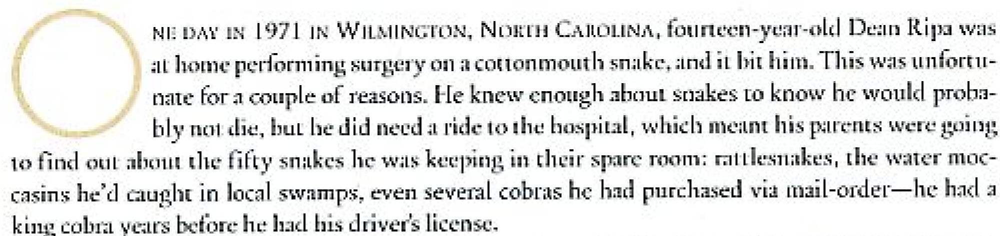
LOVE AND DEATH
IN THE CAPE FEAR SERPENTARIUM

SOME PASSIONS ARE MORE DANGEROUS THAN OTHERS.

BY WENDY BRENNER

He is a fool who injures himself by amassing things. And no one knows why people cannot help but do it.
—Danse Macabre

Fortunately, I number among my friends
a young man named Dean Ripa, who could have stepped from the pages of a Joseph Conrad novel.
—William S. Burroughs, *The Western Lands*



ONE DAY IN 1971 IN WILMINGTON, NORTH CAROLINA, fourteen-year-old Dean Ripa was at home performing surgery on a cottonmouth snake, and it bit him. This was unfortunate for a couple of reasons. He knew enough about snakes to know he would probably not die, but he did need a ride to the hospital, which meant his parents were going to find out about the fifty snakes he was keeping in their spare room: rattlesnakes, the water moccasins he'd caught in local swamps, even several cobras he had purchased via mail-order—he had a king cobra years before he had his driver's license.

The bite landed him in Intensive Care for two weeks—with fever, a grossly swollen arm, blistering skin—during which time his father donated Dean's entire snake collection to a local roadside zoo, a seemingly apocalyptic setback that might have ended any normal person's love affair with snakes. But Dean turned out to be another kind of person, the kind who, after a full recovery, quickly began amassing more snakes, breeding his own snakes, and making extra money to buy snakes by collecting snakes for the same zoo that had adopted his earlier snakes. A year after the cottonmouth episode, one

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LOGAN MOCK-BUNTING

of his new cobras got loose and the whole Ripa family had to move out of the house for five days until it could be found and shot.

Thirty-one years later, in what might be the ultimate fantasy of young snake-lovers everywhere, Dean Ripa opened the Cape Fear Serpentarium, and, most thrilling of all to a twelve-year-old acquaintance of mine, he lives there, too.

The Serpentarium is no roadside attraction, but an elegant, bi-level, 6,300-square-foot gallery overlooking the Cape Fear River in gentrified downtown Wilmington, exhibiting one of the largest collections of live exotic venomous snakes in the U.S. About a hundred are on public display at any given time, dozens of different species, almost all of which were captured by Dean himself in jungles and marshes around the world. He specializes in the rarest and deadliest: Gaboon vipers, black mambas, spitting cobras, puff adders, and bushmasters, of which he has the biggest known collection anywhere. In fact, Dean was the first person ever to breed the rare blackheaded bushmaster in captivity (he continues to supply them internationally to zoos and researchers), and once even reproduced a bushmaster hybrid, in effect recreating an extinct ancestor of the existing species. He has also survived four bushmaster bites—*envenomings* is the herpetologist's Orwellian term—despite the fact that almost all bushmaster victims die, even with antivenom treatment.

The Serpentarium was built by Dean's father, a local contractor, who has presumably forgiven Dean for his adolescence (or perhaps is just happy to have survived it). The Serpentarium's neighbors include antique stores and historic bed & breakfasts and Thai restaurants and art galleries. Snakes do not seem especially popular around here; the local attitude is perhaps best summed up by a resident of a snake-plagued Wilmington apartment complex, quoted in a recent story in the Wilmington *Star-News*: "I don't like those fellows with no shoulders." Yet Dean has gotten no complaints from his neighbors (he says they're grateful for the business he brings to the area), with the sole exception of a group of cat lovers who once confronted him after hearing a rumor that Dean stalks downtown alleys at dawn, collecting cats in a basket to feed to his snakes. "Ludicrous," he tells me. "I never get up before 10 A.M."

