

Ann Folwell Stanford: On "Gay Chaps at the Bar"

Contrasting extreme battle fatigue ("crying and trembling") with joviality and bravado ("gay chaps"), the epigraph perhaps stands as a before-and-after portrait of the black soldiers: "Gay" before the war, they are now "crying and trembling." Another reading, however, signals strategies Brooks will use in the sequence. . . . What if the soldiers are both gay and devastated? . . .

The first sonnet . . . structures a dialectic between knowing and not knowing, between before and after. The difference in behavior and understanding before the war and now, during the war, is as vast as the difference between being a "gay chap" and one who is "crying and trembling." . . .

These men know how to posture, how to function with ease and grace. . . . As long as the war is sub rosa (as much racist/sexist ideology and its ensuing oppressive systems are), undeclared and masked, these men can function, although tenuously.

. . . Nothing [, however,] has prepared them for being thrust into the "air" of war wherein bravado and cool are lost. . . . But not only is this the "air" of foreign war, it is also the atmosphere typical of black women's and men's lived experience in a racist culture. . . .

[T]he third sonnet . . . describe[s] the deferral of dreams that both war and racism entail. . . . The lighter, though determined, opening lines of the sonnet give way to an exhaustion that results from the constant effort of keeping all these dreams and works on hold. . . . Equally intense on the battlefield of World War II or in racial battlefields closer to home, a significant effect of war is psychic exhaustion and incompleteness. . . .

The focus in [the eighth] poem is less on the loss of belief than on the anatomy of belief, of what belief consists and what motivates the desire for faith in the "beautiful center." The process of dissecting and understanding that which has held one in thrall is the beginning of liberation.

. . . [T]he ninth sonnet . . . extends the reflective gesture to include a repudiation of former belief. . . . The disillusion caused by war, or war's wounding, becomes the catalyst for the soldier/speaker's awakening and subsequent healing.

. . . [T]he speaker warns, then "we assume a sovereignty ourselves." . . . By using a voice that opposes the god of "narcotic peace" (and patriotism with racism as its sub-text), the poem reverses the terms of the divine hierarchy, insisting that resistive and restorative action must grow out of belief, and if it does not, that belief is a blinding and destructive one. . . .

How indeed, the . . . speaker asks, can he possibly continue the charade of obeisance and patriotism, given what he now knows? . . . [T]he speaker of [the final] sonnet is alert to and hears the sound of "iron feet again." While this sound may be simply the never ending round of racial and military struggle, it also works as a muted threat.

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