

## *Curtis White*

FROM *MEMORIES OF MY FATHER WATCHING T. V.*

### MANIC MAVERICK

It was, for the boy, the gray repeatable night . . . shocking . . . that little pre-fab mousehole they lived in . . . and his Mommy and Poppy, such dirty stinkers . . . measly is the word for it . . . the family thoughts filled the house like farts . . . thicker than Poppy's cigarette smoke . . . never opened a window summer or fall . . . neighbors were glad for that, let me tell you . . . measly's the word all right: small, dingy, deformed . . . imagine the foulness . . . they had venetian blinds . . . the boy wrote filthy slang in the dust—"pee-hole" . . . a year later you could still read it, the letters filled in with more recent filth, like a footprint filled with new snow . . . ferocious! . . . thirty years and never dusted once! . . . they had a dog, a little cocker spaniel . . . but its fur was so matted that giant clumps stuck out at bizarre angles as if they were deformations . . . new doggy appendages . . . weird! . . . couldn't tell which way the dog was going . . . it seemed constantly to be snarling out of its asshole . . . they needed a private sewage treatment plant for all of the shit that little sweetie piled on the tiny patio . . . unbelievable . . . this dog was the anti-christ! . . . turned loaves into shit . . . imagine a mountain of the stuff out there . . . maybe that's why they kept the windows closed . . . no one went out except poochie . . . he'd move to and fro before his masterpiece . . . you could only tell if he was walking forward or backward if his tongue happened to be hanging out . . . otherwise he was just this irritable dust rag that watched over a pile of crap as if it were the Taj Mahal . . .

Forget the dog! . . . there's more . . . evening . . . that was the time when the family was truly itself . . . during the day the kids went to school, Mommy went to her job at the bank, and Poppy went off to do whatever he did . . . I'll tell you what he did, he played pool, drank Old Crow, and slept in his car . . . but beginning with dinner, they were a real family . . .

No one knew how to cook . . . they'd eat the most unbelievable junk . . . spectacular . . . worse than the dog . . . they kept their food piled in boxes in the pantry . . . freeze-dried turkey tetrazini . . . freeze-dried chicken almondine . . . loathsome . . . someone would boil a pot of water . . . each portion got a half-cup of water and began to grow . . . it was like eating sea monkeys . . . unbelievable, really . . . less than human . . . you should have seen them at the table . . . heart-breaking . . . there was a pile of Wonder Bread and the cheapest margarine you can imagine . . . came in gallon tubs . . . the manufacturer didn't even have the decency to dye it yellow . . . it wasn't something to eat, it was an expression of contempt . . .

The children were growing up idiots . . . the boy stayed in his room generating his private adolescent stink . . . his sister found little boys, charming innocent kids, really, nice as you please, and took them into the bathroom with her . . . and she did everything . . . hung her ass out the bathroom window, spreading her cheeks and screaming with maddened delight . . . the boys could put anything in there . . . she was a wonder . . . ping-pong balls, Ken dolls head first all the way to his little sneakers, Parchesi pieces . . . the boys played a game called can you guess what falls out . . . the most abominable childhood . . . little boys in the neighborhood talked about her for generations, a legendary nasty girl . . .

Her brother was the jerk-off crown prince . . . his pajamas were stiff like cardboard from all the spunk he spilled on himself . . . you could patch a wall with them, you could patch a furnace, you could use them to repair heat reflecting tiles on rocket ships . . . and the piles of stuff on his sheets were like amber deposits . . . domestic bug life got caught in it . . . house flies lost their lives in the sticky mess . . . nothing pretty about it . . . he walked through his little existence smelling of rotting mushrooms . . .

After dinner, the real action would begin . . . the T.V. . . . Poppy would watch "his show" . . . "my show is on," he'd say . . . as if that made it special . . . the old meany . . . every hour of every evening was "special" because "his show" was on . . . this is not something people accept anymore . . . times have changed! . . . we're more democratic . . . we don't put up with these tawdry patriarchs . . . but in his moment he had exclusive claim to watching "Combat," "Bonanza," "High-

way Patrol,” “Sea Hunt,” “Have Gun—Will Travel,” and many more any time he pleased . . . anything with guns in it . . . the amazing thing is, he slept through every damn one of them . . . could hardly make it through the credits . . . by the end of the first commercial he was out . . . but the bombs must have comforted him, like synthetic orgasms going off in his pineal gland . . . what an unbelievable stinking mess of a human being . . .

And the fudge! . . . every night Mommy made fudge . . . whole plates of the stuff . . . sweet enough to lock the brain . . . the sugar would open Poppy’s eyes for a moment . . . you’d see some suffocated angelic creature deep in his blue iris screaming bloody murder . . . and then, wham, gone . . . dead to the world . . . the kids of course would zing off the walls for fifteen minutes then retreat to their respective rooms . . . sudden sugar autism . . . they needed whatever tingle of pleasure might make them feel even a little less than dead . . . she’d be whamming Mr. Potato Head into her cunt . . . he’d be jamming and whacking his little whistle against the pile of amber under his sheets . . . no pleasure in any of this, mind you . . . this was pure childhood desperation . . .

Each night a new plate of fudge . . . of course, the old plates would pile up, the leftover candy turning to crusty rock . . . poochie would lick it until his tongue bled . . .

This was life for nearly two decades . . . it could have gone on forever, not like the worst but the most embarrassing circle in hell, had not the children come rattling out of the house at eighteen like a couple of loaded dice . . .

