

« (/read-267812/?page=11#booktxt)	7 (/read-267812/?page=7#booktxt)	8 (/read-267812/?page=8#booktxt)
9 (/read-267812/?page=9#booktxt)	10 (/read-267812/?page=10#booktxt)	11 (/read-267812/?page=11#booktxt)
12 (/read-267812/?page=12#booktxt)	13 (/read-267812/?page=13#booktxt)	14 (/read-267812/?page=14#booktxt)
15 (/read-267812/?page=15#booktxt)	16 (/read-267812/?page=16#booktxt)	17 (/read-267812/?page=17#booktxt)
... (/read-267812/?page=31#booktxt)	32 (/read-267812/?page=32#booktxt)	» (/read-267812/?page=13#booktxt)
13		Перейти!

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

Over the several years of working at the soup kitchen, Buckley observes different stages of homelessness. “You’re either on the way up or on the way down. Some homeless are very clean all the time, very presentable and very articulate. Others are just at the pit, the bottom, those who can’t even come out of the tunnels because they’re afraid to be seen.” He tries to tailor his advice to the person, watching him or her for a time before trying to provide a reason to return to a more conventional lifestyle.

Buckley is ambivalent about the underground communities because of the sense of belonging they offer.

“It’s healthy in that sense that the communities give them some sort of identity, which some of these people never had, but it’s not a healthy alternative,” he says, “because there’s no future in that kind of life. The longer they stay down there, the harder it is for them to readjust to life aboveground. Once you know that the communities offer them comfort and the self-esteem they can’t find in shelters, it’s difficult to say people shouldn’t live down there. But once you go down there and see the way they live, like animals, you can surely say no human beings should live like that.”

The other side of the argument comes from Bill, who claims he is not only content to be homeless but fascinated by the communal structure of his community and others that are underground. He argues that the underground is the best option, far better than the exposure and isolation of the streets or the danger and separation for his adopted family in shelters.

Bill, a black man in his late fifties who is called “Papa,” is deliberately sketchy about his background, except for his education. He earned a masters degree in economics, he says, after a business degree from Fordham University and some legal studies at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and Georgetown University. He was a senior mediator/arbitrator in the Bronx-Manhattan Summons Court until he retired, and he’ll proudly volunteer that he’s worked for the government all of his life. His wife died a decade ago.

Bill dipped into his pension to help two of his immediate family members in need. “That’s all I’m going to say about that. They’re grown adults and I have no right to tell you about the reason,” he says, shutting the door on his personal history. He refuses to inform his family that he’s homeless now, while he tries to save for an apartment with the government checks he says he receives as a disabled veteran from the Korean War.

“We’re a community just like neighborhoods upstairs,” Bill says with a professorial smile through a short, well-groomed beard peppered with gray. “To tell you the truth, it’s adventurous, it truly is, to learn about the subculture and the subcommunities of America. I would say my community here in the Rotunda is the same as those in the tunnels. I know some of them, but I can’t bring myself to go underground for long.”

THE ROTUNDA COMMUNITY OF ABOUT FIFTY PEOPLE TAKES ITS NAME from the large, pillared structure overlooking the Hudson River. Fashion photographers often use the Rotunda to pose their models against the scenic backdrop. Each morning, Parks Department employees who clean up before the public comes to the park wake the homeless. An unspoken contract between the Parks workers and the community allows the homeless to populate the Rotunda area at night on two conditions: the morning cleanup and no public use of drugs or alcohol.

Bill had not recognized the extent of the Rotunda community before joining it. “I knew nothing about its family-like structure and its communal ways,” he says, “no idea how close these people are to each other. It’s a cross section like you find upstairs—bickerings and jealousies, love lives, hatreds, homosexuals.”

In order to occupy a spot in the Rotunda, “you have to be invited,” he says. “You’d be trespassing if you came uninvited, just like in a house. There has to be a vacant spot you can set up in. We share everything from food to clothing. If food is being given out somewhere, one person from the community will run back here to tell all. If a person is sick, people here will take him to a hospital and note when he’s coming out and take care of him when he does. Some people cook, but in this setup, eating is done among the personal family.

