

Classic Poetry Series

**Joseph Seamon Cotter**  
**- poems -**

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## Joseph Seamon Cotter(1861 - 1919)

On the Bardstown, Kentucky plantation where Stephen Collins Foster composed "My Old Kentucky Home", lived a young slave girl in whose soul were interesting melodies of her own. Strong in spirit and dramatic flair, Martha Vaughn faithfully served as the personal maid to Mrs. Rebecca Rowan, mistress of the Old Kentucky Home. Yet her vivid accounts of visions and dramatic recitations of her original stories and plays while she worked, forced plantation owners to send her away concerned that she would disrupt discipline among the other slaves. It's been said that of such mothers are seers and poets born. And so in this instance it proved to be.

Joseph Seamon Cotter was born February 2, 1861 in Nelson County, Kentucky. His father was a prominent citizen of Louisville who was married to Martha by common law. It is claimed that Martha named her son for Joseph, the dreamer of biblical stories in the hope of his becoming great in the service of his people like the Hebrew Joseph. She lived to see her hope fulfilled.

Joseph S. Cotter's formal education was very scant. He attended grammar school through the third grade, but then was forced to leave to help support his mother. He worked at a variety of jobs as a day laborer. He was a teamster, ragpicker, tobacco stemmer, prize fighter, whiskey distiller, and brick hand. Because he was small he was often harassed by the other workers. He was not big or strong enough to fight to gain his dignity, but he won his fellow workers' respect in another way -- by telling them stories.

When he was twenty-two his desire for knowledge became so great that he enrolled in a Louisville night school at the primary level. At the end of just two sessions, because of his hard work, he was evidently deemed ready to teach. This was to be the beginning of a long career in education, including serving as the principal of S. Coleridge-Taylor School for nearly 50 years.

Cotter also played an active role in the business and social life of Louisville, serving as the director of the Louisville Colored Orphan's Home Society; belonged to the Negro Educational Association, the NAACP, the Story Tellers League, and the Author's League of America.

Cotter's major fame lies in his accomplishments as a writer. He was a storyteller, a dramatist, and a poet of many moods and styles. His early poems were published in the local newspaper, The Courier-Journal, and one poem, The Tragedy of Pete, won first place in an Opportunity prize contest. Among his many

published books included, *A Rhyming* (1895), *Links of Friendship*, (1899), the play, *Caleb*, *the Degenerate* (1903), *A White Song and a Black One* (1909), *Negro Tales* (1912), and finally *Collected Poems* (1938).

For an author of such limited schooling, critics suggest that Cotter's writing shows tremendous variety. His poetry could be philosophical speculation, racial protest, cultural tales, moral lessons, or simple reflections on people or places. Sterling A. Brown has divided the poetry during the period in which Cotter wrote into three concerns or styles -- the dialect tradition to which Dunbar belongs, protest poetry where we find W. E. B. Du Bois, and "literary" because it expressed higher sentiments in a more academic and lyrical voice. While Cotter shows evidence of each style, he is primarily known as one of the first poets of racial concern.

# A Prayer

As I lie in bed,  
Flat on my back;  
There passes across my ceiling  
An endless panorama of things--  
Quick steps of gay-voiced children,  
Adolescence in its wondering silences,  
Maid and man on moonlit summer's eve,  
Women in the holy glow of Motherhood,  
Old men gazing silently through the twilight  
Into the beyond.  
O God, give me words to make my dream-children live.

Joseph Seamon Cotter

# A Woman At Her Husband's Grave

Peace to his ashes!  
I cannot for the soul of me  
Sorrowing bow,  
Tho I search through the heart of me  
Grieve for him now.  
'Tis well he is gone  
And heart-break is over,  
A husband he was  
But never a lover.

Joseph Seamon Cotter

# Africa

A thousand years of darkness in her face,  
She turns at last from out the centurys' blight  
Of labored moan and dull oppression's might,  
To slowly mount the rugged path and trace  
Her measured step unto her ancient place.  
And upward, ever upward towards the light  
She strains, seeing afar the day when right  
Shall rule the world and justice leaven the race.