“Time to go to college,” Poppy said . . . heaven knows where he got that one . . . that was a good one . . . what university would take those in-turned abominations? . . . Jesuits took the boy . . . hovered around him at first dumbstruck by the absence of human attribute . . . it was a trippy sight for a suburban boy, too, the priests in their gowns . . . they made him take his hand off his dick straight away—proximity to sin indeed! . . . spoon fed him Aquinas . . . next thing you know, lo!, he’s stopped that irritating quacking that drove his public school teachers mad . . . he’d have flunked every level he was in if his teachers could have faced another year of his non-stop quacking . . . quacking, goading erections out of the top of his denims, and trying to put his lunch

inside girls . . . I'm not kidding . . . tried to put a baloney sandwich inside Julia Pacheco . . . she asked, ¿Me quieres mucho?" . . . poor kid . . . fucked up as he was . . . anyway with the Jesuits he started making human sounds . . . "sumum" . . . "bonum" . . . believe me, people were quite impressed . . .

There was only one night in two decades that was other than sepulchral . . . tenebrous . . . when things are tenebrous, you don't even want to know how dark they are . . . even the darkest human life has at least one moment of revelation in it . . . "What's on T.V. tonight?" the boy asked . . . "My show's on" . . . "What is it?" . . . "Maverick."

The voice of a deeply male cretinism started the show off . . . "FROM HOLLYWOOD, THE ENTERTAINMENT CAPITAL OF THE WORLD" he said "BROUGHT TO YOU BY WARNER BROTHERS."

"Did you hear that, Poppy? This is coming from Hollywood!" . . . "They say that every week, you idiot" . . . "I know. I was just saying" . . .

The episode opens with Bret Maverick sitting at a poker table . . . but right away there's something strange . . . this is 1959, years before color T.V. . . . and yet it's perfectly clear . . . Maverick is blue! . . . his skin is an unmistakably dark shade of blue . . . he nearly ignites the black-and-white world around him . . .

Poppy says, "What the hell is the matter with this damned T.V. set?" . . . "Is it going to explode?" . . . Poppy gets up to adjust the rabbit-ear antenna . . . no use . . . Blue Maverick quivers but remains quite blue . . . Poppy changes the channel . . . Blue Maverick sits at a poker table on every channel! . . . even Poppy's crusty, implacable and utterly changeless facial expression—composed in equal parts of authority, self-contempt, ennui and a sadness that knows not its own name—even this monument to every-moment-the-same-as-the-last-please! begins to quake under the implications . . . Poppy frowns and, compelled by a weird force he begins to sense emanating from the Blue Maverick, returns to his place on the couch . . . it is almost as if Blue Maverick is directing Poppy to sit and watch . . . it's about time . . . the old meany hasn't been dealt with like this in years . . .

A weak, pusilanimous, pasty creature, a doctor perhaps, comes through the swinging barroom door panicked . . . "Is there a Mr. Maverick

here?" he wants to know . . . Blue Maverick turns on him limpid cow eyes . . . immediately the doctor's anxiety seems to melt . . . he seems drunk with the color of a new joy . . . his eyes dart like birds . . . he is suddenly filled with an inexplicable ecstasy . . . a desire to repeat the beloved name, Maverick . . .

At the table the players sing spontaneously . . . "Who is the tall dark stranger there?" . . . instantly they know . . . "Maverick is his name" . . .

So captivated by his own joy is he that the doctor cannot speak his message . . . Maverick reaches forth a single blue finger and touches the spot on the doctor's forehead directly between his eyes . . . immediately he is calmed . . . he speaks, "Maverick, there's someone looking for you. He hates you. He hates the lady called Luck who sits at your elbow. He's lookin' to kill you. He is the demon John Wesley Burden-of-the-Earth."

The camera holds fast on Blue Maverick's face, but it reveals no emotion save an oblique playfulness . . .

Blue Maverick smiles the spectacularly charming and boyish smile for which he is paid \$2,000 per week by television tycoons and pushes the broad-brimmed hat back on his head . . . his oblique response is to sing, "I love a girl named Lila" . . . one of his opponents interrupts stupidly, saying, "I call you, dark stranger" . . . this savage man lays out a full house, aces over kings . . . then Maverick lays out his impressive hand, a thousand suns risen all at once, a mass of splendor, shining on all sides, blazing fire . . .

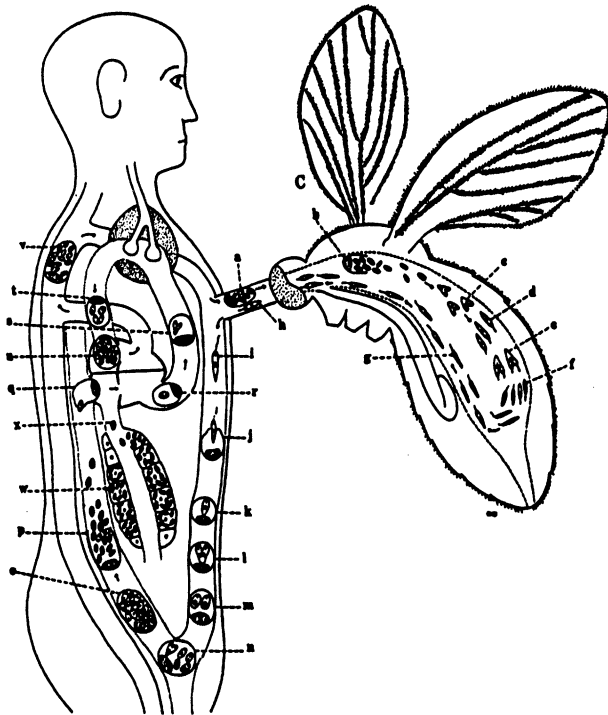
"That sure beats me I guess," says the man . . . and Maverick smiles the smile of a god who is not remote and uncaring, but personal, attentive and accessible . . .

You can't imagine the effect this scene has on Poppy . . . I can't describe it . . . he looks blasted back against the sofa cushions . . . ideas are coming at him with the centrifugal force of a jet . . . thirty G's knock him silly . . . this is a guy who hasn't had a thought in years . . . the scales on his eyes have their own scales . . . the poor guy looks like the Upanishads have just been downloaded into his frontal lobe . . . he sees it all . . . worse yet, "his show" is just getting started . . . there's a commercial break . . .

