to it. Had I been home, I might have just grit my teeth and gone to bed. 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 . . . No roads in those days, only random fishing boats, and no possibility of getting to a hospital. So I

am trying to walk down out of the woods back to the coast, when the strangest thing starts happening to me, something I have never encountered before or since. I start *sneezing* . . . convulsive sneezing attacks! . . . Cannot stop! An endless staccato of sneezes, one on top of the next till it feels like my eyes are jumping out! *Achoo! - achoo! - achoo! - achoo! - achoo! - achoo! - achoo! - achoo!* Well, it’s some sort of histamine reaction to the venom, I’m thinking—and I have not been smart enough to bring any Benadryl in my pack! Now I am getting too dizzy to stay on the path. I keep falling off into the bushes. I look like a drunk man lost in Central Park . . . But it is not Central Park, it is Costa Rica’s version of the Amazon and this is going to be no casual stroll. Now there are deep ravines bridged by fallen timbers, and I am too dizzy to cross over them. Several times I nearly topple to my death . . . Getting out of there is looking more and more hopeless! And I am still sneezing like a loon! To round it all off nicely, the sky has commenced an insipid drizzling—and boding a heavier rain to come.

“Now there is no way I can walk out of those steep mountains, tough even in the best of health. My native assistant, a 14-year-old farm boy weighing all of ninety-nine pounds, can’t carry me. So with all this panic, we inject the antivenom. Five vials into the hip muscles.

“The boy has spread some palm leaves out for me to die on uh lie down on, and for the next hours this will be my bed . . . That little bit of serum in my bloodstream doesn’t change things much—and wouldn’t anyway, if it was an allergy I was having . . . 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 bed somewhere till I get through this bite, which means no more 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; I am in for the whole ride. And meanwhile a veritable hurricane is coming on! Look on the bright side: the lying down has done me good; the sneezing fits have let up; and while I am still quite dizzy, and can’t walk, I can at least practice my three words of Spanish. Fact is, it’s getting pretty dull out here. 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, and counting mosquitoes. And sooner or later it’s going to get dark—then what? So now my young guide hits upon an idea: he will go down the mountain to fetch a horse.

Horse? Which horse—where? I never saw any horses near here. Nobody has horses, it's just jungle, miles and miles of jungle! Is he kidding? Oh no, he knows where a horse is, he says. His friend's farm, his friend has got lots of farm animals . . . Now my three words of Spanish do not include the metric system and if said animal really is extant I get the idea it is miles away, hours away, days away, perhaps even on another continent, and that he doesn't know with genuine certainty if his friend still has the horse or if he might not have traded it for a pig!

"Exit the boy to go horse rustling. I know I won't be seeing him anytime soon. I am going to have to get used to my mat of palm leaves in the rain.

"Hours pass and my young friend has not returned. The ground is ankle deep with water. I am freezing cold, but my hand is on fire—a nice contrast. Looks like a catcher's mitt, my hand! Where is the boy? Has he forgotten me? Run off to sing rancheros? Guides will do that sometimes, especially farm kids don't know what they are getting into with snake-business. I envision his father has caught up with him, telling him, 'No! *No!* NO MORE SNAKES!' He sends the kid 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! I don't know any of that, of course. All I know is downpour, wilderness, snakebite, pain—and waiting. *Waiting for Godot!* The man who will never return! Waiting for the venom to do its work on me, or for the antivenom, which ever gets there first. Lonely, too! My arm is now a big fat pork sausage and the rain is lashing down on into my eyes. The slopes have converted into rivers, and my little island of palm leaves is shrinking away under the oceans of rain surrounding me. Meanwhile, a cyclone is ripping through the canopy, hurling great branches and even whole trees down with a noise like wailing freight trains! It's a vegetable avalanche, and I am in the middle of it! And the boy? Where is he? Has he deserted me? Has he gotten lost? The hell with the venom I will be drowned before he gets back! Suddenly he is there looking down at 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 as we start down the slopes, the an-

