

"The mental disease of the present generation is impatience of study, contempt of the great masters of ancient wisdom, and a disposition to rely wholly upon unassisted genius and natural sagacity. [...] Men who have flattered themselves into this opinion of their own abilities, look down on all who waste their lives over books, as a race of inferior beings condemned by nature to perpetual pupilage, and fruitlessly endeavouring to [...] succour their feebleness by subsidiary strength. They [...] readily conclude, that he who places no confidence in his own powers owes his modesty only to his weakness."

Samuel Johnson: Rambler No. 154 (September 7, 1751)

There was a knock at the door. The knock turned into a pound which became a pause, a bodily thump and then a curse.

Zabriskie turned over and reached for the lamp. It appeared that they were no longer even able to batter down a door with any degree of competence. He lay still and listened as the pounding continued. After a few seconds spent staring at the ceiling, Zabriskie, now wide awake, threw back the covers and wandered over to the wardrobe, donned a t-shirt and a pair of shorts and made his way to the door where the pounding continued unabated.

He opened the door and two men in dark suits fell breathlessly into the room. They adjusted their appearance, handcuffed Zabriskie in a businesslike fashion then grabbed him around the biceps and escorted him outside where a car waited with its engine running.

What the fuck have you got on that door? Demanded the first as they walked.

It's called a deadlock, said Zabriskie.

Fuckin' secure deadlock, said the second man with a mixture of admiration and derision.

The door-frame's metal, said Zabriskie, you'd need a Sherman tank to get through it.

Get in the car, said the first man, pushing Zabriskie's head under the frame of the rear door. Zabriskie sat in the middle of the back seat, flanked by the two men.

In a building overlooking an alleyway, in a rear room above a symphony of sulphides an extremely wealthy man sat in a chair amongst sycophants and other inhabitants of the planet Yes.

The contract assassin looked at the photo.

Can you find him? The rich man asked. If so, I want him dead. Not necessarily in a way that he suffers but nonetheless I want him to know that it's coming. Do you acquire my drift?

The rich man waited for confirmation, the fingernails of his left hand raking the carved wooden arm-rest of the chair he was sitting in. It looked expensive.

The assassin bowed almost imperceptibly.

You have made yourself crystal clear, he said.

Good, said the rich man, now kindly leave; I have to remain calm for my tests.

A roll of thermal paper scrolled jerkily at his left side, charting heart palpitations that rocked him back and forth and made him grit his teeth and wince.

As they drove, Zabriskie sneaked glances at each of the two men. They both stared ahead dispassionately.

Where exactly are we going? Zabriskie asked finally.

For a quiet chat, said the first man.

Am I under arrest? Have I done something? Asked Zabriskie.

It's for your own good, said the second man.

Can I see some ID? Zabriskie asked.

The second man paused for a moment and looked at Zabriskie.

I'm Jensen, he's Arnt. That's all the ID you're getting.

Three leagues east through a pyrex corridor the assassin sought guidance from the chief of logistics. He waited silently while the chief ignored him.

I am trying to eat my lunch, in case you hadn't noticed, he said, shovelling what appeared to be a stodgy attempt at paella into his cavernous mouth.

I don't need much of your time, said the assassin whose shadow reached halfway up the back wall even though he stood near the centre of the room. I've been asked to find someone, what they used to call a "liquid affair", you know...

Details are sketchy, said the chief, what I can say is that the man you are looking for can generally be found in the central business district around lunchtime seeking what one might call a midday refreshment.

The assassin assimilated this, nodded, then turned and left the room.

The car swerved violently, shoving Arnt against Zabriskie who was shoved against Jensen who swore as his head bumped against the window.

What the fuck was that? Jensen shouted as the car resumed its direction.

Tree shredder, came the reply from the driver. Right smack bang in the middle of the road.

They're still cleaning up after the storms, said Arnt, ruminatively.

They arrived at a rather nondescript building and parked out front. Zabriskie was shown (by the biceps again) up the stairs to a room with a large wooden desk and three armchairs. This was hardly your standard bare room with a swinging sixty watt bulb, Zabriskie thought. He scanned the bookshelves lining the walls, filled with leather-bound volumes, some of them probably first editions. Without his glasses Zabriskie was unable to make out the titles.

