

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FL 9795

**THE POETRY OF
MARGARET WALKER
READ BY
MARGARET WALKER**



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FOLKWAYS RECORDS FL 9795

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Library of Congress Catalogue Card No. 74-750939
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43 W. 61st ST., N.Y.C., U.S.A.

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DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

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THE POETRY of Margaret Walker

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NOTES TO THE RECORDINGS By Margaret Walker

INTRODUCTION

Citations which accompanied the presentation of honorary degrees to Margaret Walker at the following Universities:

Doctor of Fine Arts degree conferred at Denison University, June 1, 1974. Citation reads:

"Margaret Walker Alexander, insightful student and teacher of literature, celebrated poet and novelist, courageous worker for racial equality."

Doctor of Literature presented at Northwestern University Commencement, June 15, 1974. Citation reads:

"Margaret Walker Alexander inspired many young black poets, especially by her poem, 'For My People.' All black Americans revere her. She has dedicated her life to teaching those who need her most. She has always sought to liberate the human spirit - - We are proud indeed of this Northwestern graduate."

An Alumni Merit Award from Northwestern University was presented to Mrs. Alexander on May 4, 1974 at the Northwestern University Alumni Awards Program. "The Alumni Merit Awards are presented to Alumni who have distinguished themselves in their particular profession or field of endeavor in such a way as to reflect credit upon their alma mater."

The following CITATION FOR ACHIEVEMENT, awarded to Dr. Margaret Walker Alexander by Mississippi Valley State College, November 29, 1967, reads:

"In recognition of extraordinary accomplishments in the unique presentation of the Negro in the 'Chorus For Survival,' with great appreciation for the scholarly grandeur in which our struggle for full fruition has been recorded for history in JUBILEE, and with cognizance of the contribution you made to Negro uplift through a revelation of truth and dynamic thought, using a style made magnificent by elegance of diction, brilliance of metaphor, and the poetry of imagination befitting the highest ideals of contemporary literature."

THE MISSISSIPPI VALLEY STATE COLLEGE

Proudly dedicates and presents this Award to

DR. MARGARET W. ALEXANDER

An educator, thinker, author, poet, teacher, and distinguished public servant whose contribution to the cause of education molded minds and characters and inspired the youth of our generation.

BIOGRAPHY OF MARGARET WALKER

Margaret Abigail Walker (Mrs. Firnist James Alexander, Sr.), was born July 7, 1915, Birmingham, Alabama. She is the daughter of Marion Dozier Walker, Musician, and The Reverend Sigismund Constantine Walker, Methodist Minister and Professor of Religion and Philosophy (deceased). Her maternal grandfather, The Reverend Edward Lane Dozier, was a Baptist Preacher. She has two sisters and one brother, all of whom teach school. Mr. and Mrs. Alexander are the parents of four adults: daughters - Marion Elizabeth and Margaret Elvira; sons - Firnist James, Jr., and Sigismund Walker.

She is a poet, novelist, educator and professor of English at Jackson (Mississippi) State University, where she is also director of the Institute for the Study of History, Life, and Culture of Black People. In addition to her illustrious teaching career here at the University, she organized and directed the 75th Anniversary Literary Festival, the Humanities Program, the National Evaluative Conference in Black Studies, several Summer Institutes in Black Culture and the Phillis Wheatley Poetry Festival, which brought world-wide recognition to the Institution.

Miss Walker earned the A.B. degree from Northwestern and the M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Iowa. She has taught in Livingstone College, West Virginia State College, the University of Iowa, and the Cape Cod Writers Conference. In 1969, she was visiting professor in Creative Writing at Northwestern University.

CONCERNING THE POEMS

Margaret Walker's poems were first published during the decade of the thirties in such magazines as: Crisis, May, 1934; Poetry, magazine of verse, November, 1937, 1938, 1939; New Challenge, 1937; Creative Writing, 1938; Opportunity, 1938, and American Prefaces, 1939. In 1941, she appeared in The Negro Caravan; Phylon, 1944; Virginia Quarterly, 1955; Northwestern Tri-Quarterly, 1965; Encore, 1973 and Ebony, 1974.