★

A man who is perhaps Walt Disney's clone or automaton stands before a chalk board wearing a white lab jacket . . . he carries a rubber tipped pointer . . . "Hello, I'm Dr. Ronald Entirety. Our friends at Open Mouth Pharmaceuticals have asked me to speak to you tonight about a sensitive personal problem, a medical problem that affects both ourselves and our loved ones. Parasites."

Dr. Entirety moves to one side revealing a chalk board on which is this image:



"Animal parasitism is a way of life" . . . reassuring smile . . . "The parasite lives in or on another species gaining its livelihood at the other's expense" . . . Dr. Entirety strolls to his right out of the clinical environment and directly into a domestic environment . . . one that looks every bit like the typical American middleclass household of the

nineteen-fifties . . . it is Poppy's household except that it is polished . . . Dr. Entirety sits in a replica of Poppy's overstuffed chair and looks confidently into the camera . . . "Parasites live everywhere. Even here in your own livingroom. They are in your carpet. Clinging to the follicles of your hair." He pulls a strand of his own lank and graying locks. "In order to live in or on a host, a parasite must evolve structures for adhering to it. Some develop tarsi for holding on to hair, others develop rigid hooks which actually sink into flesh. In the most advanced types, as with the trematodes, they have suckers which actually interlock with our own fretted capillaries. When I return at the next commercial break, we'll see just how these creatures enter the human host and what some of the consequences of this infestation can be. But for now this is Dr. Ronald Entirety for our friends at Open Mouth Pharmaceuticals saying, Fare thee well."

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Blue Maverick comes riding up over the crest of a hill on the horse-demon Keshi . . . Keshi is gigantic, powerful, and swift as the mind . . . he furrows the earth with his hooves, crowds the sky with clouds, disperses the heavens with a wave of his mane, and terrifies all who behold him . . .

Maverick has received a note from his old friend Ward Harper, the owner of the Rocking H ranch and the man who on one legendary morning discovered Maverick as an embryo in his boot . . . with incredulous eyes Ward Harper beheld Maverick, his mind confused and enraptured . . . he bent low to praise the embryo which gestated in the cowboy's boot, and the Maverick embryo whispered to him the story of his previous lives . . .

Ward Harper raised Maverick . . . cared for him from the day that Maverick emerged from his boot clinging like a marsupial to the rawhide fringe of Ward's chaps . . . In his youth, once, Maverick ate some dirt . . . Ward Harper was genuinely angry . . . "Did you eat dirt?" . . . "No, Ward Harper" . . . "I said, 'Did you eat dirt?'" . . . "No, sir, Ward Harper" . . . "Then open your mouth" . . . When Maverick opened his mouth, Ward Harper glimpsed the Universe, consisting of objects that

move and objects that do not move, the ethereal dome, cardinal points, mountains, oceans, wind, fire, stars and even the mind itself . . . “Ah ha,” said Ward Harper, “I knew it. Now why do you lie to me, boy?” . . . he grabbed little Maverick by the ear . . . “Don’t you know that you can get sick eatin’ that? . . . there’s tiny critturs live in the dirt” . . .

In remorse, Maverick spit out the dirt . . . when it landed, it became the infinite and majestic Rocking H ranch . . .

But that was all long ago . . . now Ward Harper had different problems, bushwhackers . . . they finally succeeded . . . his string ran out . . . his body was found dry-gulched and back-shot on the road to Tucson . . . now was his son, Blue Maverick, come to repay the ancient debt to his Pappy, Ward Harper . . .

Eight centuries hadn’t made any great changes in the ranch layout . . . the main ranch house was in need of paint . . . nearby was the cookhouse with the hand pump through which a young Maverick had once pumped an angry river demon, Pecos Ba-Gua, thus bringing an age of growth and prosperity to western Arizona . . . a long wooden bench lined with wash basins was under the porch awning . . . in the corral, the young cows ran to the rail at Maverick’s approach and wept from their big round eyes calling his name . . . Moooverick . . .

Blue Maverick rode directly to the main ranch house and hitched Keshi to the rail in front . . . just before entering the house, he looked up for the familiar plume of smoke which for eight hundred years had curled from the chimney . . . but the chimney was cold . . . Maverick entered without knocking and whistled the tune to “I love a girl named Lila” . . .

The room Maverick entered was a man’s room . . . there were animal heads on the wall—antelopes, mountain goats and buffalo . . . hides covered everything . . . rifles hung in the few empty spots, Sharps and Remingtons . . . Maverick began to understand how things had gone wrong . . . one by one, he visited each buffalo and antelope, stroking its head, kissing its brow and feeling for the force of a lost life in each silent horn . . . tears came to the glass eyes of each beast . . .

Could his Pappy, honored Ward Harper, have gone so wrong? . . . Ward Harper had taken him in and taught him many things . . . it was Ward Harper who had said to him, “Work is all right for killing time,



but it's a shaky way to make a living" . . . these words were now etched into temple walls in the holy city of Amarillo . . . for these reasons, Maverick felt he owed Ward Harper a boundless debt, and he was here now to pay it . . . but these deaths hung on the wall of a room meant for life . . . it could not be a good sign . . .

Then a voice came from a back room . . . "Who's there? Just a minute" . . . but when the person belonging to this voice entered the room, she was no young woman, surely not his sister Lila, but someone terribly old, superannuated in fact . . . she wore curlers in her hair that hadn't been removed in several decades, as if she'd been stood up at the high school prom and left in these curlers while her so-called "date" vomited on some other girl's front porch . . . she wore a tattered robe, open indecently in the front . . . and she carried a rifle which she leveled at Blue Maverick's heart . . . could this be the little eleven-year-old barefooted girl in pigtails and peeling sunburn that Maverick remembered? . . . could a mere eight centuries have been so harsh on her? . . .

