

A Snakeskin E-chapbook

Naomi

A Life in Flashbacks

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21.

The day before she died, she sweetly lied.
She said, "I love you, Paul." She saw the pride
Inflame his cheeks, and if she thought of John,
She wished she hadn't. Deeply, she was glad.
"If John could hear this, it'd drive him mad,"
She thought, and that's the way she carried on
Until the train came in. And she implied
They'd meet again soon, and she saw his smile,
Which made her more than glad then, for a while,
A little while, the day before she died.

20.

Waking tired again, she slaps the alarm clock
And dislikes her own smell. (This was a week ago)
Beside her, sleeping solid as a block,
Lies Paul. She thinks, "I just don't want to know.
I do not want to care. I do not want
To want him here" And with a single smooth
Movement she's off, to a shower that will not soothe,
To a dull day, to the usual amount
Of office bitching - then the vivid night's
Intense transforming chemical delights.

19.

Looking into Paul's face, she has to know
Some things she doesn't really want to know.

It's the way he looks at her with no
Defences, straight in the eyes, with no
Evasions. Simply, she can't pretend, "No,
He means nothing to me." She can't help but know
He and the whole thing are here and matter, no
Question about it. No. She definitely does know
What she has to say. Simply there is no
Molecule of her not urging "Yes." She says, "No."

18.

She opens the desk-drawer idly, slams it shut,
Enjoying the smooth run of the runners.
Two weeks before her death, life's tedious, but
It could be worse. She likes the way her manners
Grate on the manager's nerves. She likes the clean
Lines of the boss's desk where John once fucked her.
She loves the black silt of the coffee machine.
She prays, "Make me a lightning conductor
Receptive to a dangerous energy
Stronger than life. Oh life, astonish me."

17.

A small white pill, that's oh so slow
So insidious, so giving and oh so
What she desires, and oh see the world glow
Like she's a star with her own big show...
So...

Music's where you hide and find
Music's where you lose your mind
Lights and noise are what you need
Lights and noise are what can feed
High quality anticipation.
This is the expectation nation.

16.

Stopped between stations on the Central Line,
Her eyes explore a man with face as dull
As council flats. "He looks," she thinks, "like Paul
Will look in ten years, grey, defeated, mine,
All mine." The train now jerks and jars
To life again, then stops and doors slide wide.
She crumples her paper, will not read her stars.
What do they know? It's journalistic crap.
She's beautiful with energy and pride.
A disembodied voice says, "Mind the gap."

15.

She knows Paul likes her, and she knows that she
Has power there, but she's not sure how much,
So she goads him: "So what are you trying to be?
My confessor? My dad? My support? My crutch?"
He dislikes being told he's dependable
Or complimented on his steadiness,
But it's her unsteadiness makes him obsess...

Better remind him he's expendable.
She tells him just that - and believes it, too -
In case he leaves, the way that people do

14.

Her first day at the job, John is the one
Who's told to take her round, to show her things.
Inside, a jubilant alarm bell rings.
This guy is dangerous; this guy is fun;
She likes his casual style; she likes his hair
And predatory grin; she likes the sense
Of "Job's crap but you've got to work somewhere."
He seems to radiate experience,
And when he asks, "Right, d'you feel like a drink?"
She loves that feeling like she's near a brink.

13.

The interviewer scans through her CV
And does the friendly act - "So you've
Played hockey for your school's first team, I see..."
And if she did - so? What does that fact prove
Now school is finished, all that childishness?
She needs to leave such things behind.
There is a world out there for her to find
Of possibilities. She can't care less
For what is past and gone and dead and done.
Give me the job. Let me afford some fun.

12..

Family parties suck. You can only sit
Knowing they feel sorry for you, and hating
Each moment of it, their sympathy grating,
Looking at your watch, feeling like shit.
Waiting for the end, when glancing
Around you see cousin Janine, dancing,
And not with an utter dork, but with a dark-
Haired smoothie of sorts, who's tall
And looks too good for her. For a lark
You introduce yourself. He says, "I'm Paul."

11.

Sex and death. These are the mysteries.
On a bed, at fifteen, her tongue down Jason's throat,
She makes a deliberate mental note.
"Today it's all the way." She gives his flies a squeeze
And looks into his eyes, those eager blanks.
It happens then, the meet of willing wills,
And though she feels no oceanic thrills,
It's all right. When he tries to stutter thanks
She covers his mouth and will not let him speak.
She tells him then, "My mother died last week."

