



Volume 11
Issue 3
2017

Like a New Snake: A Fable

Adrian Chapman

Jonathan had been playing dead all his life. He'd do it even when there wasn't the slightest vibration of an approaching creature—when there was no possibility, that is, of a threat against him.

Relinquishing the thrust and flex of muscular exertion, he'd exhale softly, letting out a gentle hiss. Before he knew it, he'd be curled luxuriantly, motionless in long grass, on the fringe of woodland or the edge of a pond. And if the mood took him, it could happen in an instant. He'd go from life to death in the flicker of a tongue, and splay himself out on a riverbank in a cataleptic trance.

Playing dead was the easiest thing in the world and afforded tremendous contentment and reassurance. If anyone came upon him, they'd just ignore him. When they were gone, Jonathan could slither around a bit and giggle to himself, or if the sun was out he could do a spot of basking. And if he wanted to, he could always play dead again.

There's nothing unusual in any of this, though. This is just the way some kinds of snake like amuse themselves.

Lately, however, the old pleasure of playing dead was wearing thin. Jonathan wondered if this was down to the time of year. He was feeling dull and dusty. When he examined his reflection in the pond, he saw that his eye scales had become milky blue. But this was all to be expected.

Usually, when he was molting, Jonathan felt at a slight distance from the pulse of life. His head didn't feel quite connected to his tail. He wasn't a happy snake; but, it must be said, neither was he an especially unhappy one. Life slithered on in a middling sort of way. This year, however, things were different. One moment he'd be overcome by lethargy, and the next, he'd be thrashing himself around for no reason at all. When he played dead now, he wasn't really sure if he was dead or alive.

Others of his kind always became so excited at this time. Take Ivan, for instance, a serpent who'd been annoying Jonathan since his school days and who was his long-term rival for the affections of the seldom-seen long, sleek, and lovely Amanda.

"Skin-shedding time, Jon-Boy! I can't wait," said Ivan. "I'm going to be bigger, I'm going to be brighter, and I'm going to be better. I'm ready to tip the scales again!"

Jonathan usually just ignored Ivan and the others who'd hiss about the pleasures of molting. Good for them, he used to think, if it was all a matter of release and reinvigoration. And if all their talk about feeling like a new snake was nothing more than nonsense, well, let them talk anyway.

But today Jonathan was piqued by Ivan's words, and he saw with dreadful clarity the reason

why: he had to admit that he had never felt contented in his own skin and couldn't envisage ever doing so. Now that he reflected on the problem, he was sure this unease had been building up for years. He'd done well at school and everyone had urged him to continue his studies. But to him, his success meant nothing; he'd had to swallow too much whole, and nothing much excited him now. He'd lost his taste for knowledge—in fact, he'd lost his taste for everything.

And so he slid from riverbank to riverbank and from wood to wood, rarely encountering others. He told himself he was searching for something but wasn't sure what. Really, his thinking never got very far, or even anywhere at all. Worst of all, his favorite pastime, playing dead, now afforded him no joy: what was once a delightful game had become a terrible compulsion.

One evening, he found himself over at Ivan's, where he curled up in the corner of the room and half-watched TV. His mind became more and more restless and his coils more and more flaccid as a property-buying show fronted by an unconvincing fox was followed by a cooking program presented by over-excited orangutans. But then a shiver of electricity ran through Jonathan, and his tongue started darting frantically: it was Beast Vision's flagship current affairs program, News Bowl—an interview with someone called Theo, a snake psychiatrist who, Jonathan learned, now proudly called himself an 'anti-psychiatrist.' Many, it was said, considered him a philosopher of madness, and some thought him a sort of contemporary shaman.

He was being asked by Helena, a very elegant red setter, about his new book, *From Snake in the Grass to Snake in the World*. But Theo refused to play the interview game. He was hiccuping and flopping around, hardly able to keep himself on the sofa.

Asked if he was drunk, he replied, “So what if I am? Maybe it helps me bear the profound unreality of this ridiculous little show.”

And then he seemed to fall asleep. Helena woofed politely while moving on to the next item—at which point Theo jolted on the sofa and began hissing drunken imprecations.

