NEGRO HERO (To suggest Dorie Miller)

GWENDOLYN BROOKS

I had to kick their law into their teeth in order to save them.

However, I have heard that sometimes you have to deal

Devilishly with drowning men in order to swim them to shore

Or they will haul themselves and you to the trash and the fish beneath.

(When I think of this, I do not worry about a few

Chipped teeth.)

It is good I gave glory, it is good I put gold on their name

Or there would have been spikes in the afterward hands.

But let us speak only of my success and the pictures in the Caucasian dailies

As well as the Negro weeklies. For I am a gem.

(They are not concerned that it was hardly The Enemy my fight was against

But them.)

It was a tall time. And of course my blood was

Boiling about in my head and straining and howling and singing me on.

Of course I was rolled on wheels of my boy itch to get at the gun.

Of course all the delicate rehearsal shots of my childhood massed in mirage

 before me.

Of course I was child

And my first swallow of the liquor of battle bleeding black air dying and

 demon noise

Made me wild.

It was kinder than that, though, and I showed like a banner my kindness.

I loved. And a man will guard when he loves.

Their white-gowned democracy was my fair lady

With her knife lying cold, straight, in the softness of her sweet-flowing sleeve.

But for the sake of the dear smiling mouth and the stuttered promise I toyed

 With my life.

I threw back!—I would not remember

Entirely the knife.

Still—am I good enough to die for them, is my blood bright enough to be

 spilled,

Was my constant back-question—are they clear

On this? Or do I intrude even now?

Am I clean enough to kill for them, do they wish me to kill

For them or is my place while death licks his lips and strides to them

In the galley still?

(In a southern city a white man said

Indeed, I'd rather be dead.

Indeed, I'd rather he shot in the head

Or ridden to waste on the back of a flood

Than saved by the drop of a black man's blood.)

Naturally, the important thing is, I helped to save them, them and a part of

 their democracy,

Even if I had to kick their law into their teeth in order to do that for them.

And I am feeling well and settled in myself because I believe it was a good job,

Despite this possible horror: that they might prefer the

Preservation of their law in all its sick dignity and their knives

To the continuation of their creed

And their lives.

Dorie Miller, hero of Miss Brooks' poem, is the young mess attendant who won the Navy Cross at Pearl Harbor for his "distinguished devotion to duty, extraordinary courage and disregard for his own personal safety during the attack." Miller manned a machine gun on the USS Arizona after members of the gun crew had been put out of action and shot down four Japanese planes, then carried his wounded captain to safety under the whistle of enemy bullets. He has been missing in action in the Southwest Pacific since December of 1943.

This poem was originally published in *Common Ground* magazine in June 1945.

“In 1945 her first book of poetry, *A Street in Bronzeville* (published by Harper and Row), brought her instant critical acclaim. She was selected one of *Mademoiselle*magazine's "Ten Young Women of the Year," she won her first Guggenheim Fellowship, and she became a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Her second book of poems, *Annie Allen*(1949), won*Poetry*magazine's Eunice Tietjens Prize. In 1950 Gwendolyn Brooks became the first African American to win a Pulitzer Prize. From that time to the present, she has seen the recipient of a number of awards, fellowships, and honorary degrees usually designated as Doctor of Humane Letters.

President John Kennedy invited her to read at a Library of Congress poetry festival in 1962. In 1985 she was appointed poetry consultant to the Library of Congress. Just as receiving a Pulitzer Prize for poetry marked a milestone in her career, so also did her selection by the National Endowment for the Humanities as the 1994 Jefferson Lecturer, the highest award in the humanities given by the federal government.

Her first teaching job was a poetry workshop at Columbia College (Chicago) in 1963. She went on to teach creative writing at a number of institutions including Northeastern Illinois University, Elmhurst College, Columbia University, Clay College of New York, and the University of Wisconsin.” – From *The Oxford Companion to African-American Literature*. Copyright © 1997 by Oxford University Press.