



THE
SERPENT
WILL EAT
WHATEVER IS IN
THE BELLY OF THE BEAST



MARC ANTHONY RICHARDSON



DALKEY ARCHIVE PRESS

DIĒS HEBDOMADIS

diēs Sōlis

diēs Lūnae

diēs Martis

diēs Mercuriī

diēs Iovis

diēs Veneris

diēs Saturnī

THEATRUM MENTIS

It's not about other people knowing.
We don't even tell the victims.
We just whisper to him,
Your Day has come.

~ Morrison, *Song of Solomon*



now you have to harvest our humanity to send it to the laboratory, a small piece from this vertebrate brain, to be transferred in formalin, to harden, as was harvested from every organ cut away and weighed *when I was just a little girl*, from our heart, our lungs, and all the visceral rest *I asked my mother what will I be*, from the liver *will I be pretty*, from the kidneys *will I be rich*, for once the ventral and cranial cavities are empty, *here's what's she said to me*, the decedent looks like a canoe: *qué será, será** it's gone out, you've got to believe in something it's gone, *no qué será, será*, because unless you have an unquenchable curiosity to solve puzzles you would surely need to believe in some bliss or rebirth or requital or else dealing with this *damn song in my head* all day every day you would never be able to deal with this, so now you're only remembering it because it has gone out and smells a bit, briefly, because of the beeswax or the still-hot paraffin that was encasing the wick and in kind these small tissue samples will be encased in paraffin too to be sliced by razors for microscopic slides, smell it despite the dulled, sickly sweet stupefying stink of the cadaverine and the blood black in the bowl, the piss and the late shit, the devil's cake batter you've been told your face is shielded, you are masked, gowned and gloved and have been standing and studying the decedent on this slab with a gutter under a downdraft in this room of brightdead fluorescents and have fucking forgotten about it, about why *why does it only smell when it goes out* are you even doing this, your scrotum's

* *Que Sera, Sera*, written by Jay Livingston and Ray Evans, 1955, Columbia Records.

tightened, it's cold, *a cream-colored candle lit out of respect* and yet you are used to it, *my life is ripe for suicide* so you don't need the fable of coffee-scented snuff or the peppermint oil or the camphoric, eucalyptic, methylated liniment to snuff out the noise or make the terrible smells tolerable, no, they would only open you, you just need to stay in the downdraft of this first-floor room with its air coming down from the ceiling vents to the vents above the floor, sweeping the smells down and not up into your face, you need to stay in here to inundate the receptors since every time you'd leave the room and return you would just be assaulted all over again, so you keep the receptors flooded *I don't want to die in this country* that's kind of like snow blindness, *I don't want to die in a room full of people who are afraid to touch me*, like acoustic trauma, *before executing me*, or a callus or the inability to taste sweets due to the overconsumption of sugar you simply smell what you smell and discern yourself smelling the smell since none of them no longer nag you anymore, *I long to miss this*, no longer triggers the reflex of retch or spew or enervates you, *I long to miss this place*, you just do the work

let me see, let me see, let me see

you Sōlis said, four hours ago and just before the dictation, as you're working without an assistant today, and then you were speaking our existence into the tape recorder Sunday

June the eighteenth, nineteen ninety-five, eight twenty-eight ante

meridiem: the postmortem examination of one Lucy Anarcha

Westcott

and now it has guttered out, for you're almost finished with us, a cream-colored candle lit like a riot out of respect and rot and ensured to burn for us for hours, and it has, and over a year from now this city will be lit, because the necropsy will impeach the police report and will fail to justify the future adjudication, the verdict which will ignite our uprising at night, over a year from now on the Fourth of July, nineteen ninety-six, with fireworks cascading like nightmares in

