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.
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
   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
   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,—
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
   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;
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
  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.
  The gifts divine are theirs, music and laughter:
All other things, however great, come after.