Now bare her swarthy arm and firm her sword,  
She stands where Universal Freedom bleeds,  
And slays in holy wrath to save the word  
Of nations and their puny, boasting creeds.  
Sear with the truth, O God, each doubting heart,  
Of mankind's need and Afric's gloried part.

Joseph Seamon Cotter

# An April Day

On such a day as this I think,  
On such a day as this,  
When earth and sky and nature's whole  
Are clad in April's bliss;  
And balmy zephyrs gently waft  
Upon your cheek a kiss;  
Sufficient is it just to live  
On such a day as this.

Joseph Seamon Cotter

# And Thou Art One

And Thou art One--One with th' eternal hills,  
And with the flaming stars, and with the moon,  
Translucent, cold. The sentinel of noon  
That clothes the sky in robes of light and fills  
The earth with warmth, the flowering fields, the rills,  
The waving trees, the south wind's elfin rune,  
Are One with Thee. All nature is in tune  
With Thee, O Father, God--and if one wills  
To humbly walk the fragrant, leaf-strewn path  
And kneel in reverence 'neath the vaulted sky,  
Hearing the hymnals of the waving trees  
And prayers of the souging winds--what hath  
He less of heaven in him than we, who cry,  
"God in our creeds doth dwell and not in these?"

Joseph Seamon Cotter



# And What Shall You Say?

Brother, come!  
And let us go unto our God.  
And when we stand before Him  
I shall say--  
"Lord, I do not hate,  
I am hated.  
I scourge no one,  
I am scourged.  
I covet no lands,  
My lands are coveted.  
I mock no peoples,  
My people are mocked."  
And, brother, what will you say?

Joseph Seamon Cotter

# Compensation

I plucked a rose from out a bower fair,  
That overhung my garden seat;  
And wondered I if, e'er before, bloomed there  
A rose so sweet.

Enwrapt in beauty I scarce felt the thorn  
That pricked me as I pulled the bud;  
Till I beheld the rose that summer morn,  
Stained with my blood.

I sang a song that thrilled the evening air  
With beauty somewhat kin to love,  
And all men know that lyric song so rare  
Came from above.

And men rejoice to hear the golden strain;  
But no man knew the price I paid,  
Nor cared that out of my soul'd deathless pain  
The song was made.

Joseph Seamon Cotter

# Dreams

There is naught in the pathless reach  
Of the pale, blue sky above,  
There is naught that the stars tell, each to each,  
As over the heavens they rove;  
That I have not felt, or have not seen  
Clad in dull earth or fancy's sheen.

There is naught, in the still, mauve twilight  
When the dreams come flitting by,  
From lands afar of eternal night,  
Or lands of the sunswept sky,  
For countless spirits within me dwell  
With heaven's effluence or dark hell.

Joseph Seamon Cotter

# Ego

Day passeth day in sunshine or shadow,  
Night unto night each cycle is told;  
Sun, moon and stars in whirling and glamour,  
All unto all the creation unfold.

What of the strivings, what of the gropings,  
Out from the darkness into the light?  
What of the weepings, what of the grievings  
Now from the day to the passionate night?

Stars of the stars, heavens of the heavens,  
Rising or falling or pausing a span,  
Each to the great "I am" replying  
E'en as the crystal, e'en as man.

Chant of the worlds from aeon to aeon,  
Song of the soul from dust unto dust,  
Dream of the clods that, upward and starward,  
Rise to the call of the primal "Thou must."

Space beyond space, eternity's vision,  
Chaos to chaos, calm unto calm,  
World beneath world, heaven above heaven,  
Life but the urge, death but the balm.

Joseph Seamon Cotter

# I Shall Not Die

Never shall I die  
While this untrammeled spirit-mine  
Shall in hope's constellation shine  
And faith-embraced my soul shall lie.