imal skating on its hooves through mud . . . He resents my presence the whole way, kicking and bucking and trying to dislodge me; rubbing himself against jagged boulders, deliberately squeezing in between close-lying trees, trying to scrape me off. I am like a big tick he is trying to get rid of. I tell you, 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. He is not going to know where to draw the line . . . He is not going to be able to say, 'that's it, I've had it! I need treatment!' 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 he is looking at. And when the fear hits him good, he is going to get even more confused . . . Just as I was, 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. A week 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 ten years and if they botch it up, well, 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, the doctor is saying . . . Well, it's a goddamn *Bothrops*, what do you think! Twenty-thousand dollars in blood tests just to tell me what I already knew! Just gimme some whole blood 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, is modern medicine—but it is also quite blundering and blind. Powerful, if guided properly, otherwise, clumsy and crushing everything in front it. You are going to have to guide these healers along, because they are not going to know what the hell 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. The trouble is, a serious envenoming doesn't go like that. What the antivenom can't do, nothing else can. No quick recovery, just a long slow decline before things start turning up again. . . Your swollen arm . . . But 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 indeed, you will have to keep these doctors in check, because they are the first ones who are going to murder you, if the venom doesn't.

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, etcetera. 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. The majority of his customers believed in him too, 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 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 and 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, have their own little monkey to feed before they get around to playing with our bananas. Their minds are no less muddled than 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 witch-doctor can do for you, and things the patient can do, to make the witch magic work better . . . Put them together and 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! The Devil had a different henbane, in those days . . . a different garlic. 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 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 hospital. No backwoods clinic, no torch lights and whiskey—this was modern treatment! *What are those little crosses on your hands?* people wonder, taking me for a religious zealot . . . *Witchcraft*, I tell them. And I am not far off the mark. Trouble was, those little crosses didn't make the medical establishment much money! Crosses were something *anybody* could do! After all, they were starting to sell these cut-and-suck kits in the sportsman's shops and that didn't seem quite like higher medicine . . . Something you could get for five bucks. . . . Need to be more creative 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 about that time. Anybody could cut and suck, 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: “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-paresthesia is only a late symptom—*which leaves only p-pain to characterize their demons habits!!!* Hee-hee. Well, I fairly think they left out the most important *P* of all . . . for *Profit!*

“How the *goyim* must tremble when they hear those dreaded P's enunciated, and going blind from shock at the even more dreadful crescendo—*Compartment Syndrome!* Now how soft and soothing the word *fasciotomy*, breathed to them hopefully across the anaesthesia machine lest they pass out from sheer horror at the sight of it, not to mention the price tag . . . It's not all that technical, really, your local butcher could do it . . . 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, is 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 later on, 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 to get 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 bony things dangling from his shoulders! Looks like two miles of bad railroad track, so many scars round and round. ‘You are like sent over from Frankenstein's castle, awready!’ I tell

him. ‘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 hook, and I guess he’ll be back for a fifth the next time, till they have to amputate—why break with tradition? George Went Hensley, bitten *four hundred times*, was buried with less damage than this guy will be. 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!

“Now 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. I will tell you what *Compartment Syndrome* really means; it is really a secret code! It means *live one* . . . A sly, polite way for Doctor Fingerstein to tell you, ‘Well, it’s not legal for me to murder you, son; but I can damn well ruin your limb for a price.’ Fasciotomy. Not a single fact of evidence supports its use, and it kills snakebite victims like flies . . . And you will find it used in nearly every hospital in the world, where ever 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 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? That’s insane!”

Dean Ripa: “Is it? Probably the world’s first surgery. And do you know what it was done for? To immortalize you, to 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 hook-nosed old guy standing 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 these 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 probably 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. 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 limbs 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 responsibility. 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, yes . . . 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*.² 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 had happened. I got to see the head hanging on! An impeccable delivery. A true death bite, 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. The prestigious *Fang Award*, for Lifetime Achievement—killing her own keeper. Which was, of course, the equivalent of committing suicide. Quite a sacrifice for science.”

Mertens: “You sound excited about it.”

Dean Ripa: “The summit of my career . . . How often does a student of snakebite get to experience such a thing—and come back from it? I will thank that snake with my dying breath.”

Mertens: “You say the bite was into deep muscle. Why is this *better*—my god, you've got me talking like you 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 any of the tests on mice. All part of the hunting strategy. This works quite well on the small

mammals bushmaster's eat. The bushmaster's gigantic fangs blast their poison directly into the organs of the prey animal, bypassing the skin entirely. In predation, there are no merely cutaneous envenomings, unless something has gone wrong with the delivery.