The Serpentarium snakes live in lush enclosures built to Dean's specifications by set designers from Screen Gems (Frank Capra, Jr.'s, Wilmington film studios), featuring stalactites and stalagmites and twisted roots and vines, real animal skulls and bones, moss-draped grottos and cypress knees and running waterfalls and ponds. Each snake is rated by skulls-and-bones to indicate its deadliness level (two skulls mean life-threatening to children and the elderly, possible mild disfigurement; five skulls mean survival unlikely), and placards on the exhibits give detailed descriptions, especially popular with children, of

exactly how you will die if bitten by each particular snake.

I learn that the Egyptian cobra, whose festive yellow and black stripes evoke Charlie Brown's shirt, is believed to be the asp that killed Cleopatra; in ancient Egypt, the sign reads, these snakes were awarded to royal prisoners as a means of suicide. The Asiatic spitting cobras, meanwhile, which never seem to run out of venom, are like a "SORT OF ENDLESS POISONOUS SQUIRT GUN." The bite of the Central American fer-de-lance feels like having your hand slammed in a car door and then seared with a blow torch. As the placard helpfully elaborates, "THE BITTEN EXTREMITY SWELLS TO MASSIVE PROPORTIONS, THE SKIN BURSTS OPEN, AND YOUR EYES WEEP BLOOD." The fifteen-foot king cobra, the longest venomous snake in the world, can kill an elephant with a single bite, and is known to rear up six feet in the air, hood flared, and look a man in the eye while growling like a dog. For some reason, perhaps a primal one, the male king cobra's eerie, flat dirt color is scarier to me than some of the flashier patterns on display here. Likewise the look of the steely black mambas, who are long, skinny, and, according to their description, "EXCITABLE"—and indeed each time I've visited they were wide awake and slicing around their enclosure like a gang looking for some action. Most disturbing of all, perhaps, are the puff adders, whose odd, fat cigar-shaped bodies make them grotesquely evocative, like nightmare shape-shifter snakes. *We are snakes,* they seem to say, *but we are on the verge of becoming something else.*

The Serpentarium also exhibits a few nonvenomous reptiles, including a 250-pound python named Sheena, some ethereally beautiful emerald tree boas, and a nine-foot, man-eating crocodile, which, like every crocodile, alligator, or lizard I've ever seen, looks fake, prehistoric, and improbable. One day while I was visiting Dean, the girl at the front desk reported that a worried visitor claimed the beaded lizard looked dead. "It always looks dead," Dean said irritably. "That's how it looks." We went to check on the lizard, which was fine. It resembled a large, exotic purse. The placard noted that "THESE LIZARDS MAKE EXCELLENT—IF UNRESPONSIVE—PETS."

For the truly obsessive, the Serpentarium gift shop offers a huge assortment of fetishes: toy snakes, snake-decorated T-shirts and snake stickers and snake books, Viper Blast spray candy (and, inexplicably, Skittles), watercolor paintings by Dean's mother, carved Peruvian rainsticks, and the occasional display of traditional African art and sculpture, available for purchase from a local importer. A sign on the front desk warns against tapping on the snakes' enclosures: IF YOU KNEW THAT THE ONLY THING STANDING BETWEEN YOU AND DEATH WAS A PANE OF GLASS, WOULD YOU RISK BREAKING IT? This is not P.T. Barnum–style hyperbole. One day I was taking flash photos of an apparently pissed-off cobra (she was waving menacingly about, hood flared), my face as close as my camera lens would allow, when she finally had enough and struck at me, hitting the glass. I had the delayed jolt you get right after a fender-bender—*did that really just happen?*

Though this is the kind of safe thrill one might expect at a zoo, weekend feedings at the Serpentarium go one step further. Suddenly the barriers between audience and predator disappear: a few comically symbolic plastic yellow chains are hooked up to keep people out of the way, the glass enclosures propped wide open. Dean (or his curator, Scott) uses barbecue tongs to deliver dead rats, jiggling them to provoke a strike, sometimes even climbing in with the snakes to prevent fights. (One might imagine the feeders wear something like astronaut suits, but the day I saw Dean break up a tussle between two bushmasters, he was wearing only a polo shirt and cargo shorts.) The yellow chains are, it turns out, unnecessary—men the size of linebackers dart to the back of the crowd, pretending they're just joking: *Ha! I think I'll stand back here.* Some people can't even bear the sight of Dean handling the dead rodents. During one feeding a woman murmured, "He's touching that rat like it ain't nothing."