Jensen sat behind the desk as Arnt arranged two of the armchairs at an angle and shoved Zabriskie into one. Zabriskie sat with his handcuffed hands on his lap.

Do you know why you're here? Asked Jensen. He pulled out a fat manila folder from the bottom drawer of the desk.

No idea whatsoever, Zabriskie said. Unsettling thoughts played in the back of his mind.

You're here for your own protection, said Arnt with a self-satisfied smirk.

This is what you call protection, is it? Asked Zabriskie incredulously.

Jensen ignored his sarcasm.

You've managed to piss off some very powerful people, said Jensen, flicking through the file.

Zabriskie looked puzzled for a moment.

I can't think who, he said.

Oh, I think you can, said Jensen, glancing up from the pages.

Your work has been noticed in some very high places, said Arnt.

And these people are not pleased, added Jensen, not pleased in the slightest.

A lightbulb flicked on in Zabriskie's mind. He had recently written some articles and letters to the editor proposing the principles of cybernetics as a more effective means of formulating public and social policy. Zabriskie studied the look on Jensen's face. Dumb bastard probably thinks that cybernetics has something to do with freezing sperm, he thought.

We've been informed that there are people after you, Zabriskie, Jensen continued. Serious people, intent on causing you bodily harm. He sat back in his chair and folded his arms contentedly.

Zabriskie had an amateur interest in the science of cybernetics, the study of systems and the communication between elements of systems. He thought that it could be applied to public policy as an improvement on the currently fashionable (and in his opinion grossly mis-applied) macroeconomic models. Rather than let the participants largely invent their own rules of conduct, as was now the case, cybernetics could be used to select and test via a carefully constructed series of simulations the optimum governing parameters for each participant. After that, the system could be left to run much as it did under the free-market model with a high level of confidence that the correct checks and balances were in place.

In some of the numerous letters and articles Zabriskie had suggested that politicians at all levels of government should be required to have a minimum qualification in cybernetics before being let loose in the arena of legislative and

public policy. Perhaps it was this that had caused such opprobrium in the halls of power and influence. Perhaps this somehow didn't fit in with the game plans of the self-appointed meritocracy.

Jensen caught Zabriskie staring distractedly at the bookshelf that stood behind Arnt.

You like books, do you? asked Jensen.

I enjoy reading, said Zabriskie, yes.

Do you know how many people buy books nowadays, Zabriskie? Asked Jensen, answer: none.

We've been looking at a list of your recent purchases, said Arnt.

Quite a conspiracy theory reading list you've got for yourself, haven't you? added Jensen, Buckminster Fuller, Stafford Beers, T. E. Lawrence, Stephen Knight, Mailer, Garrison, Robert Pirsig, e e cummings, I could go on...

I like to keep informed, said Zabriskie.

Informed as to what? Asked Arnt. Jensen shot a glance at him.

Secular issues, said Zabriskie, non-committally.

Arnt frowned.

And what's that, then? He asked.

Sek-u-lar: said Zabriskie. From the Latin saecularis, preoccupied with the affairs of the World at large.

He glanced at Arnt.

You know, as opposed to the spiritual.

You wouldn't be looking for the truth, by any chance? enquired Jensen.

I suppose so, in a way, yes. Said Zabriskie.

Well, that's too bad, said Jensen, leaning back in his seat, for as the great Western philosopher Jack Nicholson found out to his cost, people frequently cannot handle the truth.

Zabriskie contemplated Jensen's rather feeble attempt at grandiose rhetoric. He was ashamed, however, to admit that the sentiment (as banal as it was) did strike a certain chord. Zabriskie felt that at its most simplistic level society and the economy was like a room containing a heater and an air conditioner. Those who were impaled on the pointy end of this society mandated that the room should be at the optimum temperature of twenty-one degrees centigrade. Those in society who stood most to gain from extremes of interior climate demanded that market forces should dictate the prevailing temperature of the room. Traditional macroeconomic theory dictated that you cranked both heater and air conditioner up to full power and left them to fight it out, leaving self-appointed lobby groups to protest vociferously whenever the temperature of the room reached the extremes of either forty or zero degrees.