“Now to kill their prey bushmasters do not always need their poison. The sheer power of the jaws, which squeeze the prey to death in the process of injecting venom, pierce the rodent's body neatly through. This has implications for the also ‘squeezeably soft’ human victim. In meaty areas of the body, the compression exerted by the jaws on the skin, 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)”

Dean Ripa: “Grab a hunk of flesh on your upper forearm, now press in between your fingers . . . You 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.

² “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 them 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 quite 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?”

Although the bite was not to the hand, and well at the other end of my forearm, my three fingers spasmed up into my palm uncontrollably. The 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 reach them. Within twenty seconds 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 knew I had 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—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, repeat that one great sensation, feel the heat coming off 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 deadly 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 that time? 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 the spiritual ones as though they were all part of the same process, and yet remains, for all his brooding anarchy, 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, 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: “Yes, but don’t get the idea it is an exciting change. There is little exhilaration. You are too sick for

exhilaration. It is flat, gray, painful and depressing. 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 dreadful-ness of surviving snakebite is only exceeded by the dreadful-ness 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. By the time you hear the thump, it's over. They say the dead stay alive for a few seconds afterwards; the severed head 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! Yes, it's true! This feeling never left me as I matured, and even today, ripe and rotting after 14 snakebites and late middle-age, I find I can't put it away. Snakebite remains one of the most exciting things I can think of, and the 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 deliberate carelessness. 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?* 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 the day. . . 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 new uncharted area. My writing contains the very first, firsthand accounts of bushmaster bite in the literature. Through seven bushmaster bites I have recorded every stage of the envenoming, from the effects of the neonate venom, to the subadult, and now, with this one, the full adult. There is nothing else like it in the envenomation literature. Short of dying there is nothing more I can do. In a certain sense now, I feel I can close the books . . . move on to other territory. My writing has gained immeasurably from these experiences—how much poorer my book would have been 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? It is the act of killing yourself. Well, think about that sentence for a minute . . . think of the words . . . 'killing yourself.' Who is the *self* you are killing and how has it become detached from the 'you' that is taking the life . . . When a man puts a gun to his head, *who's finger* is pulling the trigger? Does the hand that loads the gun expect to survive the bullet he is fitting into the chamber? It would seem that there are *two* parties involved . . . One of them thinks he is immortal, and wants to get rid of the other that is not, which has become quite a strain, dragging him around. . . A strange battle—against an illusive, unknown enemy . . . The ultimate survival game, but one that 'you' will make it through. Though some part of you might not . . .

"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 the friends I have, that have died, have done so by killing themselves . . . Is that statistically normal? I wouldn't think so. What little message did I leave these people with? How did I contribute, what special negativity, left behind, latently, that when the end came, they chose the dark road? Each of us harbors something like that, and of course we turn our backs on it . . . but the question is haunting, always there.

"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 circumstance 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. Even the Bible says it. '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, etcetera . . . 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' Snake! 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."

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 a pyramid toward . . . who knows? Note this fact: While there are many snake people who have never been bitten even one single time, is rare to find anybody, among those who have been bitten, who has been bitten just once. *Twice bitten—twice again!* Hold that thought a minute . . .

"The story, *Imp of the Perverse*, by Edgar Allen Poe. It's the tale about the man who can't resist doing things he knows he shouldn't, till it is his final undoing. He commits a murder, because he knows he shouldn't. Even confesses, because he knows he shouldn't. I can identify with that character. Surviving 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. 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 . . . *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. 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 this time . . . Who ever notices it? Yet that’s how it is, isn’t it, the hour of your death always in the background. 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 great 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 I was never less than aware had the power to kill me. This question proposed to a psychologist might better be answered by a priest! A reenactment of the same impulse that guides the hand of the religious snake handler, or the African sorcerer, to take up serpents! Even Moses in the Bible, besides being a magician, was evidently a snakehandler. 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 former must have felt the need to dominate the latter, even to the exclusion of considering his own safety.

