

DEAN RIPA

Confessions of a Gaboon Viper Lover

NO SNAKE OF MY childhood mythology was more dreamily considered, nor more sought after by me during my first years of collecting venomous snakes abroad, than the Gaboon viper, whose morphological wonder seemed to fulfill all the dreads—and desires—I had to experience, in line and color the very image of pure Death. Coming upon a Gaboon viper in the grass is like stumbling onto a pile of human bones; it gives you the same sense of shock, of trespass into an unwelcome territory. The pallid oblongs that traverse the animal's spine look like nothing so much as the disconnected articulations of a dismembered skeleton, held in ligaments of hourglasses. A head of cruel pale color, heart-shaped, flat; it might be a blanched tree leaf—or the denuded pate of a human skull half embedded in the forest litter. Left unmolested, the snake is not likely to move, relying on its disruptive pattern to sink indistinguishably into the leaves in front of you. Once startled, however, that stone-dead skeleton stirs with the sudden viciousness of unexpected life! The head heaves abruptly forward like an arrested javelin, and the squat, tire-sized body, blowing up and down like a molten, fluid thing, jerks spastically, the reeded nostrils under the fork-horned nose growling out

blasts of air from bloated, twitching coils. The Gaboon viper rises and moves and appears! Like some secret glyph writing in a chaotic code, the ancient warning invoked: “*Halt! Go no further! Here is Death!*”

There is something supremely eerie in the character of this snake’s appearance. Like the archetype of a vast human idea that sets gongs going off and warning flags raising, the pattern of the Gaboon viper exploits racial memories of the fear of death itself. Question: If the Gaboon viper is mimetic of something in nature, *what* (in nature) is it mimetic of? Why this *particular* design, whose fearful expression—formed some ten million years before man set foot on the scene—communicates images of death and horror to all who behold it?

She is not an ugly snake.* By any artist’s standard, she could be called art. Her pattern might have been lifted from a Persian carpet. She crawls in an oriental profusion, richly colored and drawn, her lines evocative of all that is startling and bizarre in nature. Purples, carmines, buffs, mauves, silky white crescents and splashes of green ellipses under a longitude of dun-colored coffin shapes outlined in black, are arrayed in pastel hues on each large spade-shaped scale. Conflicting and fantastic shapes, embedded with cryptic symbols and arcane directives, have been embroidered into her hide, acting on the subconscious level with the nameless fear promptings of certain dreams. Ornate, wonderful and terrible, her forever fashionable design strikes the viewer as forbiddingly as the scarlet hourglass on the abdomen of the black widow spider. Here is something awful, something that

*The writer is speaking of his own personal Gaboon, Madame Zsa Zsa.

can kill . . . but there is a loveliness to this Death, a soft, velvety allure. In the tenebrious conditions of its forest environment (walking through true rain forest may be equated with walking on the bottom of the sea—it's that dim) the snake seems an outwardly meaningless shape, part of a background. Behind the verdant stage wires of her theatrical jungle, in a crazy painted domain of mossy and incult avenues, she waits like a deadly potential for conscious perception—to make her *real*.

“The look of *bones* is what makes them so highly coveted,” a witch priest in Old Sunyani (Tanzania) told me years after I'd caught my first one. “One can *see* into the pattern . . .” Just what things he *saw* he declined to say. That the Gaboon viper should be revered as a holy object among some African snake cults is not surprising. Among “covetable” creatures, snakes rank high, but certainly few other snakes (and few other animals, excepting certain insects), can compare with the serpents of the *Bitis* group (Gaboons, rhino vipers, puff adders), in the jewel-like perfection of their forms. A Gaboon viper in the exhibition case at a zoological park is apt to magnetize more awestruck faces to the glass than any other, and incur more remarks afterward. How is it that the snake is in *zoo* at all, and not an art museum? The Gaboon viper makes one aware of the feebleness of human art, always imitative of nature. The strongest paintings can little compete with it for sheer effect and impression. An ever-changing, liquid form, it strains the art critic's preposterous theories as to origins. One day it is Kandinsky zigzags, a borderline hallucination; at another moment, with the mere shifting of its coils, it is a litter of bones more compelling than any of Georgia O'Keefe's mere-