PEOPLE WHO DEVOTE THEIR CAREERS TO ANIMALS—veterinarians, zoologists—are often quite different in temperament from garden-variety animal lovers, taking a flat-footed, unsentimental approach to their subjects, skeptical of any anthropomorphism. My mother worked as a docent at Chicago's Lincoln Park Zoo for twenty-five years, and has an enormous collection of butterflies she traveled all over the world to catch; my father is a lifelong birdwatcher, getting up before dawn every weekend to search for rare shorebirds at landfills and sewerage plants. And yet neither of my parents is particularly romantic about the animals they love. They love them for perplexingly literal reasons—because they're such fascinating examples of evolution, or because they have "unusual plumage." My parents do not seem especially interested in talking or thinking about what animals are like, what they evoke or suggest, what they *mean*—all the things that are most compelling to me, the writer in the family.

My favorite novelist, Joy Williams, once said in an interview that the Bible had influenced her as a child because "all those wonderful stories—about snakes and serpents and mysterious seeds and trees—didn't mean what they seemed. They meant some other thing." In Williams's short story "Lu-Lu," the characters do nothing but sit around discussing the meaning of a giant snake (Lu-Lu)—whether she has a soul, how she seems to materialize and dematerialize at will, how she can occupy herself doing nothing. The snake continues to accrue symbolic weight until the story finally ends, hauntingly, with a young woman trying to coax the stoic Lu-Lu into her car: "How do you beckon to something like this, she won-

dered; something that can change everything, your life?" When I was twelve, my mother gave my father a pet boa constrictor for their anniversary, and never once in all the subsequent years we owned Jaws (we got and named her in 1978) did it occur to me that she could change anything, let alone our lives. We did not discuss her symbolism. We talked about whether she was going to shed her skin soon, or whether she was ready to move up from mice to rats.

So even before I meet Dean Ripa, I think I know what kind of person he will be: another scientist. Though he has no advanced degree, his snake collection is internationally recognized, his research on bushmasters published in herpetological journals.

But then he gives me a copy of his essay, "Confessions of a Gaboon Viper Lover," which appeared in Gary Indiana's 1994 anthology *Living with the Animals.* It is a paean to Ripa's own late Gaboon viper, Madame Zsa Zsa. "Morphologically, she seems halfway to some unspeakable transformation that may or may not include a human head," he writes. "Her pattern might have been lifted from a Persian carpet," he says, and also suggests skeletons. "One can *see* into the pattern," a Tanzanian witch priest told Dean, but then declined to say what it was he saw. The snake's design brings to mind "Kandinsky zigzags," the "meretricious skulls" of Georgia O'Keeffe; its face suggests Bosch, or Dürer's engraving of *The Fall of Man.* Seeing the Gaboon viper, Dean writes, "seems largely participatory, on a parallel with perception itself. Like Dali's paranoiac-critical method of the hidden face, there arises that 'magic' effect of audience creation." Watching a Gaboon viper "literally materialize before you from the debris of the forest floor," he concludes, "is perhaps the closest one can ever come among live creatures to the fright of encountering an actual ghost."

I notice that I am feeling slightly in love.

