

« (/read-267812/?page=29#booktxt)	25 (/read-267812/?page=25#booktxt)	26 (/read-267812/?page=26#booktxt)
27 (/read-267812/?page=27#booktxt)	28 (/read-267812/?page=28#booktxt)	29 (/read-267812/?page=29#booktxt)
30 (/read-267812/?page=30#booktxt)	31 (/read-267812/?page=31#booktxt)	32 (/read-267812/?page=32#booktxt)
» (/read-267812/?page=31#booktxt)	31	Перейти!

NemaloKnig.net (/) / Документальная литература (/genre/dokumentalnaia-literatura/) / Публицистика (/genre/nonf_publicism/) /
Toth J. (/author-87759/) / книга «The Mole People»

After finding communities with him, I go by myself to interview the underground homeless. With him nearby, people are less free to talk, glancing nervously at him. They are even more anxious when I’m with him than when I’m with a policeman.

One day I tell Blade that I’ve heard of a new tunnel to investigate and describe its location. He immediately says no one lives there, but later I learn that Blade sometimes sleeps there himself, so I avoid mentioning the tunnel again. He has said that he no longer lives in tunnels.

So on one fateful day, a Thursday, I go into that tunnel alone. I find no one, although there are mattresses and garbage bags that suggest it is used nightly. I resist the temptation to look for Blade’s clothes. He had become more than just a guide and protector; he was a friend and it would be treacherous to search for his home in this unhappy place.

I go away from the city for the weekend, but on Monday, I visit a familiar tunnel community. Sneakers, a small man who earned his nickname by being fast and quiet, tells me that Blade is looking for me. “In a bad way,” he adds pointedly.

I laugh, wondering if he is angry at me because I left town without telling him. But Sneakers is obviously worried, so I ask why Blade wanted me.

“Dunno,” Sneakers says, looking away.

Another camp member, George, freezes when he sees me. It is in sharp contrast to the great warm smile I usually get. He stares at me for a minute before turning to Sneakers.

“You tell her?” he asks.

“No man, I jus’ tell her he was lookin’ for her,” Sneakers replies, kicking the ground.

“You gotta get outta here,” George says urgently. “He’s not messin’. He’s looking for you bad.”

George drops the garbage bags in which he has been collecting soda cans, takes my arm, and walks me toward the exit.

“It’s no joke,” he says, looking into my face. “He’s after you.” He was visibly upset, so much that he could barely speak clearly.

Why? I ask, but George just shakes his head. He doesn’t know, but it doesn’t matter why, he says. Just go. I wonder if he just doesn’t want to tell me.

That afternoon, still not believing the danger, I visit another community. Tyrone, one of its runners, frowns.

“It’s on the street that someone’s looking for you,” he says severely. A large man named Blade is looking to kill me, he says, “and he ain’t messin’.” He says that I should stay out of the tunnels from now on.

I can’t believe any of this. They are serious, I know, but it is a huge misunderstanding. When I last saw Blade, on a subway platform, he patted me on the head as usual and was laughing. The image was crystal clear. Now I am standing on the same platform, at 33rd Street on the Lexington Avenue Line, and a homeless woman comes up—I’ve never seen her before—and warns me to be careful. “Blade is looking for you,” she says in a terrible repetition of the words I’ve heard all day.

By now I have become thoroughly frightened. I know it is not a joke. Blade is angry, but about what, I have no idea. I must find out and set him straight.

In the next few days I speak to other tunnel people, but they also warn me about Blade without offering any information about his anger. I should stay away from the tunnels for a very long time, they say.

Tyrone agrees to try to learn why Blade wants to kill me. A few graffiti artists do, too, particularly Chris Pape, who has painted many underground murals and is accepted by tunnel people.

Chris asks if I saw drugs in Blade’s tunnel, on the theory that Blade may have been dealing or storing drugs there. Perhaps he saw me, or suspected I saw him with drugs, and now he is scaring me away from any thought of talking to the police about it. No one really knows.

Then Blade phones me at home. I have never given him my phone number. On my answering machine he says he wants to see me. He sounds angry and distant. Even when he has been angry before, he has not sounded so cold.

“I need to talk to you,” he says coldly. He calls again, his messages increasingly frustrated and furious.

“I need to see you. You need to talk cuz I know what you done.” I have never given him my address either, but he says he knows it.

“I know where you live and I’m gonna come visit you. We need to get something straight finally.”

The phone wakes me up, but no one speaks. I’m certain it is Blade.

Tyrone calls me at the office. He wants to meet in Queens. I am now badly frightened, and, although I know Tyrone, I don’t know him as well as I know—or knew—Blade. So I ask Tyrone to meet in Central Park and he agrees.