the sky, above the rioters and the outliers, the reactionary angels *I know the long tale of your soul what it would say to this dissolution of flesh, this monstrous smell ratted me out since you didn't want to be found out, no not like this, not like this, what you were wearing, doing, the smell the unbearable noise of it amping up from the grassy, drainage ditch, facedown underwater with your skirt hiked up and you mooning the moon the fat officer laughed, offhandedly, on the morgue telephone, as if I wasn't standing to the side of him talking to the investigator overlooking you in your sleeping bag before being gurneyed into a room the florescent colorlessness and temperature of your father's refrigerator, or as if or as if the fat white fuck wouldn't even be able to see this forensic niggernurse in front of him let alone in his periphery despite the fact that I am not another niggernurse but a forensic pathologist summoned again to examine another nigger, that white pig fuck, laughing over the dead*

darkskinned black female: fifteen years old, height: five feet and six inches, weight: one hundred and eighteen pounds, eyes: brown, hair: black, shoulder-length and relaxed and

laughing over the dead darkskinned girl: I will have the last laugh now that I am no longer and long after now you the salesman said, Sōlis, deep inside yourself, even then trying to sell yourself on the assignment, instinctually, during the dictation of the external examination, before you even knew of the color of our killer, before you even knew of the color of the cop, that we were one of the children of the plantation, droit du seigneur, yes yes a salesman, Sōlis, for each knife has taken a life, all seven of them, all seven of them and if, one day, someone were to want to use one of these knives against you, the first knife, you would take out your wears and spread them across this adjoining table, as you would need to have everything out on the table, and you would tell them to make a selection, and then they would tell you the price, and then they would tell you the price, and then they would tell you *your forehead felt dead your father said, lifeless and unlovable, neither warm nor cool like cardboard a hardcover, because when he came to identify your face**

* the right of the lord (French)

you were an open hymnal to him and you knew it, the once-mobile face of his only motherless offspring, after closing his eyes once you began whispering and whimpering to hear what you were truly trying to say to him, what, like an animal that eats teeth, what, smelling the bones in the dirt down deep, his jaw's an archeologist's dream, before he broke face and started whispering and whimpering ladybug ladybug as if he would forever see, no takebacks, but then he sweetly reached over and touched your forehead as if expecting a fever or to wipe away the mark of some very evil memory your father the priest, and not the Jheri-curl'd confectioner who always licked your legs with his lashes or those brown bodega boys who would hail asses, the punani on the Jamaican liver lips as the clouds scudded the sky, me a go put me hand ina yuh pocket, what, can I put my hand into your pocket, no, you didn't want him to find you like this, no not like this, but he treated you so much like a child, motherless, yet had he not written down the number in the jacket of a fifteen-year-old girl what were you thinking girl, what were you wearing, but what does it matter what you were wearing, you were human, and I shouldn't blame you for my finger thoughts, were you waylaid on your way to some towered project party where all the flygirls were way past the age of menarche, pudenda means to be ashamed of in Latin but most of them knew that you were not, dressed for skin and veined labia to bloom into the satanized door of a confessional, unknow, unload it said the price, yes yes the salesman, Sōlis, but for now you have not been betrayed or discovered or destroyed and everything is as it always is so that this morning, after eating a chocolate croissant, you just gurneyed us from a refrigerated room to this autopsy station, leveled us down to this slab, unbagged us, releasing the odiferous puff of released bladder most likely done from when we were throttled because this happens quite a bit with females with short little urethras, and then slid us onto this slab supinely as if we were just anybody, unaware of our killer's civic commitment and color, with a sheet under us to collect any trace evidence you may miss, which along with the clothes will be rolled up after we've been rolled back into that refrigerated room the size of a charter bus, and then bagged for the slow process of the deoxyribonucleic acid analysis to be

begun by some obscure alcoholic academic with a special interest, as for now with a camera and some interchangeable lens, some stainless steel tools, a reciprocating saw, a transparent plastic speculum and anoscope to avoid obscuring any potential site of injury, and other specialized items needed for homicides and sexual assaults on the adjoining table at the ready, for the transcription to be done later, with the use of diagrams and clockface position references to avoid any ambiguity when relating to a genital injury, you were dictating into a cordless headset while photographing

