

1975

Parish Doctor

Sterling A. Brown

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Finale / Ann duCille

His face fades slowly to infinity.
You begin to grow tired of teardrop
and burning daffodil deep in the homefires
of your vacated thighs.

It's true he taught you lightning,
introduced you to your thunder,
gave you root.
Root.

But somewhere in St. Louis,
there's a stranger who smiled at you once
and you suspect that you could love him
just for his supenders.

Parish Doctor / Sterling A. Brown

They come to him for subscriptions.
They resent examination, investigation.
They tell *him* what is wrong with them. They know.
It is pus on de heart, hole in de head
The maul is open, they got stummatache,
Somebody let some night air in the battens.
They want him only to subscribe
The medcin: bitter-bitter is the best.

“Docteur, I doan b'leave you can do nothin' fuh me.
I got a snake in me. I know, me, I been spelled.
You laugh, non? I tell you son, a snake he in my inside.”
He tells them he's the best conjuh doctor, best for roots and herbs
North of New Orleans. They pop their eyes:
“You tink he know dose ting for true?”

They drink the boiled juices of a jit black hen
For diarrhea, for consumption
They kill a jit black dog, bury him three days, then cook him,
And oil the ailing person with the grease.
For rheumatism they kill a turkey buzzard,
Fry him up; rub the stiff jints with the mess.

But jit black dogs and carancros are none too plentiful.
They come to see their docteur when these fail.

They like him: young, good-looking, easy laugher.
As brown as they and one of theirs forever.
The women call him *cher*, tender but embarrassed,
Their good men pass sly glances at his clipped mustache
They think he lies about the conjuh knowledge.
But still he got sharp eyes, you never know.

They pay him off with garden truck, and cane-juice,
One auntie brought him six hens tied together
Squawking and screaming enough to wake a graveyard,
One hen was jit black to help him fix his medcins.

One night, past midnight, we jolted twelve miles to a cabin.
It seemed as if the Ford would never make it.
“Tank Gawd, you’s e here. I tole ’em you would git here.
He’s hurted bad. He caught a bullet in his laig.
Tank Gawd, you’s e come.” In the dull light of the lamp,
I watched his skillful probing for the slug.

Outside the rim of light, dark faces watched us.
His fingers were deft and gentle. The woman’s sobbings
Quieted; the man on the table lay there sweating,
Breathing heavily, but trusting; his eyes rolled,
Following the hands.

To John Oliver Killens in 1974 / Gwendolyn Brooks

John, we are marvelous monsters.
Look at our mercy, the massiveness that it is not.
Look at our “unity,” look at our
“black solidarity.”
Dim dull and dainty.
Ragged. (And we
grow colder: yea, we grow colder.)
John, see our
tatter-time.

You were always a mender.