
Three Fictions by Paul West

Down in Flames

1944

Leutnant Steinhof of the Luftwaffe, a former ladies' man, belonged to the ladies more than they to him. His nimble, peppermint face blond-downed enough only to need a weekly shave did not even chafe the insides of their thighs.

That was him in his first incarnation, so to speak. In his second, after cockpit burning, he made them flee, the few that stalked him barefoot in his chamber, they unwrapping his chops from the silken turban he wore with fighter-pilot élan. What they then saw, on a dare or in ill-managed incredulity, singed their brains. The eyes were pot that once had been the rinsed-est azure. The nose was merely the vomer camouflaged with suet bric-à-brac. The septum was a see-through tear like a girl's glue-on nail. The ears looked retracted into invisible wings. The teeth were brown wood. And the skin, once a delicatessen of glowing samite, hung in folds like something from the disemboweled carcass of a cow, an unevenly spread-out doyley.

Odd, though, although he had become less himself than they knew, he had become more of what was not he; his chops and mien and physiog, as we say, had become an anthology of whatever grew on the planet: shrimps, damsons, spinach, cobweb, snailtrack, dew, snakeskin

shed, a molten carapace to write home to saying I am all right but I have been missed in action. □

A Reviewer

His arrogance should be liquefied, sealed in a jar, then poured into his mouth while he is dying. His is the true hubris of the promoted greenhorn let loose upon the world because it is safer to risk losing him in battle than letting him escort desirable authors at home. □

A Publisher

He was so accustomed to being called a little prick, he began to boast that he came from the original crown of thorns. Famous in his salad days for taste, he turned taste upon itself, picking out with devious facility anything well said and then rejecting it as a menace to his company's pelf. Up he went, from VP to Senior VP (he sounded like successive British table sauces), until literature and its aspirants became a scurvy miasma farther and farther from him. Now his taste, so-called, identified the bad, the schlocky, which he at once acquired, firm in his belief that a tribe's hacks fortified it, kept it pure. He even evolved, with help from his colleagues Puby Jannings and Cuthbert Hirdheitz, the famous Toff Cloaca formula, in which you add up the number of sentences beginning with He, She, or It; the total of four-line paragraphs; and the number of one-line sentences. From this you subtract the number of commas in the book. Thus emerges the TC formula: $S + 4P + L - C$. Some fool in his

entourage once subtracted the speed of light, as *C* is sometimes known, and so produced a most unfavorable TC factor, damning the book almost as much as if it had been written by Proust.

After a decade of crypto-mediocrity, Toff Cloaca yearned for stronger stimulants and so rented a pretty, soundproof room not far from the publishing house where, twice weekly, in an Afrika Corps uniform, dreaming he was Rommel the Desert Fox, he thrashed with a silver-handled whip the collected works of those he thought disgraced human society: Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Joyce, Woolf, Mann, Broch, and the aforementioned Proust. Moving from pile to pile of hardbound greatness, he perspired, but got that good old Kasserine Pass feeling. Power over men and women was what he sought, and especially over the good taste of his subordinates, who usually quit after a year or two in incredulous despair. And he played softball with his favorite hacks and had them clean his nostrils with hundred dollar bills, little realizing he had become almost an Australian, unable to spell the word *beer*, calling it XXXX instead. □