

Poetry Porch: Poetry

At the Library: Montréal, Quebec, circa 1950

By Beth Brown Preston

For my father

Portrait of a Black man as scholar among ancient volumes
after he left his native country for Canada
and followed the North Star to the destination of his mind's bright freedom.

He found the object of his desire, the ballad of the slaying of monsters,
*where Beowulf spied, hanging on the wall,
the mighty sword hammered by giants, strong and blessed
with a powerful magic, the finest of all weapons,
but so massive no ordinary man could grasp
its carved and decorated length. Drew the sword
from its scabbard, broke the chain at its hilt.
Then, savage with anger and desperation,
lifted the sword high over his head
and struck Grendel dead. With all his strength.*

And the Black man wandered that library's dusty corridors
in the sacred building nestled between Montréal's steepest hills,
gathering the endurance of mind to conquer his task,
to render the poem from so long ago it was sung only to kings,
was written by an unknown, yet passed on, in the tradition
of glorifying the fierce and brave deeds of a warrior.

And the Black man himself became a warrior,
wielding the sword of language, fighting the good fight,
basking in the light of a certain fame,
trusting in the consequences of his bravery,
the preservation of his own honor, the value of the poem
in a world of monsters.

The Black man rendered his dreams.