the decedent's eyeballs were bulged out and softened...her mouth was open, tongue protruding out, hemorrhagic bite marks around the tongue, due to hypoxic seizure, the teeth are still intact...her face has been disfigured by massive contusions on the left side, due to blunt force trauma...a burn scar near the hairline, perhaps from a hot comb...a continuous ligature furrow and some bruising around the cervix, the embroidered imprint of a belt is neatly imprinted upon the epidermis, tiny abrasions from where a knife blade was pressed against it...moving down the body...the decedent is partially dressed in the athletic fashion of the day, a pink, tight-fitting, hooded sweat jacket with many diamond simulant studs, an opened front zipper, and a torn yellow crop top with some vomitus...fingernail abrasions around the breasts...a soiled black miniskirt...postmortem lividity was present on the dorsal part of the body when it was found lying prone, facedown, the mini skirt hiked up, nude from the waist down...circumferential bruising to the wrists and to the ankles...abrasions on the patellae...blood on the inner thighs and around the vaginal area...multiple genital lacerations, abrasions, and bruises...radially oriented, split-type lacerations of the

hymenal tissue, the labia minora, the posterior fourchette, the fossa navicularis...some insect activity in the vagina...perianal, anal, and rectal lacerations, also due to forced penetration...her perineum is ruptured

and photographing as if you were the investigator at the crime scene who had covered our hands with these oven-mitt-sized paper bags and taped them around our wrists which we often wanted to slit to preserve any evidence in case we might've struggled and scratched our attackers since it would've taken at least one person to hold us down while another attacked, but for now in this municipal morgue, before sliding the sweat jacket sleeves over these hands, you removed the paper bags which will also be kept in case any trace evidence has fallen into them and then you lifted the inky fingerprints, swabbed underneath our nails, cut nails and plucked pubic hair, you swabbed our mouth, our vagina, our rectum, our broken perineum and once the femoral blood sample for toxicological analysis was drawn, by the hypodermic syringe just below the groin, our skirt, jacket, and crop top were removed

there is a horizontal row of keloidal scars going across the left antebrachium, the left forearm like the fretboard of a guitar, or notches, possibly self-inflicted

and laid across another adjoining table for the lights to be flipped off and for the blacklight to fluoresce any fructose-filled seminal stains and blood on the body and clothes, some saliva no semen, lots of blood and something else, then the lights were flipped on and our breasts and buttocks were swabbed because they were clutched, brushed, and licked, our teats sucked by the self-begotten sick, men who could be uncle-like not white, news will be gleaned from these swabs as well as from these articles of clothing that will be cataloged and bagged in paper instead of plastic to avoid any development of mold: now, as if we're being violated it all over again, and again, we are still seeing you placing the

rubber block under our shoulders blades so that our head can drop back to expose the neck and to protrude the chest, you select a stainless steel scalpel, sanitized to avoid any cross-contamination, and with the belly of the blade

initiating the internal examination of the torso

you incise an oblique line from each shoulder, from the tip of each acromion, conjoining them at the sternum and above the budding breasts since we won't be wearing any lowcut dress, and then you finish with a single line, making a little twist around our umbilicus, to the pubis, slicing midnight to reveal a buttery midday, creating a crude Y, you then begin to undermine and reflect the skin and the subcutaneous tissue and underlining musculature from the chest wall with the scalpel, releasing a puff of blood, an iron rose, cutting the fat to begin to peel back the side flaps with the top flap flown back like a bib above the underjaw, the inverted V over our visage, from the neck down to expose yellow fat and red muscle over white bone but around the stem of the Y you go steadily, incising the serous membrane lining the abdominal cavity, and then you lift the abdominal wall away from the organs with the V-shape of your two upturned fingers to guide the scalpel between them and deeper down the stem, avoiding the impetuous nicking of any organs, our bowels, which is why the face shield is worn and then you reflect the rest of the skin and underlining tissue to expose the viscera and since our fifteen-year-old body had not had the chance to fully ossify yet, no broken ribs, you cut through the sternoclavicular joints and the costal cartilages with the scalpel instead of the cartilage knife or the saw or the beaklike bolt cutters, the decisive snaps that would've been needed on an adult, and while removing the shieldlike breast plate for another puff of blood you cut away more underlining tissue, the unique, atavistic smell of organs and meat like the meat you thawed out from your refrigerator last week, for the barbeque, forever hankering for a rack of ribs as you rake and appraise the thoracic and abdominal organs in situ, all the organs that once

