

# The Negro Dancers

Claude McKay

I

Lit with cheap colored lights a basement den,  
With rows of chairs and tables on each side,  
And, all about, young, dark-skinned women and men  
Drinking and smoking, merry, vacant-eyed.

5 A Negro band, that scarcely seems awake,  
Drones out half-heartedly a lazy tune,  
While quick and willing boys their orders take  
And hurry to and from the near saloon.

Then suddenly a happy, lilting note

10 Is struck, the walk and hop and trot begin,  
Under the smoke upon foul air afloat;  
Around the room the laughing puppets spin  
To sound of fiddle, drum and clarinet,

II

'Tis best to sit and gaze; my heart then dances

15 To the lithe bodies gliding slowly by,  
The amorous and inimitable glances  
That subtly pass from roguish eye to eye,  
The laughter gay like sounding silver ringing,  
That fills the whole wide room from floor to ceiling,—

20 A rush of rapture to my tried soul bringing—  
The deathless spirit of a race revealing,  
Not one false step, no note that rings not true!

Unconscious even of the higher worth  
Of their great art, they serpent-wise glide through

25 The syncopated waltz. Dead to the earth  
And her unkindly ways of toil and strife,  
For them the dance is the true joy of life.

III

And yet they are the outcasts of the earth,  
A race oppressed and scorned by ruling man;

30 How can they thus consent to joy and mirth

Who live beneath a world-eternal ban?  
No faith is theirs, no shining ray of hope,  
    Except the martyr's faith, the hope that death  
Some day will free them from their narrow scope  
35     And once more merge them with the infinite breath.  
But, oh! they dance with poetry in their eyes  
    Whose dreamy loveliness no sorrow dims,  
And parted lips and eager, gleeful cries,  
    And perfect rhythm in their nimble limbs.  
40     The gifts divine are theirs, music and laughter:  
    All other things, however great, come after.

McKay, Claude. "The Negro Dancers." *The Liberator* (July, 1919): 20.