Joseph Seamon Cotter

# I Sometimes Wonder If The Mighty God

I sometimes wonder if the mighty God  
Cares aught about the little deeds of men;  
And if their day and time can reach his ken  
Or raise their breath above the hungry sod.  
Does He who lightly holds th' eternal rod,  
Now taut, now loose, the threads of Why and When?  
Giving passing heed--or be they one or ten--  
To one-time flesh but now the wind-blown clod?

If men can die who never yet knew life,  
And, smiling, hold it is no strange affair;  
Or live when death were welcome boon of strife,  
Torn, broken sheaves the ghostly reapers spare;  
The saints must grieve for earthly sorrows rife,  
And God must heed, yea surely, God must care.

Joseph Seamon Cotter

# I Would Not Tarry If I Could Be Gone

I would not tarry if I could be gone  
Adown the path where calls my eager mind.  
That fate which knows naught but to grip and bind  
Holds me within its grasp, a helpless pawn,  
And checks my steps when I would travel on.  
Forever shall my body lag behind,  
And in this Valley with the Moaning Wind  
Must I abide with never a glimpse of dawn?

Though bends my body toward the yawning sod,  
I can endure the pain, the sorrows rife,  
That hold me fast beneath their chastening rod,  
If from this turmoil and this endless strife,  
Comes there a light to lead Man nearer God,  
And guide his footsteps toward the Larger Life.

Joseph Seamon Cotter

## I'M A-Waiting And A-Watching

I'm a-waiting and a-watching for the day that has no end.  
For the sun that's ever shining, for its rays that ever blend;  
For the light that casts no shadows, for the sky that's ever fair,  
For the rose that's ever blooming as its fragrance fills the air.

I'm a-waiting and a watching for the land that knows no night;  
Where the terrors of the darkness are dispelled in morning's light,  
Where the murmurs of the breezes blend themselves into a song,  
And the silvery carol echoes to the heavens, soft and long.

I'm a-waiting and a-watching for the song that's never o'er,  
For the joy that's never ending on that light-emblazoned shore,  
For the peace that shall enfold me with the heaven's holy breath,  
For the glory that shall greet me, for the life that knows no death.

Joseph Seamon Cotter



# Immortality

From your life's blood to coin a trenchant word--  
The past, the present and the future's ken  
To hold--and weave it to a ringing chord  
That sounds within the changing hearts of men.

Joseph Seamon Cotter

# Inconstancy

Blue eyes, gray eyes,  
All the eyes that be,  
Hold within their changing depths  
Wealth of charm to me.

Dark-eyed maid, of moment's fancy,  
Gay as stars above;  
Is it you that I adore,  
Or is it Love I love?

Joseph Seamon Cotter

## Is It Because I Am Black?

Why do men smile when I speak,  
And call my speech  
The whimperings of a babe  
That cries but knows not what it wants?  
Is it because I am black?

Why do men sneer when I arise  
And stand in their councils,  
And look them eye to eye,  
And speak their tongue?  
Is it because I am black?

Joseph Seamon Cotter

## Is This The Price Of Love?

Never again the sight of her?  
Never her winsome smile  
Shall light the path of my journeying  
O'er many a weary mile?  
Never again shall her soft voice come  
To cheer me all the while?  
O Thou, who hearest from above,  
Tell me, is this the price of love?

Never again the touch of her lips?  
Never her dark, brown eyes  
Shall shine on me with the dancing joy  
Of stars in the summer skies?  
Never again shall my song be aught  
Save minor chords of sighs?  
O Thou, who hearest from above,  
Tell me, is this the price of love?

Joseph Seamon Cotter

## Looking At A Portrait

O why are there eyes like these,  
That sparkle and dapple and tease,  
So wide with the morning, so deep with the night,  
Dancing and gleaming in passion'd delight?  
O why are there eyes like these?

O why are there lips like these?  
Caressed by the southern breeze,  
That beckon and call and hold a slave  
All who therewith each soul-cry leave?  
O why are there lips like these?

