

# The Insect House

by Duncan Harman

Clothing bagged, tagged and removed. Urine sample taken. Scrapings made from beneath fingernails and sealed inside a small, labelled jar. I'm trussed into a polyurethane suit the colour of rusty straw, and then I'm up over the table, grabbing the grey-skinned motherfucker by the throat and screaming hot greedy lungfuls of his own esoteric cop-talk gibberish back into his skull. An arm reaches for the alarm and in the resulting commotion I'm struck, the club connecting with hair, head, skull. As I slump to the ground I swear I can hear the whine of a theraamin. As I slump: I am not a violent man.

Or rather, this doesn't begin here. Later I'll head-throb awake on some cop-doctor's couch. Later still, under the too bright strip-lights, they'll reconvene the interview. Picture me spiked with intravenous diazepam and cuffed to the table. The identikit detectives - I'll rubberneck their flapping tongues with a distant incomprehension, furbishing their questions, insinuations, insults with a grunt or two, a giggle. And it won't commence there either, these bit-part players reciting their lines in subsequent scenes already written. Me? I'm at twenty-eight o'clock, drunk on H<sub>2</sub>O, on M&Ms and motor oil. Springs clink, my head coyly pulses. Cold air seeps out of the radio's casing and the fridge broadcasts nothing but static. A plane floods, another Bangladeshi village crashes on take-off, and I've already been guided down towards the sub-zero. All of this, it's memory hacked at, spliced and spliced again into images all quick-flick and porno, my own private peek-a-boo. There exists a version of me, pharmaceutically marginalised and pummelled by the authorities to the cusp of confession, but inside all I feel is summer, a stolen embrace, the splaying, the spurting, her, her, her...

Then: "Tell me about The Insect House".

I know I'm asked this. Initial interview, second, third - I'm far from certain, but when fired the words sit suspended a few degrees above my head, all widescreen and flirting to be answered. Anna wants me to tell about the Insect House (throughout, I knew that she would come). Anna holds my hand, looks through me as if she's here to study the off-yellow walls or the no-smoking sign that somebody's glued to the wall. She's smoking a cigarette like she thinks she's Faye Dunaway in Chinatown. Save our City. Los Angeles is Dying of Thirst. Vote Yes. This is what I tell Anna, but Anna just wants me to tell.

The Insect House - at work, amidst the dictyopteran vistas and rows of captive orthoptera where I sweep the floors, change the light bulbs, hold open the refuse sacks that the two curators fill with the detritus of insect life - this was where it all started.

In a darkened chamber: "You're not supposed to smoke in here".

"No? It pisses off the bugs? Irritates their emphysema?"

"I don't make the rules" I told her. "I carry even less weight around here than these glassed-in friends", and then swept my arm in an arc before me, towards the tanks of roaches, locusts, coleopterans against the far wall.

"Pity..." (inhale) "...I've always found smoking in the dark to be somewhat..." (exhale) "...soothing, wouldn't you say?" (smile).

"For the comfort and safety of our patrons and staff, smoking is not permitted anywhere in the museum". Guidebook small-print, recited wholesale; she laughed.

"My, you do know the rules...tell me...", and as she dropped the cigarette to the floor, her booted foot grinding the butt into the carpet tiles I'd shortly find myself cleaning, she leaned forward, "...but do you ever break them?"

The Insect House. Take a ragged collection of outhouses, glasshouses, assorted horticultural structures in the grounds of a country house (she's flirting). Insert an Edwardian industrialist owner with philanthropic leanings and a curious passion for a certain strand of natural history. Install heat, three dozen mid-sized glass tanks, shade and illumination wherever necessary for optimum exhibit comfort (she isn't subtle). For each tank, introduce collections of carefully selected live specimens, and display the dried husks of yet more in cases along the walls (when she invites me for a drink, I'm not in a position to decline). Apply time - say enough for the death of an Edwardian industrialist, the encroachment of suburban sprawl, the gift of a country house and its grounds to the municipality - and there, you have your Insect House. A provincial museum of limited standing (she wants me?), a zoological backwater. An edifice of entomophobia, a citadel of creepy-crawlies visited by occasional parties of school children, disappointed families, people sheltering from the rain.

Add a monkey with a cloth, wiping Anna's lipsticked telephone number from the surface of the large termite tank, and you've also got me.