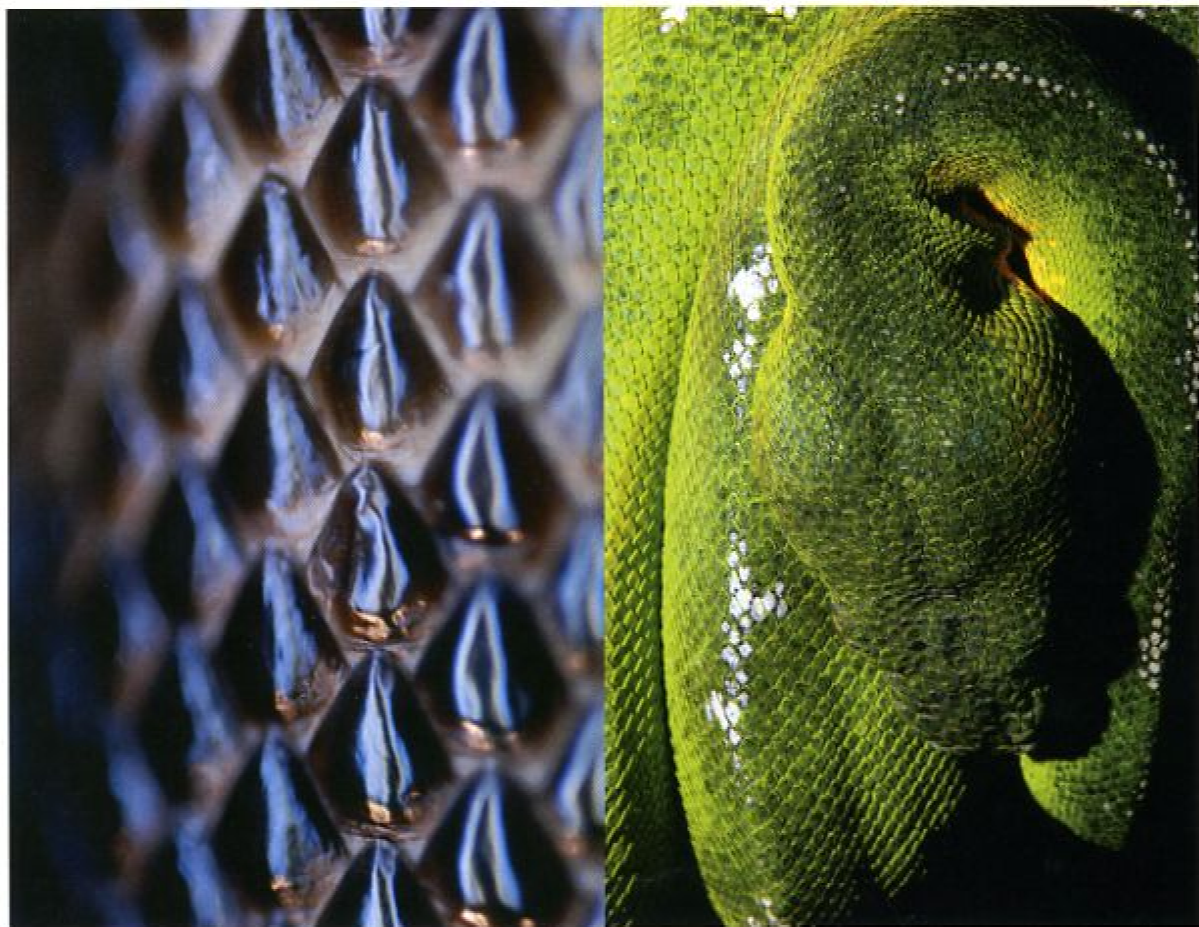
IT'S DEFINITELY NOT LIKE TV," Dean says, somewhat defiantly, about the Serpentarium experience. Dean has been invited by various animal-related TV programs to bring his snakes out into the jungle, set them loose, and then pretend to discover them on camera, and he declines all such invitations on principle. In the wild, he says, snakes are nearly impossible to find—you will go years without finding the one you want, unless, like Dean, you know where to look.

He is telling me this in his apartment, the entrance to which is an unmarked door on the Serpentarium's second level; he lives alone with his tiny, eleven-year-old Maltese dog, Wednesday (whom he also calls, variously, "Winky" and "Pinky"), and several aquariums full of deadly bushmasters in his bedroom. He has been married and divorced three times, but claims his snakes played no part in his romantic misfortunes. "I'm just not somebody who can be halved," he says, enigmatically. I suggest that it must be hard to find women who will sleep in a room with snakes—or maybe some women think it's a turn-on? "You get both kinds," Dean says. Either way, it occurs to me, if one were going to sleep with Dean Ripa, one would need a great deal of faith in Dean Ripa.

