

Classic Poetry Series

Jean Toomer

- poems -

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A Certain Man

A certain man wishes to be a prince
Of this earth; he also wants to be
A saint and master of the being-world.
Conscience cannot exist in the first:
The second cannot exist without conscience.
Therefore he, who has enough conscience
To be disturbed but not enough to be
Compelled, can neither reject the one
Nor follow the other...

Jean Toomer

A Portrait in Georgia

Hair-braided chestnut,
coiled like a lyncher's rope,
Eyes-fagots,
Lips-old scars, or the first red blisters,
Breath-the last sweet scent of cane,
And her slim body, white as the ash
of black flesh after flame.

Jean Toomer

Conversion

African Guardian of Souls,
Drunk with rum,
Feasting on strange cassava,
Yielding to new words and a weak palabra
Of a white-faced sardonic god--
Grins, cries
Amen,
Shouts hosanna.

Jean Toomer

Cotton Song

Come, brother, come. Lets lift it;
come now, hewit! roll away!
Shackles fall upon the Judgment Day
But lets not wait for it.
God's body's got a soul,
Bodies like to roll the soul,
Cant blame God if we dont roll,
Come, brother, roll, roll!
Cotton bales are the fleecy way,
Weary sinner's bare feet trod,
Softly, softly to the throne of God,
"We aint agwine t wait until th Judgment Day!
Nassur; nassur,
Hump.
Eoho, eoho, roll away!
We aint agwine to wait until th Judgment Day!"
God's body's got a soul,
Bodies like to roll the soul,
Cant blame God if we dont roll,
Come, brother, roll, roll!

Jean Toomer

Evening Song

Full moon rising on the waters of my heart,
Lakes and moon and fires,
Cloine tises,
Holding her lips apart.

Promises of slumber leaving shore to charm the moon,
Miracle made vesper-keeps,
Cloine sleeps,
And I'll be sleeping soon.

Cloine, curled like the sleepy waters whtere the moonwaves start,
Radiant, resplendently she gleams,
Cloine dreams,
Lips pressed against my heart.

Jean Toomer

For M.W.

There is no transience of twilight in
The beauty of your soft dusk-dimpled face,
No flicker of a slender flame in space,
In crucibles, fragility crystalline.
There is no fragrance of the jessamine
About you, no pathos of some old place
At dusk, that crumbles like moth-eater lace
Beneath the touch. Nor has there ever been.

Your love is like the folk-song's flaming rise
In cane-lipped southern people, like their soul
Which burst its bondage in a bold travail;
Your voice is like them singing, soft and wise,
Your face, sweetly effluent of the whole,
Inviolable of ways that would feile.

Jean Toomer

Georgia Dusk

The sky, lazily disdaining to pursue
The setting sun, too indolent to hold
A lengthened tournament for flashing gold,
Passively darkens for night's barbeque,

A feast of moon and men and barking hounds.
An orgy for some genius of the South
With blood-hot eyes and cane-lipped scented mouth,
Surprised in making folk-songs from soul sounds.

The sawmill blows its whistle, buzz-saws stop,
And silence breaks the bud of knoll and hill,
Soft settling pollen where plowed lands fulfill
Their early promise of a bumper crop.

Smoke from the pyramidal sawdust pile
Curls up, blue ghosts of trees, tarrying low
Where only chips and stumps are left to show
The solid proof of former domicile.

Meanwhile, the men, with vestiges of pomp,
Race memories of king and caravan,
High-priests, an ostrich, and a juju-man,
Go singing through the footpaths of the swamp.

Their voices rise...the pine trees are guitars,
Strumming, pine-needles fall like sheets of rain..
Their voices rise...the chorus of the cane
Is caroling a vesper to the stars..

O singers, resinous and soft your songs
Above the sacred whisper of the pines,
Give virgin lips to cornfield concubines,
Being dreams of Christ to dusky cane-lipped throngs.

Jean Toomer

Harvest Song

I am a reaper whose muscles set at sundown. All my oats are cradled.
But I am too chilled, and too fatigued to bind them.
And I hunger.

I crack a grain between my teeth. I do not taste it.
I have been in the fields all day. My throat is dry.
I hunger.

My eyes are caked with dust of oatfields at harvest-time.
I am a blind man who stares across the hills, seeking stack'd fields of other harvesters.

It would be good to see them . . . crook'd, split, and iron-ring'd handles of the scythes.
It would be good to see them, dust-caked and blind. I hunger.

(Dusk is a strange fear'd sheath their blades are dull'd in.)
My throat is dry. And should I call, a cracked grain like the oats...eoho--

I fear to call. What should they hear me, and offer me their grain, oats, or wheat, or corn?
I have been in the fields all day. I fear I could not taste it. I fear knowledge of my hunger.

My ears are caked with dust of oatfields at harvest-time.
I am a deaf man who strains to hear the calls of other harvesters whose throats are also dry.

It would be good to hear their songs . . . reapers of the sweet-stalk'd cane, cutters of the corn...even though their throats cracked and the strangeness of their voices deafened me.

I hunger. My throat is dry. Now that the sun has set and I am chilled, I fear to call.
(Eoho, my brothers!)

I am a reaper. (Eoho!) All my oats are cradled.
But I am too fatigued to bind them. And I hunger.
I crack a grain. It has no taste to it.
My throat is dry...

O my brothers, I beat my palms, still soft, against the stubble of my harvesting. (You beat your soft palms, too.) My pain is sweet. Sweeter than the oats or wheat or corn.
It will not bring me knowledge of my hunger.

Jean Toomer

Her Lips Are Copper Wire

whisper of yellow globes
gleaming on lamp-posts that sway
like bootleg licker drinkers in the fog

and let your breath be moist against me
like bright beads on yellow globes

telephone the power-house
that the main wires are insulate

(her words play softly up and down
dewy corridors of billboards)

then with your tongue remove the tape
and press your lips to mine
till they are incandescent

Jean Toomer

November Cotton Flower

Boll-weevil's coming, and the winter's cold,
Made cotton-stalks look rusty, seasons old,
And cotton, scarce as any southern snow,
Was vanishing; the branch, so pinched and slow,
Failed in its function as the autumn rake;
Drouth fighting soil had caused the soil to take
All water from the streams; dead birds were found
In wells a hundred feet below the ground--
Such was the season when the flower bloomed.
Old folks were startled, and it soon assumed
Significance. Superstition saw
Something it had never seen before:
Brown eyes that loved without a trace of fear,
Beauty so sudden for that time of year.

Jean Toomer

People

To those fixed on white,
White is white,
To those fixed on black,
It is the same,
And red is red,
Yellow, yellow-
Surely there are such sights
In the many colored world,
Or in the mind.
The strange thing is that
These people never see themselves
Or you, or me.

Are they not in their minds?
Are we not in the world?
This is a curious blindness
For those that are color blind.
What queer beliefs
That men who believe in sights
Disbelieve in seers.

O people, if you but used
Your other eyes
You would see beings.

Jean Toomer

Portrait in Georgia

Hair--braided chestnut,
coiled like a lyncher's rope,
Eyes--fagots,
Lips--old scars, or the first red blisters,
Breath--the last sweet scent of cane,
And her slim body, white as the ash
of black flesh after flame.

Jean Toomer

Reapers

Black reapers with the sound of steel on stones
Are sharpening scythes. I see them place the hones
In their hip-pockets as a thing that's done,
And start their silent swinging, one by one.
Black horses drive a mower through the weeds,
And there, a field rat, startled, squealing bleeds,
His belly close to ground. I see the blade,
Blood-stained, continue cutting weeds and shade.

Jean Toomer

Song of the Son

Pour O pour that parting soul in song
O pour it in the sawdust glow of night
Into the velvet pine-smoke air tonight,
And let the valley carry it along.
And let the valley carry it along.
O land and soil, red soil and sweet-gum tree,
So scant of grass, so proligate of pines,
Now hush before an epoch's sun declines
Thy son, in time, I have returned to thee,
Thy son, I have in time returned to thee.
In time, for though the sun is setting on
A song-lit race of slaves, it has not set;
Though late, O soil, it is not too late yet
To catch thy plaintive soul, leaving, soon gone,
Leaving, to catch thy plaintive soul soon gone.
O Negro slaves, dark purple ripened plums,
Squeezed, and bursting in the pine-wood air,
Passing, before they stripped the old tree bare
One plum was saved for me, one seed becomes
an everlasting song, a singing tree,
Caroling softly souls of slavery,
What they were, and what they are to me,
Caroling softly souls of slavery.

Jean Toomer

Tell Me

Tell me, dear beauty of the dusk,
When purple ribbons bind the hill,
Do dreams your secret wish fulfill,
Do prayers, like kernels from the husk
Come from your lips? Tell me if when
The mountains loom at night, giant shades
Of softer shadow, swift like blades
Of grass seeds come to flower. Then
Tell me if the night winds bend
Them towards me, if the Shenandoah
As it ripples past your shore,
Catches the soul of what you send.

Jean Toomer

The Lost Dancer

Spatial depths of being survive
The birth to death recurrences
Of feet dancing on earth of sand;
Vibrations of the dance survive
The sand; the sand, elect, survives
The dancer. He can find no source
Of magic adequate to bind
The sand upon his feet, his feet
Upon his dance, his dance upon
The diamond body of his being.

Jean Toomer

Unsuspecting

There is a natty kind of mind
That slicks its thoughts,
Culls its oughts,
Trims its views,
Prunes its trues,
And never suspects it is a rind.

Jean Toomer