

Utah State University

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From the Selected Works of Gene Washington

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## Exercises in magic realism

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## EXERCISES IN MAGIC REALISM

### I

#### *AQUI, AHORA Y MÁS ALLÁ DE: TESTAMENT OF THE DYING TORO*

Now he knows he is being laughed at. Now there is only fever mixed with magic. Now he no longer has the strength to rage. Now *La Querencia* has rejected him. Now he understands his helplessness. Now he has lost the dignity of the animal. Silence and rest no longer wait for him under his trees. Here he represents the history of all the martyrs. Now he looks like the embodiment of a mocked, beaten Christ. Now he resembles a victim of the Spanish Inquisition. He stands where he now is and no longer hopes to return to what he had been.

### II

#### FORAY INTO THE ABYSS

My friend, I am here in the grip of terrible ignorance and superstition. I've been wanting to go outside and pee for some time. But there are large bats flying around. Their wings, like leaves blown around in fall, are knocking against the windows. I hear screams coming from the river.

Sounds of digging are coming from the basement. It happens at the same time every day. But nothing has changed down there.

I feel as if the houses are staring down at me with malicious expressions, full of nameless spite: the doors are black, gaping mouths in which the tongues have rotted away, throats that might at any moment give out a piercing cry, so piercing and full of hate that it would strike fear to the very roots of our soul.

It's the law...you have to turn left at all the intersections.

No one told me about the insects or the bats or the zombies. No one told me the truth about the lousy infrastructure here. So what if I didn't think to ask? Somebody could have told me: the cruel things that go on right in my backyard for everyone to see. I'm sitting here, friend, afraid to go outside and I'm writing my apology to you. We've had a bad harvest. The price of grain is increasing. The devil appeared at the marketplace here last week. He wore a cap in three different colors of red and he carried a sign with NEVER LOSE TOUCH WITH EVIL written on it.

The mayor and his wife started drinking heavily at the thought of the devil returning. Yesterday the mayor got blind on a combination of beer and vodka. Then he splashed some of the vodka on his wife and set her on fire.

The sheriff's wife, trying to put out the fire, died in the flames. So we've got one more angry ghost to contend with.

By the way, the beer here is terrible. It's because the ants are having sex in it.

Everybody tells me lies. Not only the ones you would expect in a place like this but also the kind that surprises you. Nobody told me about the footsteps alongside my house at night. Or the annual tax on sidewalks and shoes.

My house sits at the edge of a woods, alone. I hear howls at night. One evening a local contractor was sitting on a stump in the woods reading The Plumbing Ordinances and something hit him from behind. He sat there for three days, staring straight ahead.

Most of the husbands here turn into wolves at night. When someone's knocks at the door the wife never opens it on the first knock. If a wife did she would see her husband while he is still a wolf and he would eat her up and run off and never be seen again. When he knocks for the second time she still mustn't open, because she would see him with a man's body and a wolf's head. Only at the third knock can she let him in. By that time the change is complete. The wolf has disappeared and he is the same man he was before.

Never, never open the door before they have knocked three times.

Back of my house is a deep ravine. A house has dropped to its edge and has been hanging there for years with one half of it in the air, propped up by a flimsy pole. I'm told that three or four generations of the undead have lived in it indifferent to the perilous position of the house.

Why didn't anyone tell me about round-the-clock sound of sirens?

A citizen went to relieve himself in the woods the other day and saw heads without bodies rolling around in a clearing. He told his wife about it and then he died.

Now all he can do is fly around and fluoresce.

In order to increase revenue, the town council is renting out all public buildings for the storage of toxic waste.

This place is full of the enemies of progress. There are trolls, witches and werewolves everywhere and the inhabitants of this place refuse to do anything about them. Every time the highway department builds a new bridge over a river here the zombies burn it down.

All this, my friend, is keeping me from buying the stamps at the post office you want in order to complete your collection. I'm sorry. I apologize. Everybody is entitled to have a complete collection.

I believe, with all this going on, that I have a good reasons for not posting this letter.

