

# “SNAKE”

by D.H. Lawrence

A snake came to my water trough  
On a hot, hot day, and I in pajamas for the heat,  
To drink there.

In the deep, strange-scented shade of the great dark carob tree  
I came down the steps with my pitcher  
And must wait, must stand and wait, for there he was at the trough  
    Before me.

He reached down from a fissure in the earth-wall in the gloom  
And trailed his yellow-brown slackness soft-bellied down, over the  
    Edge of the stone trough  
And rested his throat upon the stone bottom,  
And where the water had dripped from the tap, in a small clearness,  
He sipped with his straight mouth  
Softly drank through his straight gums, into his slack long body,  
Silently.

Someone was before me at my water trough,  
And I, like a second comer, waiting.

He lifted his head from his drinking, as cattle do,  
And looked at me vaguely, as drinking cattle do,  
And flickered his two-forked tongue from his lips, and mused a  
    Moment,  
And stooped and drank a little more,  
Being earth-brown, earth-golden from the burning bowels of the earth  
On the day of Sicilian July, with Etna smoking.

The voice of my education said to me  
He must be killed,  
For in Sicily the black, black snakes are innocent, the gold are  
    Venomous.

And voices in me said, If you were a man  
You would take a stick and break him now, and finish him off.

But must I confess how I liked him,

How glad I was he had some like a guest in quiet, to drink  
At my water trough  
And depart peaceful, pacified, and thankless,  
Into the burning bowels of this earth?

Was it cowardice, that I dared not kill him?  
Was it perversity, that I longed to talk to him?  
Was it humility, to feel so honored?

I felt so honored.

And yet those voices:  
"If you were not afraid, you will kill him!"

And truly I was afraid, I was most afraid,  
But even so, honored still more  
That he should seek my hospitality  
From out the dark door of the secret earth.

He drank enough  
And lifted his head, dreamily, as one who has drunken,  
And flickered his tongue like a forked night on the air, so black,  
Seeming to lick his lips,  
And looked around like a god, unseeing, into the air,  
And slowly turned his head,  
And slowly, very slowly, as if thrice a dream,  
Proceeded to draw his slow length curving round  
And climb again the broken bank of my wall-face.

And as he put his head into that dreadful hole,  
And as he slowly drew up, snake-easing his shoulders, and entered  
Farther,  
A sort of horror, a sort of protest against his withdrawing into that  
Horrid black hole,  
Deliberately going into the blackness, and slowly drawing himself  
After,  
Overcame me now his back was turned.

I looked around, I put down my pitcher,  
I picked up a clumsy log

And threw it at the water trough with a clatter.

I think I did not hit him,  
But suddenly that part of him that was left behind convulsed in  
    Undignified haste,  
Writhed like lightening, and was gone  
Into the black hole, the earth-lipped fissure in the wall-front,  
At which, in the intense still moon, I stared with fascination.

And immediately I regretted it.  
I thought how paltry, how vulgar, what a mean act!  
I despised myself and the voices of my accursed human education.

And I thought of the albatross,  
And I wished he would come back, my snake.  
For he seemed to me again like a king,  
Like a king in exile, uncrowned in the underworld,  
Now due to be crowned again.

And so, I missed my chance with one of the lords  
Of life.  
And I have something to expiate:  
A pettiness.