Bruised Totems. 2004

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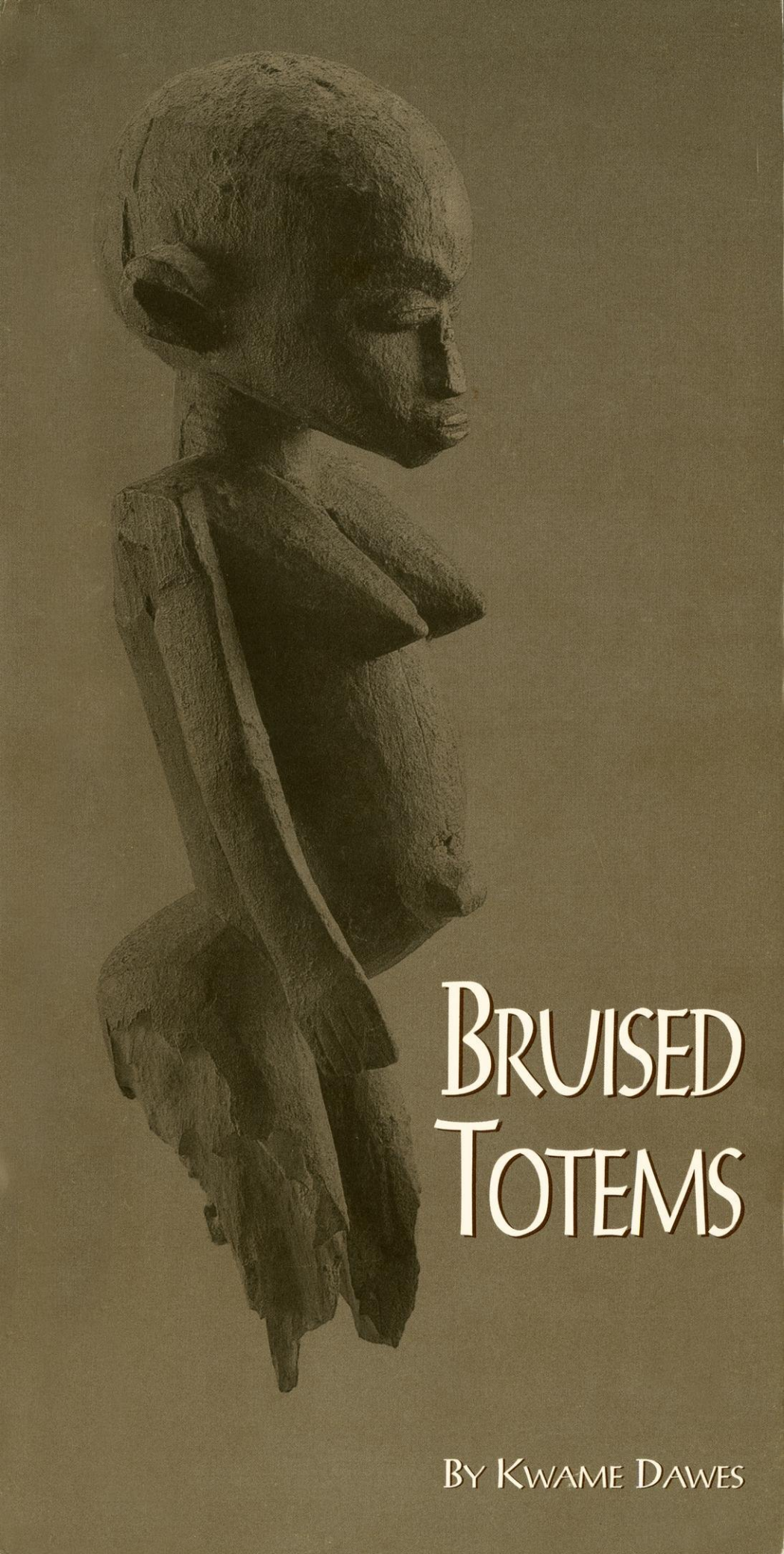


Bruised Totems

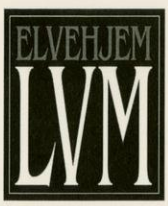
By Kwame Dawes

BRUISED TOTEMS

Poems Based on the Bareiss Family Collection of African Art

BY KWAME DAWES

PARALLEL PRESS ◆ 2004



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This chapbook is being published in association with the African Studies Program at the University of Wisconsin–Madison on the occasion of the African Literature Association's 30th Anniversary Conference. The exhibition "Perspectives: African Art from the Bareiss Family Collection" is on display at the Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin–Madison, April 16 – June 27, 2004.

