The Bloods
Also by D.S. Marriott

Incognegro
Hoodoo Voodoo

On Black Men
Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity
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“Surely the blood-witness too belongs to the witnesses of truth..”
—Søren Kierkegaard, *Attack on Christendom*

“Blood is this absolute thirst.”
—G.W.F. Hegel, *Encyclopaedia of the Human Sciences*
Looking at signs these days
   is all I can manage,
the world adrift in glances
   as if so much flotsam & jetsam
is where it begins
and what disturbs the eye is the line
where boredom subsides
   beneath paneled ceilings.
   It is the ground
pywned because of a lifetime,
when projects burn
   in thrall to new flames,
and heads roll as if by magic,
   and the revolution feels cheap
because no longer immaculate (especially in summer),
maybe because the intervals
   are now much longer, and the signs
not so easy to read because, like most of us,
they sweat too. The red ones wink at me as I go past.
   Objects are not things.
Among the poplars
   the lynched body does not resemble
an image. Only the other can save us,
even though he wears funny peasant shoes
and walks like a German. In the cellar,
a smell of mold and excrement,
and, in the obscure darkness,
*the blackened and burnt stumps*
*of existence.* Hard to forget the relief
of not taking a bath,
having just gotten reacquainted
   with the swarm inside my crotch.
Things are not objects.
   I lie down in the rain,
   decked out in my tiredness,
bound to what must be remembered,
what is absent.
I reach out my hands but see nothing . . .
In a poem, silence sounds like a gunshot.
To the flame darkness is an offering,
in the moment
just before something happens . . .
The Virus Called Smith

Sometimes, at the end of a day,
the dream is of ashes in the yard.

A white dog
with sorrowful eyes,

hunting near parked cars.
Howling as if he’d never lived.

It’s true.
The weather turns so quickly.

The cold that was meant
to be bracing,

is too delicate, and scorching—
a lesion upon the verge.

And the buckets
that we took from the reservoirs,

so dark, so fleeting,
that we had no fear—

hold nothing except lures.

The thrust has taken us far—
from islands

of refused delusion,
to horizons rimmed by kerfs of snow.
Inside the matrix
that contains the all: a window with no views.

In the real world, after all,
each escapee falls, then wakes up

not far from a shingle shore.
Drunk and naked among nettles,

and wishing themselves home
after the hazy night before.

Two servings
of rum vindaloo won’t help us.

And the water
that we laved in handfuls,

now coils in the jars,
dirty, surreal, unknown.

There’s no escaping it,
we’re happiest when we drink alone.

When we turn to go back,
we take so many pills we open a magic door.

Agent Smith’s tumbling eyelid
in plain sight, sunk in a single form.
From amid a grove of poplars it appears—and perhaps this testifies to how uninspiring the late morning walk had been—a little aspen tree, shimmering in the heat. It was not so long before this that he had set out, with his boxes and pencils, eager to do some drawing. The sun had been scalding, but despite the heat transfixed him, gouging his forehead, the dusty cart road had been easy underfoot, fringed by oaks and box scrubs. It wasn’t long before he had come to a turn in the path and saw the tree: black, sickly, ancestral. By presenting itself in this way, close to the cattle wandering deep in the fields, straining to stand upright amid tightly spaced trees where shafts of light fell in a dense bluegreen, it was as if it were performing a courtesy for those passing through. And further, that it should form a stand in such a hot parched landscape suggested to him the most hopeful of signs—a circle of connection, a return. He decided to sit down and draw it. Beside him he placed a jug of water and a basket of strawberries. He felt content. Thoughts of restlessness abated; his mind grew rooted and still. It was as though something inside him were slowly uncoiling, wanting to burst forth into an act of pure attention. He felt himself recede into the present—as if hit by a sudden cold wave. As he begins to draw the tree seemed to arrange itself into an image of the eternity he craved rather than the brute emptiness he feared. But close up he saw something that clutches at his heart: something like a shadow, or a delayed pain, a gaze overflowing from the tree. He didn’t know what to do with that ardour overflowing from a tree. Or that gaze. Think instead of a mind trembling under its own weight, trying to glimpse its own undoing; then subtract the feeling of something formless surging on the forested floor, waiting to flow back to the source. Or you could imagine that the tree itself, trying to resist the forces that shaped it, had burrowed back into this black mouth. As though it had given up on its treeness—tired at last of its offices, unwilling to be woven from the earth. As though it had misread its own nature, refusing the illusion of its own form. He had engineered the encounter. He had wanted to see the tree free from artifice, whatever that may be. But it did not. It wanted nothing. Nothing at all. Better stop here. Better to simply stand, serving your purpose, waiting for the world to appear elsewhere.
Sirens

