

Post-Mortem

by Daniel Harris

It is said that the great French chemist, Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier, before mounting the guillotine on May 8, 1794 asked the executioner's assistant to see if he blinked his eyes three times when the executioner held up his severed head to the crowd¹

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This is a work of fiction speculating on the possibility of conscious thought milliseconds after a decapitation. * * *

She threw the wine glass on the floor. The wine-dark puddle snuffed out the glittering shards. The cat, fully puffed up, bolted up the stairs.

—You never gave me any credit. You have no respect for women, none. No wonder all your women left you.

She stood up, picked up her half eaten dinner and threw the plate down on the floor. The wine-dark puddle now had an ear-of-corn ship and a half-eaten hamburger island with a red glacier. Broken and shattered pottery slithered across the floor into the kitchen. She followed that with the carafe. The puddle was now a small lake.

—I'm going to take a knife in the night while you're sleeping and kill you!! You disrespectful bastard.

—I should call the police.

—Go ahead you bastard. I've had enough of your condescending attitude. You and your asshole condescending woman-hating friends.

She threw her napkin at me and ran into her bedroom. She slammed the door so hard I felt it in the floor all the way into the dining room.

I sat for a long time by myself. The cat came downstairs and jumped up on my lap.

—It's OK, boy. Looks like you got yourself a big chunk of hamburger.

I got up and cleared the table, plucked the burger out of the mess, washed it off and crumbled it for the cat. I took a broom and dustpan and swept up the damage.

I'll have to mop the floor. But first I will have to vacuum to get up all these tiny shards of glass. Cut-glass leaves nasty tiny pieces when it breaks.

After loading the dishwasher, vacuuming and mopping the floor; I started rounding up knives: Kitchen knives, gardening knives, sailing knives, camping knives, hunting knives, and every sharp edge I could find. I emptied a toolbox and locked all the knives in the toolbox.

I poured a big tumbler of Scotch and went out to my painting studio. I spent a long time looking at my work-in-progress on the easel. It was called *The Black and The Red*. It was based on Thoreau's description of the battle of the ants.

[http://danielharrismusic.com/images/albums/NewAlbum_ddff4/tn_1200_a404705be70f73ac8417eceb5979486a.jpg.png]

The Black and The Red2

I drained the Scotch and chewed the last piece of ice. I better hide these. I gathered up the mat knife and a box cutter. I turned out the lights in the studio and headed for who-knows-what Armageddon.

There was no lock on my upstairs bedroom door. I closed it and put a chair against the handle. I started to read in bed, but my mind was on my failing marriage.

I fell asleep, but woke a few hours later. I used the upstairs bathroom and went back to bed.

No sense going through this charade of security, she's not going to do anything.

She slashed the machete across his throat with as much hatred, anger and strength as her adrenaline could give her. His head rolled off the pillow. Blood gushed from his neck. She noticed that his eyes blinked at her, and his lips were moving: *The machete! I forgot the machete!*

Notes:

1 Since no one has survived a guillotine decapitation, it is hard to know if the mouth movements, eye movements or croaking are conscious brain activities or the involuntary muscle responses as the

rest of the twitching corpse exhibits. Since there is only anecdotal evidence, it is difficult to determine if there are conscious brain controlled responses shortly after decapitation. Because the guillotine is the most sure and accurate mode of decapitation, and has not been used since Nazi Germany and 1960's Viet Nam, there is a paucity of subjects for study. Most beheadings involve major blunt force trauma from an axe or similar weapon and require multiple blows to succeed in the decapitation. Witness al- Qaeda beheadings filmed for on-line viewing. In these cases the victim is rendered unconscious by blunt force trauma or bleeding, and are thus not good subjects for discovering, if in the first few milliseconds after decapitation, conscious thought exists.

2Painting: "The Black And The Red" by the author, Daniel Harris: Acrylic on Strathmore Gesso'd Mixed Media Paper. Based on chapter 12 in Thoreau's "Walden" describing the battle of the ants. Copyright June 7, 2012 by Daniel Harris, All Rights Reserved. A full resolution version can be viewed here:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/74848179@N03/7350270338/in/set-72157629373077679/lightbox/>