In 1942, she won the Yale Award for Younger Poets and her first book, FOR MY PEOPLE, a volume of verse, edited and introduced by Stephen Vincent Benet, was published by Yale University, October 20, 1942. The book has had seven printings and is now out of print. Her Civil War Novel, JUBILEE, a Houghton Mifflin Literary Award winner for 1966, has become internationally known and has had some 33 printings: 12 in hardcover and 21 in paperback published by Bantam Books. Opera South has commissioned the distinguished Afro-American Composer, Ulysses Kay to write an Opera based on JUBILEE and Miss Walker's poetry with Donald Dorr as Libretist. This Opera will be presented in it

World Premier, April 10, 1976 as a feature of the Nation's Bicentennial and to celebrate the Centennial of Jackson State University where Miss Walker has been teaching since 1949. Her two most recent books of poetry are PROPHETS FOR A NEW DAY (Civil Rights poems of the 1960's), published by Broadside Press, 1970 (also available on tape) and OCTOBER JOURNEY (a small group of published poems not yet gathered in a volume), published by Broadside Press, 1973. A POETIC EQUATION, Conversations between Nikki Giovanni and Margaret Walker, was published by Howard University Press, 1974. Since the thirties, Miss Walker's poems have been anthologized in some twenty-five or more anthologies and have been translated into Dutch, German, Slavic and Japanese languages. These Anthologies are: The Negro Caravan, Black Voices, New Black Voices, Beyond the Angry Black, Kaleidoscope, Calvacade, Beyond the Blues, I Saw How Black I Was, I Am The Negro, The Black Man and the Promise of America, Black Insights, Black American Writing, Black Poets, Poetry of the Negro, Right-On, Afro-American Literature, Understanding the New Black Poetry, Broadside Treasury, From the Roots, From the Dark Tower, Black Orpheus, You Better Believe It, Cernoska, On Being Black, I Am the Darker Brother, Famous American Negro Poets, People in Poetry, and Deep Rivers, A Portfolio - 20 Contemporary Black American Poets.

Some of her speeches and articles have appeared in Common Ground, 1943; Phylon, 1950; Negro Digest, 1951; Education Age, 1967; Vital Speeches of the Day, 1968; Many Shades of Black, 1969; The Afro-American Studies Journal, 1970; American Library Association Bulletin, 1970; University of Missouri New Letters, Volume 38, NO. 2, 1971.

She has been reading poetry in public all of her life. Beginning in 1943, she lectured under the auspices of the National Artists and Concert Corporation, Lecture Bureau and has read her poetry in more than half the United States at churches, public schools and private academies, colleges, universities, clubs, municipal auditoriums, town halls, et cetera. She has also appeared on many occasions on radio and television and as a platform speaker for many national organizations and conventions. Among her many such appearances is listed the Library of Congress Conference on the Teaching of Creative Writing, January, 1973 (Washington, D. C.).

In 1944, she received the Rosenwald Fellowship and was a Ford Fellow at Yale University in 1953-1954. She was appointed a Fulbright Fellow to Norway in 1971, and won a Senior Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1972.

Miss Walker first recorded her poetry for Moses Asch in 1954 on Album, Folkways Records #FL9791 - Anthology of Negro Poets.

Guidance Associates has prepared eight Profiles of Black Achievement and the first on Mrs. Alexander is introduced as follows:

"Margaret Walker Alexander recalls her culturally rich home life, her journey through depression Southlands to attend Northwestern University, her first success as a poet, creation of her historical novel, JUBILEE. She reviews her twenty-nine year teaching career, discusses contemporary black problems. The filmstrip features dramatically read lines (not her voice) from her best known poem, "For My People."

