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Snake Behind Glass

A fly  
walks across the bone wedge  
of the viper's skull, pauses  
over a lidless eye  
and cracks its knuckles.  
Calm and still as rock,  
chin resting on the coils  
of its own body, the copperhead  
watches lions across the corridor  
stalk their cages  
and roar for the African hunt.

The Captive

At his capture a gunstock cracked his skull  
but the Jap lived, God be praised, for ten days.  
The Philippinos forgot their tropic pleasures  
and labored industriously at a vise in which  
ten successive knuckles were crushed. Then,  
after some deliberation, hot lead was poured  
into his nostrils, sizzling vomit and blood.  
The blowtorch and battery acid, however,  
proved too much. Broken bone probing skin,  
eyeslits sagging over hollow sockets, the Jap  
died. But not before he had been hung on hooks  
dug under his ribs. When they found the remains  
they arrested fifty or sixty people in Manila.  
Each died by similar means.

The sergeant told this story, with variations,  
for the amusement of the men. It does not  
matter that the poor Jap never existed, save  
in the dungeon of his mind. The story,  
like a deck of Mexican cards whose pictured  
perversions challenge possibility, brought us  
to a response so dark that even our genitals  
shriveled with shock. Oh, sergeant of excrement,  
how many times have we strapped that fellow  
soldier naked to a table, howling in the hell  
of each man's jungle.