“The moralist’s squabbling about whether people should be allowed to keep snakes and other dangerous creatures will be of little interest to toxicology, whose gold will be in the case histories—and of this gold, science can never get enough. Without my occasional lapses in the self-preserving instinct, how much poorer my 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 documents of every kind . . . But my rat’s eye view allows me a special insight these writings do not have—I dare say, one not now available to many other men on this earth. In an advancing collectivist society where safety seems to be the only thing on everyone’s pleasure seeking mind, 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, or held up at a stoplight in high traffic, or enduring the ten-minute hate 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 bites, 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 way, and I—yet again. Truly death yawns for us all. Now or later, we will all meet there, on that rugged cross. The psychologists, the priests, the scientists. And the pigs too on which all those pillars of society have experimented!

“No man-made law can ever change that.”

At this time a nurse enters to take Dean’s blood. He waves her away. “No more blood tests,” he tells her, “You think I am Rockefeller, 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.”

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. It could not help but explode—and there was nowhere else for it to go but into me! In such circumstances the 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 itself. 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. That means ‘kill it quickly, for it is large and could hurt me.’ 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 an extra 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 muscular construction, and quite different from the rattlesnakes or lancevipers, whose heads are not so rigidly constituted. 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. This is 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 more than ten minutes while the snake seemingly just tortured it to death, eventually suffocating it rather than envenoming it. Equally, I have seen rats snatch-bitten and released, and then fall over dead as though from a gun shot to the head.

“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, nothing more—and when I looked up I saw the snake’s head hanging onto my arm as though I had just sprouted a long, gnawing vine. I say, *when I looked*, but in fact, while I had seen everything, I had seen nothing but my own horror. My reaction was not swift enough to have understood the details, else I might have escaped it. 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—these things would have been preserved other than as wounds on the skin, rather as wounds in my comprehending brain. It is quite different from the flash-grab of the rattlesnake or *Bothrops*, which is over with almost before you can comprehend it. This bite lingered for a meaningful second, giving me enough time to grasp what was happening to me, even if I could do nothing about 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 plunged 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 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. Still, the heart was its target, and when it found it, would begin pooling blood rather than beating it out again. 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; to less vomiting and diarrhea, to 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 crook-

ed 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 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, and he can spin it on his nose, and pick the places he will live in, and even where he will die. It doesn't count on things like dreams giving up, or on a dreamer simply gotten 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 it one last time—or to 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 what lost Garden? Now I would just drop down, another among the billions of monkeys 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—as 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 winning . . . Getting bit, pulling through, getting bit, pulling through . . . I got up each day, tending the deadly worms in my coffin, worshipping my own grinning skull high-up on a pole, over-crawling with the evil life I had given rise too . . . 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, a 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 your death. Even when you manage put your mind off from it, you are mounting other thoughts against it; so that these anti-Death thoughts are actually *of* Death, too, and tainted. One is always there building one's little shrine, and whether staring in disbelief that such a thing could really be; or disregarding it, putting the burden on a secret god who has a better purpose for you afterwards than just bones, it always comes out in the mortician's wash . . . 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 till he gets it right! And if that *pretender* of life refuses to hear, or even greet him at the door, 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 its mission on earth. My death was the other end of its 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 only to get itself into a jug of formaldehyde, for a reward. State's evidence! Given a choice, wouldn't the poor snake rather have escaped me? Why then, hadn't I escaped it? 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 here was no measurable separation be-

tween us—we had merged, serpent and I. It had risen and appeared, writing undulating shadow language on the wall of the prison that had once been a garden, 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 my own 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 has 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: “The *venomous* snakes. The true baby devils of the greater Devil. I suspect I was trying to make some sort of deal. Russian roulette is a game, you will note, that is played primarily by teenage boys. I have never grown up. No chance of winning, of course. Like entering a staring contest with a skull—you always lose. The snakes just got more venomous and the calls closer, and the countries I had to retrieve them from, got farther and farther away. The missions were getting more and more dangerous. Snakes are rare and valuable for one reason: because nobody else has them. And there are often some very good reasons for that . . . like nobody wants to risk going where they are. And so I went out into the world. 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, the Devil too . . . The primal haunter that

fills the human heart with terror at the thought it—of snakes, of snakes, of what a snake is. The terror that *is* snakes and that all people loathe and fear, whether they have been taught the fear or not. The great invisible Snake that lives in every primal scream. 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 *snake-ness* that makes birds encircle them, shrieking out their warning to other birds, even those not of their own species, and yet both understand the message . . . Strange, isn’t it, this shared Knowledge and complicity among creatures cooperating against a single enemy known to all? The *shapes of things* were the first writing . . . And all animals learned to read that writing—or failing, perished. All 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 *spider* that writes 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, spins its web within us! And yet, no matter how hard we try to look the other way, we can’t help glimpsing that web sometimes—and touching the edge of Fate! Then like a bird circling and screaming at a snake, we are find ourselves crying out in the age old tongue.