CONCERNING THE FOLK TRADITION

Margaret Walker justly claims an authentic knowledge of the folk language in these poems she reads. Reading Dunbar's poems in Dayton, Ohio on the Centennial of his birth in 1972, Miss Walker brought down the house with a resounding ovation, especially with her rendition of "The Party," and she discovered at that time that reading Dunbar's dialect poems is fast becoming a lost art in these

last years of the 20th century. She heard her mother read these poems in the well-known dialect of Dunbar's parents generation and, thus, is giving an authentic interpretation to these poems.

Likewise, she heard James Weldon Johnson read his Sermons in Verse when she was still an adolescent girl in New Orleans and at that same time in 1932, she heard Langston Hughes read his Blues-Rhythms in that Southern City for the first time. The Folk Tradition in Afro-American Poetry is amply illustrated in these four black poets: Paul Laurence Dunbar, James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes and Margaret Walker. The plantation dialect is captured in the homely, humorous poems of Dunbar - some noted more for pathos than humor. Margaret Walker's poems show a complete integration of all the folk strains in Negro folklore with her heritage from these first three. James Weldon Johnson's Sermons in Verse vividly tell the story of the tradition of the Negro Preacher and the Negro idioms with Bible English or "the idioms of King James English." Note also the "Antebellum Sermon" by Dunbar and the poem - "We Have Been Believers," by Margaret Walker.

The street dialect or urban speech from "The Streets of Harlem" which Langston Hughes so faithfully captures represents another facet of folk life, language and ways which, in turn, have influenced the folk poems of Miss Walker in such examples as "Kissie Lee," "Poppa Chicken," and "Gus, The Lineman." She is, as a matter of fact, deeply influenced by her black predecessors and shows in her poetry the influence of this folk tradition whether it is plantation, sermon, street or even the roustabout and railroad hand for whose work and love songs Sterling Brown is so famous. Note her poems, "Yalluh Hammuh," "Two Gun Buster," and "Trigger Slim." Added to these sources of her folk poems are Black folk legends and Black history. "John Henry" and "Stagolee" are noted Black folk heroes. Miss Walker's "John Henry" poem is taken from the Mississippi Delta and is a version of the deep South. Other versions reflect various other locales. Phillis Wheatley, Harriet Tubman, and the Black leaders in "Ballad of the Free," are all real people in Black literature and history.

In addition, Margaret Walker deals with the subject of sympathetic magic, witches, juju and the long heritage of the witch doctor, medicine man, black religion and the conjure man or the root-worker, and hoodoo-hex - spell-maker. "Molly Means," her first ballad written in the 1930's and "Hoppy Toad," a ballad begun in the 1940's, completed and revised in the 1960's, deal with this completely authentic ingredient in Black folk history, legend and lore.

Not a serious student of anthropology, Miss Walker, nevertheless, reveals a knowledge of the ideas of shifting shapes, transference of the soul, et cetera. These ideas are all inculcated in the "Ballad of the Hoppy Toad." See the highly perceptive essay "A Shoulder Hunched Against a Sharp Concern" by Paula Giddings in Black World, December, 1971 for further elucidation of African (Nigerian) Symbolism of the horse and the toad frog as they are used in this poem by Margaret Walker.

A BALLAD FOR PHILLIS WHEATLEY

Pretty little black girl
standing on the block
how have you withstood this shame
bearing all this shock?

How have you succeeded
weathering the trip;
how have you come through the stench
riding on that stinking ship?

Pretty little black girl
come, go home with me;
I will take you far away
from this painful sea.

This is little Phillis
shedding two front teeth
this is little Phillis
caught and torn beneath

All the bright blue canopy
of her native land
caught and kidnapped far away
from her native land.

Child bereft of mother
father—stricken soul,
what will happen to our little one
who will see her grow?

Boston is a cold town
ice and snow and rain
nothing like a tropic world
nothing like the Plain

I have known in Africa
warm and soft and green
I am sick for Africa
take me home again

And I think I cannot bear
all the anguish here
faces pale and men with ships
danger always near.

Pretty little black girl
no one now can see
all the greatness you will know
all that you will be

Pretty little black girl
standing on the block
how have you withstood this shame
bearing all this shock?

"A Ballad For Phillis Wheatley"
By Margaret Walker was published
in EBONY, March, 1974.