Not long after he quit high school ("for dramatic effect," he says), Dean moved to Italy to study painting under the portraitist Pietro Annigoni, whose work he had discovered in an art magazine. For a number of years, then, collecting and selling snakes became secondary, a way to support his art career. He enjoyed relative success, spending time with Salvador Dali and selling a couple of paintings to the writer William S. Burroughs (these now hang on the walls of Dean's apartment, on loan from the Burroughs estate). His style is blackly surreal—muddy-hued portraits and still lifes with hidden messages, faces, and severed limbs floating to their dark, dreamy surfaces. "Ripa's painting depicts biologic fragmentation," Burroughs wrote. "The artist is giving birth to his selves on canvas." I think of *Rosemary's Baby,* the paintings Mia Farrow sees on the corridor walls as she's being carried into her Satanic neighbors' apartment, and I ask Dean why he so admired Annigoni, a more traditional, Renaissance-inspired realist. "I wanted to learn the secrets of the Old Masters," he says. "I've always been on a quest for hidden things, occult things. It's like the snakes. Certain things, to me, always seemed to promise more than they outwardly were."

In 1975, when Dean was eighteen, he sent Burroughs the manuscript of a children's book he was writing called *Johnny Zimb.* He didn't know Burroughs but was a fan of his work, its renegade exoticism seeming to speak directly to the "voices in my head," he says. *Johnny Zimb's* plot was "a scarecrow-boy type of thing," he tells me. "You know, a surrealistic thing." Burroughs replied to Dean, "I think you have written a very good children's book, though perhaps a little too complex and literate for juvenile reading." Over the years that followed, their correspondence and friendship escalated, Burroughs sending letters to Dean in Ecuador, Ghana, Suriname, and Costa Rica, giving advice on writing and asking Dean's advice on art, inviting him to visit at his home in Lawrence, Kansas. They exchanged knives, guns, snakes, and, at one point, a human skull Dean claimed to have robbed from a grave as a teenager. ("I did indeed receive Helen with open arms," Burroughs wrote in thanks. "I know how difficult it was for you to part with her.") One time Dean brought Burroughs a suitcase full of snakes; another time he set a cobra loose in Burroughs's living room. While I'm reading through their letters, Dean goes into his room and brings out a .357 Magnum that Burroughs gave him, mentioning off-handedly as he sets it on the table before me that it's loaded. (*Jesus,* I think, *how many different things that can kill you can one person keep in his bedroom?*)

Burroughs's letters to Dean are full of fond and cryptic personal counsel: "Oh and as for Madame Whosit and her



Oath of Secrecy I would caution you to stay well away from her dubious emanations. She sounds like bad news." In the mid '80s, Burroughs asked Dean to write a letter about centipede venom that he could include in his novel, *The Western Lands*; it appears in the text unedited, and Dean is thanked in the book's acknowledgments. "Have you thought of writing your memoirs as a snake catcher?" Burroughs wrote Dean in 1986. And again in 1988, Burroughs suggested, "Why not write a book about your experiences as a snake catcher? Your letters to me would be a good start." Then, as now, however, Dean was more interested in writing fiction and collecting snakes.

When Burroughs died of heart failure in 1997, Dean was at his bedside; he happened to be visiting that month ("I don't think it was a coincidence," he says). He had never seen someone die before, and stayed at Burroughs's house for days afterward—even sleeping in his bed—while fans came and went, leaving flowers on the door.

Nowadays, in between endless interruptions from the Serpentarium downstairs, Dean is working on a couple of novels, at least parts of which are based on his own experiences. He shows me the thick manuscript of one, *Succumbu (Mama Sleep)*, but then will only let me read its first line: "The beauty of Hell is that it is self-regenerating."

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO MEET DEAN RIPA and not think of John Laroche, the ragged, eccentric outlaw orchid breeder Susan Orlean wrote about in *The Orchid Thief*, portrayed by Chris Cooper so brilliantly in *Adaptation*. But the similarities are only in kind, not physical. For one thing, Dean still has all his teeth, and he is darkly, boyishly handsome, looking much younger than his age. The only off-note is his slightly malevolent grin. And while the orchid thief's various obsessions "arrived unannounced and ended explosively, like car bombs" (he had already abandoned orchids by the time Orlean finished writing about him), Dean's passions—painting, writing, and, most especially, snakes—seem eternal. "I'm doing the exact same things now that I was doing when I was ten years old," he says.