tricious skulls. Its colors, a conglomeration of peculiarly African symmetries, seem lifted from an African shield painting. Did I say the beast has horns? I didn't mean this halfheartedly. A pair of forked rhinoceran appendages crown the nose of this otherworldly devil, like a weird afterthought to creation. Nasal appendages seem out of place on a snake; on a heart-shaped nose of enlarged nostrils, pugged like a pig's, they seem a macabre embellishment; something from Bosch's hell world, or Durer's engraving of the Devil in the Garden. Add silvery little eyes that flicker like mica chips in the face, and a tendency to maggot-like bloatedness, and you have a creature incomparably perverse, repellent, and beautiful. The Gaboon viper, queen of the world's deadly maggots, might be a living model for the early Christian demons depicted in the Gothic Renaissance.

To the African native it presents as stark and frightening an appearance as one of their own ancestral Devils made carnate—a breathing, flattening, spreading thing, with horns and eyes glittering on a vaguely human mask, like one of their own grotesque fetish carvings come to life. Violent expellations of breath produce a rasping, growling sound that no prayer to fetishes can propitiate; the body, expanding taut as if to explode, contracts, withers alternately, like some hideous hallucination of a demon being that can both shrink and increase itself at will. The angular head depresses sharply, mashing its nose against the dirt, so that the silvery little cat-like eyes seem bent back into the rubbery flesh of its head. The creature seems to be making horrible Chinese faces at its observer to frighten him away; the huge venom glands, swollen with the amplitude of lethal potentials, displace the angles of its jaws, and are thus enlarged and ampli-

fied by these contortions. On some specimens these glands may be tinged a pinkish hue of their own—like the baboon’s florid bottom, they scream out at you—pulsing, throbbing against the dirt. . . . Flanking the back of the head, painted in mirrorment on the apex of the glands, are two large black spots that stare out like the eyes of a target, lending a death’s head moth appearance to the face. Their position is strangely deceptive, giving the impression that the snake is looking backward at you, even as it looks forward, with the head connected to the “trunk” in reverse! The real eyes are tinier, like vertical slits in the face, set far on the muzzle and hidden within disruptive black arrows invading the lips. The unblinking, jewel-like gaze is not as fixed or immobile as it seems. Now and then, the eyes can be perceived to *twitch* visibly, as with some furtive intention; their movement, at once appraisive and stealthy in the motionless head, conveys a strange intelligence that seems inappropriate, even ghoulish, in an animal that has no arms or legs. Like a devious little humanoid mind imprisoned in glassy cockpits of eyes, the snake appears to be considering your motives. Or plotting some tricky maneuver to steal your soul. . . .

Had the snake any fur, one would have no trouble in accepting it as a mammal—a new line of mammals, maybe, ones who had given up bothering with limbs—a creature well on the road to weasels, rats, and human beings. The horns, the pugged head, the weird little vertical eyes, the slug-like body dressed in the elaborate pattern—on a snake these features seem suspect somehow, part of a costume, a disguise. Here is Madame Zsa Zsa, stretching like taffy through her Halloween jungle, on her way to some nameless ball. . . . “*Who are you?*” you ask, charmed and inspired.

Her discrete hips slink like a flaccid lure into the moonlit fronds. Implausible, desirable, some indefinable teleology, present latently, but strongly palpable, makes one question her very "snakeness." Morphologically, she seems halfway to some unspeakable transformation that may or may not include a human head. The palaver is finished—with an abruptness you could never imagine, she is gone—and off you go without her, despondent and alone, to make water in the tall grass. Now *here* is the amputated torso of the local witch priest lying across the footpath, in the process of some Juju reversion to human form. . . . "Excuse *me!*" you cry—seeing as it was magic and not love all along—and stepping quickly over the quixotic shape (so as not inconvenience his change), you go running back to the hut for more palm wine.