"Lila? Sister?" he asked, his heart breaking.

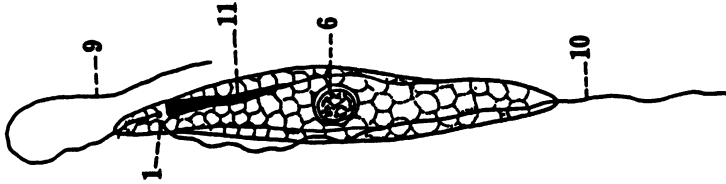
When she saw it was Maverick, she put down the rifle . . . "Ah, Maverick, returned too late after all these years" . . . she walked slowly toward him now, changing as she approached, opening her robe and revealing breasts that were in fact the heavy breasts of a young woman . . . she raised them in her hands . . . Lila's face grew more youthful, a face of charming smiles and sidelong glances . . . "I've waited here for you, brother, for so long . . . please drink" . . . and she lifted her breasts toward his mouth, the milk already spilling from her nipples and running in pearly streams down her stomach . . .

"Drink . . ."

**"HELLO AGAIN.** Dr. Entirety from Open Mouth Pharmaceuticals, and I'm here tonight to talk to you about parasites.

"What is a parasite? Well, it may be an organism that helps you, like the bacteria in your intestinal tract, or it may be an organism that hurts you, like the mad paramecium that will swim to your brain and set up there a housekeeping not in the least neighborly. But whether friend or foe, these bugs will eventually eat you. Let me put it this way, there are things out there, with their own genetic story to tell, which wish to inhabit you and live your life for you.

“But let’s take a moment to look at some of the nastier varieties we humans might encounter.”



“This is our little antagonist *Trypanosoma cruzi*. It is pathogenic to humans.

“How do we come in contact with this little cutie? Well, I’m sorry to tell you this, but on occasion humans do things that perhaps they oughtn’t. Oh not you, my friends, and probably not anyone you know, but there are people out there who seem clean but they are not.

“And what, you might like to know, are some of the things that unclean people do? I will tell you bluntly: contaminated feces come in contact with the mucus membrane of the lips or eyes. Don’t ask me how. It is simply a medical fact. Or the disease is transmitted by the thoughtless members of the reduviid bug family. A case in point, while feeding on a vertebrate, the reduviid habitually defecates, voiding feces that contain numerous metacyclic trypanosomes like the cruzi. The fecal matter enters the skin through punctures made by the biting of the bug.

“Finally, venereal equations of an unspeakable nature are not out of the question. Yes, to answer the question that you are all asking out there, the venereal equations can and do involve feces and certainly in statistically significant numbers even the reduviid bug himself.

“Not a nice thing to contemplate, I agree.

“Believe me, there is more to know of this character the parasite. At the next commercial break I would like to speak to you of the unsuspected connection we have to the gut of the land snail.

“Until then, I am Dr. Ronald Entirety, speaking for your friends at Open Mouth Pharmaceuticals, saying, Until that fateful day!”

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Blue Maverick, however, was quite aware that this was not really his sister Lila . . . and he sensed that her breasts flowed not with milk, but with a deadly poison distilled in fact from the horns of a million murdered buffalo . . . Maverick closed his eyes and allowed the beautiful woman to take him on her lap as if he were her infant . . . but when she gave him her tit, Blue Maverick squeezed it between his powerful hands . . . “Whoa, honey, that’s a little rough,” she said . . . “Simmer down. You know, that can hurt a girl. That’s sensitive business in your mitts there. Owee. OWWWEEEE!” . . . then Maverick sucked the tit and along with it her life . . . his seductress grimaced as if a creature with small tooth-like projections of the family dictyocaulus filia were dragging her lungs up and out through her gaping mouth . . . being crushed in all of her vital parts, she cried out for him to let go, but Maverick would not let go his grip . . . her body was drenched in perspiration, and her hands and feet lashed about convulsively . . . “I mean it, baby doll, this is not quality time for me, this is not a life-enhancing experience” . . . still Maverick persisted in his squeezing and sucking until she dropped dead . . . only a thin string of her poisonous milk drooped from his lips and then with a flip rose and entered his nose . . . but Blue Maverick did not have time to consider the meaning or portent of this strange milk . . . he had to find his own Lila . . .

He walked to the back room, the same room from which the demonic woman had come, and there was his lovely sister Lila, just putting the finishing touches on a rawhide vest with the name “Maverick” blazoned in red rhinestones on the back . . . for hers was a pure and endless devotion . . .

As Maverick looked upon her, he was struck through with passion . . . dark blue in appearance and extremely handsome, Maverick had the same effect upon her . . . instantly, Lila, lovely Lila, dropped her fancy-work and revealed to Maverick—behind her own calico skirt printed with designs of a white church and a red schoolhouse—her great loins and buttocks, both wonderfully strong . . . it was between these thighs that Visnu had placed the cosmos, like a dense walnut, which when cracked exploded with its infinite light . . .

Maverick then committed with his sister Lila, there on the bare dirt floor of that rancher’s home, the eight kinds of sexual intercourse (ad-

verse, etc.), systematically assailing her with teeth, nails, hands and lips . . . he kissed her in eight mysterious ways consistent with the doctrines of sexual science and delightful to the ladies . . .

Done, Maverick rose from the floor and said, "Oh Visnu, shit, I'm some dude! I could eat the world, no problem. Give it to me, I'm ready. I'll open my mouth for you. You can place it on the tip of my tongue like a breath mint."