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Biography

Ghanaian-born and Jamaican-raised, Kwame Dawes has published nine collections of poems, a book of short fiction, and several anthologies and critical texts. Dawes has won several major awards for his writing including the Forward Poetry Prize, the Poetry Business Prize, the Pushcart Prize, and the Hollis Summers Poetry Prize. In 2001, *Midland,* a collection of poems, was published by the Ohio University Press. In 2002 Dawes published three new titles: *Bob Marley: Lyrical Genius* (Sanctuary), a critical look at the lyrics of Bob Marley; *A Place to Hide and other Stories* (Peepal Tree); and *New and Selected Poems* (Peepal Tree). *One Love,* his adaptation of Roger Mais' novel, *Brotherman,* opened at the Lyric Hammersmith in London in 2001 and has been published by Metheun Books (2001). Dawes lives with his wife Lorna and children Sena, Kekeli, and Akua in Columbia, South Carolina. Dawes is professor of English and Distinguished Poet in Residence at the University of South Carolina. Former MFA director, he currently directs the South Carolina Poetry Initiative and serves as the program director of the Calabash International Literary Festival.

For
Lorna
Sena, Kekeli, Akua
also for
Gwyneth, Kojo, Aba, Adjoa, Kojovi
and for
Mama the Great

Preface

Art feeds on art

Art feeds on art. This is a truism, but an important one. This is, too, a metaphor—a metaphor about the cannibalistic nature of art—but cannibalism is not the right word. Art feeds on art, but art does not negate art, art does not destroy or erase art. Art feeds on art and in the process art manages to enliven art. It is this strange paradox that characterizes what happens when a poet approaches a piece of art—a painting, a sculpture, a mask, a staff—and finds language to dialogue with that art. The poet is feeding on the art he or she sees, but the poet is also giving birth to something new, some articulation that will not replicate or replace the art, but will somehow achieve an energy and a life of its own. This is what happens when the dialogue works. But one never knows if and when it will work.

Bruised Totems is a collection of original poetry born out of the intended confluence of the 30th anniversary conference of the African Literature Association and the opening of an exhibition at the Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin–Madison, of some sixty pieces from the 800-strong Bareiss Family Collection of African Art.

I arrived in Madison in early March to see if my encounter with the collected art from Africa, a collection whose provenance I did not know and a collection that I frankly knew little about, would lead to the writing of poems. I was commissioned to meet the art work, and then write poems about it. I met the work as it was laid out in the disorderly order of the warehouse, on shelves, on the floor, in shadowy places and out in the bright, unforgiving fluorescent light of the warehouse with manila colored tags labeled in red ink. I made notes. I then saw more work in the gallery behind glass. I made notes. I found myself slipping into old familiar landscapes, I found myself latching onto words and images. But I also found myself filled with curiosity about the hands that shaped these works of art, the faces that had sweated behind the masks, the lips that had sipped the bowls, the fingers that had plucked on the strings of the musical instruments, the minds that had taken their leap of fancy to create these

stunning works. I imagined them because I had to. There were no names. It was as if the circumstances of their procurement was conspiring to make these pieces artifacts, the rewards of archeological excavations, and not art—not the product of the artist's imagination.

I was struck by the human presence in the work—that quality of "everyday use" that Alice Walker coined to talk about African American quilts—art for everyday use, and yet art that stands for posterity. I imagined the loss represented in the presence of the art in this warehouse here in Madison, Wisconsin–thousands of miles from the home of their first life, and I wondered what it all meant.

Then I wondered at my own complicity in this moment—that without this collection, I would probably never see this art. And was this important? Was it important that I and thousands of people from around the world see this art? A part of me says yes—it is important. It is important because this work is amazing for what it says about the capacity of humans to engage so fully and so powerfully with the world around them. The artists represented in these pieces are individuals who have determined to make themselves one with their materials and the things they seek to represent in an act that is tantamount to a religious moment. And in these pieces we realize that the very idea of religion is inadequate to speak of the art. Religion presumes secularism—as if the two things can actually exist independent of each other. This art reminds us that in many African traditions the world cannot be reduced to such binaries: that spirits walk the earth has nothing to do with religion; this is merely what the world is. And this art reminds us of the common truth of human experience locked in the determination to make beauty, to engage aesthetics and to find ways of showing such beauty to the world, to the community.