OCTOBER JOURNEY
By Margaret Walker
Broadside Press. Detroit, 1973

HARRIET TUBMAN

Dark is the face of Harriet,
Darker still her fate
Deep in the dark of Southern wilds
Deep in the slavers' hate.

Fiery the eye of Harriet,
Fiery, dark, and wild;
Bitter, bleak, and hopeless
Is the bonded child.

Stand in the fields, Harriet,
Stand alone and still
Stand before the overseer
Mad enough to kill.

This is slavery, Harriet,
Bend beneath the lash;
This is Maryland, Harriet,
Bow to poor white trash.

You're a field hand, Harriet,
Working in the corn;
You're a grubber with the hoe
And a slave child born.

You're just sixteen, Harriet,
And never had a beau;
Your mother's dead long time ago,
Your daddy you don't know.

This piece of iron's not hard enough
To kill you with a blow,
This piece of iron can't hurt you,
Just let you slaves all know.

I'm still the overseer,
Old marster'll believe my tale;
I know that he will keep me
From going to the jail.

Get up, bleeding Harriet,
I didn't hit you hard;
Get up, bleeding Harriet,
And grease your head with lard.

Get up, sullen Harriet,
Get up and bind your head.
Remember this is Maryland
And I can beat you dead.

How far is the road to Canada?
How far do I have to go?
How far is the road from Maryland
And the hatred that I know?

I stabbed that overseer;
I took his rusty knife;
I killed that overseer;
I took his lowdown life.

For three long years I waited,
Three years I kept my hate,
Three years before I killed him,
Three years I had to wait.

Done shook the dust of Maryland
Clean off my weary feet;
I'm on my way to Canada
And Freedom's golden street.

I'm bound to git to Canada
Before another week;
I come through swamps and mountains,
I waded many a creek.

Now tell my brothers yonder
That Harriet is free;
Yes, tell my brothers yonder
No more auction block for me.

Come down from the mountain, Harriet,
Come down to the valley at night,
Come down to your weeping people
And be their guiding light.

Sing Deep Dark River of Jordan,
Don't you want to cross over today?
Sing Deep Wide River of Jordan,
Don't you want to walk Freedom's way?

I stole down in the night time,
I come back in the day,
I stole back to my Maryland
To guidethe slaves away.

I met old marster yonder
A-coming down the road,
And right past me in Maryland
My old marster strode.

I passed beside my marster
And covered up my head;
My marster didn't know me
I guess he heard I'm dead.

I wonder if he thought about
That overseer's dead;
I wondered if he figured out
He ought to know this head?

You'd better run, brave Harriet,
There's ransom on your head;
You better run, Miss Harriet,
They want you live or dead.

Been down in valleys yonder
And searching round the stills,
They got the posse after you,
A-riding through the hills.

They got the blood hounds smelling,
They got their guns cocked too;
You better run, bold Harriet,
The white man's after you.

They got ten thousand dollars
Put on your coal-black head;
They'll give ten thousand dollars;
They're mad because you fled.

I wager they'll be riding
A long, long time for you.
Yes, Lord, they'll look a long time
Till Judgment Day is due.

I'm Harriet Tubman, people,
I'm Harriet the slave,
I'm Harriet, free woman,
And I'm free within my grave.

Come along, children, with Harriet
Come along, children, come along
Uncle Sam is rich enough
To give you all a farm.

I killed the overseer.
I fooled old marster's eyes,
I found my way to Canada
With hundreds more besides.

Come along to Harpers Ferry
Come along to brave John Brown
Come along with Harriet, children,
Come along ten million strong.

I met the mighty John Brown,
I know Fred Douglass too
Enlisted Abolitionists
Beneath the Union Blue.

I heard the mighty trumpet
That sent the land to war;
I mourned for Mister Lincoln
And saw his funeral car.

Come along with Harriet, children,
Come along to Canada.
Come down to the river, children,
And follow the northern star.

I'm Harriet Tubman, people,
I'm Harriet, the slave,
I'm Harriet, free woman,
And I'm free beyond my grave.