Dean dreams about snakes all the time. Sometimes they are good dreams: that he discovers he owns snakes he didn't know about, that aliens abduct him and take him to a secret part of North Carolina that was incompletely glaciated (there is always a scientific explanation in Dean's dreams), revealing a colony of rare snakes. He also has nightmares that his snakes are dying, that they're eating one another, that he forgot to feed them, that he must protect them from some unseen danger. He almost never

dreams that his snakes bite or kill him; it is always the snakes that are in jeopardy, that he must save.

"The greater the value of a collection, the greater the risk of loss that it represents," Philipp Blom writes in *To Have and to Hold: An Intimate History of Collectors and Collecting*. To collect is to continually negotiate with the afterlife, with the fact that you can't take it with you. Even worse, if you collect living things you must also confront their mortality. In *The Orchid Thief*, Susan Orlean calls collecting "a sort of love sickness." Because orchids die, "to desire orchids," Orlean says, "is to have a desire that will never be, can never be, fully requited." So what kind of person devotes his life to collecting something both mortal and deadly? A collection that is both hard to keep alive and that might at any moment kill you?

Dean insists his romance has always been with danger, not death. He has eleven times endured the bites of potentially lethal snakes, including the cottonmouth that bit him when he was fourteen. "[S]ome Greek said that men give themselves more trouble than is ordained by the Gods," Burroughs wrote to Dean in 1989. "A parish priest would tell you that your trouble is scruples. Like you make things more complicated than they need to be and more categorical.... So take things philosophic and remember you have reached a point where antivenom is almost more dangerous than snake bite." Dean claims Burroughs meant this last comment literally, since antivenom really can be as deadly as the snakebite itself. Still, it strikes me as beautiful, Zen-like advice.

I ask whether he suffers lingering effects from the envenomings. "I don't know about lingering effects, but I don't feel so great," he says, and laughs weakly, like he's not exactly joking. He claims he has a headache, and so I offer him something (I've got every kind of painkiller in my purse, I tell him, thanks to a recent dental procedure). "Well, then you'll lead a long life," he says wearily. He does admit he's more easily fatigued these days, but that it may be a result of the malaria, schistosomiasis, dysentery, and miscellaneous other tropical ailments he contracted during his travels. His hands are weaker from the bites, he says, and he has a greater tolerance for pain. Also, he fears death less than he used to, but this is not necessarily a good thing. "Actually what scares me isn't death," he clarifies, "but that I'll forget to fear death." He doesn't mean this figuratively or philosophically. He means: during feeding times.

Religious snake handlers sometimes try to buy snakes from Dean, but he won't sell to them, claiming his snakes are just too deadly ("They don't have enough faith for my snakes, believe me," he says). Yet he has no objection to what the handlers do, and even declares, "If I had a religion, that would probably be it. At least they're willing to test, to prove what they believe." He adds, "Actually, I might be a magic animist, if I'm anything. I'm interested in voodoo, but I would never call myself a voodooist. I don't like organized things, groups, mobs. The most frightening thing in the world is a group of people just *standing* there."

When too many visitors pack the Serpentarium, Dean hides out here in his apartment. But, I ask, I thought your purpose with the Serpentarium was to educate people. "I'm not here to educate people," he says. "I couldn't give a damn what happens to them." But then he adds, grudgingly, "Well, there are some people worth something, and ideally they'd get something out of it." By now I've grown accustomed (and rather devoted) to Dean's rhetorical style—outrageous overstatement, subsequent qualification—but I think I recognize something else, something authentic here: a certain strain of introverted misanthropy that often leads people to commit their lives to animals, something I think I know about from my family. Introverts and loners love animals. It runs the spectrum, I think, from my father's boyhood shyness to full-fledged autism—Temple Grandin and all those like her who understand animals better than people. Whether it's a quirk of personality or a genuine disorder, it's a trait I find familiar and strangely comforting.

THE CAPE FEAR SERPENTARIUM

is located at 20 Orange Street in downtown Wilmington, North Carolina. It is open 11 A.M. to 5 P.M. daily. (Summer is tourist season; off-season hours may vary.) Feedings take place at 3 P.M. on Saturdays and Sundays. Admission is $7; call (910) 762-1669 for group rates. For more information about Dean Ripa's snake collection (or to purchase a snake), visit www.bushmastersonline.com or www.capefearserpentarium.com. To hear Dean Ripa sing, visit www.deanripa.com.