composed the ballet of our bodily functions, our fluids, but no need for the ladle and the graduated cup, no fluids in the cavities, no fluids and so since it's a strangulation you start emptying and weighing and cataloging the contents from this coffer of fear from just the top of the thorax to leave the dissection of the cervix for later, for last, and this part is the boring part because everything appears to be perfect: on a sanitized table near a sink, to avoid any cross-contamination, you rinsed and studied the harvestable heart, the thoracic aorta, the lungs and diaphragm, the liver and spleen, the abdominal aorta and the guts with the pancreas all the way down cut off at the pelvic brim because of the rape dissection that's to be done, on the genital tract, not even leaving the kidneys and the adrenal glands in the back and yes yes this is all very boring, because everything appears to be perfect, but along with the blood sample for toxicological analysis, with syringe aspiration, you extract urine from the bladder and bile from the gall bladder, because any drugs that might've been in the blood and urine five days ago would still be in the bile today, and vitreous fluid from the eye, because unlike the blood and bile the humor in the highly protective eye would remain untouched by even a puncture of the gastrointestinal tract, and because glucose skyrockets after death and especially after an agonal death when the liver breaks down glycogen and floods the system with the simple sugar, so take a vitreous sample not a blood sample to estimate the antemortem blood sugar level of a girl who might've been a diabetic, you slice open the stomach and the duodenum and fish out the gastric contents as sometimes you can see where someone has been due to the sad contents of the stomach, because the stomach becomes a gastronomic time capsule of someone's final moments, so then these signature finger foods, the undigested chunks of flamed-broiled hamburger meat and thick-cut fries with their skins still attached will place us at the new fast food place not far from where we were found, in that grassy, drainage ditch, outside our neighborhood and show that we had

died in under two hours of eating this malnutritious shit as you wring out the malnutritious shit we ate earlier from the colon into a bowl, the devil's cake batter you've been told, once, offhandedly, by our lead investigator: the drive-thru video camera that captured our off-duty policeman will have him and his friend apprehended, both in their mid-forties and married, because we were poor and so proud to be sitting in the plush upholstery of his passenger seat and then back in an apartment applying the lipstick straight from the bullet instead of the brush, just him and us, that we didn't see his friend coming in or even know that he was coming, but for now, for now you are conclusively dissecting out our rectum and genital tract to study the uterus and such and find fistulas in the anal and vaginal canals, more bruises and lacerations, our stunched menstruation, you save the ovaries and slice off samples from every other organ and place them into stock jars separately, to harden in formalin, but due to the good health the cause of death will have nothing to do with any naturally occurring disease in any of these, and due to the sheaths no pregnancy, no sperm: the microscopy will be grossly unremarkable, the histology won't tell you a thing, not a damn thing, notshit, it is merely routine in case a killing goes to court and the defense speculates something else other than the cause of death as the cause of death you take a deep breath, you take a deep breath and place a rubber headrest under our neck and then study the head for any injury, satisfied, you part the chemically straightened hair from ear to ear as if you were about to treat it, a bit frizzy behind the crown of our head, especially the kitchenette, the naps at the nape of the neck the niggerknots, and while using our scrunchie to create a topknot pushed forward over our face like a quiet quail's you see the beautiful five-year-old you dissected yesteryear and the seventeen plastic barrettes in her poorly plaited hair, dry as hell, so many in her big little hair that you see her getting ready the day before yesterday and grabbing our scrunchie out of a drawer to pull back the long relaxed hair like a

white girl into a pony, with no way of knowing as to what the rest of the night would bring or as to how that pink little scrunchie would be utilized today: a biparietal incision is made between the part on the head, where our headphones ought to be, so it can be hid by a pillow later, then you flay the scalp by gripping the scrunchie, peeling our hair and skin forward and over the top chest flap over our face, exposing that thick fibrous membrane attached to the little muscles in our forehead that made us frown and then the back flap is peeled down, you check for bruising and, satisfied, you clip a portable air pump to your belt, don a pullover ventilated hood, and reach for the hooded, vacuum-affixed, reciprocating saw