Whereas, Zabriskie felt, the cyberneticists' approach would be to install a thermostat which either engaged or constrained the activities of either mechanism depending on the prevailing temperature above or below the optimum twenty-one degrees centigrade. In Zabriskie's view, the Government was in a unique position to install such a thermostat by means of legislation based on the principles of cybernetics which, again in his opinion, was the most likely way to arrive at the optimum operating parameters.

And that's just the contemporary authors, said Jensen, starting to get into his stride, then there's the classics, Boethius, Plato, Socrates, Marcus Aurelius, Machiavelli...

Jensen paused, looked at Zabriskie and Arnt in turn and made a note in the border of one of the pages of the file.

...Defoe, Swift and Samuel Johnson, he continued.

Boswell, said Zabriskie, technically it's Boswell.

Jensen made another note.

Why? He said, lowering the file and raising his hands. Why all this concern with people and things that are dead and buried?

As I said, I like to keep informed, said Zabriskie.

You don't subscribe to any of the major newspapers, do you? asked Jensen.

I buy the paper now and then, said Zabriskie.

For the form guide, interjected Arnt, you throw the rest of the paper away.

I read the other bits occasionally, protested Zabriskie.

Well that's it, said Jensen, isn't it? Occasionally. Now and then. It's all a bit, er...

Erratic, suggested Arnt.

Yes, said Jensen, this sort of behaviour causes us deep concern.

Zabriskie looked stunned.

You don't subscribe to pay TV either, do you? Jensen continued.

Wouldn't have it in the house, said Zabriskie with conviction.

Jensen made another note.

Don't buy lotto tickets, said Jensen.

Lotto is a tax on people who are mathematically challenged, said Zabriskie.

Arnt looked down at his shoes.

But you bet on the horses, though, don't you? Arnt said dejectedly.

I put the odd trifecta on, yes, now and then, admitted Zabriskie, but not seriously, I don't expect to make money.

Then you'd be thrilled with your progress so far, said Jensen dryly as he flipped through the pages of the file.

Jensen was becoming fatigued by the seemingly endless diversions in the stream of conversation.

So tell us why are you so interested in the truth, if you wouldn't mind, he said.

Zabriskie frowned. He couldn't put it into words, exactly.

Jensen waited impatiently.

If you don't wish to co-operate, that's fine, said Jensen. We can fill you full of morphine and dump you next to a rubbish skip in Campbelltown, you just say the word, pal.

Zabriskie felt profoundly unsettled by this concept.

Or we could just drag you up to the roof and shove you off the edge, said Arnt.

They could throw him off any building they liked, thought Zabriskie nervously.

It didn't have to be a tall one. Nine point eight metres per second per second.

Fifty metres; that's... at least thirty metres per second by the end. A golf ball hit by Ernie Els doesn't go that fast. Then, boom! The heart tears, the spleen bursts, the brain liquefies and...

I'm interested in the truth, Zabriskie said slowly, because in this day and age it seems to be an increasingly scarce commodity.

Scarce? asked Jensen.

What about our friends in the media? enquired Arnt. They promote informed discussion and debate, don't they?

The media? Get real! Zabriskie said rather forcefully. He could hardly believe that Arnt was serious.

The media does everything it can to curtail and stifle informed discussion by reducing it to its most basic emotional level, Zabriskie said with a considerable measure of emotion of his own.

Which you don't think is a good thing? suggested Arnt.

It's a good thing if not stifling it would cause unrest, interrupted Jensen.

Exactly, agreed Arnt. Do you want to live in an unstable society?

No, I don't, said Zabriskie reluctantly.

Then it must be a good thing, said Jensen. He was glad to have won that little argument.

Jensen seemed ruffled by this turn in the conversation.

You know what I think of you, Zabriskie? asked Jensen. I think that you like to spend your time thinking up new and inventive ways to piss people off.

Zabriskie looked slightly nonplussed.

Except this time, said Jensen, you've fucked up large. You've managed to piss the wrong people off.

Yeah, added Arnt, This time you've pissed off the organ grinder instead of the monkey.

The organ grinder? asked Zabriskie, slightly confused.

Are you familiar with the saying “the enemy of my enemy is my friend”? asked Jensen.

Zabriskie shrugged.