O why are there arms like these?  
That crumple and crush as they please  
A weak man's heart, and in their embrace  
Bring a glow of red to a strong man's face?  
O why are there arms like these?

Joseph Seamon Cotter

# Love

Love is the soothing voice of gods  
To which men ever list.  
Love is the ease of soul's travail  
And sorrow's alchemist.

Joseph Seamon Cotter

# Love's Demesne

Old memories come trooping down  
The vistas of the years;  
In blue-girt robes of pleasure clad  
Or garbed in tears.

Down from the days when hope was young  
And sorrow never born,  
My thoughts sweep o'er remembered scenes  
Unto this morn.

Though motley company they are  
Of smile or tear or frown,  
They hold aloft the burnished gold  
Of my heart's crown.

For through it all and over all  
There gleams the light serene,  
On purpled walls and crimson heights  
In love's demesne.

Joseph Seamon Cotter

# Memories

The burnished glow of the old-gold moon  
Shines brightly over me.  
A thousand stars, like a thousand isles  
In a dark and placid sea,  
Bring memories of a golden night,  
Bedecked in Autumn's hue  
And fragrant with the lilac's bloom,  
That brought me joy--and you.

Joseph Seamon Cotter



# Moloch

Old Moloch walks the way tonight  
On Flander's poppied field,  
Where foe meets foe in steel and might  
And never one shall yield.

Old Moloch of the fiery shrine,  
Deep in the throes of pain,  
Cries for the bleeding anodyne  
Of flesh of youths again.

Heart of my heart went out tonight,  
Where Moloch holds the way,  
To lads of brown and black and white  
Who blazon Freedom's day.

Tear down the shrine of Moloch there,  
From crimson field and glen,  
Tear down the shrine of Moloch where  
It shames the hearts of men.

Joseph Seamon Cotter

# Night Winds

The slender moon in its silvery sheen,  
The golden stars with the blue between  
Of a dreamy, summer sky;  
And still the night winds sigh.

With the silvery moon to whisper to,  
And the golden stars to kiss, mid the blue  
Of a listening, summer sky,  
For what should the night winds sigh?

Joseph Seamon Cotter

# November

Old November, sere and brown,  
Clothes the country, haunts the town,  
Sheds its cloak of withered leaves,  
Brings its sighing, souging breeze.  
Prophet of the dying year,  
Builder of its funeral bier,  
Bring your message here to men;  
Sound it forth that they may ken  
What of Life and what of Death  
Linger on your frosty breath.  
Let men know to you are given  
Days of thanks to God in heaven;  
Thanks for things which we deem best,  
Thanks, O God, for all the rest  
That have taught us--(trouble, strife,  
Bring thru Death a larger life)--  
Death of our base self and fear--  
(Even as the dying year,  
Though through cold and frost, shall bring  
Forth a new and glorious spring)--  
Shall shed over us the sway  
Of a new and brighter day,  
With Hope, Faith and Love alway.

Joseph Seamon Cotter

# O, Little David, Play On Your Harp

O, Little David, play on your harp,  
That ivory harp with the golden strings  
And sing as you did in Jewry Land,  
Of the Prince of Peace and the God of Love  
And the coming Christ Immanuel.  
O, Little David, play on your harp.

A seething world is gone stark mad;  
And is drunk with the blood,  
Gorged with the flesh,  
Blinded with the ashes  
Of her millions of dead.  
From out it all and over all  
There stands, years old and fully grown,  
A monster in the guise of man.  
He is of war and not of war;  
Born in peace,  
Nurtured in arrogant pride and greed,  
World-creature is he and native to no land.  
And war itself is merciful  
When measured by his deeds.  
Beneath the Crescent  
Lie a people maimed;  
Their only sin--  
That they worship God.  
On Russia's steppes  
Is a race in tears;  
Their one offense--  
That they would be themselves.  
On Flander's plains  
Is a nation raped;  
A bleeding gift  
Of "Kultur's" conquering creed.  
And in every land  
Are black folk scourged;  
Their only crime--  
That they dare be men.