Lila could not guess it at the moment, but this filial conjuncture had wrought a change in beloved Maverick . . . certain critical synapses had begun simmering in a cerebral brine . . . Lila would have cause to remember this moment in days to come . . . she would recognize it in the diagnostic manual under the heading, "initiating episode" . . . do not be surprised at this . . . we are always astonished to learn of such-a-one's mental illness . . . "he seemed just fine to me" . . . "I saw him last week happy as a clam" . . . but even our gods hide flaw, damage, genetic error . . . yes, even our gods are "cracked" or there is no explaining this world . . .

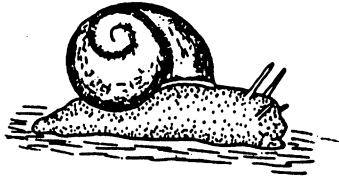
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Dr. Entirety is standing behind a white enameled table surrounded by the trappings of science . . . Bunsen burners, test tubes, microscopes, centrifuges, voltage meters, alligator clips for the testicles . . . he has before him a tray of snails, moving back and forth with the best show of panic a snail can muster . . . he holds one of the snails in his left hand while running, with scientific detachment, what appears to be a glass pipette deep into the snail's cavity . . . a bit of drooling snail matter actually runs down the pipette and then down Dr. Entirety's fingers . . . with a shudder of disgust, Entirety drops both pipette and snail . . . the pipette shatters on the counter top . . . the snail lands with a nauseating crunch among his brethren snails multiplying their frenzy, giving objective content to their snail-dread . . .

"Hello, again," Entirety says, wiping his hands on his smock . . .

"You probably don't think of yourself as much in contact with the snail, do you? The connection probably seems to you distant and unlikely. Well, what if I told you that the pulmonate land snail (*anguispira alternata*) is an enemy not only to your garden, but to you. For he

carries a malevolent essence in his gut. His scientific name says it all: *anguispira alternata*. He is our anguish breathing Other. Skeptical? Well, look here.”



“Snails frequently gather together with aquatic organisms such as arthropods and amphibians. The infective meacercariae (or ‘Voodoo mask’ parasite) lurks among them. Fully embryonated eggs enclosed in thick, impervious shells are passed in the feces of the definitive host. A hatching occurs in the gut of the land snail. Cercariae released in the air chambers of the snail provoke an excessive secretion of mucus which surrounds them in an environment which clinicians call ‘slimeballs.’ These slimeballs are discharged into the vegetation or soil where they can wait protected in slime for the inevitable arrival of a human host.

“Not to put too fine a point on it, the metacercariae are lapped up from the fronds of unwashed vegetables. Or they are ingested along with clumps of soil. Or the cercariae (a.k.a. the-bug-our-death) enter the openings of the ureter. How does this happen! How does the human organ of micturition and regeneration, male or female, come in contact with the slime trail of the garden snail? We do not know. We can not speculate. But it is a scientific fact.

“Things then accumulate in the blood. Parasitemia. Lymph nodes, liver and spleen become enlarged. The patient develops a fever. The parasites migrate to and accumulate in the central nervous system. They invade the brain. Are you understanding this important point? The disease terminates with a headache and death.

“This sort of thing is not acceptable to the good folks at Open Mouth Pharmaceuticals. They are not amused. The ‘snail connection’ is not evidence of a quaint regional custom. This is not something to be protected and preserved by a misguided Smithsonian. It is evidence of humans in league with forces bent upon our destruction.”

Dr. Entirety picks up another snail and examines it closely . . . a tiny spermy ball of slime appears beneath the snail . . . quickly, Dr. Entirety's expression changes from one of distant disinterest to horror and personal urgency . . . he looks directly into the camera and begins screaming, "Stop it! Do you hear me? Stop it, stop it, stop it! It's intolerable! You are a foul people! Most foul! Disgusting! You disgust me!"

Fade to black . . . a voice-over suggests: "Dr. Entirety will return with a final comment from the good people at Open Mouth Pharmaceuticals after this dramatic interlude."

★

Maverick and Lila began restoring the Rocking H to a place meant for life . . . they removed the hides from the floor and furniture, sweetly lifted the animal heads from the walls and created an enormous consecrated pyre in the yard . . . the demoness that Maverick had sucked dry, it turned out, was made all of paraffin . . . chopping her body and mixing it with fragrant sandalwood, they fueled the fire which would allow the slaughtered beasts, and even the demoness herself, to enter the great Wringer, out of which they might return as something superior . . . clearly, they'd earned it . . . perhaps they would return as cowboys . . . sure enough, just as the flames began leaping toward the celestial dome, a chorus of cowboys appeared, their necks draped with colorful bandanas . . . they began to sing an ancient hymn:

"I love a girl named Lila,  
She's nicer than my dog,  
And when I think of Lila,  
My feet begin to clog.

"They stomp the ground in bliss,  
Worshipping this miss,  
And begging for a kiss,  
Say, 'What a girl, this Lila!'

"Oh Lila, lovely Lila,  
Our heads go all agog,

Oh skinny, juicy Lila,  
Nicer than my dog.”

The ceremony done, the cowboys threw their Stetson hats in the air, harumphing in cowboy happiness and shooting their guns in admiration at the stars . . . then they turned to their bunk house . . . they set to work in an instant and before the afternoon was over the roof was patched, the siding freshly painted, the floors scrubbed and the cowboy beds made . . . at night, they lined up in their flannel pajamas with the bucking broncos on them . . . Maverick shook their hands and Lila kissed their cheeks . . .

Then Maverick and Lila sat down so that Lila could tell him the whole story . . . it was long and sad, and often tears came to Maverick’s eyes to think of his Pappy’s suffering . . . the Rocking H was in debt . . . \$50,000 . . . the mortgage was due in five days . . . a local financier had bought the loan from the bank . . . he meant to take over and throw Lila and all her many cowboy devotees off the land . . . his name was John Wesley Burden-of-the-Earth . . . and he was no one to fool with . . . for he was all business . . . and, as if this weren’t bad enough, he was a dead shot, the fastest gun in the west . . . and thus has it ever been with financiers . . .