The Gaboon viper does not yield easily her confidences. There is no appealing to her human qualities. Her shocking appearance in the long grass may drive the foraging bush man to temporary insanity. Impending destruction by his gods is forthcoming, and he knows it. Something he was not *supposed* to see. He may flee, shrieking "*Obeah!*"—having beheld the very source of his superstitious dreads. As often, his fears leave him paralyzed in his tracks, sweating bullets and quite unable to move in the presence of the snake. "I am hypnotized the way little birds are hypnotized by the stare of snakes till they can be caught and eaten," his brain squirms, "Soon he will eat my soul!" This latter talent of snakes (soul eating) has never been disproved to me, by the way; the former—that of mesmerism—one may argue, is the result of fear. I ask instead: what is *fear* but a kind of hypnotic trance? I have heard more than one African complain of motor

paralysis upon encountering this snake. Others tell of a magnetic draw that reels them irresistibly toward it.

A Ghanaian man, Harry Tembo, confided an interesting story to me while I was undergoing treatment for malaria in Accra. He was out driving in the country, returning from a visit to his less worldly relatives, when, by some hideous magnetism, his car was suddenly *drawn* off the road to collide with a tree! The presence of a Gaboon viper, lying coiled nearby the crashed vehicle, was the sullen proof of ulterior forces at work. "The snake pulled me off the road!" he shouted at me, "It tried to kill me!" "Decidedly," I said to him, putting the *ganja* pipe to my mouth, "Just as it has drawn *me* to your Africa!" I remember a young guide who, before going into a kind of convulsion fit in the grass, chanced upon a certain Gaboon viper we had been hunting for several days. He froze in his tracks, his yellow eyes wild and whirling, a mute utterance of terror struggling on his lips, while, below one foot (raised midair), lay the deadly zigzag of familiar coils. His cry was withheld to no purpose: snakes are deaf to airborne sounds. A moment later and the man was flipping and frothing in the leaves. We could never understand the reason for these histrionics, but they seemed sound practice, as no bite had been struck.

There is always this danger when walking in even the most open terrain, that one may tread upon the Gaboon viper unawares. I recall an episode.

A snarl of tree limbs and stick debris from a small land clearing sat heaped in a stack. Eyewitnesses to the snake's proximity were abundant. A half a dozen scared cane workers saw it crawl into the sticks, but never out again. They ran to get the "snake men," naturally, as a bounty had been of-

fered. Clearing the tree limbs by hand, sifting them piece by piece, so as not to miss anything, we were soon left with a cleared, neat circle of flattened grass and leaves—and no snake! For a while we stood disgruntledly about, fuming and talking our “lying” informants down. Two hours work in the African heat for nothing, and both of us malarial! Taking a single step forward (by way of exiting the disappointing premises), a startling blast of air brought the rocketing bump of an unseen head against my shoe. *There* was a young Gaboon viper, hissing like a boiling blast furnace, coiled but scant inches from my foot! It had struck out blindly, close-mouthed, not to bite, but to warn. It had been coiled placidly beside my foot all that time, and we hadn’t seen it! Subsequent search with a rake through the dry matted leaves turned up two others—each as undetectable as the first.

“Seeing” the Gaboon viper seems largely participatory, on a parallel with perception itself. Like Dali’s paranoiac-critical method of the hidden face, there arises that “magic” effect of audience creation. The eye seeks form and structure, even in the worst chaos. Most people agree that a “car” looks like a car, a “tree” a tree—but this is an *agreement*, it should be remembered, a consensus of like expectations, for there are other truths, other worlds. . . . The Gaboon viper offers no key to unravel her, no solidity, no aspect, only a giddiness and a sense of swarming, a liquidity of incurving circles bending the vision to fish-eyed extremes. This is never more apparent than when one is led out to the scene of a recent snake bite, and expected to turn up a snake.

“We saw it *there*. . . .”