Come along to freedom, children,
Come along ten million strong;
Come along with Harriet, children,
Come along ten million strong.

PROPHETS FOR A NEW DAY
By Margaret Walker
Broadside Press. Detroit, 1970

THE BALLAD OF THE FREE

Bold Nat Turner by the blood of God
Rose up preaching on Virginia's sod;
Smote the land with his passionate plea
Time's done come to set my people free.

The serpent is loosed and the hour is come
The last shall be first and the first shall be none
The serpent is loosed and the hour is come.

Gabriel Prosser looked at the sun,
Said, "Sun, stand still till the work is done.
The world is wide and the time is long
And man must meet the avenging wrong."

The serpent is loosed and the hour is come
The last shall be first and the first shall be none
The serpent is loosed and the hour is come

Denmark Vesey led his band
Across the hot Carolina land.
The plot was foiled, the brave men killed,
But Freedom's cry was never stilled.

The serpent is loosed and the hour is come
The last shall be first and the first shall be none
The serpent is loosed and the hour is come

Toussaint L'Ouverture won
All his battles in the tropic sun,
Hero of the black man's pride
Among those hundred who fought and died.

The serpent is loosed and the hour is come
The last shall be first and the first shall be none
The serpent is loosed and the hour is come

Brave John Brown was killed but he
Became a martyr of the free,
For he declared that blood would run
Before the slaves their freedom won.

The serpent is loosed and the hour is come
The last shall be first and the first shall be none
The serpent is loosed and the hour is come

Wars and Rumors of Wars have gone,
But Freedom's army marches on.
The heroes' list of dead is long,
And Freedom still is for the strong.

The serpent is loosed and the hour is come
The last shall be first and the first shall be none
The serpent is loosed and the hour is come

BALLAD OF THE HOPPY-TOAD

Ain't been on Market Street for nothing
With my regular washing load
When the Saturday crowd went stomping
Down the Johnny-jumping road,

EPITAPH FOR MY FATHER

Seen Sally Jones come running
With a razor at her throat,
Seen Deacon's daughter lurching
Like a drunken alley goat.

But the biggest for my money,
And the saddest for my throw
Was the night I seen the goopher man
Throw dust around my door.

Come sneaking round my doorway
In a stovepipe hat and coat;
Come sneaking round my doorway
To drop the evil note.

I run down to Sis Avery's
And told her what I seen
"Root-worker's out to git me
What you reckon that there mean?"

Sis Avery she done told me,
"Now honey go on back
I knows just what will hex him
And that old goopher sack."

Now I done burned the candles
Till I seen the face of Jim
And I done been to Church and prayed
But can't git rid of him.

Don't want to burn his picture
Don't want to dig his grave
Just want to have my peace of mind
And make that dog behave.

Was running through the fields one day
Sis Avery's chopping corn
Big horse come stomping after me
I knowed then I was gone.

Sis Avery grabbed that horse's mane
And not one minute late
Cause trembling down behind her
I seen my ugly fate.

She hollered to that horse to "Whoa!
I gotcha hoppy-toad."
And yonder come the goopher man
A-running down the road.

She hollered to that horse to "Whoa"
And what you wanta think?
Great-God-a-mighty, that there horse
Begun to sweat and shrink.

He shrunk up to a teeny horse
He shrunk up to a toad
And yonder come the goopher man
Still running down the road.

She hollered to that horse to "Whoa"
She said, "I'm killing him.
Now you just watch this hoppy-toad
And you'll be rid of Jim."

The goopher man was hollering
"Don't kill that hoppy-toad."
Sis Avery she said "Honey,
You bout to lose your load."

That hoppy-toad was dying
Right there in the road
And goopher man was screaming
"Don't kill that hoppy-toad."

The hoppy-toad shook one more time
And then he up and died
Old goopher man fell dying, too.
"O hoppy-toad," he cried.