But as I wrote the poems, I found myself unable to shake the haunting presence of the nameless artists reminding me that a man or a woman, with a name, with an imagination, with a peculiar twitch in the left eye or a limp in the right ankle or a passion for mangoes or a laugh rough as tree bark, made this work. The tragedy of this art is perplexing, as perplexing as

the tragedy of the Middle Passage. For we all know how bereft a world this would be without jazz, without the blues, without Derek Walcott, without Aimé Césaire, without Toni Morrison, without reggae, without the negro spirituals, without *son* music, without Carnival. Yet we also know that those riches would not be available to us without the horrors of the Middle Passage. Do we, like Phillis Wheatley, give thanks for slavery that brought her to the face of Jesus, or do we, like Olaoudah Equiano, hold on to the belief that perhaps the world would have been a better place had this tragedy not happened—that perhaps Jesus would have made his way to Africa, anyway? This art is at once a celebration of the greatness of African artists, of the power of their imagination, of their skill, of their humanity, as it is a statement about loss, about the absence of the artist in the gallery, the absence of the master craftsman's and craftswoman's name from all that we are seeing. But it is what we have.

A poet is satisfied with questions. A poet does not have to find answers. I still have questions. But I have also found poems. I have fed on this art, and found poems that are beginning to move me closer to finding the names of the hands that shaped this art. And for me, a poet, I have the currency of the imagination which allows me to construct a world as I would prefer it to be. These poems are as much about the works of art as they are about my own journey into history and into the dynamic relationship between Africa and the New World. Ghana is where my home is. But Jamaica, too, is where my home is. And now I have found my feet clinging tightly to the soil of South Carolina, that very African state that carries the bones of so many millions of Africans. My poems grow out of a belief that these worlds have something to say to each other. So I am grateful for the art collected here and filled with celebration song. But I am also singing songs of lamentation and regret for the loss that these works represent. My hope is that these poems find the language to resist the erasure that a more cannibalistic encounter with art might have. The poet reclaims. Art feeds on art . . . they grow.

Kwame Dawes, 2004

BRUISED TOTEMS

The air is clean
sterilizing the stories
once sweated
into the wood, terra-cotta,
ivory and bone.

We have only orderly shelves
with off-white tags
numbered in a woman's hand
dangling on thin threads.

They are arrayed neatly,
these stiff masks,
a host of holy witnesses
so far away from the humid
air of home.

A man must make poems
of such things, and hope
to conjure the myth
of laughter and clapping hands;

the bruised totems
of a civilization.

STAFF

We carve out our generations in stained ivory;
totems. Oh, to be able
to plant a tree that bears fruit,
like fat ancestors that tell their story.

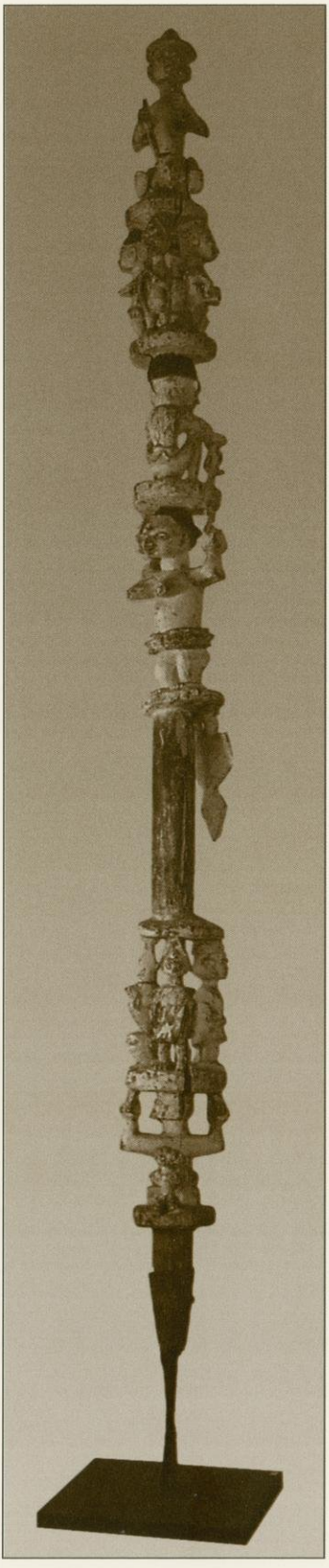
At the center, carrying the weight
of ancients on her shoulder is the grand,
her breasts like missiles.

