

Staggerlee Wonders

by James Baldwin

The sons of greed, the heirs of plunder,
are approaching the end of their journey:
it is amazing that they approach without wonder,
as though they have, themselves, become
that scorched and blasphemed earth,
the stricken buffalo, the slaughtered tribes,
the endless, virgin, bloodsoaked plain,
the famine, the silence, the children's eyes,
murder masquerading as salvation, seducing
every democratic eye,
the mouths of truth and anguish choked with cotton,
rape delirious with the fragrance of magnolia,
the hacking of the fruit of their loins to pieces,
hey! the tar-baby sons and nephews, the high-yaller
nieces,
and Tom's black prick hacked off
to rustle in crinoline,
to hang, heaviest of heirlooms,
between the pink and alabaster breasts
of the Great Man's Lady,
or worked into the sash at the waist
of the high-yaller Creole bitch, or niece,
a chunk of shining brown-black satin,
staring, staring, like the single eye of God:

creation yearns to re-create a time
when we were able to recognize a crime.

Alas,
my stricken kinsmen,
the party is over:
there have never been any white people,
anywhere: the trick was accomplished with mirrors—

look: where is your image now?
where your inheritance,
on what rock stands this pride?

Oh,
I counsel you,
leave History alone.
She is exhausted,
sitting, staring into her dressing-room mirror,
and wondering what rabbit, now,
to pull out of what hat,
and seriously considering retirement,
even though she knows her public
dare not let her go.

For, I have seen,
in the eyes regarding me,
or regarding my brother,
have seen, deep in the farthest valley
of the eye, have seen
a flame leap up, then flicker and go out,
have seen a veil come down,
leaving myself, and the other,
alone in that cave
which every soul remembers, and
out of which, desperately afraid,
I turn, turn, stagger, stumble out,
into the healing air,
fall flat on the healing ground,
singing praises, counselling
my heart, my soul, to praise.

What is it that this people
cannot forget?

Surely, they cannot be deluded
as to imagine that their crimes
are original?

There is nothing in the least original
about the fiery tongs to the eyeballs,
the sex torn from the socket,
the infant ripped from the womb,
the brains dashed out against rock,
nothing original about Judas,
or Peter, or you or me: nothing:
we are liars and cowards all,
or nearly all, or nearly all the time:
for we also ride the lightning,
answer the thunder, penetrate whirlwinds,
curl up on the floor of the sun,
and pick our teeth with thunderbolts.

Then, perhaps they imagine
that their crimes are not crimes?

Perhaps.

Perhaps that is why they cannot repent,
why there is no possibility of repentance.
Manifest Destiny is a hymn to madness,
feeding on itself, ending
(when it ends) in madness:
the action is blindness and pain,
pain bringing a torpor so deep
that every act is willed,
is desperately forced,
is willed to be a blow:
the hand becomes a fist,
the prick becomes a club,
the womb a dangerous swamp,
the hope, and fear, of love
is acid in the marrow of the bone.
No, their fire is not quenched,
nor can be: the oil feeding the flames
being the unadmitted terror of the wrath of God.

Yes. But let us put it in another,
less theological way:
though theology has absolutely nothing to do
with what I am trying to say.
But the moment God is mentioned
theology is summoned
to buttress or demolish belief:
an exercise which renders belief irrelevant
and adds to the despair of Fifth Avenue
on any afternoon,
the people moving, homeless, through the city,
praying to find sanctuary before the sky
and the towers come tumbling down,
before the earth opens, as it does in Superman.
They know that no one will appear
to turn back time,
they know it, just as they know
that the earth has opened before
and will open again, just as they know
that their empire is falling, is doomed,
nothing can hold it up, nothing.
We are not talking about belief.