You do know who we are supposed to be protecting you from, don't you? asked Arnt.

I have no idea, said Zabriskie.

Jensen looked at Zabriskie, shook his head and smiled.

Come on, my friend, we're going to take a little walk, you and me, he said.

The contract assassin sat on the bed in his hotel room next to a tray containing the remnants of an evening meal supplied by room service.

He'd spent a fruitless few days trudging around the city sitting dejectedly in bars and cafes, ever on the lookout for his elusive quarry. So far nothing, not even a mistaken sighting to bolster his flagging morale. He rose from the bed and donned his suit jacket, careful not to snag the shoulder holster containing the 45 calibre Mauser and its silencer. He took his keys from the bedside table and strode purposefully from the room.

Zabriskie stood in an ascending lift with Arnt and Jensen once more affixed to each bicep, still handcuffed but now also blindfolded.

He heard the lift doors open and felt the grip of Arnt and Jensen dragging him forward. He winced as he repeatedly stubbed his toes on a seemingly endless set

of stairs. A door opened and Zabriskie could feel the cool night air on his face. There was a moment of silence. Neither Arnt, Jansen or Zabriskie said a word.

Jensen finally ended the welcome air of calm with a question.

Did you ever think that merely by reading a few books by a pile of dead Greek and Roman guys you'd land yourself in so much shit? Asked Jensen.

I'm in the shit, then, am I? Asked Zabriskie calmly..

Christ, said Jensen. You know, people like you... people that think they can see through all the bullshit, people like you, quite frankly...

Quite frankly you scare the shit out of us, said Arnt.

Zabriskie stood silently and indifferently in his blindfold and handcuffs.

Do you know what National Security is, Zabriskie? Asked Jensen.

A means of ensuring the continued stability of the Commonwealth? Zabriskie ventured.

No, Zabriskie, Jensen answered almost paternalistically. National Security is a blank fucking cheque.

With that Arnt yanked off the blindfold and Zabriskie was thrust off the top of the 48th floor.

As he fell, Zabriskie felt as if a great weight had been suddenly lifted. The continuing struggle for truth and perspective with all its attendant highs and lows and false hopes was finally at an end. He felt nearer to the real truth than he had ever felt in his life. A smile formed on his lips and he closed his eyes as he hit the ground.

zabriskie found himself

zabriskie found himself
roused from sleep
in a Gestapo-like flurry
by a lanky non-specialist
in the art of team rhetoric
carrying at all times
on its intrinsic
(or under its night shirt)

never to hoik up scruples
at another person's lack of ransom note
tearful flexed proviso
to be enjoyed
in pre-tax back rooms
in a distant heatproof hamlet

watched by misplaced larcenists
as wanton police vehicles
describe a swift cotangent
avoiding complacent mass
of snow-making apparatus

or tumescent pluming rorqual
or any other comment
inducing paraplegia
out of the general reach
of your average educated kidney

but Zabriskie simply mused

zabriskie found himself

as they loaded him onto the bus

that all things considered

the experience lacked

a certain polychromatic quality

The contract assassin stood forlornly over Zabriskie. He looked at the photo then back at the body. He sighed in resignation. It was going to be an extremely lean month if it ended the same way as it had started, he thought. He stood at the kerb and hailed a taxi.

Airport, please, he said from the dark recesses of the back seat.

The taxi driver glanced at Zabriskie's lifeless form. Police should do something about all these fucking drunks lying about, he thought.

the designer of a ceremonious treachery

sat on combustible Hepplewhite

strapped to a pulsating kymograph

as he scratched the depleted varnish

to the horror of his intimates

and reconvened a grievance

addressed to a southbound monolith

instructed in vendetta

and covered in a mangrove

of fibrous yet omnipotent limewash

at the expense of the usual tarmac

a porter of discomfort

with a slavish tone of downplay

zabriskie found himself

and a crick in the lower thyroid

described a short instruction

with his face buried in risotto

to be drowned in liquid thiamine

as fast as a collapsing crocus

or a photon through a whorehouse

their purana streaked with oarweed

traversed the aeolian circuits

ex post against ex ante

enjoying the unbound medley

and requiring every hyphen

of an airplane bound for memphis