To pay off the original mortgage, Lila herself had gone out and rounded-up two thousand steer and on her little dappled roan drove them to Kansas City . . . this should have provided plenty of money to pay off the mortgage, but Burden-of-the-Earth had arranged a stage robbery, seized the money chest, and with that same money bought the Rocking H mortgage for himself . . . this irony made him chuckle . . . to ensure that Lila executed no more one-woman cattle drives, he placed his own sister, a demones named Budding Beauty Vanity, as her governess . . . this had all happened within the last two hundred years . . .

But Blue Maverick’s arrival had messed up their little game . . . or at least complicated it . . . on the other hand, the death of Burden-of-the-Earth’s sister, Budding Beauty Vanity, had made Burden very cross . . . what’s worse, Burden’s henchmen laughed behind his back about the lurid means of her death . . . at night, lying sleepless in bed, Burden saw Blue Maverick with his teeth sunk in his sister’s tit, sucking her dry . . . it was a tit, in fact, that Burden-of-the-Earth himself had

sucked, her poison for him his life's blood . . . he was determined to destroy Maverick . . . he had legitimacy, the rule of law, on his side . . . therefore he summoned the sheriff, Mr. Machine, to arrest Maverick for suspicion of murder in the death of his sister . . .

But it was no easy thing to locate Maverick during this period . . . oh, one might have hoped, one surely would have expected, that he would settle down to tending the ranch, recovering its fortune, paying off the mortgage, siring blue avatars in his comely sister . . . but the elation of returning home after eight-hundred years, the ecstasy of carnal relations with Lila on their father's dirt floor, these facts seem to have made Blue Maverick a bit "tetched," as we used to say . . . he was experiencing an excess of optimism . . . he was "on top of the world" in the naughty sense . . . he was caught in the play of a manic gloom and glee between which he careened like a battered shuttlecock . . . Lila was very worried . . .

For example, one evening Maverick returned home and announced that he was going back to school . . . he was an outstanding student, but decided that he would do secretarial work rather than go on to college . . . Maverick developed many avocational interests including ballet, reading and languages . . . soon Lila and the worshipful cowpokes noticed that Maverick was going out every night . . . he began dating men, attending church meetings, language classes and dances . . . he got a job at a local insurance agency where his seductiveness resulted in his going to bed with two of the available married men . . . he burst into tears on occasion and told risque jokes . . . he became talkative and restless, stopped eating, and didn't seem to need any sleep . . . he began to talk about being in contact with god, which frankly was news to no one, but also expressed a conviction that it was god's wish that he give himself sexually to all who needed him . . . there was no news in this either . . .

When it was suggested by Lila that he was "going too fast" and "doing too much in life," he became quite angry . . . "Lila," he shouted, "I am a god! I am one of Visnu's chosen! Gods do not suffer from excessively busy work schedules!" . . . convinced by his own irreproachable logic, he became so enraged that he killed one of the cowboys—who had come along with Lila for moral support—by reaching in



through his mouth and pulling him inside out . . . this crisis was easily, but guiltily, papered over, for no one, not the authorities and not even the cowboys themselves, were really quite sure about just exactly how many cowboys there were out at the Rocking H . . .

And, it should go without saying, there was much of gambling . . . Maverick became legendary for his gambling . . . poker, horses, pitching nickels, any gambit was worthy of his attention . . . on one day alone he won all of Madagascar . . . in fact, he lost every hand but the last that night in perfect good humor . . . then, at the stroke of twelve, he suggested that they play for their respective properties . . . he put up his sister Lila . . . he showed his skeptical opponents convincing Polaroids that demonstrated that in fact Lila's buttocks were the equivalent of the rolling foothills of the fertile Loire Valley . . . in an inspired tactic, he insisted that they play a single hand of "Indian" poker, winner take all . . . the ludicrous seven of diamonds that he pressed to his forehead caused his gaming companions to laugh and wager with impunity . . . you can imagine their chagrin when among the four of them they could manage only a five of clubs . . . well, he left the house that night with the deeds not only to Madagascar but to large tracts of Louisiana, the Russian steppes and a particularly rich fishing pond in rural Iowa . . .

As any gambler knows, however, a hot streak is only a cold streak waiting to happen . . . within a week, he returned home not merely calmer, but despondent . . . he sat in his room and could not be convinced to speak . . . the news of his losses trickled in slowly . . . at first, he paid off his debts by liquidating his assets . . . he clearcut his rain forest holdings, relocated the indigenous tribe (which in any case was extinct within a few years from AIDS and the exotic Kansas City flu), slaughtered the two hundred thousand dwarf deer that lived there, then sold the mineral rights to a strip mining company . . . but it soon became clear that these resources would not stanch the flow . . . an affidavit from the International Bankers Confidence Fund demonstrated compellingly that Lila was now the property of a transnational banking consortium with headquarters in Berne . . . and the lovely singing cowboys were the property of a Mister Phookeet who owned a nightclub called "Lipstick" in the Patpong district of Bangkok . . . dutifully, they went off and, frankly, have never been heard from again . . . occasion-

ally, a tourist will return with a strange story of meeting little Eurasian boys in Stetson hats on the beaches of the Gulf of Thailand where they perform lewd acts with their lips in return, they insist, for “silver dollars” . . . a devastating devotion indeed . . .

Lila was crushed by these turns in fate . . . “Maverick, will I really have to go? Are you sure this is legal?” . . . Maverick showed no emotion . . . perhaps he felt guilty, perhaps this was the final shock that would allow him to change his ways, but he showed no sign of it . . . still, there was nothing unclear in his thinking . . . he knew the answer to her question precisely . . . “I’m afraid, my love, that for the International Bankers Confidence Fund there are few issues of law that can impinge upon its great trans-national will . . . of course you will have to go . . . of course you will do as they bid . . . of course it will not be pleasant . . . but” . . . he grew suddenly confident . . . “my luck is bound to change . . . I can feel it . . . it rises in me like a green fuse . . . I will play a single hand of five card draw with the executive director in charge of foreign holdings . . . I will win” . . . “But what will you wager? You’ve lost everything” . . . “My virility if it is necessary . . . my very blueness” . . . an image of Maverick’s blue penis against the green felt of the card table came to Lila’s suffering mind and she shuddered . . .