Every generation carries its own joke,
the line to the next, the family's tree
reaching upwards.

Someone cut away at the center
of our line, scattered the shards
of splintered ivory over our land,
and we have forgotten
the paths to our roots.

Build me a totem
with tendril roots that clutch soil
and hold us steady, sentinels on the plains.

Staff, Yoruba peoples, Nigeria



SEED

The wood is distended—
that ancient gleam,

and a Makonde man
wraps in his fist

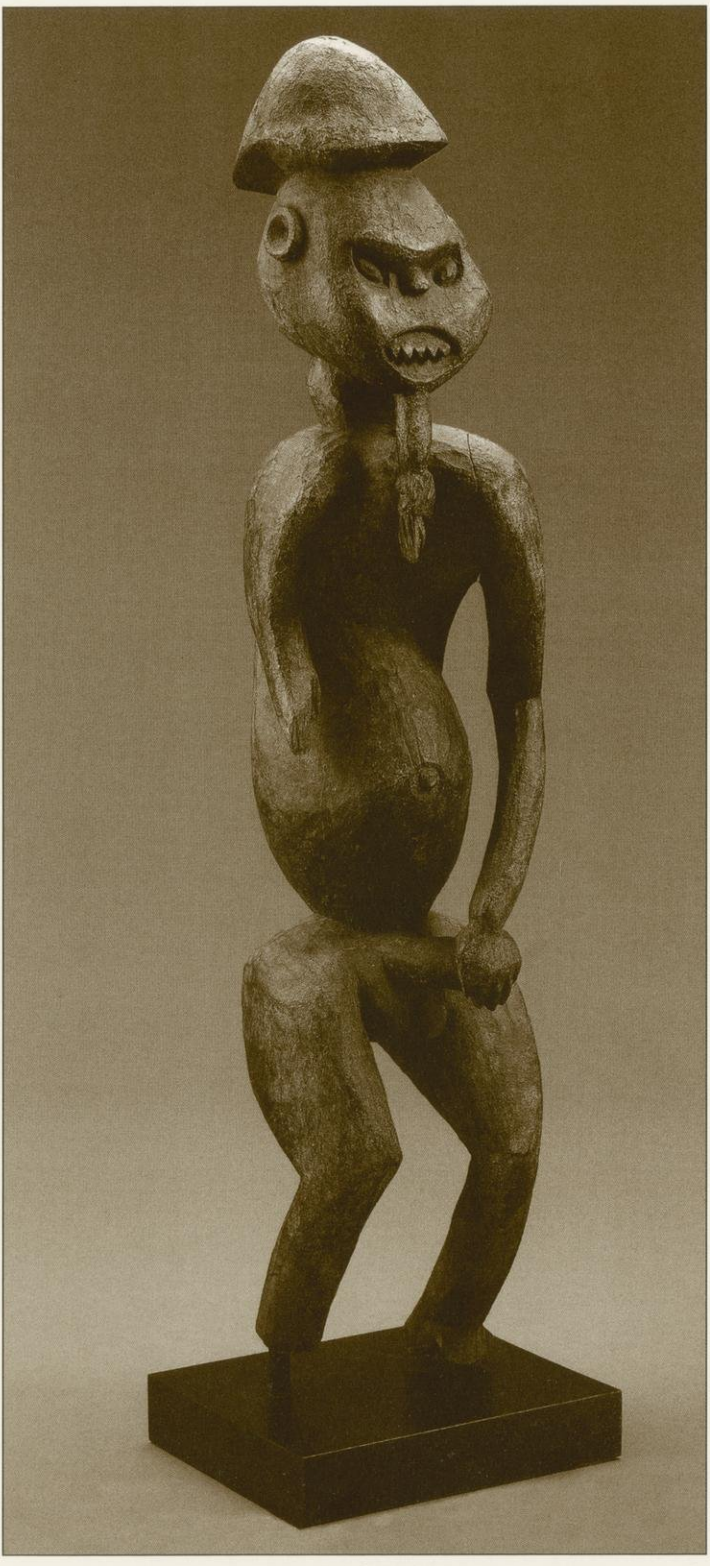
this fat legacy of his people.