“Almost everyone here has something to do in the daytime— cooks or maintenance men in churches—but some who come from the South have no skills and almost no education. But we also have some highly educated persons. He’s got a masters in chemistry,” Bill says, pointing to a man slumped in a stone corner. He stares out at the winter mist receding from the gray river. “He’s got a Ph.D. in biology,” Bill nods at another man, this one reading a book. “We have native Americans, a Yugoslav, an Irishman, blacks, Caribbeans, Latinos, male and female. We’re just as diverse as people upstairs,” he says, meaning people who are not homeless.

Society places the Rotunda homeless outside its traditional concept of community. “They call us a subcommunity the same way they say we have a subculture even though we believe we have our own culture in our own community,” Bill says. This culture has its own pecking order. Among other things, the Rotunda homeless feel superior to the homeless who live in tunnels directly underneath them. Bill admits he stays aloof from the underground people.

“Their communities may operate like ours, but they are different. They have their own water, electricity, cooking arrangements. They seldom come up. Generally they’re not as clean. They’re further removed than we are,” he says, as if his community is halfway between the underground homeless and traditional society.

Tunnel homeless resent the attitude of the Rotunda community. “I can’t understand why they think they’re better than we are,” says Bernard Isaacs, who lives underground about two miles due north of the Rotunda community. “If anything, we’re more highly developed. Our underground communities are tighter.”

However, these communities are more like each other than either is like a traditional community. Sharing a cigarette is one example. “You light a cigarette, you pass it around here,” says Bill. “It’s part of the pattern.” Also, culturally, the homeless communities have a great respect for privacy and are far less concerned with past and future. “We very rarely go into depth about each other’s backgrounds because it’s very personal, sometimes very painful. We build on everyday stuff. Sharing the past isn’t the thing that brings us close. It’s sharing the knowledge of how best to survive each day.”

When day-to-day concerns are so paramount, there is virtually no sense of future in these groups. “These communities offer no long-term alternative to society, really,” says Buckley, “because they become more and more isolated particularly as they go deeper and deeper underground, and it gets harder and harder for them to fit back into society at any level.

“They slowly die because they’re cut off from the whole. I think that’s what happens to them eventually. They get so isolated from society that it gets harder and harder for them to fit back in at any level. You’ve got to fit into society. You don’t have to fit the mold, but you’ve got to be able to fit so that you can participate. Society is society with all its faults, it’s still our culture and somehow you’ve got to be able to tap into it. You may want to change it or make an alternative, but somehow you got to be able to play along the main route.”

Buckley says he sometimes gets frustrated and dejected watching a familiar pattern among homeless of recovery and falling out. “Sometimes it’s hard to understand,” he says.

“It’s like leaving home,” explains Sam, raising a cup of bitter coffee to his overgrown mustache. His leathery skin proves his claim to living on the streets and underground for fifteen years. “You leave your space, all your friends. Your family really.” He has left several times because he wanted to get clean and warm, but each time has returned.

“I want a better life, but I don’t want to give up the friends here. There’s no one up there for me anymore.”

Tripper is an addict who personifies those underground homeless no longer striving for a better life. “Why should I go dry? What for?” he asks. “There’s nothing up there for me. This is what I want. If it means I die early, then I die early. Who cares? What’s the point of cleaning up to fit the myth that everything’s better up top? You’re only miserable a little longer up there.”

MANY OF THE STRONGER ONES NOT ONLY WANT TO CLIMB BACK OUT but they also want to succeed.

Virginia is a slight, homeless woman with big, earnest eyes and hair that is pulled back smoothly. She was a secretary before losing her job, and then her husband, because of her drug use. She was expecting a child when she met Frank, once a featherweight boxer, who was just out of jail. They met at All Saints’ Soup Kitchen, became lovers, and decided to go through drug rehabilitation together. They have slowly been rebuilding lives within society, falling back a few times, they admit, but making progress through persistence and mutual support. They now have an apartment and are seeking jobs. They come to All Saints’ rarely now, only when welfare money has run out before the end of the month.

“It’s hard to come back around people I was out drugging with on the streets,” Frank says. Virginia, shy and mousy in a smart, fitted blue dress, nods agreement.

“They’re good people,” she adds sadly. “They’re real happy we got our lives straight and all. A lot of them say “I wish I could do that,” and I tell them they can but they don’t believe me.”