Before these awful ideas could come to a head, fate intervened . . . it was an inconsequential trip into town . . . Maverick was just getting down out of the buckboard with Miss Lila at his side when Sheriff Machine called out to him . . . “Maverick, I’m going to have to ask you for your gun, son” . . . Sheriff Machine’s body was a transparent, fun, take-apart body . . . you could see all of his internal gears . . . when he walked his mouth opened and closed rhythmically as if he were saying something very stupid over and over again . . . something like, “Goobers, goobers, goobers” . . . he was a potent idiot . . . but since Sheriff Machine had no functional elbows, he was notoriously slow on the draw . . . he had been shot and patched and shot and patched by every outlaw in the territory . . . Maverick could take him in a moment . . .

And he was about to when, to his left, John Wesley Burden-of-the-Earth appeared, packing hardware . . . “What’s he doing here, Sheriff?” . . . “Oh, he’s properly deputized, don’t you worry about that” . . .

“Well, then I guess it’s just you and me, Burden-of-the-Earth” . . .  
“Yep” . . . “Any time you’re ready” . . . “Show me what you got, cow-  
poke” . . .

The invitation to show the gathered townsfolk what he had was welcome to Blue Maverick . . . he felt suddenly euphoric, capable of anything . . . good golly, Visnu, he was top of the tops . . . then thirty of Burden’s thugs appeared from behind every wagon, horse, and corner in the square . . . he was outnumbered and without hope . . . but this only made the challenge and the opportunity for glory seem the greater to him . . . he smiled broadly . . .

Lila screamed, “Maverick, you’re crazy! Don’t do this! It can’t be done! They’ll kill you!” . . . but he moved forward, hands ready . . . the fact that he had less than one-quarter of the bullets, never mind the hand speed, necessary for this feat seemed curiously beside the point to him . . .

“Maverick,” pleaded Lila, “how many times does six bullets go into thirty men? Do you remember the rules for long division? Let me show you in the dirt with this stick” . . .

John Wesley Burden-of-the-Earth seemed amused . . . “Maverick, why this folly? Do you love the gamble so much that you wish to die for it?” . . .

This was an interesting question he’d been asked . . . Maverick considered what it would mean to answer it properly . . . he pondered . . . he used the instant as if it were twenty years of solitude in the mountains, and he answered frankly if not wisely . . .

“For me, John Wesley Burden-of-the-Earth, gambling is a question posed to Fate: Am I loved?”

Burden-of-the-Earth was reasonably perplexed . . . “But my dear Maverick . . . you have posed this question to fate a thousand times even in the last month.”

“Yes,” replied Maverick, his blueness surging and radiant, “I want to be sure.”

“Sure! Sure of what, my boy? Sometimes the answer to your question has been yes, sometimes no, sometimes maybe . . . what does that tell you about the quality of the question itself? . . . perhaps you ask the wrong question” . . .

Maverick was shaken . . . it hadn't occurred to him that there might be something wrong with the question itself . . . but that put into doubt every premise of his life . . . Burden didn't need to shoot poor Maverick, he had flung him into the abyss with a question . . . Maverick had been tossed out toward the most distant, inhuman stellar range where his sleeve had caught on a star's point . . . he felt he hung there, alone and wretched . . . suddenly the sun on that little western town square throbbed through Maverick's eyeball to his brain with a hot sense of heaviness and pain . . . and he said . . .

"You are right. I am not loved."

"For goodness sake, Maverick, that's not what I meant," groaned John Wesley. "Besides, it's perfectly obvious even to people bent upon your destruction that the courteous Lila here loves you, even if her love is in questionable taste and perhaps evidence of your mutually damaged genetic past" . . .

"That's true, dearest," pled Lila, "you are loved . . . I love you!"

"Your love does not count," Maverick sneered . . .

Even Burden-of-the-Earth was amazed at this reply . . . "Young man, why in the world not?"

These words of care from one who was his sworn enemy threw Maverick into a rage . . . "Because, as you yourself say, you stupid, she is just my sister! She's just my stupid sister!" . . . Maverick was crying . . . he struggled to remove his gun but couldn't seem to get it out . . . he wanted to shoot someone . . . but he couldn't get his gun out of the holster . . . it was stuck . . . could somebody help him? . . . Burden crossed his arms and smiled sadly . . . "Goodness goodness" . . . "I'm going to kill you!" screamed Maverick, his voice climbing registers . . .

Then Burden-of-the-Earth did something quite amazing . . . he lifted his right hand and, cocking his thumb, pointed his finger dead at Maverick's head . . . right between the eyes . . . Maverick froze and stared . . . there was a dense quiet . . . would he shoot? . . .

"Bang," said John Wesley Burden-of-the-Earth . . .

Maverick shuddered, his knees buckling . . .

Then everyone broke out in laughter . . . all the simple gray townfolk . . . they clapped him on the back . . . town drunks and mooncalfs guffawed in his face . . . local humor, simpletons, grinned and ran their sooty fingers across their throats . . . *kaput!* . . . what a clown, what a

feeb, what a joke, the great Maverick, a poltroon, a slicker, a mere tin-horn . . .

Maverick stood there, broken, as the townspeople moved away in their devastating mirth . . . Lila came to his side . . . she put her handkerchief to his nose . . . “Blow,” she said . . . “Come on, blow . . . Your nose is running” . . . Maverick blew . . . as if it were written somewhere, as if the runny tale of a blown nose were tea leaves in which the future could be read, they both looked into the handkerchief . . . a tiny, milk-white worm wriggled against the cotton . . .

