

*Maggie Harris*



## Dear Claude,...

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

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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.