O, Little David, play on your harp,

That ivory harp with the golden strings  
And psalm anew your songs of Peace,  
Of the soothing calm of a Brotherly Love,  
And the saving grace of a Mighty God.  
O, Little David, play on your harp.

Joseph Seamon Cotter

# Rain Music

On the dusty earth-drum  
Beats the falling rain;  
Now a whispered murmur,  
Now a louder strain.

Slender, silvery drumsticks,  
On an ancient drum,  
Beat the mellow music  
Bidding life to come.

Chords of earth awakened,  
Notes of greening spring,  
Rise and fall triumphant  
Over every thing.

Slender, silvery drumsticks  
Beat the long tattoo--  
God, the Great Musician,  
Calling life anew.

Joseph Seamon Cotter

# Remembrance

Forget?

Ah, never!

Your eyes, your voice, your lips.

Those little ways of love,

Half-childish yet all-wise

That held me but a slave to you,

Will never loose their bonds.

The power to forget

Would Fate but yield to me.

Remember?

Ah, too well!

The hurt, the pain, the grief.

The wrack of nightly dreams,

The ruth of brooding days,

Have left a lesion in my soul

That only Heaven can heal.

Remembrance is the lot

That Fate does hold for me.

Joseph Seamon Cotter

# Reward

Out of the silence  
I come to you,  
Bringing a love  
Free as the dew.

I come and sing  
A heart's great love,  
And passion of soul  
Pure as a dove.

But this I crave  
As you pass by--  
A smile on your lips,  
A light in your eye.

Joseph Seamon Cotter



## Sonnet To Negro Soldiers

They shall go down unto Life's Borderland,  
Walk unafraid within that Living Hell,  
Nor heed the driving rain of shot and shell  
That 'round them falls; but with uplifted hand  
Be one with mighty hosts, an arméd band  
Against man's wrong to man--for such full well  
They know. And from their trembling lips shall swell  
A song of hope the world can understand.  
All this to them shall be a glorious sign,  
A glimmer of that resurrection morn,  
When age-long Faith crowned with a grace benign  
Shall rise and from their brows cast down the thorn  
Of prejudice. E'en though through blood it be,  
There breaks this day their dawn of Liberty.

Joseph Seamon Cotter

# Supplication

I am so tired and weary,  
So tired of the endless fight,  
So weary of waiting the dawn  
And finding endless night.

That I ask but rest and quiet--  
Rest for days that are gone,  
And quiet for the little space  
That I must journey on.

Joseph Seamon Cotter

# The Band Of Gideon

The band of Gideon roam the sky,  
The howling wind is their war-cry,  
The thunder roll is their trump's peal,  
And the lightning flash their vengeful steel.  
Each black cloud  
Is a fiery steed.  
And they cry aloud  
With each strond deed,  
"The sword of the lord and Gideon."

And men below rear temples high  
And mock their God with reasons why,  
And live in arrogance, sin and shame,  
And rape their souls for the world's good name.  
Each black cloud  
Is a fiery steed.  
And they cry aloud  
With each strond deed,  
"The sword of the lord and Gideon."

The band of Gideon roam the sky  
And view the earth with baleful eye,  
In holy wrath they scourge the land  
With earth-quake, storm and burning brand.  
Each black cloud  
Is a fiery steed.  
And they cry aloud  
With each strond deed,  
"The sword of the lord and Gideon."

The lightnings flash and the thunders roll,  
And "Lord have mercy on my soul,"  
Cry men as they fall on the stricken sod,  
In agony searching for their God.  
Each black cloud  
Is a fiery steed.  
And they cry aloud  
With each strond deed,  
"The sword of the lord and Gideon."

And men repent and then forget  
That heavenly wrath they ever met,  
The band of Gideon yet will come  
And strike their tongues of blasphemy dumb.  
Each black cloud  
Is a fiery steed.  
And they cry aloud  
With each strond deed,  
"The sword of the lord and Gideon."

