

Lords of Life

The snake our cracker neighbour had to scotch
was black and white and beautiful to watch.
I'd watch it shift its length, stay still, sashay,
shunting its flesh on shuffled vertebrae
for days before, and thought of it as 'mine'
so long had I wondered at its pliant spine.
My neighbour thinks it queer my sense of loss.
He took a branch festooned with Spanish moss,
at the cooler end of one long afternoon,
and pestled my oaksake's head into a spoon
he flourished laughing at his dogs, then slung
the slack ladle of its life to where it hung
snagged on a branch for buzzards till, stripped bare,
it trailed like a Chinese kite-string in the air.
Waal! he exclaimed, *if ahda knowed you guys*
like snakes on your land... he turns and sighs
at such greenhornery. I'd half a mind
to say I'd checked the snake's a harmless kind
in *two* encyclopaedias but know the looks
I'd get from him for 'talking books'. –
There's something fairy (I can hear him say)
about a guy that watches snakes all goddam day!
The wife he bullies says: O Bill, let be!
There's doers and there's watchers, maybe he...
Ain't no doer, says he, that's plain to see!
I seed him sit out on their porch and read
some goddam great Encyclopaed-
ia, yeah, read! What does the fairy DO?
O Bill! she says, *not everyone's like you.*
And you'd be the first man to stand up and say
that people living in the USA
have every right to live the way they please.—
Yeah! But those guys look too young for retirees!
Nothing that I did made any sense
but I think he offered me as recompense
for battering my snake the chance to see
the alligators on his property.
Each Sunday his riding mower wouldn't stop
till every blade of grass had had its crop,
so that the bald, burned earth showed through the green
but any snake that trespassed was soon seen.
That was the front, but out there in the back
he hadn't even hacked a proper track

down to the swampy lake, his own retreat
kept as wild as the front part was kept neat.
This was his wilderness, his very own
left just as it was, rank, overgrown,
and into this he went with guns and beer
to wallow in his dreams of the frontier
and shoot the gators we were seeing glide
with egrets on their backs from side to side.
The egrets ride in threes their gator skiffs,
Pharoahs' sarcophagi with hieroglyphs!
He offered me his rifle: *Wanna try?*
Go for the big ones, not the smaller fry!
They've taken gators off the Endangered List.
I took aim and, deliberately, missed.
He blasted three egrets like a fairground shy
and then the gator they were ferried by.
Then we sat down at his fire and watched the day,
now reddened at the edges, drain away.
The hissing of damp logs and ringpull Bud
drunk from the can, his seal of brotherhood
(the sort where I'd play Abel and him Cain!)
I can't stand his beer but don't complain
as he flings them across the fire for me to catch:
round 1: the shooting. 2: the boozing match!
Each dead can he crushed flat and tossed aside.
(When I was safe back home I also tried
and found, to my great chagrin, aluminum
crushable with pressure from one thumb!)
We stare into his cookout and exchange
neighbourly nothings, gators still in range.
Liberal with his beer-cans he provokes
his gator-watching guest with racist jokes.
Did you know, sir, that gators only eat
dogs and niggers, darker sorts of meat?
But you can eat him if he won't eat you.
I'll give you a gator steak to barbecue.
(He knew that cooking's something that I *do*!)
He'd watched me cooking, and, done out of doors,
cooking could be classed among male chores.
His suspicions of me as an idle loafer
who couldn't gut a mullet or stew gopher
I tried, when I felt him watching, to dispel
by letting him see me working, working well.
I make sure, when he stares over, my swing's true
when I heave the axe like I've seen rednecks do,
both hands well-balanced on the slippery haft,

or make certain that he sees me when I waft
the coals to a fierce glow with my straw hat,
the grill bars spitting goat or gator fat.
*If them fireants ain't stopped with gasoline
you can say goodbye to every inch of green.
They say on the TV they'll eat their way,
if we don't check 'em, through the USA!
The 'red peril' 's what we call them bugs down here.*
(A hiss for those villains from his seventh beer!)

*From this house, you know, we're near enough to see
space launchings live. The wife watched on TV,
then dashed outside, and saw, with her own eyes,
'like a silver pen', she said, 'The Enterprise',
then rushed back for the message from the Prez
who'd just been wounded by some nut. He says:
We feel like giants again! Taking over space
has made Goliaths of the human race.
Me, I was in the rowboat, trying to relax.
I'd gotten me some chicken, 2 or 3 6-packs
like relaxing, and I zoned out of a snooze
with a sudden start, clear as I see you,
like a bullet disappearing in the blue.
I must say that it made me might proud.
I sang God Bless America out loud
to those goddam alligators then I got
the biggest of the brutes with one sharp shot.*
(But a man might get, say, lovesick, then she shoots
not one of your unendangered gator brutes
that glide so gracefully through silver ooze
and gladden gourmets in those Cross Creek stews,
and instead of potting dumb beasts like your gators
shoots the most acknowledged of all legislators,
on whose scaled back as corpse and cortège glide
the egret of the soul bums its last ride!)

Stuck goat fat's spitting from my still hot grill.
I've eaten very well, and drunk my fill,
and sip my *Early Times*, and to and fro
rock in the rocker watching ashes blow
off the white-haired charcoals and away
into the darkness of the USA.
Higher than the fireflies, not as high as stars,
the sparks fly up between the red-hot bars.
I want no truck myself with outer space
except to gaze on from some earthly place
very much like this one in the South,
the taste of *Earl Times* warm in my mouth.

Popping meals in pills in zero G
's not the dining that would do for me.
I'm feeling too composed to break the spell
when mosquitoes probe the veins of mine that swell
like blue earthworms. A head with sting
burrows in the blue, starts syphoning.
Let be! the watcher in me says, *Let be!*
but suddenly the doer side of me
(though my cracker neighbour couldn't, though he'd tried,
fathom if I'd got a doer side!)
swats the bastard and its legs like hair
sprout from my drop of blood on the cane chair.
The day's heat rolls away to make the night thunder.
I look at the clouded planets and I wonder
if the God who blessed America's keen eye,
when He looked on that launching, chanced to spy,
in this shrinking world with far too many men,
either the cock-pecked wife who saw a pen...
(if I'd seen it going I'd've said
it was my snake sprayed silver, whose black head
my neighbour battered concave like a spoon,
pointing its harmless nose towards the moon,
lacquered in rigor mortis and not bent
into eternity's encirclement,
curled in a circle, sucking its own tail,
the formed continuum of female/male,
time that devours and endlessly renews,
time the open maw and what it chews,
the way it had mine chewed down here on earth,
the emblem of continuous rebirth
a bleached spine like one strand of Spanish moss—
for all above *vide sub* Ouroboros!
All this is booktalk, buddy, mere En-
cyclopaedia know-how, not for men!)

either the cock-pecked wife who saw a pen,
or the lurching rowboat where a red-faced man's
sprawled beside his shotgun and crushed cans,
who saw a bullet streak off on its trek,
and to that watching God was a mere speck,
the human mite, his rowboat lapped with blood,
the giant gator hunter killing BUD!