### **III**

### **ZOO**

The zoo was in a small town in the Missouri Ozarks. The town, which had never had a zoo before, had determined that it would be a good thing for their children. Here the children would come, accompanied by their teachers, to

learn about the animals. The animals, in turn, would teach the children how to behave in the correct way towards their elders. Like most towns in the Ozarks, the town was very poor and, consequently, the zoo animals were of extremely poor quality. Very poor quality indeed. The giraffe's neck was too short to reach any of the leaves on the trees. The male rabbits had lost their whiskers and, consequently, were unable to attract females for breeding. The old lion had lost his mane and no longer roared. Worse, the zoo had no elephant or rhinoceros. How, without these, the townspeople wondered, would their children learn proper behavior toward their elders?

Since the town could not afford to hire a qualified zoo-keeper, they hired the first person who applied for the job. The keeper, an old man with long hair, a beard and bad eyesight, expressed his indifference to his job by sleeping most of the time and often neglected to feed and water the animals or clean their cages.

One day a letter from the governor came to the town-officials. It announced that a rhinoceros and elephant had been allotted to the zoo. At first the officials were overjoyed. Now their children could visit the zoo and be taught by the elephant and rhinoceros the proper behavior toward their elders. But then, one of the officials, the owner of a feed store, pointed out to his colleagues the cost of feeding such large animals. Perhaps, they thought, they should lower their expectations and ask the governor for smaller animals? No, one said. That would be an act of ingratitude. Could they rent

the animals from another zoo? No, another said. The cost of transporting them would be prohibitive. So, there it was. They would have to refuse the governor's offer.

Then the female member of the town council, and the owner of a dress shop, spoke up. My staff and I, she explained, will mold an elephant and a rhinoceros out of liquid latex. The animals will then be inflated, painted the proper colors, and be placed out of harm's way behind protective railings. The children will come, look at the animals, and learn proper behavior toward their elders. The council, pleased with the plan, congratulated each other and started to leave. Then one of them asked about pumps for inflating the animals. Where would they get them?

Finally, a member suggested that the zoo-keeper blow up the animals. They agreed that the plan would work and they hired an assistant to help the keeper.

Back in a thick woods, behind the zoo, stood an old barn. The perfect place for the keeper and his helper to do the inflating. Since the woods were known to be haunted, none of the town's children would dare enter the woods. But just to be sure that the secret of the latex elephant and rhinoceros was kept, the zoo-keeper would be required to do the work at night behind locked doors.

Now the zoo-keeper had a wife who suspected that he was having an affair with the mayor's wife. It wasn't true, of course. Who was foolish to

believe that an old, poor man like the zoo-keeper would ever have the chance to commit adultery?

"How will I ever explain to my old lady that I've spent the night blowing up a fake rhinoceros and elephant?", the zoo-keeper said to his assistant.

"You're right," replied the assistant. "It's not something people do everyday, especially at night."

Still they tried. After several hours of blowing from both ends, the latex was still shapeless blobs on the floor of the barn. It had nothing like the shape of either an elephant or rhinoceros. What would they do? Then the assistant found a bicycle pump in a corner of the barn. They attached it to the latex and, presto, there stood a magnificent elephant and rhinoceros in the middle of the barn.

Next day, the keeper and his helper moved the animals to the zoo and set them up behind a protective railing. The following day a teacher brought her students to the zoo to view the animals. The teacher began to lecture the children about the elephant and the rhinoceros as role models:

□The elephant, the largest land animal, is the most respectful of land animals towards its parents. Size matters, children.



□The rhinoceros, the second largest land animal, is the second

most respectful animals towards its parents.

□For this, these two animals have been granted by nature the longest, and the second longest, life of all land-animals.

In addition, they are the happiest, and the second happiest, animal on earth.

"Why are they so sluggish," one of the children asked. "Are they sick?" A gentle breeze moved the leaves of the trees. "No, not sick," the teacher said. "The respect they have for their parents has made them especially calm and gentle." The breeze turned into a wind. "Why are they standing behind that railing?" another child asked. "Are they afraid of us?" The wind, now a gale, picked up the elephant and the rhinoceros and blew them up and over the trees.

The next day the animals were found, just two shapeless pieces of latex, pierced by a thorn tree. The teacher left town because of the loss of instructional material and the school closed. The children went bad. Their parents started to drink and refused to pay their taxes. The zoo closed. The old zoo-keeper ran off with the mayor's wife and his helper took the bicycle pump with him to a neighboring town to start a business in making and marketing fake zoo-animals.