“All human culture to date has been nothing more than a systematic effort by billions of deceased contributors to perpetuate that archaic system within a social context dependent on the predicted actions of other men, rather than on the manifestations of wild, happenstance nature. It has happened that these new markers have replaced the old ones entirely, so that the old ones have lost their meaning. 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 your book 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, and abolish it ad hoc, and in the ruins, create an artificial world of pleasure for himself—one he can dominate and control. But what have his technological advancements really come to? A million crutches for his *failings* as an animal! Every new invention or innovation is 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 has *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 returning 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 programing. 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. 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 . . . 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. Now 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 . . . 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 in time.

“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 man 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 people 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 so close 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.

“Recognition of the concept ‘snake’ was more important than selectivity and identification past that point. One didn’t say this kind was harmless and this kind dangerous. It was too far against the grain of total avoidance. Thus even to this day snakes remain untouchables. The mind is not allowed to ‘go there’ If your mind is going there, you are standing (or squatting, as the case was here) too close. It is no different today, millions of

years later . . . 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, and then the herd might lose you—a very bad precedent, if others follow you off into independent life-styles. 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 . . . Though the snake has changed its name 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, its still the same old serpent in the tree. Father of lies . . . that is camouflage.”

Mertens: “Camouflage?”

“Of course—that was the first great lie. The trick to get you to step on him, or pick him up . . . The Forbidden Fruit. You must understand that human ancestors would have eaten a wide variety of small animals, among them snakes. And they would have eaten them alive. And those who did, some of them—who had picked up the wrong species—would have *surely died* . . . Just as god’s command 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 imitateness, 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, like monkeys, humans can’t think without first consulting the signaling expressions of their fellows, 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 is in the archetype . . . or *meme*, as they are calling it nowadays. The hidden ‘snake’ living in 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 inter-

face 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, is as susceptible to ‘snake-madness’ as somebody from the backwoods. Mention snakes to him and he will demonstrate a degree of gullibility almost shocking to behold. He might be an air pilot or a lawyer or a mathematician. Bring up snakes and watch him turn into an idiot. In primal days man lived in such terror of snakes, and for so many millions of years, that it all got stored 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 snakes poison people. It is not more than about four or five hundred years old this knowledge . . . but even after Francisco Redi had explained it, it remained esoteric knowledge at best, known to just a few specialists. The rest of the planet, up until about a century ago, thought snakes harmed you through implanting a devil or by some other supernatural means—and probably a good three-quarters of the population of the world 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 he heard, 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 bitten by snakes but also being consumed by them. 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 calls—reproductive signaling—and the fear cry, which, once others were capable of recognizing its meaning, became the warning cry. 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 in it, according to the level of fear detected in the sound. In various birds this 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 that cry signifies, to gather round, till it all becomes a raucous mob. 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 as typical when that kind of predator made a threatening appearance. Why snakes and not, say, a big cat or a hawk? Simply because snakes are the most common and yet hardest to detect, and the one these smaller primates stood most to be afraid of. A snake is also quite deaf and the monkeys could make all the hoop and holler they wanted without angering it, or increasing their chances of being eaten by it. And because snakes—I am talking about viperine snakes here, and constricting snakes—are ambush predators requiring special skill to detect them. A warning cry heard in the nick of time could make all the difference to a young primate who had not mastered the art of separating the complex visual pattern a well camouflaged snake makes in the tangled background of the forest floor. 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 what was what. That branching of catarrhine human ancestors has reached modern man with these very tendencies unchanged, with such communication that is not poetic or commercial—derived from mating advertisements—being instructional or oracular—derived from these early 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, and 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.³ 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 one

in a million people, such as myself, should be so obsessed with snakes as to devote his whole life to them has an answer going back millions of years. It's an obsession lying dormant in all of us.

“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 . . . The fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, eaten thanks to the serpent . . . leads 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 consider your subject matter, brings evolution full circle, doesn't it! The pattern recognitions that allow you to read a page, or to construct the words and sentences on it, were paid for in ancient blood and venom.

