

Text and Discussion Questions:

Aimé Césaire

“The Childhood Home”

At the end of daybreak, another little house very bad-smelling in a very narrow street, a miniscule house which harbors in its guts of rotten wood dozens of rats and the turbulence of my six brothers and sisters, a cruel little house whose demands panic the ends of our months and my temperamental father gnawed by one persistent ache, I never knew which one, whom an unexpected sorcery could lull to melancholy tenderness or drive to towering flames of anger; and my mother whose legs pedal, pedal, night and day, for our tireless hunger, I was even awakened at night by these tireless legs which pedal the night and the bitter bite in the soft flesh of the night of a Singer that my mother pedals, pedals for our hunger and day and night.

At the end of daybreak, beyond my father, my mother, the shack chapped with blisters, like a peach tree afflicted with curl, and the thin roof patched with pieces of gasoline cans, which create swamps of rust in the stinking sordid gray straw pulp, and when the wind whistles, these odds and ends make a noise bizarre, first like the crackling of frying, then like a brand dropped into water the smoke of its twigs flying up. And the bed of boards from which my race arose, my whole entire race from this bed of boards, with its kerosene case paws, as if it had elephantiasis, that bed, and its kidskin, and its dry banana leaves, and its rags, yearning for a mattress, my grandmother’s bed...

Translated from the French by Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith

Discussion Questions

1. Describe this home in your own words. What does it show about the economic status of the speaker’s family?
2. What is the significance of the mother’s continuous pedaling?
3. In your opinion, why does the speaker evoke the bed of boards in relation to his ancestors?