

Maggie Harris



Dear Claude,...

FOR CLAUDE MCKAY, JAMAICA-BORN AFRICAN-AMERICAN POET,
AND FOR WRITING WOMEN

Dear Claude,
Your words have reached me late
And I write here in the weald, where some might say I dwell
Within the belly of the beast. Here castles and monuments
Rise like trees, and moats like banded jewels guard and glitter
Oasts, and merchants' dwellings, galleries.
It takes no leap of vision to imagine whole cavalries
Rushing at me through these trees.

'A tiger's tooth', you write, of your adopted Motherland
Where Liberty and Black are whip and glove,
And I remember lashings of the cane
And passages of Pope; but then again
That fast beating of the heart
When letters came!

My heart beats still and flutters
A valve, like Demerara shutters, closed to wind and rain
But scents creep in, that thirsty aftertaste of sugarcane.
My eyes rove, whose house, where?
Whose great grandmother's taste for sugar in her tea
Whose middle son crossed that sea
For hands-on experience
In 17th Century estate management?

The sadness is, you are not here to see
Your words like poppy-fields enliven, recreate this landscape
Bond me with these friends whose hallelujahs echo mine.
The gladness is, our mistress set us free
The moment she commanded:
Look, at me.

