

# **Ritual Verses**

**S. C. Gordon**

## Santería

In the Key West cemetery  
the grey grass bristles with heat  
giving way to dry sand with the pressure  
of frequent feet.

The soil there is thin  
(only an inch of it above the rock)  
so bodies can't be buried underground.  
Each is locked in a concrete box.

Beside the family vaults and soldiers' tombs  
stands a pastel-painted wall of graves –  
Havana Deco pink and yellow  
towers of inverted catacombs.

Each niche has a glassy thumbnail picture,  
verses from the scriptures,  
lines from the Roman Catholic Mass  
and messages in Spanish to the dead.

On mornings after festivals  
the ground is red  
with chicken blood  
and greasy goat bones swelter in the  
grass.

## The Snake Priest

The Snake Priest knows the snake –  
    knows well the undulation  
        of the serpent's form –  
                knows the cobra's knell,  
            the adder's quick-tongued flick,  
    and the viper's smell.

The Snake Priest is the snake  
    on ceremonial nights  
        when the townsfolk come  
            to have their ailments cured.  
                He dances; dances; crazed, his  
                    dance –  
        and serpent-like he twists  
into his trance.

The Snake Priest holds the snake  
    up to his face –  
        eye to eye –  
            and sees the trace of evolution's curl,  
                of Satan's kin,  
        and one day, like the snake,  
he'll shed his skin  
    so a new, more streamlined body can unfurl.

## Merrick

From freak show to  
freak show  
they peddled him, his wares  
a vast skull and bulbous, hanging  
limbs, and people came to watch him  
live  
behind glass where his patron  
put him charging shilling fares:

A shilling for a glimpse; a shilling's  
charge  
to see an elephant man shouldered  
in a purple veil.

*Who's curiosity could fail?*  
said the painted banner at the top  
of the seaside high-street booth  
that's now a sari shop.

## Paquirri

From Zahara de los Atunes (Cádiz)  
to Pozoblanco  
to die  
on the road to Córdoba

Paquirri

shadowed by his father and his father's father,  
set in his turn to shadow his sons  
from Zahara de los Atunes (Cádiz)  
to Pozoblanco  
to die  
on the road to Córdoba

Gore and the  
flash of the *traje de luces*,  
pink capes and lances and  
banderilleros that leapt as they hooked.

The picadors' flat hats like beekeepers  
holding the stings of their bees and pressing  
jabbing  
pressing  
into Avispado.

Avispado

Big and as black as the black on a bee  
on the orange sand and the sun

bristled with porcupine red banderillas,  
thrashing and lowing,  
tossing, throwing  
his head and his horn  
to send Paquirri

Paquirri

down through the decades –  
Zahara de los Atunes (Cádiz)  
to Pozoblanco  
to die  
on the road to Córdoba

## Mary

a hot day  
sliding through the rushes across the plate grey  
water  
of the everglades  
we docked at a sanctuary  
greeted by a man in shades who led us in and  
brought us to a green pond ringed with bushes  
where a short brown alligator lay  
we watched the way  
its jaw touched  
the metal rod and closed  
in a lazy snap –  
the man baiting and baiting  
prodding and peeling wide  
the mousetrap jaws  
displaying his sway over lines of teeth  
for the reservation tours  
then through to a woman sitting in the full heat  
making fabric braids, knitting native patterns –  
the work of generations to be sold in the shop  
*We named her Mary*  
the tour guide said.  
But she wasn't Mary, and the big hand  
the tour guide clamped on her head  
for comradeship was the same  
rod  
held – jammed and held while  
the alligator thrashed,  
it's jaws a smile.

## Victor

You'd think a savage child like him –  
brought from the woods to change and tame –  
would be loud and canine, wild and frantic-eyed,  
malevolent and grunting.

He was not.

*Wild Boy Rescued!* the papers cried  
*The Child That Time Forgot!*  
and then the pictures showing how  
they'd pulled him like a dawn-raid  
out between the trees, and laid him  
squat inside the Black Maria.

This one was docile, quiet. Gentle  
when they'd washed him, threaded  
the bracken from his yellow hair;  
washed him then dressed him  
like a pet, freak act under  
gaudy letters; clothing him, buttoning  
tight to the neck – he who'd gone  
unclothed.

And at his throat the nurses  
found a jagged smile of a scar. They  
eyed each other, three of them, and tried  
to cover what they thought it was: a foiled  
infanticide.

They pitied him.

The doctors tucked  
a fork into his hand, expecting him to eat  
with it; attacking him with pointless whys

when he did not. He cackled guilelessly  
and fixed them with his grey eyes.

And then they tried to teach him how to talk  
and struggled sense out of his sounds  
to fit their own. Just once, he seemed  
to utter *milk* – like the caged mynah bird in the  
matron's room who quoted what it  
heard the nurses say,  
but wanting none of it  
he skirmished underneath their fawning  
palms, and  
broke away.

One of the nurses took him as her son  
and named him *Victor* with a lash of irony  
thinking she had won,  
not knowing that savage boy would grow  
to savage man  
and teach her his will –

tortured, wretched  
Caliban.

**Studies for a portrait of T. S. Eliot by Patrick  
Heron (National Portrait Gallery)**

in profile

head-on

in different voices

different shades

the reader

views

the man made modern

the modern made man

## The Regiment

That morning they'd bent to don their black-soled boots  
after hours through which none of them had slept.  
Bending to tie them, not one thought to refuse  
the fate that dogged them even as they crept

into the trenches; cheerful swipes and looks  
to mask the snapping, banging dread  
of their mortality written, poised to hook;  
thinking of nothing but the sweating dread.

Their death pose, now preserved in picture form,  
shows ten brown, soiled skeletons dug out from  
the pit  
where the part-time sacristan had laid them down  
hands clasped, the line of them unsplit

by years, by decades that have gone:  
a regiment of bone-men, boots still on.

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