Jamaica is an Island full of Bays
Like jewelled tourmaline set in the sea.
The Caribbean coasts are washed with dazzling sand
So blinding white the sunlight flashes fire,
And trade winds lash against the palm strewn shore.
Born near Buff Bay my father loved to play
Among the Inlets; shouting over waves
And wading through the sands, would wish to go
Out where the winds would often part the sea,
And as a Hebrew child of long ago
He crossed dry land while waters rose congealed
Till afternoon when once again the winds
Would bring the walls together meltingly
And send the naked children screaming home from play
Or catch the luckless souls upon the open sea.
Those bluest sparkling waters of the Bays—
Montego, Orange, Buff! where many times at play
He watched the ships sail into port of call
And laden with their cargo, their fruit and golden haul
Banana, plantain, palm, palmetto, hemp
Would go again to sea beyond the distances
Where only God knew where, but carefree boys
Would stop their play and longingly gaze far
Out where the ships would disappear from sight
And as the setting sun would light the sky
With flaming rays descending on the sea, as twilight
Travelled from the thin horizon's line
Casting its light to where the mountains stood
Like giants in the Night, dark, high, and still
So homeward they would drag their listless feet
Still thinking of the ships that sailed to foreign shores.
He longed to know the lot of those adventuring
Who join the ocean's fleet and sail into the dusk.
He must have been a very thoughtful lad
Loving his aging mother at her handiwork
Artful with needle and breathing piety,
So full of dreams and ideals for her youngest son.
His fat' er, quite the other sort, could mix
His tavern-keeping with his Lord's day's task at Church
And read the lesson as a layman should.
All his household loved their books;
His brother's full of gibberish and foreign words
Fit for his work, Her Majesty's interpreter
Of all who came from far off India
Or Germany and France and Spain
And even England's farthest empirod land.
And thus this little boy—the last of seven
Would dream of going where the languages
His brother Ben interpreted were known.
But most of all he longed to go to school
In England and at Cambridge, and there
To be a man of learning till once again at home
Where all who knew and loved him would be proud.
Especially his mother, fond and growing old,
But then she died. And he, bereft of all her love,
Disconsolate with grief,
Considered more and more the soonest he could go
Out where the ships plowed through a stormy sea.
My father came to this new land instead,
His dreams of Cambridge roughly put aside
Where opportunity and expediency
A round-about long journey carried him
Before he touched the soil at Mobile Bay.
But still he hoped to study, then return
To make his mark at home; his papers drawn
Allowed him only rights of visitors', a visa
Stated when he hoped to finish here.
He never left. When all the scholar's honors he could heap
Into a pile were won, he saw my mother's face
And turned aside briefly to gaze
Upon the aura, charm and grace
In which she spoke and smiled and played—
Her fingers dancing over ivoried keys.
So they were wed, his child-bride all too young
From Pensacola's Bay dashed starry-eyed away
With this strange son come from a foreign land—
An older sadder soul, ambitious, proud and quite removed