Now here, thought Jonathan, is a real snake: one, perhaps, who can really understand me. Contemporary life, epitomized by the shallowness of the media, was unreal—profoundly unreal, just as Theo had said.

As soon as Jonathan could, he bought Theo’s book, and he found himself fascinated by a chapter on skin shedding and alienation. Doctor, anti-psychiatrist, philosopher or shaman—whatever he was—Theo seemed to be addressing Jonathan personally. An appointment with him, thought the young snake, might be his only chance of sidewinding his way back into a livable life.

And so he found his way to the clinic on the outskirts of the capital.

There was no couch in Theo’s consulting room, just a couple of beanbags. The walls (which appeared bluish to Jonathan, as did everything) were soft white in color. In the corner were a desk and a drinks cabinet. The rest of the room was blank,

featureless—a canvas for the imagination, Theo liked to think.

The two snakes lay down, each on his own beanbag. No one spoke for a long time. It was Theo who broke the silence.

“What I like about you, Johnny, is that you’re different from other snakes.”

“The reason I can tell you this,” he continued, “is that every snake is unique. There’s a singular ‘thisness,’ a distinctive vibration about each of us.”

He was slurring his words and had obviously been drinking. But he intrigued Jonathan, who was most flattered at being addressed as “Johnny.”

“I don’t care about making you happy,” continued Theo. “Find someone else to help you adapt to the idle chatter of the crowd. There are plenty of shrinks around for that. I’m interested only in the truth: your truth.”

This was exactly what Jonathan wanted to hear. At last here was someone who would take him seriously.

“And you can think what you like about me, Johnny. I’m a messiah, a holy fool, a snake oil salesman—whatever you like. What matters is what you think and who you are.”

This, thought Jonathan, was an invitation for him to speak, and so he began.

“As an infant, I never felt really close to my mother. She always seemed to resent the effort needed to protect me from—”

“I don’t want to hear about your infancy,” interrupted Theo. “I couldn’t care less about your

mother or your father or your siblings. And I'm not interested in the long, sleek and lovely—”

“Amanda? You know about Amanda! That's amazing.”

“Amanda, Deirdre, Deborah, Philomela: the names change, but they're always long, sleek, and lovely.”

“You mean she represents the preoccupations of the crowd?”

“You catch on quickly, snake. So let's steer clear of the clichés, shall we? What I'm going to suggest is that you go over to the corner, where, behind the drinks cabinet, you'll see a saucer. Drink some of the rainwater-colored liquid you'll find there.”

“What is it?”

“It's a little something our ancestors used to sup before the advent of so-called civilization. It's something that helped them find themselves. And it was particularly helpful during the trauma of molting. Want to try it?”

It was an undulation of just two or three body lengths to the saucer. But what Jonathan drank was to take him far from the movements of his everyday life.

“Just sip it and tell me what's going through your mind,” said Theo.

After a few minutes, Jonathan spoke: “Is it getting hot in here?”

Ah, it's beginning, thought Theo. Just a word or two from the experienced therapist would start the process.

“Hot, Johnny?”

“Yes, hot. I’m wrapped up in a soft, delicious warmth.”

“Where are you? Tell me, Johnny.”

“I’m in the egg of the world, Theo. It’s the place where dreams come from. It’s where the fever of creation is enacted over and over again.”

“Fever?”

“A dreadful miasma rising out of swampland. I can see the particles, molecules—shimmering three-dimensional webs—I can’t tell you how beautiful—and they’re slowly drifting over towards me, over to my tongue.”

“Tell me about the smell, Johnny.”

“The scent goes from my tongue and down my lungs. A delicious tremor flickers through me: something horrible, Theo, horrid but wonderful.”

Jonathan fell silent, and Theo, experienced in these matters, didn’t press him into speech.

The curious scent joined with the warmth that was surrounding Jonathan, and the heat-smell infused itself into his thoughts—thoughts of Ivan and Amanda entwined in melting undergrowth, and Helena, the red setter TV dog, with her long, well-bred snout, looking confused and elegant.