“And so snakes live very deep inside us, as old as the startle-reflex, shared by all creatures, and out of which terrors grew the pattern recognition skills we needed to see them and not get bitten by them, and later the mythologies and religions meant to protect us from what they meant to us symbolically . . . And so when a snake attacks us, there is something supernatural in it . . . Something ghostly and inconceivable . . .

“My own impressions in this bite, were much the same. The attack was like a hand reaching down from another world, to snatch me up into Death's jaws . . . And though I was looking dead at it [the snake], it was completely unexpected . . . 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 this world. An idea old, older than I was by millions of years, and 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*

³ Lynne A. Isbell (2006). Snakes as agents of evolutionary change in primate brains. *Journal of Human Evolution*. 51: 1 - 35

. . . 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 fear. 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 to me? 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 go with it, the misbegotten utterance an eight-year-old boy looking up into a black field of stars and wishing for *wisdom*, of all things! What a foolish thing, that desire! I had not believed it real or I would have never dared to 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 waking up in a hillock of dirt.

“I was ambushed. The snake popped out like an assassin. A curtain spread; a knife came plunging down; I staggered backwards, spouting blood. Pure sleight of hand. I had 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 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. 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 being 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, the section of the paper she actually lie on—my eyes watchful, my nerves on hair-trigger alert to make a swift retreat should any of sign of movement betray an active intent

“Foolish man who tries to second guess the whims of a snake! 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 dead 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, but could it have all been slowed down on film, I am sure it would have looked very organized and mathematical. For me it was only an unexpected hammer-blow, a gavel slapping down from outer space. 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, planting 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 from a life reduced to the level of a still lingering aftershock. Yet it was there just the same, flash-frozen in my brain cells in that traumatic instant—snapshot scenes 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 half closed and the tongue popping ritually out. . . . She was like a 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, looming above the place where my arm had been—under whatever ‘bush’ or ‘cavern’ 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, perhaps, 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 skin-shed . . . Large rodent thing crossed by again . . . bit it good and hard . . . too big to restrain properly . . . bolted away into the forest. . . Probably dead 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 blob bobbing . . . She had taken a chance—dinner always came from that direction! A girl gotta eat! Besides, she was pregnant and growing her 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 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 insane or drunk, before dropping down dead on the sidewalk in front of amused passersby. They thought him insane or drunk—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, enjoying abdominal convulsions as of being stabbed with cattle-prods, my arm boiling with subterranean fire—yes, I would be a fine mess and unappetizing too for my staff to have to deal with! The office bathroom upstairs would be easier to mop up afterwards. . . a worthy goal. The sudden vanishing of my 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.

“The poems and sonnets about Death betray how little the writers knew Him personally. *When Death comes knocking*, goes the old cliché. 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 of life a bit 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 ten milligrams, the amount of poison necessary to convert a living man into a corpse, did not alter my circumstance after receiving it. My life’s work spent searching for the answer to that question, 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 a 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 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 reckoning, for the sake of a few more years staring into the face of a skull, 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—it was the noise of the snake-hook, clattering against the wall! It was good that it had fallen over, else I might never have come back from the edge. *Move, goddammit, move!* I told myself. *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 clatter-

ing hook seemed several seconds delayed—as though it were still falling. 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, fending 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, either to save my life—or to deal with my remains; that extending between Now and Death was a period of the most excruciating torture and from which relief I might well be begging for death 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 serpents disturbed by the sound of cursing and doors slamming to left of the gamboling crocodiles. 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 performing the least task. I could not have opened 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 would be 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 2 meter long bushmaster snake from South American . . . 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. Prerecorded too, along with this body . . . *Hold on a minute, please!* Frozen lips mumbling last words to my wife—financial affairs first, 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!

“That phone went on ringing in my head long after it had stopped in my pocket; clinking like the vials of anti-venom I was ever rolling toward, down white hospital corridors on rattling gurneys eyes rolling back in my head could never get enough somehow. . . Sounds of glass breaking, rattle of death and fear, noises from another lifetime voiced through distant answering machine . . . *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. Old Charley getting anxious

““Still there?!—I really must break off now . . . Pall-bearers 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 the 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?*””

*