From life's realities and practicalities;
A dreamer, quiet, seriously withdrawn
From enmities and hates, yet hurt by them
And startled by the strange ironic turn
Of epithets: "You, monkey-chaser, You, nigger, You, I
mean!"
And thus they came to live in Birmingham.
When I was very young and still quite small
My father used to take me on his knee
And say to me, "My little one, I wish that you could see
The land where I was born—so beautiful!
With fruit so sweet and land so rich
Where black men, too, are free.
Star apples grow and breadfruit trees
The mangoes and the cocoanuts
Date palms and yams and green banana trees
Cassava, pumpkins, okra too
Just like the okra here and alligator pear
And flowers, oh, the blossoms there
That grow so wild and so profuse
And every color of the rainbow only brighter
And bolder and richer in their hue
More blue, more red, more orange than the rind
Of melons that we grow
And black men, too, live side by side
With yellow, white, and brown
And they have not this craziness
Of Jim-crow and race prejudice.
I never thought this place could be so full of bitter-
ness."
And yet he never went back home again
He took his papers out to be a citizen
Yet all his life he talked about his home
And going to that Island in the sea.
When I was five his father died
And there was no one left
To take him back. The final tie was gone.
I saw the letter and his unshed tears.
The earliest memories I have
Are seeing all my father's hours spent in toil
From teaching daily, preaching Sundays
Tailoring at night to give us bread.
In summer, wintertime and fall
His days were all the same—
No time in fun. Relaxing by the fire
He fell asleep and snored
And mama cried annoyed, "Get up and go to bed!"
And in the night how often could I hear
Both whispering of future plans for us,
For buying shoes and clothes and sending us to school
Always to keep a roof above our heads
And sometimes I would hear my father say,
"Let's buy a car!" And mama said
"We can't afford it now."
Or else he'd want a bigger house with stairs
And mama horrified would cry, "not now."
But he would buy her pretty dresses
And say, "Surprise!" and she would say
"I have to hold your father down."
"He thinks that all his family should dress in golden
I liked it when my father went to town wings."
And bought our clothes
No hand-me-down made-over things,
He bought the best and struggled hard to pay,
And tried to keep in check his great desire for books.
Two times we moved from Birmingham.
The first to Haven in Meridian and back again.
And then to New Orleans. At first my mother was a wraith,
A frail and walking ghost with babies in her arms
And many nights I dreamed that she would die
And dying passed beside my bed.
I screamed to wake her, went to touch her arm,
Sometimes not sure, would crawl beside her
Feeling safer there.
But time relentlessly moved on the years
And from that twilight time
When first I saw her bending down
Above her dying sister's bed
And daddy writing, "Please come home again
Everything here is going to Fillymanew."
And on the train that carried us away from home and
friends
Till past the blue dim past of years in New Orleans
And Mardi Gras with nights of bitter cold
When Daddy took us out to see parades;

My father's summers off at summer school
And figs and biscuits and water were all we had to
Until my graduation days. eat;
Then off at college hearing ominous reports
Depression and no salary checks at home
And letters from my mother, "Don't do this or that.
Wear your green dress. Don't sit up late.
Stay off Chicago streets at night."
My father seemed so far away; his letters seldom;
Yet when I read the few lines many times
I thought with pride, how well he writes!
But conversations late at night with him
Were best, for now he ventured out
And said what reading I should do for depth.
His favorites were mine: the Greeks and Romans
And from the Bible all the words of Paul;
The Sage of Konigsberg;
The gentle Spinoza;
Fichte and Schopenhauer;
Whitehead, the English classics;
Poetry and mystics and the wine of all the ancient East:
Buddha, Confucius, Laotse, "The Gita," then
Gandhi's way;
And when he said, "I wish your verse were more religious,"
I pertly said, "It can't be what I'm not!"
And wished I'd cut my tongue out; only then
My lips were always in a pout rebelliously.
If I had been a man
I might have followed in his every step,
Had preached from pulpits, found my life as his
And wandered too, as he, an alien on the earth,
But female and feline I could not stand
Alone through love and hate and truth
And still remain my own. He was himself;
His own man all his life.
And I belong to all the people I have met,
Am part of them, am molded by the throng
Caught in the tide of compromise, and grown
Chameleon for camouflage. Yet I have known
A noble prince-like man for all my life,
For he was humble in his dignity
Composed and calm in every storm of life,
Harsh poverty could not debase, demean
His deep integrity. He rose above the fray.
And when at last my children came
His joy was indescribable:
"I only wish they had not come so late in life for
me."
Now travelling everywhere about this land
The golden years descended on his head,
And with my mother he saw the promised land
Of California, Boston, and New York,
Nebraska, Philadelphia, and then
When suddenly the shades of night began to fall
The ship at sea was tossed and buffeted
He stood and watched the light
That beckons every pilot to his harbor's home
In resignation to the will and fate
Of Providence, the destiny of Men.
In dreams I stood beside him, heard him say
"I came to tell you I'm about to go away.
I'm going to a Church meeting, very great.
My name is on the program, I want to look my best,"
And pointed to the undertaker's suit;
I begged him not to go, but then he smiled
"Child, don't you understand? I'm going to be
promoted!"
And sadly waved at me.
That day I sat as in a dream and heard
The preacher echoing familiar words:
"We spend our years as a tale that is told;
The days of our years are three-score years and ten."
I glanced through windows, saw the sun
Peep from the clouds in one bright blaze of gold
Lighting the casket where he lay so cold
And then I knew that he would never die—
Not on the earth or in the sky or sea.
He did not leave a fortune made with gold
Nor lands and wealth of human hands
But all the deep recesses of our minds and hearts
Were filled with plunder from the Ages old:
The way to greet a stranger and a guest;
The love to bear a friend and how to pray
In deep compassion for an enemy;

