

# Heritage

By COUNTÉE CULLEN

*Sculpture reproduced by courtesy of the Barnes Foundation*

WHAT is Africa to me:  
Copper sun, a scarlet sea,  
Jungle star and jungle track,  
Strong bronzed men and regal black  
Women from whose loins I sprang  
When the birds of Eden sang?  
*One three centuries removed  
From the scenes his fathers loved  
Spicy grove and banyan tree,  
What is Africa to me?*

Africa? A book one thumbs  
Listlessly till slumber comes.  
Unremembered are her bats  
Circling through the night, her cats  
Crouching in the river reeds  
Stalking gentle food that feeds  
By the river brink; no more  
Does the bugle-throated roar  
Cry that monarch claws have leapt  
From the scabbards where they slept.  
Silver snakes that once a year  
Doff the lovely coats you wear  
Seek no covert in your fear  
Lest a mortal eye should see:  
What's your nakedness to me?



*African sculpture*



*Bushongo*

All day long and all night through  
One thing only I must do  
Quench my pride and cool my blood,  
Lest I perish in their flood,  
Lest a hidden ember set  
Timber that I thought was wet  
Burning like the driest flax,  
Melting like the merest wax,  
Lest the grave restore its dead.  
*Stubborn heart and rebel head.  
Have you not yet realized  
You and I are civilized?*

So I lie and all day long  
Want no sound except the song  
Sung by wild barbaric birds  
Goading massive jungle herds,  
Juggernauts of flesh that pass  
Trampling tall defiant grass  
Where young forest lovers lie  
Plighting troth beneath the sky.



Ivory Coast—ceremonial mask

So I lie, who always hear  
 Though I cram against my ear  
 Both my thumbs, and keep them there,  
 Great drums beating through the air.  
 So I lie, whose fount of pride,  
 Dear distress, and joy allied,  
 Is my sombre flesh and skin  
 With the dark blood dammed within.  
 Thus I lie, and find no peace  
 Night or day, no slight release  
 From the unremittant beat  
 Made by cruel padded feet,  
 Walking through my body's street.  
 Up and down they go, and back  
 Treading out a jungle track.  
 So I lie, who never quite  
 Safely sleep from rain at night  
 While its primal measures drip  
 Through my body, crying, "Strip!  
 Doff this new exuberance,  
 Come and dance the Lover's Dance."  
 In an old remembered way  
 Rain works on me night and day.  
 Though three centuries removed  
 From the scenes my fathers loved.

My conversion came high-priced.  
 I belong to Jesus Christ,  
 Preacher of humility:  
 Heathen gods are naught to me—  
 Quaint, outlandish heathen gods  
 Black men fashion out of rods,  
 Clay and brittle bits of stone,  
 In a likeness like their own.

*"Father, Son and Holy Ghost"*

Do I make an idle boast,  
 Jesus of the twice turned cheek,  
 Lamb of God, although I speak  
 With my mouth, thus, in my heart  
 Do I not play a double part?  
 Ever at thy glowing altar  
 Must my heart grow sick and falter  
 Wishing He I served were black.  
 Thinking then it would not lack  
 Precedent of pain to guide it  
 Let who would or might deride it;  
 Surely then this flesh would know  
 Yours had borne a kindred woe.  
 Lord, I fashion dark gods, too,  
 Daring even to give to You  
 Dark, despairing features where  
 Crowned with dark rebellious hair,  
 Patience wavers just so much as  
 Mortal grief compels, while touches  
 Faint and slow, of anger, rise  
 To smitten cheek and weary eyes.

Lord, forgive me if my need  
 Sometimes shapes a human creed.



Zouenouia