I met Anna in the Insect House; this is what I tell the police. These mannequin detectives, they're bursting with unhealthy obsessions towards Anna's exact whereabouts. Save our Anna. Anna is Dying of Thirst. Vote Anna. She's here with me - I've tried to point it out but they don't appear to listen. In the dead air of Interview Room Two she whispers encouragement, rests a manicured hand on my knee, suggests I scattergun this arena in dextrous profanity. At one stage an anonymous interrogator frowns, rubs a forefinger over his jaw, orders me to "stop fucking about" to "give me the truth", but at this stage of my pretty devolution I'd struggle to even provide my name without peeling off laughter or blasphemy. Anna is all that matters now, all that can silence the dentist drill Prokoviev sounding off in my frontal lobes. She's taking my hand, she's leading me...

Commence with this memory Lethean, these Babel-snapshots of memory debased. Evenings together: laughter, our bodies entwine, emotion building. I draw her cactus moths on the back of restaurant napkins, decorate discussions with arachnids, entomological titbits I hoped she'd feed from, and all the while this undercurrent of passion: rising, rising. Then, the proposition. That day on a bench at the rear of the esplanade, a sea breeze nuzzled at her hair, stroking her cigarette smoke in my direction. She needed someone new to the scene, quiet and innominate and prone to not asking too many questions. Someone dependable, someone with access to the off-limits suburbs of The Insect House. The pick-up guy

was under surveillance, couldn't collect without complicity or a drop-off scene low in suspicion; the merchandise - smuggled into the country and a little too hot too handle through the usual channels. Hence the vacancy for the intermediary: collect, stash, guard and ensure delivery into intended hands. Plant the gems deep in insect territory; smother them, say, amongst the decaying foliage in Tank 15, the home of *Sphrodomantis Viridis*: the praying mantis.

And when Anna visits me locked in the shallow dark of a cell, nocturnal, I tell her that she's using me, jilting our feelings, our relationship.

"You think we had something?" She dresses her words in a sharp confidence that scares me, contrasts heavily with my flickering stutter, this desolate confusion .  
"Think I'm thrilled at the thought of you creating me anew for the benefit of your police friends, inventing me all one-dimensional and cliché?"

"Anna, I..."

"You what? You got involved in something you weren't capable of dealing with – you screwed up – and if that's not enough you subsequently imagine something that happened between you and I that's supposed to magic this mess away?"

And then she's grabbing my head as I flail on the bunk; her admonishing, soothing, caressing; me smashed and wild and beyond definition and comprehension and jolting awake sweat-wet because morning was hitting hard and another grey-skin stood by the open door holding a meagre breakfast on a tray, proclaiming that the next interview required my attendance and would I like to get a move on?  
Jump to now; in this chronology abused I'm approaching the present. Initial interview, second, third - I'm far from certain. I find the room's familiarity uplifting – there's a clock above the door and a table over which the two policemen watch me, one reclining in what resembles mock-comfort, the other leaning in and full of attention. At some stage I've been trussed into a polyurethane suit the colour of rusty straw, and I hope that it complements my complexion, doesn't clash with my bloodshot eyes or swollen tongue. There's a plastic cup of stale water on the table before me, and when I attempt to drink, the recent history – the reasons why I've been summoned here before my co-accusers and coerced into performing – feel as simple and as wholesome as sunlight; I don't think I'm scared, nor compromised by delusion. That there's been a murder, that I want a cigarette: I'm sure I can deal.

"So you made the pick-up around seven?"

"Yeah". I smile. "She wanted someone anonymous, not a face from a wanted poster or a name on an arrest warrant. It was quite easy really – I half expected it to be like in the movies, y'know; snarling gangsters and ill-disguised threats – but she told me what to say and who to say it to, so I jumped into the passenger seat of the car when it stopped for me and then I had the loot and was heading back to town, easy as that".

I grin again when asked to elaborate on faces, on vehicles and composition of the bounty. "I'm not the most reliable witness," I have to tell them as an aside, and I

point to my brow for emphasis: "It's all jumbled up here you know".

"Okay, so you've got the jewels; where do you go next?"

"Go on" urges Anna, "tell them".

So I do.

Think twilight climax (I still have the money you've been promised, can get it immediately once you return the gems). There's me at home, in good humour and glugging freely from a bottle of expensive bourbon that I have no recollection of buying. Mood music activated on the stereo, my insect sketchbook – soon to be a gift to Anna - lies open on a coffee table. When she arrives my nostrils tingle when I inhale her perfume, her body sheathed in ochre and sheer hosiery from base to summit as if I'd costumed her myself.

It'll take me a second or two to register the air of hurried displeasure she brings with her into the room. There's a slight betrayal to her body language, an angry sheen to her eyes when I ask her to sit, ask if she wants a drink.

"You're drunk".

"I know. I find it helps me to relax."