“It’s hard for Frank and Virginia,” Buckley says later. “They’ve had to cut themselves off from a whole group of people who were their support. Their struggle has hit a new niche, a transition. They aren’t really here and they aren’t yet there. They constantly try to take in old friends and help them to get straight, but they are constantly disappointed when the friends go back on the streets again after a month.”

Virginia wants to speak to me more at All Saints', but I am preoccupied with the underground people in the room, rather than those who obviously do not live in tunnels. She looked as though she had no connection to the tunnel world. She follows me, even tugging at my sleeve to get attention. As I leave, I give her my business card.

She phones me several times before we get together again. "I just wanted you to tell them," she says of the homeless people I meet, "that they can do it. I didn't believe I could get straight. Nobody ever told me I could, so it's important that you tell them they can get themselves cleaned up and respectable," she says in a soft but insistent voice.

I'm taken aback by her, persisting with such a simple message, and I remember Tripper's chilling certainty that those living aboveground are only miserable longer in a world where they do not belong.

Is it worth cleaning up? I ask Virginia. Are you happier?

"Oh, yes," she replies with equal certainty. "I miss my people down there, my friends, and I want better for them. They were more my family than I ever had. My family gave up on me. They were the only people who cared whether I was alive. But then I was pregnant with Vicky and I knew I had to do right by her. She's what made me get out. I couldn't give her up. I miss them, but there'll be new friends someday, a full new life. We're halfway there. Please tell them they can do it, too. There are people for them up here, too. Not many, but we're here."

11

Bernard's Tunnel

"Behold! Human beings living in an underground den.... Like ourselves, they see only their own shadows, or the shadows of one another, which the fire throws on the opposite wall of the cave."

—Plato, *The Republic*

AFTER FIVE MINUTES THAT SEEM FOREVER, THE TUNNEL IS STILL impenetrably dark. It feels expansive in its own darkness. I have slipped through the grated emergency exit from the tunnel that stands flush in the steep hill overlooking the Hudson, then picked my way down a score of steep slate steps—some jagged, some broken and wobbly, and two missing—while holding tightly to the rusted pipe that serves as a banister. My flashlight helps, but its beam seems to fall short of the far wall and only dimly finds the single-track rail line. I switch it off and wait for my eyes to accustom themselves to the shadowless world. Subtle movements stir in the dirt.

I feel the chill of strange eyes on me before I become aware of the red glow of a fire in the distance. As I near, a thin figure separates itself slowly from the wall, and its shadow, the stretched form of an already tall and thin man with wild hair, glides toward me over the tracks and the weeping walls of the tunnel.

He crouches when he reaches me, like a wrestler preparing to lash out, and begins to circle me.

Bernard? I ask, extending my hand.

He continues to prowl, silently, until halfway around, my back to the fire, he stops and leans forward. The fire lights his face but I can barely discern its features. I think I have found a mole person and, panicked, I begin to look around for an escape.

Suddenly he takes my outstretched hand in a warm, firm shake.

"Don't be afraid," he says, standing erect now. "I just wanted to check you out, see who you are. Forgive me for being so rude. Please come in."

His welcoming words are in such contrast to his frightening pose a few seconds earlier that I am even more disoriented, but I follow him toward his home, one of a half-dozen cement-walled cubicles in this tunnel that once sheltered track maintenance crews. About forty-five men and women call this area home.

He offers me coffee or tea and soon, he says, some spaghetti that he dumps into water boiling on the campfire. I begin to relax as I listen to this intelligent and articulate black man. I'm embarrassed at how wrong I was in my first impression.

Bernard Isaacs is thirty-eight years old, has a slim six-foot-three-frame, and wears his hair reggae-style. He was once a model, he says, which is easy to believe. His high cheekbones and well-defined nose and lips were inherited, he says, from his Cherokee mother; his lithe frame came from his East African father.

"I'm pretty much what you see," he smiles expansively by the fire after I tell him of my terrified first impression. "The way I approached you back there, well, let me tell you, Jennifer, 'hello' is the most expensive word in the human language. Down here it can cost you your life. Or worse, your sanity."

"The only thing misleading about me is my name," he continues after stirring the spaghetti. "I'm no part Jewish. My father's family took the name of our family's slaveowners after they freed us."