Hoodoo Voodoo
Also by D.S. Marriott

Incognegro

On Black Men
Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity
I

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;
death 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.