Every man longs for a penis
that travels for days

waiting for the flame
of duty to stiffen it

erect for the use
of the tribe.

Male figure, Kingdom of Misaje, Cameroon



MASK

First shape the wood,
burn out its pulpy guts,
leave the hollowed shell,
a thin skin of hard wood.

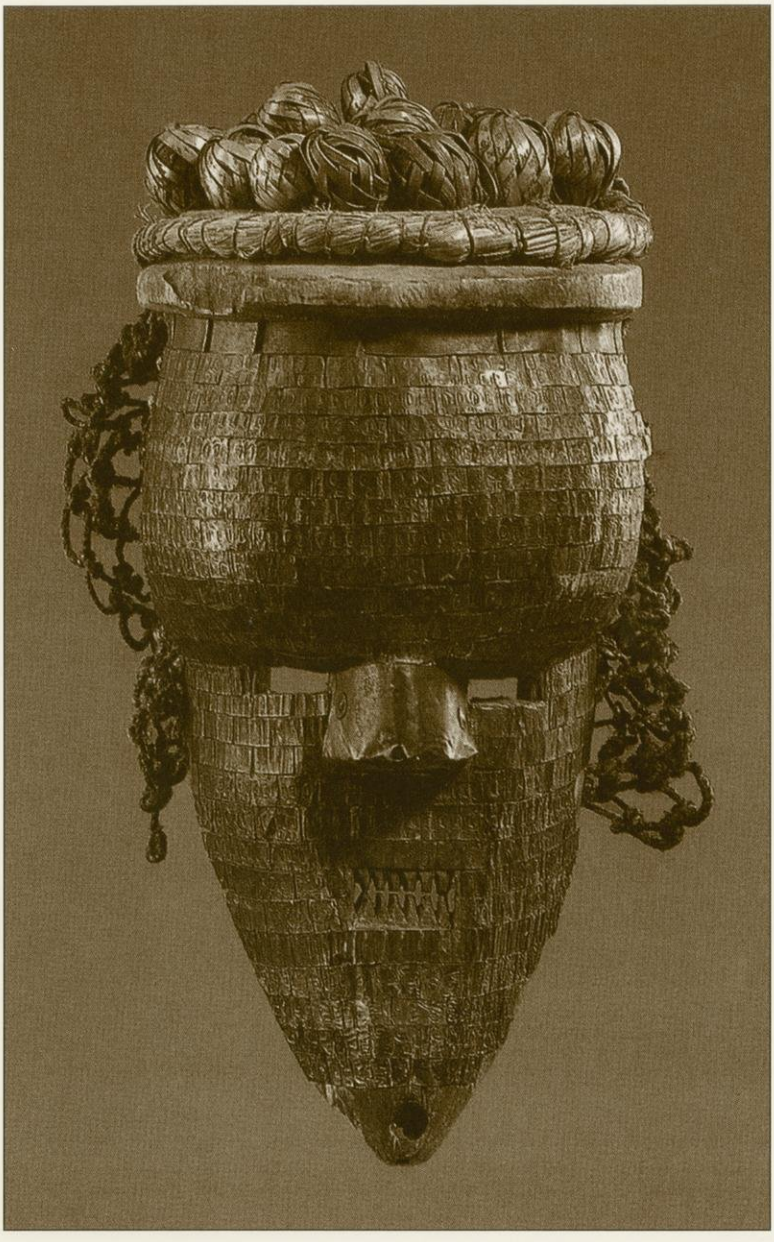
Shine light through the slits
for eyes, so the green and sky
rising above the red dirt
will burn through.

The grate of teeth
for the spirit to chew
and the hole of a nose
for it to breathe
the sweet offerings
burnt on aromatic balsam,
must be cut out of the wood.

Then place tiny plates of copper,
armor to protect
the vulnerable forehead
of the dancer, so that no rot,
no rut can destroy dreams
of the nation in her head.

We find the mask,
wear her to see our fears,
to dance into days
clean as infant song.

Mask, Salampasu peoples, Democratic Republic of Congo



BODY MASK

She comes slow and unsteady
each step a clanking of bells.

She comes, back arched, weary
on her skin flowered with scars

beeswax in relief like the raised
topsoil of a rodent's journey underground;

such pain for beautiful things.