Joseph Seamon Cotter

# The Deserter

I know not why or whence he came  
Or how he chanced to go;  
I only know he brought me love,  
And going, left me woe.

I do not ask that he turn back  
Nor seek where he may rove,  
For where woe rules can never be  
The dwelling place of love.

For love went out the door of hope  
And on and on has fled,  
Caring no more to dwell within  
The house where faith is dead.

Joseph Seamon Cotter

# The Goal

I have found joy,  
Surcease from sorrow,  
From qualms for today  
And fears for tomorrow.

I have found love,  
Sifted of pain,  
Of life's harsh goading  
And worldly disdain.

I have found peace,  
Still-borne from grief,  
From soul's bitter mocking  
And heart's unbelief.

Now may I rest,  
Soul-glad and free,  
For Lord, in the travail,  
I have found Thee.

Joseph Seamon Cotter

# The Mulatto To His Critics

Ashamed of my race?  
And of what race an I?  
I am many in one.  
Thru my veins runs the blood  
Of Red Man, Black Man, Briton, Celt and Scot,  
In warring clash and tumultuous riot.  
I welcome all,  
But love the blood of the kindly race  
That swarthes my skin, crinkles my hair,  
And puts sweet music into my soul.

Joseph Seamon Cotter

# Then I Would Love You

Were you to come,  
With your clear, gray eyes  
As calmly placid as, in summer's heat,  
At noontide lie the sultry skies;  
With your dark, brown hair  
As smoothly quiet as the leaves  
When stirs no cooling breath of air;  
And shorn of smile, your full, red lips  
Prest firmly close as the chalice bud,  
Before the nectar-quaffing bee ere sips;  
I would not know you.  
I would not love you.

But should you come  
With your love-bright eyes  
Dancing gaily as, on summer's eve,  
The stars adown the Western skies;  
With your hair, wind-caught  
And circled round your shining face  
In fashion which no hand ere wrought;  
And your full, red lips poised saucily,  
As the slender moon midst an hundred stars,  
And held aloof in daring taunt to me,  
Then I would know you,  
Then I would love you.

Joseph Seamon Cotter



# Theodore Roosevelt

Now with the dust that bore him he is one,  
Silent, into into earth's silent maw ye laid him.  
Dimmed is his light, as with the setting sun,  
He folds his steps unto the God who made him.  
When shall the weak stand and rejoice again  
To see his banner in the battle's light?  
When shall the humble hear his voice again  
Raised from the mountain of majestic right?  
O ye shall see that banner gleam again  
High o'er the ramparts of a nation's goal;  
O ye shall hear that voice redeem again  
The blood-stained conscience of a nation's soul.  
Rise ye that tremble 'mid such fearful moan,  
He stands annointed at Jehovah's throne.

Joseph Seamon Cotter

To \_\_\_\_\_

Sunless days and starless nights  
Bearing fruits of wrack and pain,  
Purge my lips of lover's vows,  
Bid me never hope again.

Yet the longing of my soul,  
Oft denied, still faintly cries,  
For the heaven of your smile,  
And the starlight of your eyes.

Joseph Seamon Cotter

## To Florence

Sister, when at the grassy mound I stand  
Which holds in cold embrace thy mortal frame,  
The tears unbidden rush into my mortal eyes  
And wash away from me all save the sight  
Of thy pure life and patient suffering.  
And ever and anon comes memory  
Of days gone by when health's bright sun did shine  
Upon us both. And tho within the Cloud  
I stand, content I am to think of thee  
And live as best I may, till by thy side  
In God's own time, I lay me down to rest.

Joseph Seamon Cotter

# Why?

The little child crosses the street--  
Why does she wave to me?  
What sees she in my wasted form  
To hail so joyously?

Her olive face and curly hair  
Are tidings of earth-peace,  
Her golden smile's a wreath of joy  
That bids my sorrows cease.

To me she is a fairy sprite--  
A heavenly harbringer  
Whose sun-kissed eyes are songs of God--  
But what am I to her?

Joseph Seamon Cotter