

Serpent Knowledge

In something you have written in school, you say
That snakes are born (or hatched) already knowing
Everything they will ever need to know—
Weazened and prematurely shrewd, like Merlin;
Something you read somewhere, I think, some textbook
Coy on the subject of the reptile brain.
(Perhaps the author half-remembered reading
About the Serpent of Experience
That changes manna to gall.) I don't believe it;
Even a snake's horizon must expand,
Inwardly, when an instinct is confirmed
By some new stage of life: to mate, kill, die.

Like angels, who have no genitals or place
Of national origin, however, snakes
Are not historical creatures; unlike chickens,
Who teach their chicks to scratch the dust for food—
Or people, who teach ours how to spell their names:
Not born already knowing all we need,
One generation differing from the next
In what it needs, and knows.

So what I know,
What you know, what your sister knows (approaching
The age you were when I began this poem)
All differ, like different overlapping stretches
Of the same highway: with different lacks, and visions.
The words—"Vietnam"—that I can't use in poems
Without the one word threatening to gape
And swallow and enclose the poem, for you
May grow more finite; able to be touched.

The actual highway—snake's-back where it seems
 That any strange thing may be happening, now,
 Somewhere along its endless length—once twisted
 And straightened, and took us past a vivid place:
 Brave in the isolation of its profile,
 "Ten miles from nowhere" on the rolling range,
 A family graveyard on an Indian mound
 Or little elevation above the grassland. . . .
 Fenced in against the sky's huge vault at dusk
 By a waist-high iron fence with spear-head tips,
 The grass around and over the mound like surf.

A mile more down the flat fast road, the homestead:
 Regretted, vertical, and unadorned
 As its white gravestones on their lonely mound—
 Abandoned now, the paneless windows breathing
 Easily in the wind, and no more need
 For courage to survive the open range
 With just the graveyard for a nearest neighbor;
 The stones of Limit—comforting and depriving.

Elsewhere along the highway, other limits—
 Hanging in shades of neon from dusk to dusk,
 The signs of people who know how to take
 Pleasure in places where it seems unlikely:
 New kinds of places, the "overdeveloped" strips
 With their arousing, vacant-minded jumble;
 Or garbagey lake-towns, and the tourist-pits
 Where crimes unspeakably bizarre come true
 To astonish countries older, or more savage . . .
 As though the rapes and murders of the French
 Or Indonesians were less inventive than ours,
 Less goofy than those happenings that grow
 Like air-plants—out of nothing, and alone.

They make us parents want to keep our children
 Locked up, safe even from the daily papers

That keep the grisly record of that frontier
Where things unspeakable happen along the highways.

In today's paper, you see the teen-aged girl
From down the street; camping in Oregon
At the far point of a trip across the country,
Together with another girl her age,
They suffered and survived a random evil.
An unidentified, youngish man in jeans
Aimed his car off the highway, into the park
And at their tent (apparently at random)
And drove it over them once, and then again;
And then got out, and struck at them with a hatchet
Over and over, while they struggled; until
From fear, or for some other reason, or none,
He stopped; and got back into his car again
And drove off down the night-time highway. No rape,
No robbery, no "motive." Not even words,
Or any sound from him that they remember.
The girl still conscious, by crawling, reached the road
And even some way down it; where some people
Drove by and saw her, and brought them both to help,
So doctors could save them—barely marked.

You see

Our neighbor's picture in the paper: smiling,
A pretty child with a kerchief on her head
Covering where the surgeons had to shave it.
You read the story, and in a peculiar tone—
Factual, not unfeeling, like two policemen—
Discuss it with your sister. You seem to feel
Comforted that it happened far away,
As in a crazy place, in *Oregon*:
For me, a place of wholesome reputation;
For you, a highway where strangers go amok,
As in the universal provincial myth
That sees, in every stranger, a mad attacker . . .
(And in one's victims, it may be, a stranger).



Strangers: the Foreign who, coupling with their cousins
Or with their livestock, or even with wild beasts,
Spawn children with tails, or claws and spotted fur,
Ugly—and though their daughters are beautiful
Seen dancing from the front, behind their backs
Or underneath their garments are the tails
Of reptiles, or teeth of bears.

So one might feel—
Thinking about the people who cross the mountains
And oceans of the earth with separate legends,
To die inside the squalor of sod huts,
Shanties, or tenements; and leave behind
Their legends, or the legend of themselves,
Broken and mended by the generations:
Their alien, orphaned, and disconsolate spooks,
Earth-trolls or Kallikaks or Snopes or golems,
Descended of Hessians, runaway slaves and Indians,
Legends confused and loose on the roads at night . . .
The Alien or Creature of the movies.

As people die, their monsters grow more tame;
So that the people who survived Saguntum,
Or in the towns that saw the Thirty Years' War,
Must have felt that the wash of blood and horror
Changed something, inside. Perhaps they came to see
The state or empire as a kind of Whale
Or Serpent, in whose body they must live—
Not that mere suffering could make us wiser,
Or nobler, but only older, and more ourselves. . . .

On television, I used to see, each week,
Americans descending in machines
With wasted bravery and blood; to spread
Pain and vast fires amid a foreign place,
Among the strangers to whom we were new—
Americans: a spook or golem, there.
I think it made our country older, forever.

I don't mean better or not better, but merely
As though a person should come to a certain place
And have his hair turn gray, that very night.
Someday, the War in Southeast Asia, somewhere—
Perhaps for you and people younger than you—
Will be the kind of history and pain
Saguntum is for me; but never tamed
Or “history” for me, I think. I think
That I may always feel as if I lived
In a time when the country aged itself:
More lonely together in our common strangeness . . .
As if we were a family, and some members
Had done an awful thing on a road at night,
And all of us had grown white hair, or tails:
And though the tails or white hair would afflict
Only that generation then alive
And of a certain age, regardless whether
They were the ones that did or planned the thing—
Or even heard about it—nevertheless
The members of that family ever after
Would bear some consequence or demarcation,
Forgotten maybe, taken for granted, a trait,
A new syllable buried in their name.

“Serpent Knowledge” is from *An Explanation of America* (1979), and is reprinted by permission of Princeton University Press and the author. Robert Pinsky teaches at Boston University. His most recent book is his brilliant and readable translation of Dante’s *Inferno*.