"In that case..." and I head back to the kitchen, to the bottle of wine I do remember buying.

She drinks hungrily. It's an action that emphasises a growing sense of impasse. I feel apprehensive, the consumed bourbon slowly warping my field of vision; this isn't how it should have started.

"I've something to tell you". That was Anna and I, simultaneous.

"You first."

"Yes", she says coldly. "That's probably a good idea". So she does, and once she's finished I can only watch passively as the bottle of bourbon, held up to this point prostrate in my hands, slow-motions to the ground and discharges its contents onto the carpet with a muted gurgle.

This was to be a moment of confession – but not the confession she'd want from me. Feelings exposed, devotion professed – of this, she had no interest. She felt nothing for me, that was the subtext, not even spoken gently or directly, but simply indicated within the contours of her frozen glances. Her words when heard left me standing stun-gunned: she'd needed someone dependable, she told me, someone there to collect, stash, guard and ensure delivery into intended hands. I should have planted the gems deep in insect territory; smothered amongst the decaying foliage in Tank 15, with the praying mantis; and then, once camouflaged, I should have watched, made sure that when the time came for collection the jewels would be ready to hand over.

The police had been observing, she told me, waiting for him to make the collection directly from the courier. Hence the need for the intermediary and his hiding place; me and the Insect House. She'd visited before, she told me, evaluated scenarios where the transfer could be made without suspicion, settled upon the cool dark interiors where I worked, understood the need for an inside accomplice eager to supplement his meagre wages. So I had agreed, had collected, stashed and presumably guarded, but when time came for the pick up – there wasn't a me. The intended had arrived feigning a family excursion: there's his wife, there the somebody else's child, there the police entourage following. In the darkened chambers, he pointed out the tanks of stick-insects, pretended to gasp as the tropical spiders crawled inside their glass, all under the view of the two watching plain-clothes. The wife, intentionally separated from her pretend family, headed for the mantids, for me. She expected me there as arranged, contraband in hand. She wasn't to be away from her husband for long. I wasn't there. I'd quit my job, she was told by the new face pushing the mop. Quit my job, a scene exit I'd garnished by the removal of the museum's only live praying mantis specimen and leaving its body crushed atop the entrance steps, adorned with broken glass. The jewels are the husbands. Anna is his wife.

"I still have the money you've been promised, can get it immediately once you return the gems".

Then the bourbon parabolas to the floor.

I'm not sure that I've been able to disguise this at all well. It isn't just the corrupt narrative, this mutilated time-frame submerged epileptic behind my smile. This is a love story – I emphasise that to the police just as pointedly as I did to Anna, after the bourbon bottle had bounced from her skull with an unnerving clunk. "We never had anything" I think she mumbled, "None of what you remember ever happened" – but by this stage she'd slumped forward from the sofa, face bloody and contorted, and maybe that was the point at which the essence of what was real was finally wrenched from my invalid grasp. Presumably I'm heavy with a stolen diamond wealth, yet this registers at a level far removed from the me and the now, lies within somebody else's story. As it is there's the immediacy to deal with; I don't remember the bottle breaking, adorning the prone Anna in shards of a glass stained blood-copper, don't recall this glass slicing through her pale skin, penetrating clothing, the blood pooling rapidly where she lies. I'm mentally palsied; drunk on H2O, on M&Ms and motor oil. Anna's dead and I get to witness myself carrying the blanket-smothered body to her car as though I'm somebody else, just a random quick-flick moment, fluttering to earth. This is a love story; this is a love story. Staggering crimson into the police station confessional, that's all I can tell – this is a love story.

When we hit the end the story's final grey-skin, he'll enter my cell and when I painfully rise from my bunk's stained matting, he'll tell me that it's time to go, that their enquiries are complete. He'll be carrying a package – my clothing, returned from chemical analysis and still lacking the tell-tale signs of my own putrid guilt. Once dressed, they'll be talk of the potentially pending - a possible police time waste charge – but right now, I'm a free man. "Make sure you take care of yourself"

orders a uniform in the corridor, but I'll out of the building before I can assess whether his tone was mocking. The fresh air will hit me like a brick in the face and in the car park, Anna will perch at the wheel of her car, the same in which I dumped her body just hours previously. She'll smile, invite me to climb in, show concern at my bruises, and all the while I'll be numb with the knowledge that I got it all wrong, that none of this really occurred, that I'm hugging the border between could-have-been and never-never.

After minutes of road-born silence: "Where are we headed?"

"The Insect House," she'll tell me; "That museum, the one next to the country house. There's something I need to collect".

I'm laughing uncontrollably, wilting towards the footwell; and as I slump...