She comes, navel precocious
as her down turned nipples;

you can see the tufts of beard
poking beneath the mask.

She comes, belly a wooden bowl
so boys may know the power

of their seed, and girls
may know the myths

of their making and unmaking.

A man turns into a woman
for a day, stiff, uncertain;

he tamps down the earth
leaving us perplexed

by the seduction of his hips
swinging with a girl's boldness.

Body Mask, Makonde peoples, Tanzania and Mozambique

GALLERY ART

Ripped from the rooted trunk,
your body stands, staunch,
in perpetual pout.

Oh sister, your knob navel
is a rough screw in your skin.

I come to witness the coy
of your body, now cleaned up
in the open gallery guarded
by a curator who warns
that my breath on you
may cause you to crumble,
your parts to fall away.

Oh sister, we are a long way
from home, you and I .

Figure (boteba), Lobi peoples, Burkina Faso

CONTAGION

This spotted beast
walks into a crowd.

The crowd flees
tomorrow the body

stretched out like faggots
on the dirt floor

the air thick, heavy
too late to dance,

too late to dance
away the ailments

of a continent.
Today's contagion

passes with the night.
In the morning

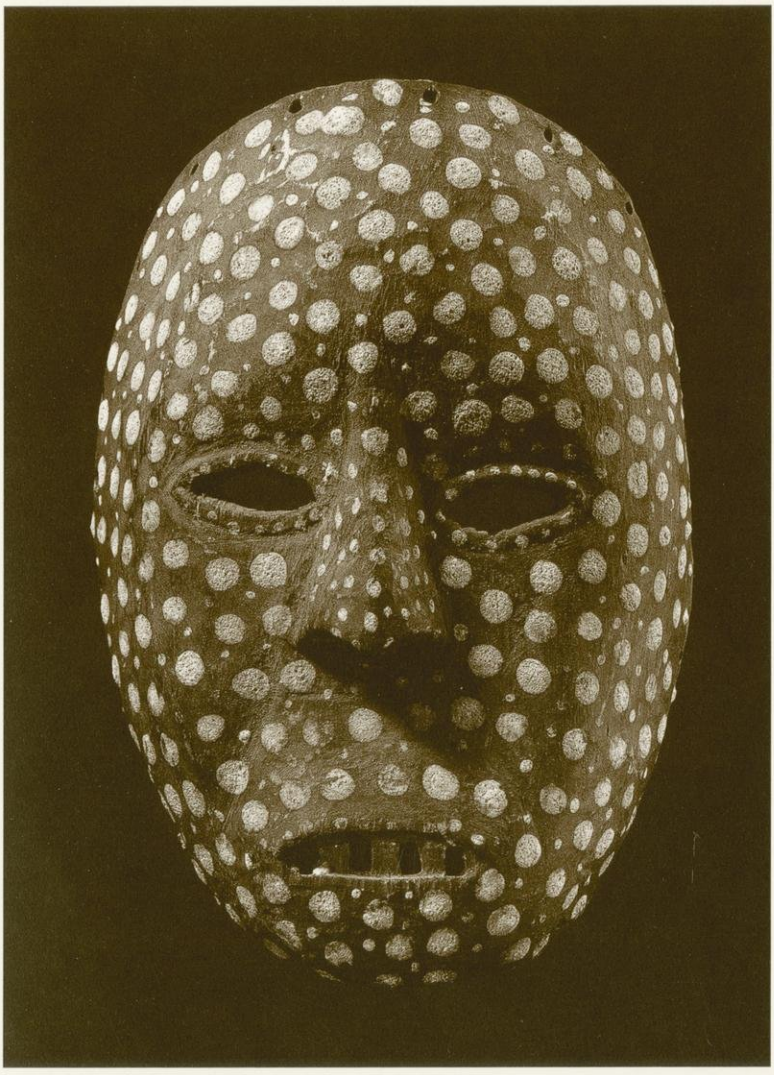
a new spotted face
is raised above the crowd.

How we long
for the healing

of a mask raised
on a carved pole

over the multitude.

Mask, Byeru peoples, Democratic Republic of Congo



I PRESUME

Jesus, I never expected
to run into you here.
But that is faithlessness—
forgive me, friend.

