

“Heritage” by Countee Cullen

What is Africa to me:  
Copper sun or scarlet sea,  
Jungle star or jungle track,  
Strong bronzed men, or 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, cinnamon tree,  
What is Africa to me?

So I lie, who 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.  
So I lie, who always hear,  
Though I cram against my ear  
Both my thumbs, and keep them there,  
Great drums throbbing through the air.  
So I lie, whose fount of pride,  
Dear distress, and joy allied,  
Is my somber flesh and skin,  
With the dark blood dammed within  
Like great pulsing tides of wine  
That, I fear, must burst the fine

Channels of the chafing net  
Where they surge and foam and fret.

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 flesh 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?  
Here no leprous flowers rear  
Fierce corollas in the air;  
Here no bodies sleek and wet,  
Dripping mingled rain and sweat,  
Tread the savage measures of  
Jungle boys and girls in love.  
What is last year's snow to me,  
Last year's anything? The tree  
Budding yearly must forget  
How its past arose or set  
Bough and blossom, flower, fruit,  
Even what shy bird with mute  
Wonder at her travail there,

Meekly labored in its hair.  
One three centuries removed  
From the scenes his fathers loved,  
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,  
What is Africa to me?

So I lie, who find no peace  
Night or day, no slight release  
From the unremittent 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--  
I can never rest at all  
When the rain begins to fall;  
Like a soul gone mad with pain  
I must match its weird refrain;  
Ever must I twist and squirm,  
Writhing like a baited worm,  
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.

Quaint, outlandish heathen gods  
Black men fashion out of rods,  
Clay, and brittle bits of stone,

In a likeness like their own,  
My conversion came high-priced;  
I belong to Jesus Christ,  
Preacher of humility;  
Heathen gods are naught to me.

Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,  
So 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 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 You  
Dark despairing features where,  
Crowned with dark rebellious hair,  
Patience wavers just so much as  
Mortal grief compels, while touches  
Quick and hot, of anger, rise  
To smitten cheek and weary eyes.  
Lord, forgive me if my need  
Sometimes shapes a human creed.

All day long and all night through,  
One thing only must I do:  
Quench my pride and cool my blood,  
Lest I perish in the flood.  
Lest a hidden ember set  
Timber that I thought was wet  
Burning like the dryest flax,  
Melting like the merest wax,  
Lest the grave restore its dead.  
Not yet has my heart or head  
In the least way realized  
They and I are civilized.