initiating the internal examination of the cranium

circling the greatest diameter of the skull recalls that saw wielded to cut away casts, from the padded limbs of adolescence, without cutting skin and now without cutting the brain, you carefully cut the connections and remove the skullcap with part of the dural membrane still attached, a particularly godly experience, and examine the encephalon in situ: despite the downdraft of this ventilation system, the saw's vacuum and hood, the sawing still kicked up some bone dust that is harmful within itself without being a possible carrier of the new human immunodeficiency virus, still, wearing the ventilated hood and the battery-operated air pump, you sever the cranial nerves and the meninges and the spinal cord and from the cranial vault you remove the most complex known structure in the cosmos, gingerly, to weigh it: the forebrain, the midbrain, and the hindbrain with the wrinkled ball of the cerebellum, a three-pound mass of fats and tissues the consistency and texture of tofu, which at one time contained many human imaginations and hundreds of billions of cells interlinked through trillions of communications, and on the sanitized table you section and section it, photograph and photograph it, and after finding nothing wrong *when I was just a little girl* with it, a perfect specimen that could go on a tour, *I asked my mother*

what will I be, you harvest my humanity to send it to the laboratory, *will I be pretty*, placing the sample in formalin, *will I be rich*, for once the ventral and cranial cavities are empty, *here's what she said to me*, the decedent looks like a canoe

concluding the postmortem with the internal examination of the
cervix

concomitant with strangulation, having flickered in agonal respiration, in the end that candle was only noticeable when it went out, that small little light underneath all this deadlight, if only briefly *but how could I have even smelled it and so deeply being so inundated and disembodied by all this stench and disembowelment*, you take pictures of my scrawny chicken neck, performing a layer by layer dissection of my anterior muscle straps, the sternocleidomastoids you dissect those, looking for signs of any injury and then carefully peel out the midline structures of the birdlike neck: you cut out my teenage tongue with its truth still attached, the submandibular salivary glands, the almond-shaped, sublingual salivary glands on either side of the undertongue, the hyoid bone most important at the base that anchored it, that kept it from rolling up into a ball whenever I contracted it, the only bone that does not articulate with any other bone, the trachea, the esophagus, the thyroid in front of the larynx the birdbox atop the tracheal totem, leaving the carotid sheaths with their vessels and nerves uncut for the mortician to embalm the head with them, looking for any bruising anywhere in the midline structures after finding the unfused horseshoe-shaped hyoid bone that was so vital in what was swallowed and said so thin and flexible like a wishbone, as opposed to in an older person whose hyoid would be inflexible and broken, *I've never met a closed-minded flexible person* at least in a manual strangulation *or an openminded broken person*, but not always with a ligature strangulation and with a broad ligature like a belt, some prevertebral hemorrhage, some bruising between the esophagus and the vertebral column since the midline structures had been squeezed back against the vertebral

column, yet unlike a manual strangulation where you have deep, finger-size bruises the best evidence of a broad ligature strangulation are on the outside of the skin, as tool mark evidence: the wear pattern on a belt is as sui generis as the wear pattern on a boot and you can pair it with the pattern on the neck, if you can find the belt: but the belt will never be found in this incident, for now, for now you're just checking for any inner bruising in case we were manually strangled as well, so then conclusively satisfied, since strangulation was the cause of death the whole midline structures of the neck are then sealed in their own separate stock jar, filled with formalin, we announce the completion of the postmortem into the dictation device and place the brain and all the other organs that reciprocally serviced it into the red hermetically-sealed plastic bag, to prevent any leakage, we line the canoe with cotton and replace the parceled hodgepodge of parts therein, replace the breastplate and with a baseball stitch sew up the suit of skin, cut notches in the back of the skull so then now the cap doesn't slip as we peel back the scalp to sew it up, sew it up, and then we roll up the clothes and the sheet and place them into the paper bag after we wash the body and roll the bodied bag back into that refrigerated room, the size a charter bus

(Frontispiece: "La Familia" by Belkis Ayón, collagraph 1991)