10.

Cold in the echoing church, she has to hear
The vicar's blah; the patronising sod

Goes on and on about his sodding god.
Life's not like that; she holds back every tear.
Her mother's coffin squats big in the nave
And she, at fourteen, feels the power of guilt
That hurts her brain and clogs her lungs like silt.
Her stepdad weeps. Her real dad says "Be brave."
And she's appalled by the vast power of grief,
Appalled as well at feeling such relief.

9.
There is an elsewhere where the shops are vast,
Where all the colours sing, and she's allowed
A credit card so she's not just the crowd,
But is the future, not the draggy past.
She's fourteen now, and with her curtains drawn,
She dreams impatient dreams of when she has
The labels and the cash and razzmatazz
That she deserves, and for which she was born.
And all this dreaming helps her to endure
The period pains that prove she is mature.

8.
Outside the game, it's all a silly game,
But on the hockey field the run and swipe
Means life itself, and all the rest is tame.
Yes, this is living, and the rest is tripe.
The rest's a tedium of rules and fools,

Of parents, teachers, and the whole damn crew
With their nine hundred things you shouldn't do,
And their health warnings, and their scabby schools,
And what you want the very least, above
All fucking else, their suffocating love.

7.
Oh the relief at thirteen to be told
She's failed the big exam; she'll never be
In top stream, full of the dull girls who can see
Right through her. In the sink group she can fold
Her arms at the puny head, and curl her lip
At assembly preaching, and speak scornfully of gross
Infinitely desirable boys.
She will be wild, and in the know and flip
And she'll leave this world of the comatose
For another, of modern dangerous joys.

6.
A lighter, taken from her mother's purse.
She rotates it, and she tries a casual flick
Which doesn't light it. Then her next try's worse -
Not a spark, even. It makes her sick.
When finally she gets the cig alight,
That's fairly nauseous too, but she becomes
For a moment her dream, a queen of the night.
The ciggy taste is bitter round her gums -

Who cares? At twelve she's found a way
To keep the worst of everything at bay.

5.
Mother and step-dad out, she's up again
In their room, touching the soft counterpane,
Then opening cupboards, letting herself explore
Mum's liquid-silky nightgowns, and the drawer
Of stepdad's neat and mannish underwear.
And under that, his store of magazines,
Of lipsticked naked women, svelte as queens.
In just one nimble moment, she's stripped bare.
Facing the mirror, with a pouting look,
She tries out every posture in the book.

4.
Most nights she hears the thrashing arguments
Of adult hurting adult. With no sense
Of what it's all about, or why they fight
She hears them, and each word attacks, a shape
Big as a bludgeon, stupid as an ape
Above her in the dimness of the night.
Until at last those words merge into dreams
Where sometimes she is safe, sometimes not cheap.
Oh it's a great ambiguous comfort, sleep -
Like Death, a place where no one hears your screams.

3.
When she was nine, her ritual was fire.
Solemn and still, in silence but for the scratch
Against emery of a stolen match,
She would light three candles, watch the flames aspire
To pointed nothing, then take folded spills
And watch them burn to fragile curling black.
She'd whisper words like "car-crash", "heart-attack"
Unsmilingly, and will the world's worst ills
Upon her step-dad, who's the King of Lies.
The flame burns tiny in her focused eyes.

2.
She hates her uncle, whose galumphing farts
He thinks are wit. She's eight. She hates her aunt,
Abrasive as the North, who always starts
Long bitter stories that she somehow can't
Bring to an end. She hates her grandma's smell
Of too-sweet talc. She loathes her mother's cooking.
She cringes at her step-dad's "Hey, good-looking!"
Later she'll say, "I wish them all in Hell."
But now she feels it a grim mystery:
"What have these people got to do with me?"

1.
At four she sits upon her father's knee
(He won't be leaving her for three more years).

She lets him comfort her, and wipe her tears,
And tell her dizzying stories, quietly.
She lets herself enjoy his magic voice
That tells of growling witches, dancing mice,
And spooky woods, and palaces of ice,
And girls who make the right and truthful choice.
"Remember, love, there's nothing you can't do,"
He says, and means it. She believes him, too.

These verses first formed part of *Histories*, a hypertext that appeared in Snakeskin several years ago. The original version told the story backwards, like this one but only allowed a reader to glimpse random parts of it. All a bit too obscure to work. The stanzas have now been more clearly ordered, and one has been removed.