Finally, the awful truth . . . Maverick was tainted . . . Maverick was occupied, infested, his brain crawling with an overflowing alien life like the hemispheres of an infected walnut . . . whether it was the pulsing soil he ate as a child or the contaminated milk of Budding Beauty Vanity, this made little difference . . . he had a bad brain . . . Lila looked into her beloved brother’s eyes and saw not the divine radiance of earlier days but the shadows of worms who moved from lobe to lobe . . .

## THE END

A live shot of Dr. Entirety’s laboratory . . . he is not there . . . one sees only his counter with the large white-enameled tray in which are the snails . . . they now crawl freely . . . they circle the lip of the tray and wander the counter-top itself, inching aimlessly, leaving behind their luminous, infected trails . . . a few have fallen to the tile floor, crushing their shells . . . others have successfully descended the legs of the counter and are moving about the floor of the lab . . .

But there is apparently no human in control here . . . where is Dr. Entirety? . . . is this a mistake? . . . embarrassing mistakes happened frequently enough in the early days of T.V. . . . is this simply the wrong set? . . . has the wrong switch been thrown? . . . when will this error be realized? . . . worse yet, this is no avant garde underground film, this is expensive, commercially ripe prime-time, and this is a horror . . . the camera stares at the slow fury of the snails for ten consecutive hours before this grim technical difficulty ends . . . and it ends only when very gradually a moist shadow quietly eclipses the camera lens . . .

“You two goombahs!” Mommy shouts . . . “What in the world are you two doin’?”

Poppy and the boy stare at the moist, tubercular patch on the screen . . . Mommy yanks on the Venetian blind cord . . . it is morning . . . the blinds go rattling towards the ceiling with an explosion of dust . . . but on the brilliant morning light, the dust is hovering diamonds . . .

“Good lord, get some fresh air . . . it stinks in here . . . that T.V. will be the death of you two . . . come on, breakfast is almost ready . . . honey? coffee! . . . Sonny? Maypo!” . . .

Poppy and the boy look at each other for what seems the first time in centuries . . . there are tears in the boy’s eyes . . . Poppy, too, feels confused and saddened, but he also feels pity for the boy’s fear and so he gets up from the couch, takes the boy by the hand, and leads him out the front door . . . they sit together on the tiny concrete stoop and Poppy puts an arm around the boy’s slumping shoulder . . .

“Poppy, that show scared me. What was it about?”

“It was scary to me, too, Butch. And I don’t know what it was about. But remember, that’s all just life-on-T.V. That’s not real life.”

The boy looks up at this father, the huge round eyes of youth brimming with enormous tears . . . his father’s eyes brimming with the enormity of his lie . . .

“Tell you what,” says Poppy, “Whaddaya say you and me play a little catch before breakfast?”

“What kind of catch?”

“Football catch.”

“You sure Mom won’t be mad?”

“Nah, she’ll understand.”

“Okay, then.”

“Now where is that football? Didn’t I see it underneath the lawn mower? And where would the pump be?”

Poppy goes off to search for the football, but the boy remains on the stoop, staring in that splendid mix of confusion and pain that makes youth memorable . . . then, slowly, an idea begins to wriggle across his face . . . the flesh of his face seems to crawl with concept . . . he raises his right hand and points his index finger . . . he cocks his thumb back . . . he points in the air . . . he feels the rumble of a pure power rise

from his bowels . . . pkeew . . . he points at a bush . . . PKEEW . . . Poochie comes stumbling out from behind the corner of the house and pauses, naked, exposed, uncertain . . . Poochie wonders, What's he doing outside? . . . the two, boy and dog, lock stares for a moment, then the boy says, "Hold it right there, Poochie" . . . the grim creature freezes, a look of intense doggy anxiety in its eyes . . . the boy points his finger right between the dog's eyes . . . "Freeze or you're a dead dog" . . . Poochie can't get more frozen . . . "Pity me," he seems to say . . . "I just want to live my miserable doggy existence, same as you" . . . the boy smiles . . . "Good boy, Poochie. But you're a dead dog anyway" . . . PKEEW, PKEEW, PKEEW . . . Poochie shudders . . . if something furry can go white, he goes white . . . "Gotcha! You're dead, Poochie! You're dead!" . . . he's howling, laughing, this goofy kid, this wormy apple . . . "You're dead, Poochie! Aha ha! . . . I really shot you! HA HA HA HA HA HA HA!"

Poochie wobbles, waddling slowly in reverse on his arthritic dog legs and returns to his smelly backyard paradise . . .

Poppy returns wiping cobwebs and motor oil from a half-inflated football . . . "Found it! Here we go! I'm Y.A. Tittle. Who the hell are you?"

"R.C. Owens."

"Go deep, R.C.!"

Poppy disappears into the front yard, tossing the ball to himself in little comical "downfield" spirals . . .

The boy stands slowly, looking after his father . . . he notices something . . . something high in his peripheral vision . . . it's a color, a vivid color . . . it's intense, shocking, spreading behind the tormented branches of a sycamore tree . . . it's blue . . . the color blue . . . he can't recall ever seeing it before . . . he could be mistaken, but it would appear that the entire sky is the color blue.

Now, for most people, the sky's blueness is a given (and for all that is therefore less than fully blue) . . . but for the boy emerging for the first time from his gray, repeatable night . . . emerging from his stinking pre-fab mousehole, this was a new and exhilarating discovery . . . and you will forgive him if he assumed, with an excess of childish, poetic enthusiasm, that it was again Maverick intruding on a black-

and-white world . . . it was Maverick that he saw high behind the sycamores . . . he bent, brooding, over the world with his warm blue breast and—ah!—his bright laughing eyes.