Then the rocks split and reformed,
a perfect mirror, us, the sea. The song
gone before each tortuous fold.
I taste the salt, the surf, the rime
that bore us to the rim of the world, the wind
as it cools into stone—
may we hear
the miracle of each splashing wave, the tides, the caves,
we princes
of the voids below.
It seems an age before it falls.
The only clue is Odysseus, his face blazing, now luminous:
his voice as stern as crystal.
It begins: the silences,
both yours and mine, the one without echo,
and the one heard by us all.
Surely wi must not
hear this name for the name-
less, with its dreadful recoil in the body, deaf as we fall
enchanted
onto rocks black with language?
But nosir, we would rather
bi stricken, rather suspek
(wutless the impervious ocean-I)
that each note carries traces of these islands,
that each riddim taps a nation, soundlessly in the wind,
that in surviving this hour,
we will wake
awed by the waves,
our voices masters, our speech no longer sold on, or mimicked.
All that is spoken
one love to ratted, as we resound in the dark caves—
the air on our lips, the echoes so timeless,
the crisis of our mouths
deranged by a boum boum
inside a black hole gaping—
the infinities and molecules, decibels and watersheds
traversing us, our black cranial shells,
with our heads full of geometries,
our hearts full of coefficients,
and dark-brown gradients of our feet.
Trueblood

Nothing in the larder
but a drive-through Narnia;

a magic forest that you enter
from the wrong side;

oblivious to the fact
that here, too, you are fugitive.

At the thoroughfare a lion shouts ‘no blacks’.
But your hormones say otherwise.

Better to follow the body to its ancestral end.
Ejaculate on the clockface.

Mouth gaping,
a queen leaks snow from every orifice.

From the rockpools,
beavers let out a rattling rebel yell.
The Dog Enchanter

What if he were to set off
panting through the ruins
swishing his tale
    over debris
mooching near the craters
the full-throated bark
deep inside the vertebrae
synchronized
    to the weak, the yielding—
his trick to know that 'ghost'
isn't the right word for
    scents
maundering his way
over the ragged ridgeline
where mines make effigies of sense
    and the universe presses in
pissing on the leafless trees:
    out there, see him return,
where the dust
makes his tracks so easy to see
    as the journey opens before him
    his cry impending.
    Yes, see him return,
alert, muscullarily alive, the good companion—
running on through the gorges and sleet
    running on and slowing
drawn to those found wandering in the valley
who don't yet know the meaning
    of the journey
their knowledge of time
    counseled by blood
as the ground rumbles from ricocheting shells
singeing his fur like hot bees—
why
    don't they condemn him?
rend him
with strength and desire?
as he bears down on the laggards
stumbling in heavier snow
the ones who get lost in the shallows
who give up
having nothing more to hang onto
who hand over their names when they see
the steam rising over the harnesses
the ghostfur burning in the lardcans:
why do
they fall, awaiting him, mute
with a surfeit of remorse?
Why don’t
they leap (with cynicism, with joy)
from the drawn-out siege to the precipice?

As he steps into the light
between nature and innocence,
he is a dog who knows that refuge
is always behind you,
and that absence from loss
is a pet seeking deliverance: stuff of dreams.