The tribesmen had fear in their eyes. They had taken me over two miles through dense bush, and now they pointed

with stark insistence to some obscure region under the trees. A clump of green and brown ferns formed a little island hillock in the swamp, where a rise of palm fronds over a mud pool doted like so many women's skirts trailing mold. An expanse of yellowish flotsam, coagulating in a shaft of sunlight, signified the treacherous nature of the ground surface. Somewhere out there was the snake. . . . It wasn't enough to have to worry about crocodiles lying up hidden, but the murky bog water was inhabited by the schistosoma snail.

"It is just *there*," my man repeated, "Beneath the fronds. . . . Look!"

I *was* looking. . . . Their wondrous African eyes saw everything—I saw *nothing*.

"Look near the stump," suggested another, reaching forth a shaking, nubbed hand (spitting cobra bites and bush medicine, but he is very efficient with the machete even without fingers). "There . . . *now* do you see it?"

The sad truth was that I did not. I saw leaves, fronds, sticks and weeds, nothing more.

"*Onan-ka?*" I asked, trying to confirm if it was Gaboon, and not anxious to wade through any more mud for another harmless *Philothamnus*. "Is it *onan-ka?*"

The tall man nodded with exaggerated gravity, and traced an abstract shape in the air. They led me closer, into an over-shadowed distance of withered limbs suspended in a lace of mossy tendrils. Their faces spasmed against the insects striking their eyes. We had approached so closely now that the men had become visibly afraid. Yet still I saw *nothing*.

"There . . . *see! see!*" they blurted hastily, anxious to be gone from the place.

My men were losing faith in me. "This white snake man

is either blind or stupid!" I could hear them thinking, "—or so scared he pretends to be!"

"It is *there!*" exclaimed their group leader, in a low, hissing tone. His eyes darted around as though fearful of phantom betrayals. "How is it that you cannot perceive it?"

"Come . . . come . . ." whispered another, "We will go the other way, from behind!"

This new path was even deeper and more obscure. We found ourselves sinking up to our knees in places. Black leeches mobbed our legs. In a panic, we sought out the higher, dry ground, stumbling up onto crumbling logs. When I looked back the leeches were somersaulting after us! A lit cigarette applied to their flabby, detestable surfaces, and they released their numbing hold, leaving bloody trails behind them on our skin. We penetrated further, till at length the way became impassable. Now on hands and knees we crawled, worming out way into brush tangles, careful where to place our fingers, for the ground was alive with black ants. Venomous green vines dangled against us from the thickets above; we snaked on our bellies, cowering, shrinking from hidden, nettled things that pricked and stabbed, from a curious powder that rained like spores down into our hair and eyes. We came at last to a vaulted area, where flabby leafed plants flanked a spacious overhang above our heads. Here we were able to stand upright for once. A natural arbor, or tunnel, as if the woods had parted around an immense lozenge-shaped object that had bulldozed its way through, made a natural ceiling above us. Declivities big as barrel heads splayed the mud just ahead—the cavernous spoor of the bush elephant.

"*It is there . . . now you must see it!*" The two men were

wriggling and pointing, their black hides shining with sweat, their mouths gaping with exhaustion and a horror that they had allowed themselves to come so close. We were evidently almost up on top of it. But *where* was it?

I didn't dare ask them again.

Rather than try their nerves any further, risk them deserting me in a depth of wilderness I little knew the way out of, I started blindly off alone in the direction they indicated, my snake hook winnowing the weeds in front of me, my ears harkening for the violent hiss I hoped would come before the broad wedge-shaped head shot out from nowhere, falling like an axe blade against my leg.

"*There! . . . there! . . . there!*" the men shrieked behind me.

I looked down.

It was true. The Gaboon was there, smiling vexedly up at me, fat as a car tire under the tangled fronds. Its coil was such that it filled and overflowed one of the elephant tracks, a sleeping pile of evil crisscrosses looking up with silvery eyes. Nearly three hours since they'd spotted it, and it hadn't budged a purple inch.

Coming upon a Gaboon viper under the dim tree canopy, seeing it literally materialize before you from the debris of the forest floor, is perhaps the closest one can ever come among live creatures to the fright of encountering an actual ghost.