The story he tells me is that Blade has killed a man in his tunnel, a “crackhead” who was harassing a woman passing through. It happened on the Saturday I was out of the city, but Blade thought he saw me witness the killing, and that I ran away. He chased me but I escaped, and then he saw me speaking to a policeman. When he was unable to reach me by phone on the weekend, he became convinced that I had gone to the police. Because I am not a tunnel person and don’t live by tunnel rules—the chief one of which is never to inform to the police on another tunnel person—I am dangerous to Blade and will be dangerous to him for years.

This is what Blade believes, according to Tyrone. I believe Tyrone.

Tyrone shakes as he tells me. “You gotta understand how dangerous he is,” says Tyrone. “You gotta leave the city, go home.” My rapport with tunnel people has ended. Some will refuse to talk to me, and others will hide from me, he says.

“It’s not you, baby,” explains a homeless woman I particularly like. “It’s that people could get killed just talking to you. We want you to be OK. We love you, but we want you to leave. I don’t want to see you die, and if you keep coming into these tunnels like this, someone’s gonna go fetch Blade to get on his good side. There’s eyes all over this place, you know that. So go home, baby, please go home.”

Blade’s phone calls by now are even more terrifying. He tells me he will come to my apartment.

“I’m gonna come over with my blade. It’s better than some piece gun. It got ya name on it and it thirsty. Ready to talk?” His words are blurred by street sounds from a booth, but his voice is steady and hard in a quick cold environment.

That night, going down to do laundry in the basement of my apartment building, his scribbled tag is painted on the green wall of my elevator. I am hardly able to think, seeing strange colors. His signature had once been so reassuring to me, comforting; if I feared trouble, I could drop his name and I’d be left alone. Now his tag means he is close to me. I am afraid even to go outside, even for groceries.

An officer tells me I should get a gun. No matter what happens, if I kill a man in my apartment, the case would never go to trial. I wonder if I could kill Blade. Within a few days of sleepless terror, I know I can if he comes into my apartment. I wish he would stand in my doorway so I could kill him—a man whose face I still remember only with a smile.

A week later, I leave New York.

IT WAS EXHILARATING, WALKING A TIGHTROPE, EXPLORING THE underground while living aboveground. I had been part of two worlds, but I came to know the tunnel world too well, enough to be caught up in its irrational behavior and volatile emotions. I was no longer privy and at the same time immune to tunnel life with the guise of an outsider. I had already been slapped around when I tried to stop a man from battering his woman. Now I might be killed, and now I know that I could also kill.

As many tunnel people have told me, the line between them and people who live on the surface is very thin, much thinner than people on the “topside world” like to realize. I felt I could step over that line. I could also escape, and I did. I hope some of them will escape, too.

Epilogue

MONTHS HAVE PASSED SINCE I WAS LAST IN THE TUNNELS. Every time I hear about New York, I see a picture in my mind of the city in lights, sparkling with promise and excitement, and I think of the people I left behind in its shadow. Willie, Frederick, and Sane (David Smith) died before this book was published. Brenda is missing. Mac is still roaming the tunnels in search of track rabbits, and whistling. Seville’s hobble healed into a steady limp. He is still smiling, using his humor to help him and others cope while looking for the welding job to free him from tunnel life. Bernard continues to meet at his campfire with Bob, Tony, and the other members of his vibrant community. They talk about trying to retrieve Sheila, who is lost to alcohol and the streets. Sheila keeps true to her promise to Willie, and says that no matter how bad things get on the streets, she won’t live in the tunnels again. She misses the people down there, she says. She misses caring for them and being cared for. John moved out of the tunnel to live with a girlfriend on West 72nd Street. He met her with the help of John Tierney’s article in *The New York Times* in which he spoke openly about his quest for love. He left Mama in the tunnel with Joe. Chris is spending months’ worth of pay on paint for tunnel murals, he tells me, shaking his head. The one he’s currently working on, his most ambitious yet, will cost about \$1,000. He’s planning to spread Sane’s ashes at the foot of the mural on the tunnel ground. Smith sprinkled the other half of his brother’s ashes along the No. 1 subway line, Sane’s favorite. Roger is slowly recovering from his brother’s death. Dolly is living with a man three times her age “for security until my rich man finds me,” she says, her eyes blackened by drugs. She heard on the streets that Frank is in jail, but she doesn’t know where the other members of the runaway community are now. Many more of those interviewed for this book may now be lost or dead.

