

# *Hoodoo Voodoo*

*Also by D.S. Marriott*

Incognegro

On Black Men

Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity

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**Hoodoo Voodoo**

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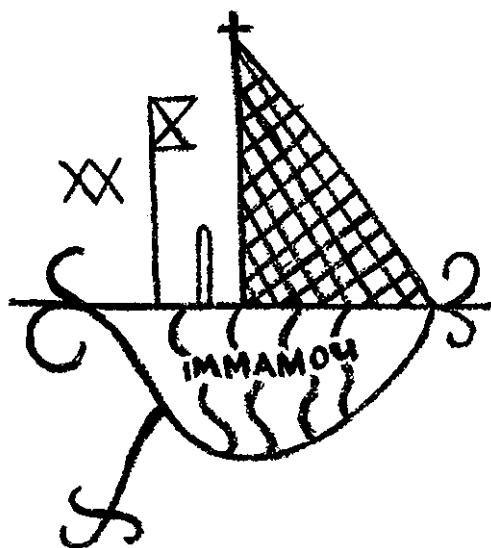
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THE SEVEN CITIES OF DELUGE



# ON THE WHITENESS OF THE WHALE

## I

Too white  
beneath  
birds wheeling in the upper air. Too white

the furrowed crown  
capped with snow,  
the storm terrible,

as darker, and colder now,  
swirls the maelstrom.  
The mist thinning,  
the keel set to breakers, the white cliff sudden

in its nearness;  
deadly and ancient  
from the depths,  
tempting us onward.

All night,  
whispers and betrayals  
and the imminent dead,  
the glazed eyes animal.

Everyone cried for himself  
as the great noise  
descended,  
the beat of a thousand wings

as the wind carries  
to starboard;  
astounded but not appalled  
by what rises.

A white tomb,  
a last refuge,  
a first evil no sooner touched  
than a fear of reeling, inward.

## II

Over the spars of the sea the beast passes,  
like wind on ice  
like god's malevolence.

Whiteness is the mask  
of its knowledge;  
the brow so infinitely pleated

by gray on gray,  
it is bleached of all mortal traces.  
The deck silent, except for doves:

wings descending,  
white as ashes,  
swirling round the mast-heads.

## III

Let the dreams slough  
in the flurries;  
the masts echo  
with the charges.

The white whale descends,  
as men and timber shatter  
black on the waters  
beached in the drifts.

The journey ends here, on the sea:  
nowhere to sail to,  
no wind to save you.

The sea moves on, as it should,

forever dark, unyielding,  
as white glides into darkness—  
tied to the flanks,  
beckoning, no longer masterful,

urging us on to the horizon:  
like a wake on the surface  
neither sad nor waving,  
lashed to the flesh he won't let go.

## THE ISHMAEL POEMS

### I. ISHMAEL ADRIFT: THE TWIST

#### I

From the uplands  
sudden cold,  
out in the ice  
with no breakers.

The eye dumb  
in all that whiteness—the vessel stuck—  
the first plea  
in the basin,  
and the snow so thick  
land is not easily  
known.

The way coldness begins  
in the vein,  
a string of gashes  
scored underfoot  
inscribed  
on the decks  
hung up to cure.

All night the tempests;  
my hands frozen  
to the rails.  
It is a slow time, that  
I was certain of  
as my forehead burned  
and the hard weather  
kept tack  
to a landscape of snows.

## II

That I have  
often come back—the stem  
unable to be found—  
to no welcome  
and no hearthstone,  
nothing possessed  
because I had no wish to hold—  
it was foolish  
to mask my own distances  
when the simplest things  
were always  
out in the snow,  
far ahead of us:

and the bleakest glimpse:  
at the edge  
of the drifts,  
snow and no depths to the known.

## II. ISHMAEL, NEGRO

### I

Today is Sunday.  
Nothing disturbs, as expected,  
the black thickets  
of the familiar,  
as demons sit and howl  
inside your misery.  
Outside,  
in the yard,  
where the sun falls on snow  
and rinses  
the darker blues,  
you hear whispers  
of the other orphans  
pierce the barred window.  
A bed, a stool, a table . . .  
the actual and the potential  
inseparable  
from the blank darkness  
of Ellis Island, 1952.

To the man inside  
the wide reaches  
of the universal,  
there is nothing  
more vast  
than Ahab's wounding;  
the stutter  
of ivory on wood  
like a monstrous beak  
tap tapping  
the difficult line of his labours,

lumbering  
toward a dark  
without rest, and alone,  
waiting for the sea  
to burn  
and day darken  
as the brightest star  
falls.

## II

After the one  
the many—  
the first thought in solitary  
when grief is cunning;  
raft-like  
the waves beneath you  
redolent, necessary, inescapably black—  
falling in your outspread hands,  
the many beginnings  
of every droplet  
silting on the scribbled walls,  
blackening the rings—  
the days dreamless, confining,  
the nights difficult,  
overcrowded, sunk in the depths.

## THE DREAM OF MELBY DOTSON

Rocking—the train's motion—  
that of an assault come alive,  
in your throat,

the feet suddenly lifting  
with a shudder  
(your difficulty breathing)

to which cries  
in the dark,  
the fear is someone else's

(not yet yours), when  
the only echo sounding  
is that of your own crazed name.

Rocking,  
and the fear of becoming—when, as now,  
the chance of taking air

with a cricked neck surprises—  
makes every dream a grave.  
For the dream is inevitable

—and yes,  
still with you  
along with the thoughts that kill—

and spills from the closed lids.  
This constriction  
is not real;

but life in the eye of the dreamer;  
for what he is  
is only an echo to what he cannot know

is waiting;  
(who urges him on)  
himself dreaming in the realm of sleep.