Still it is nice to see you
hanging here, black like me
locks all falling down
your poor ribs pulled apart
on that wooden cross,
your navel jutting
like an Accra child,
your nipples swollen
like a woman before suck:
how they have suffered,
oh savior, how they have bled.

Here at the cross roads
the sun has traversed the sky
to meet the souls here
silently staring at your body
starkly there in the bush—
give thanks for the sacredness
of wood, of brass, of iron
and the tapestry of nails.

Crucifix, Kingdom of Kongo, Congo and Angola

BLIND

A woman's tongue
turns wood to kindling.

A woman's tongue
chops clean through gristle.

A woman's tongue's
a seasoned iron blade.

This is an axe
this is her face
her eyes are closed.

She does not see
the blood she sheds
fill the gutters.

She covers her breasts
chopping
blindly.

Leadership axe, Luba peoples, Democratic Republic of Congo

SIGHT

for Rwanda

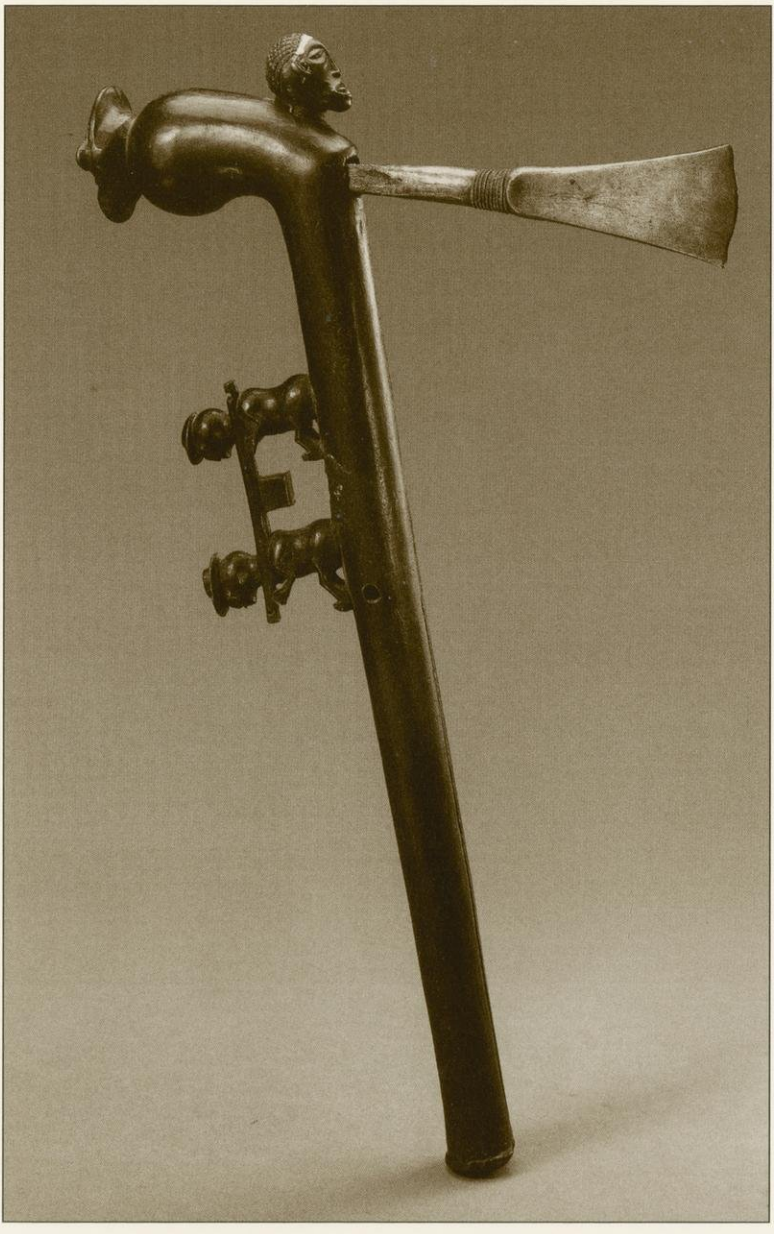
Every axe should have an eye
to see the havoc
that it wreaks.

These days our tools are made
in factories. Machetes
blind as stone arrive
stacked high in trucks.

They do not see
the soft eyes
of a child.

Every axe must have an eye
to see the havoc
that it wreaks.

Leadership axe, Holo peoples, Democratic Republic of Congo



LONGEVITY

On its smooth surface
is etched a man pouring wine.