When I began this book, I did my best not to interfere with the lives of the people in the tunnels. I never gave them money, but sometimes brought them food or warm clothes I bought from street vendors and thrift shops. I tried to avoid handing out cigarettes, but sometimes I did. I gave advice on which shelters to go to and what programs to join and sometimes helped them get there. I tried to limit such advice only to the times I was asked. I never reported children to authorities, mostly because I wanted to establish trust within the communities. I'll always wonder if I made the wrong decision.

Nightmares from the tunnels have followed me. One in particular still haunts me. It's of a girl in the tunnels living with her parents and two brothers. In my nightmare she wakes itching from the bugs and disease in the tunnels. She scratches, which only makes the itch rise into sores. She wakes her brother, who is just a year older, and they whisper so as not to wake their parents or younger brother.

"I'm sorry I woke you," she tells her brother. She shows him the sores, which have spread over her arms and soft face. He's surprised but also tired and tells her not to worry about it until the morning. The girl turns in her sleep until she can't stand the itch and pain any longer. She finds a crack razor on the tunnel floor and uses it to carve out each of her sores. It relieves the itch, but then she sees the blood running over her body and she touches her face, slippery with warm blood. She wakes her brother again. He looks shocked and frightened.

"Don't worry," he says soothingly. "Maybe you'll die by morning." And he turns over to go back to sleep. She lies on her back, thinking of the people walking above her, and accepts this as she accepts the rest of her life. She thinks that she will never be able to join their lives aboveground now that her scars from the tunnel are so obvious. She worries about her family. She closes her eyes, hoping that she'll die by morning. And then I wake up in a sweat.

AS MY YEAR OF RESEARCH IN THE TUNNELS CONTINUED, I GATHERED more nightmares and concerns for the people I met there. I found it increasingly difficult to stay on the periphery of their lives. Several people became more than subjects; they became my friends. They'd give me advice on everything from office politics to how to handle my boyfriend. They taught me more than I thought I could learn. They opened avenues of thought I had no idea existed.

Their lives became very much a part of my own life. In exploring their world, I sometimes lost my own. They could understand and even help explain some of the changes going on inside of me better than my topside friends. Very early on, I recognized that they gave me more than I could give them. They showed me warmth in their cold, often mean world, which gave me hope, not only for them, but for all things. They even showed me happiness in what first seemed to me a void of darkness. They showed me a beauty to their world that saved me from a deep unhappiness. Most of all, they showed me that, even in the worst conditions, people can care for each other over themselves.

But some also showed me how they can extinguish whatever hope they have and chances they are given. I watched too many people destroy themselves with drugs or alcohol, or neglect to care for themselves in basic ways. They were people who lost the future and had not had the guidance to see how to live the life they wanted. For too many, happiness was anticipating their next hit. I saw drugs overtake love. I witnessed how responsibility is not easily understood by those who have never grown under its protection. Some people with self-destructive ways made me angry—not for the material things I gave them, but for things they took from within myself. They took from me unrelenting optimism. At times, they took my happiness. They brought an emptiness to my adventure, turning a great story into a human one that I might never put to rest.

As much as I trusted the people who talked with me, I always walked into the tunnels clutching the can of mace my father gave me, realizing it was more for luck than protection. I was often terrified walking the tracks alone, so frightened I could not turn back to look for the eyes I felt watching me. Once inside a community, I was safe from the random violence of tunnel life. Even without the aboveground law, there was a network of protection. Violence came more from people who felt threatened. If a stranger in the tunnel approached me and I dropped a name of someone in the tunnels, I was often welcomed.

In some communities, I became a fixture and I could watch people in the tunnels act in ways I was not privy to at the beginning. But by then I began to care too much, and I began to interfere with their behavior.

My last trip into the tunnels was one that I won't forget. I visited a couple, Tina and Melvin. I didn't write about this couple in the book because I felt I became too much a part of their story. When I first met them, Tina was panhandling and sometimes turning tricks near Times Square to support "her man," which actually meant his habit. Watching Melvin's declining health, Tina steered away from drugs. She said she realized that someone had to care for Melvin and she couldn't do it high.

« (/read-267812/?page=29#booktxt)	25 (/read-267812/?page=25#booktxt)	26 (/read-267812/?page=26#booktxt)
27 (/read-267812/?page=27#booktxt)	28 (/read-267812/?page=28#booktxt)	29 (/read-267812/?page=29#booktxt)
30 (/read-267812/?page=30#booktxt)	31 (/read-267812/?page=31#booktxt)	32 (/read-267812/?page=32#booktxt)
» (/read-267812/?page=31#booktxt)	31	Перейти!