Claude McKay was born in Jamaica, West Indies, in 1889. He was educated by his older brother, who possessed a library of English novels, poetry, and scientific texts. At the age of twenty, McKay published a book of verse called Songs of Jamaica, recording his impressions of black life in Jamaica in dialect. In 1912, he traveled to the United States to attend Tuskegee Institute. He remained there only a few months, leaving to study agriculture at Kansas State University. He published two sonnets, "The Harlem Dancer" and "Invocation," in 1917, and would later use the same poetic form to record his reactions to the injustices of black life in America. In addition to social and political concerns, McKay wrote on a variety of subjects, from his Jamaican homeland to romantic love, with a use of passionate language.

During the twenties, McKay developed an interest in Communism and traveled to Russia and then to France where he met Edna St. Vincent Millay and Sinclair Lewis. In 1934, McKay moved back to the United States and lived in Harlem, New York. Losing faith in Communism, he turned his attention to the teachings of various spiritual and political leaders in Harlem, eventually converting to Catholicism. McKay’s viewpoints and poetic achievements in the earlier part of the twentieth century set the tone for the Harlem Renaissance and gained the deep respect of younger black poets of the time, including Langston Hughes. He died in 1948.

**America**

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,  
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  
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.

**White Houses**

Your door is shut against my tightened face,  
And I am sharp as steel with discontent;  
But I possess the courage and the grace  
To bear my anger proudly and unbent.  
The pavement slabs burn loose beneath my feet,  
A chafing savage, down the decent street;  
And passion rends my vitals as I pass,  
Where boldly shines your shuttered door of glass.  
Oh, I must search for wisdom every hour,  
Deep in my wrathful bosom sore and raw,  
And find in it the superhuman power  
To hold me to the letter of your law!  
Oh, I must keep my heart inviolate  
Against the potent poison of your hate.