

—CONSUMED

by Michael Louis Calvillo

If he learned anything, something, one thing, it was that his teeth were strong as hell. Limb upon limb upon bone upon gland, muscle after muscle after tough, tough muscle, slick, slimy nub after nub of indistinguishable biology: through all of it, his choppers held. They showed no signs of wear. They could, would, go on and on and on. Nathan, wide-eyed ever-stare, pictured them gleaming, gnashing, chewing, still in motion long after the gums, tendons, muscles and soft tissues that powered them had shredded away into wet webs of pulpy nothing.

He closed his eyes, not that it mattered. The bodies were still there. Bodies. Flesh. Blood. Bone. Prickly pieces, salty parts (genitalia he assumed, feared, gagged, choked), coiled, mushy greens and pinks and reds and blacks and here he was, mild-mannered Nathan at the bottom of it all, in the thick of it so to speak, mouth full, spitting decay sideways, refilling and then spitting once again.

Repeat.

So very many bodies.

His body, though gored and grimy, was holding up. Not nearly as well as his teeth, but well enough.

Well enough?

Yes, well enough, considering: hands bound behind his back, tight, thick, razor wire about the wrists and ankles. Zero cooperation. Miraculously, his limbs still functioned on his behalf. However, they bore no autonomy. Instead, they moved as one giant muscle. His mouth (more importantly his teeth) chewed away what it could, his head tossed the vile meat aside, and then his body jerked and bucked and wriggled its way upward. The process was slow and impossible, but Nathan pushed on, human worm, slug, a maggot with a good set of teeth and the unfortunate ability to ponder destiny, how he got here, and where he was going... If ever you find yourself abroad, tropical diversion, plushness so plush that the world looks soft, American antidote in the land of the ever present sun, thong back bikinis and alcoholic concoctions that taste like angel urine, if ever you find yourself here, appreciate the contentment you have situated yourself within. Appreciate and ignore the dizzy tickle in your nose, the futile thought that this could be better, that things can always be better. Ignore, ignore, ignore. Remind yourself that you are already high, that things don't get much better. This is a land of beauty. This is unreal. This isn't the cutthroat, cocksure, dog-eat-dog, rat race of the cliché-ridden Americas. This is paradise. Using cocaine here would be an exercise in redundancy.

Listen to yourself.

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Never engage the natives.

Never solicit them for drugs.

Never exude American ego, pride. Never head off into the rainforest with a Carlos or a Juan or a Hector. Never do these things or you might find yourself bound, forced to line up with others—men, women, children you've never seen before—at the edge of a deep, deep pit. Shots are fired, you are shot, or just startled by the blast, unhit, amazingly missed, falling anyway, feigning dead, plotting your escape. But the plan keeps getting tougher and tougher to realize because group after group of hysterical prisoners are being lined up, shot and dropped on top of you.

When the carnage is over and your murderers have started their jeeps and roared away, you are buried deep, oh so deep, in death.

Desensitized entirely.

Skinbiblepusblood. The retching passes after a few hours. The smell becomes, for lack of a better word, familiar. Nathan adapts and eats because he must. Must. He closes his eyes and tries to invoke memory, tries to go inward and get free. He tries to place himself in the board room, AC on full blast, his associates looking at him with envy as Boss man pats him on the back and compliments him on his deal-sealing smile. He tries for recollection; respite in the cool center of his brain, but no matter how hard he flexes and strains for cerebration he can't escape the tactility of the pit.

It's nearly impossible to get past a world that impresses itself upon you so forcefully. Imagine the pressures of everyday life manifest, made real, physical, woven into hunks and chunks of flesh and bone. Imagine them poking and prodding and penetrating every inch of your skin. Nathan shifts and the world shifts back: haggard female torso beneath, fleshy breasts and bony ribs supporting his weight, a gaggle of stiff children flanking his left and right, lips blue, hands frozen like claws. And so it goes: above and below, on and on and on: anatomy without discernable structure: pink-brown-red, strands of dark, matted hair, bone, a thousand eyes, filmy, dead, staring, inviting him to eat and eat and eat, to rise refreshed, reinvigorated, reborn.

And when free? What then? What of where he has been? What of the flesh? How can he ever look at another human being in the same way again?

He can't, no way, not now, not ever, and this horrible thought stops him, gives the worm act pause and freezes his teeth. What would freedom, escape, a lung full of fresh air, do to his brain? Would it surge, effervescent lightning, animating him, plunging him, full force into the ecstasy of being?

Or would it burn?

Would it atomize, destroy, sear, melt?

Would it drive him backward, hungry for the pit, hungry for death, burrowing downward, mouth wide, black-heart open, soul dilated, ready, waiting, burning to eat and eat and eat?

Would it accelerate the rot?

The rot manifest. The rot eternal. The rot evident.

Constant. A dead spot in his eyes, a foul taste in his throat. The impetus of all desire, natural and unnatural, made big and shiny and evil, armor plating his brain, twisting his every thought toward darkness.

Nathan's physicality has been tainted; his physiology stained. The process of living, really a process of dying, would now arch and turn, forever changed, forever