The courage and the faith to face all life;
The willingness to learn new lessons every day;
Humility and truth and deep integrity—
This is the Epitaph that I would write for him.

PROPHETS FOR A NEW DAY
By Margaret Walker
Broadside Press. Detroit, 1970

JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI

City of tense and stricken faces
City of closed doors and ketchup splattered floors,
City of barbed wire stockades,
And ranting voices of demagogues,
City of squealers and profane voices;
Hauling my people in garbage trucks,
Fenced in by new white police billies,
Fist cuffs and red-necked brothers of Hate Legions
Straining their leashed and fiercely hungry dogs;
City of tree-lined, wide, white avenues
And black alleys of filthy rendezvous;
City of flowers: of new red zinnias
And oriental poppies and double-ruffled petunias
Ranch styled houses encircled with rose geranium
And scarlet salvia
And trouble-ridden minds of the guilty and the
conscienceless;
City of stooges and flunkies, pimps and prostitutes,
Bar-flies and railroad-station freaks;
City with southern sun beating down raw fire
On heads of blaring jukes,
And light-drenched streets puddled with the promise
Of a brand-new tomorrow
I give you my heart, Southern City
For you are my blood and dust of my flesh,
You are the harbor of my ship of hope,
The dead-end street of my life,
And the long washed down drain of my youth's years of
toil,
In the bosom of your families
I have planted my seeds of dreams and visions and
prophecies
All my fantasies of freedom and of pride,
Here lie three centuries of my eyes and my brains and
Of my lips and strident demands, my hands,
The graves of my dead,
And the birthing stools of grannies long since fled.
Here are echoes of my laughing children
And hungry minds of pupils to be fed.
I give you my brimming heart, Southern City
For my eyes are full and no tears cry
And my throat is dusty and dry.

FOR MY PEOPLE
By Margaret Walker
Yale University Press.
New Haven, 1942

WE HAVE BEEN BELIEVERS

We have been believers believing in the black gods of an old
land, believing in the secrets of the seeress and the
magic of the charmers and the power of the devil's
evil ones.

And in the white gods of a new land we have been believers
believing in the mercy of our masters and the beauty
of our brothers, believing in the conjure of the
humble and the faithful and the pure.

Neither the slavers' whip nor the lynchers' rope nor the
bayonet could kill our black belief. In our hunger we
beheld the welcome table and in our nakedness the
glory of a long white robe. We have been believers
in the new Jerusalem.

We have been believers feeding greedy grinning gods, like a
Moloch demanding our sons and our daughters, our
strength and our wills and our spirits of pain. We
have been believers, silent and stolid and stubborn
and strong.

We have been believers yielding substance for the world.
With our hands have we fed a people and out of our
strength have they wrung the necessities of a nation.
Our song has filled the twilight and our hope has heralded
the dawn.

Now we stand ready for the touch of one fiery iron, for the
cleansing breath of many molten truths, that the
eyes of the blind may see and the ears of the deaf
may hear and the tongues of the people be filled
with living fire.

Where are our gods that they leave us asleep? Surely the
priests and the preachers and the powers will hear.
Surely now that our hands are empty and our hearts too
full to pray they will understand. Surely the sires
of the people will send us a sign.

We have been believers believing in our burdens and our
demigods too long. Now the needy no longer weep and
pray; the long-suffering arise, and our fists bleed
against the bars with a strange insistency.

FOR MY PEOPLE

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.