And how strange Jonathan seemed to himself—now no longer himself but somehow prior to or beyond his everyday serpent-hood, and moving toward something in the near-distance that he sensed might be his long lost home.

Now was the moment, Theo knew, to recommence the conversation. “Where are you now, Johnny?”

“I’m approaching a river. The River.” As he gazed ahead, Jonathan strained to be at one with the water, and to fit himself to the reflection of the snake that rose from the water’s surface.

And then he fell from his beanbag to the floor and began laughing.

“Let yourself laugh, Johnny,” intoned Theo, seeing that his patient simply couldn’t contain himself. “That’s right: a great big, cosmic chuckle. Let it all out.”

But it wasn’t just a chuckle; for now Jonathan was unrestrainedly sobbing and trembling.

Theo wasn’t disconcerted in the least. “It’s all good, Johnny. Let it happen, snake.”

What happened was that Jonathan’s fit of laughter-despair took him, after what seemed a thousand years—longer, perhaps, but really time no longer had any meaning—to a place of stillness and openness and light where he experienced the most expansive sense of coolness and calm he’d ever known.

Although he couldn’t say why, he knew he couldn’t stay in this place, and, overcoming an obscure but leaden internal resistance, found himself actively making the choice—and the making of a free choice was most important, it seemed to Jonathan—to undulate slowly and deliberately, and at last more rapidly and confidently, towards the edge of woodland at once entirely familiar and completely unknown.

What happened next was this: he let his body sway from side to side, and then found himself deftly wriggling out of his old skin, which was left

inside-out on the floor of Theo's consulting room. It was a sight that even the seasoned psychiatrist felt privileged to see.

Jonathan looked around him into the soft white light of the room. The blueness in his vision was gone now, and his muscles were strong and elastic. Brightness, he just knew, was emanating from the full length of his body.

Theo admired the clarity and shine of his patient's scales. "So tell me, Johnny," he asked him. "How do you feel in your skin right now?"

"I feel," said Jonathan, "like a new snake."

"And what are you going to do with your life now?"

He wasn't at all sure what he was going to do. He might study. He might write something. Or he might do nothing at all. Now "doing something" with his life no longer seemed urgent. He saw no need to make quick decisions and was open to wherever his desire might wind him.

In the meantime, he told Theo, he'd thought of a way of marketing his preoccupation with playing dead.

"I'm going to work part-time as a living statue and part-time as an artist's model," announced Jonathan. This work would bring in some money while he digested the experience of his trip in Theo's consulting room and decided on his future.

"And I might take up meditation," he added.

"You're on your way now, Johnny."

The two lay curled in silence at the end of the session. Jonathan was perfectly contented, lost in

the afterglow of his visions. Theo was ready for another drink.

It was hard work babysitting patients who were off their heads and going who-knows-where on their inner voyages. Sure, Jonathan seemed a whole lot better than when he slid in. He'd shed one or two illusions, certainly. In time, he'd find a couple of others to make up for those he'd lost, Theo knew.

Anyway, it had been a powerful experience, for sure, and the patient would make a good case history for the new book, which was proving a devil to get finished. *The Curling Away of the Skin Ego*: yes, that sounded good. Or maybe *Jonathan: A Snake Resurrected*—that would be even better.

The patient made his way on to the beanbag again and, coiled in its folds, was breathing gently, his tongue slowly flickering. Theo, ever the experienced professional, didn't want to puncture this newfound peace and so left it a moment longer before speaking again.

After a rebirthing session, the therapist needs to be at his most artful in guiding the newborn back into the everyday world. Theo always thought that the patient must be allowed adequate time to knit the fibers of his or her new self into place.

But eventually he had to break the silence: "And you'll not forget to make the transfer to my bank account?"

"I'll do it straight away," replied Jonathan as he wound his way to the door and the new life that awaited him beyond it.

“Take care, snake,” said Theo as his patient slid away, and he himself undulated over to the drinks cabinet.

Adrian Chapman
teaches English at
Florida State
University London
Centre. He has work
in *Literature and
Medicine, Psycart
Journal*, and *Critical
and Radical Social
Work*. Email:
anchapman@fsu.edu