The whisk will dance
over the chief's head.

On its smooth surface
a man wears a modern suit.

The fly whisk will outlast the chief;
the fly whisk will outlast the man.

Ivory will outlast the elephant.

The fly whisk is bald and inert
closed up in its glass case, silent.

Ivory will outlast the elephant.

Fly whisk handle, Kongo peoples, Democratic Republic of Congo

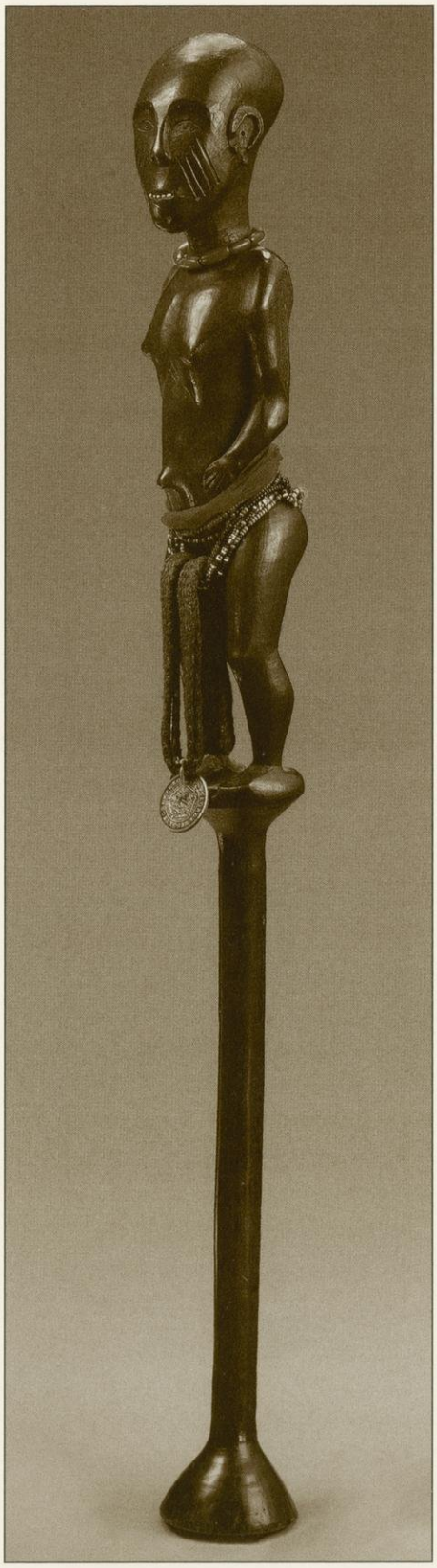
SCEPTER

For the king who had the face of his mother
carved into his scepter

When it stopped
she grew a long single strand
on her chin, her voice
became rotten like a man's.
That year he had her made
into the ruler of his scepter;
her face stern as a man
her belly round as a girl's.

The scepter
finds power in the dry beads—
fertility charms on her waist.
The king must keep her close
keep track of the circle of blood.
A woman's period will come
and go; the cycles repeat;
her breasts will swell
and fall—the belly's
button juts and flattens,
the link to the living
and the dead.

Scepter, Malawi



MEMORIAL

A woman with a mashed mouth

Two infants with mashed mouths

The babies raise her nipples
with forefinger and thumb
for the sculptor to see.

A woman with a mashed mouth

Two infants with mashed mouths

She holds them close
she squats on her haunches
they own her.

A woman with a mashed mouth

Two infants with mashed mouths

Memorial for a mother
Memorial for the dead.

Memorial (ntadi), Kongo peoples, Democratic Republic of Congo

GOURD

The browned gourd
carries the echo of music

like the taste of garden eggs and okra stew
with its slivers of white river fish
with its crimson peppers
islanding a mound of pounded cassava.

The browned gourd
is the pregnant fullness

of a woman's belly,
the sounds of its water
the suck-suck of an infant
the hum of deep water
when you pluck a string.

Trace your fingers up the neck
that ends at the rigid head of dignity—
how she organizes the notes
before they zither down the strings
into the dense dream.

The browned gourd
is a woman's breast

with the babel of truth
uncertain as a voice
searching for healing in song;
uncertain as a poem
before it arrives with words.

Flatbar zither, Kwere/Zaramo peoples, Tanzania

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