

America

BY CLAUDE MCKAY

1921

Born in Sunny Ville, Jamaica, Claude McKay (1889-1948) was an important figure in the 1920s literary movement known as the Harlem Renaissance. Although a selection of McKay's prose and poetry depicts the basic joys of peasant life in rural Jamaica, McKay is best known for his fiction and poetry that directly address the racism and urban tribulations that black people faced in America during the early twentieth century. A line in one of his most well-known poems, "If We Must Die," perhaps best underscores McKay's style and poetic aims: "Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!"

- 1 Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,
And sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth,
Stealing my breath of life, I will confess
I love this cultured hell that tests my youth.
Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,
6 Giving me strength erect against her hate,
Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood.
Yet, as a rebel fronts a king in state,
I stand within her walls with not a shred
10 Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer.
Darkly I gaze into the days ahead,
And see her might and granite wonders there,
Beneath the touch of Time's unerring hand,
Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand.