

For My People

Margaret Walker

For my people everywhere singing their slave songs
repeatedly: their dirges and their ditties and their blues
and jubilees, praying their prayers nightly to an
unknown god, bending their knees humbly to an
unseen power;

For my people lending their strength to the years, to the
gone years and the now years and the maybe years,
washing ironing cooking scrubbing sewing mending
hoeing plowing digging planting pruning patching
dragging along never gaining never reaping never
knowing and never understanding;

For my playmates in the clay and dust and sand of Alabama
backyards playing baptizing and preaching and doctor
and jail and soldier and school and mama and cooking
and playhouse and concert and store and hair and Miss
Choomby and company;

For the cramped bewildered years we went to school to learn
to know the reasons why and the answers to and the
people who and the places where and the days when, in
memory of the bitter hours when we discovered we
were black and poor and small and different and nobody
cared and nobody wondered and nobody understood;

For the boys and girls who grew in spite of these things to
be man and woman, to laugh and dance and sing and
play and drink their wine and religion and success, to
marry their playmates and bear children and then die
of consumption and anemia and lynching;

For my people thronging 47th Street in Chicago and Lenox
Avenue in New York and Rampart Street in New
Orleans, lost disinherited dispossessed and happy
people filling the cabarets and taverns and other
people's pockets needing bread and shoes and milk and
land and money and something—something all our own;

For my people walking blindly spreading joy, losing time
being lazy, sleeping when hungry, shouting when

burdened, drinking when hopeless, tied, and shackled
and tangled among ourselves by the unseen creatures
who tower over us omnisciently and laugh;

For my people blundering and groping and floundering in
the dark of churches and schools and clubs and
societies, associations and councils and committees and
conventions, distressed and disturbed and deceived and
devoured by money-hungry glory-craving leeches,
preyed on by facile force of state and fad and novelty, by
false prophet and holy believer;

For my people standing staring trying to fashion a better way
from confusion, from hypocrisy and misunderstanding,
trying to fashion a world that will hold all the people,
all the faces, all the adams and eves and their countless
generations;

Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born. Let a
bloody peace be written in the sky. Let a second
generation full of courage issue forth; let a people
loving freedom come to growth. Let a beauty full of
healing and a strength of final clenching be the pulsing
in our spirits and our blood. Let the martial songs
be written, let the dirges disappear. Let a race of men now
rise and take control.

Margaret Walker was born on July 7, 1915, in Birmingham, Alabama. She began writing poetry at age fifteen, when she entered college. She received a BA from Northwestern University in 1935 and an MA from the University of Iowa in 1940. In 1936 she joined the Federal Writers' Project in Chicago, where she became friends with Richard Wright and joined his South Side Writers Group.

In 1941 Walker became the first African American poet to receive the Yale Younger Poets Prize, for her debut collection *For My People* (Yale University Press, 1942). She was also the author of the poetry collections *This Is My Century: New and Collected Poems* (University of Georgia Press, 1989), *October Journey* (Broadside Press, 1973), and *Prophets for a New Day* (Broadside Press, 1970).

Walker married Firnist Alexander in 1943, and together they had four children. In 1949 they moved to Mississippi, where she joined the faculty at Jackson State College. She returned to the

University of Iowa for her doctoral studies and received a PhD in 1965. The following year, she published her dissertation as a novel, *Jubilee* (Houghton Mifflin, 1966).

In 1968 Walker founded the Institute for the Study of the History, Life, and Culture of Black People at Jackson State College. As director of the institute, which was later renamed the Margaret Walker Center, she organized the 1971 National Evaluative Conference on Black Studies and the 1973 Phillis Wheatley Poetry Festival.

After Walker retired from teaching in 1979, she published *On Being Female, Black, and Free* (University of Tennessee Press, 1997), a collection of personal essays, and *Richard Wright: Daemonic Genius* (Warner Books, 1988), a work of nonfiction informed by her friendship with Wright. She died of cancer on November 30, 1998, in Jackson, Mississippi.