

# Give me a Child



A BOOK OF VERSE

By Sarah E. Wright  
and Lucy Smith



# GIVE ME A CHILD

By Sarah E. Wright  
and Lucy Smith

Published by  
The National Child Welfare Association

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**Dedication:**

To all who love: to humanity entire,  
To the birthing of a child called Freedom;  
And  
A very special dedication  
To those who labored with us,  
Giving whatever was necessary,  
To make this book possible.

**Pictorial Illustrations:**

Edward Wallowich  
Condax Studios  
Charles White  
United Nations—The Society of Friends

**Book Design and Drawings:**

**Charles L. Smith**

**Typesetting:**  
Federal Typesetters

**Published by:**

**KRAFT PUBLISHING COMPANY, 333 S. Broad Street, Philadelphia 7, Pa.**

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A black and white photograph of a tree trunk on a sandy beach. The tree trunk is dark and vertical, extending from the top to the bottom of the frame. In the background, a small bicycle is parked on the sand. The sand is light-colored and textured. A dark, horizontal band is overlaid on the lower half of the image, containing the text "no greater love" in white, bold, lowercase letters.

**no greater love**



To some millions who survive Joseph E. Mander, Senior:

On Sunday, May 12, 1952, in the city of Philadelphia, Joseph E. Mander, Senior, Negro, father of three small children and a fourth one on the way, died in a heroic attempt to rescue 7 year old Paul Waxman, a white child, from death by drowning in the treacherous waters of the Schuylkill River.

He was posthumously awarded the honor of "Father of the Year" by the National Fathers' Day Council.

The following poem was written during the first week after the tragedy, and was published in the North Penn News, a Philadelphia newspaper.

Sunday strollers along a sewage-choked Schuylkill  
May soon forget where he died;  
And many will point with second-hand authority  
To the place in the liquid darkness,  
Showing only  
where death  
gave birth  
to a hero.

But they might glory in any  
Novel bit of newsprint knowledge  
Quite as pridefully:  
Great men often become great curiosities—  
Too often become conversation pieces  
And nothing more.

But something should be said  
About Joseph E. Mander, Senior,  
Lest the lesson he died to teach  
follow him to death:





Joseph E. Mander, Senior, hero today,  
And contemporary choice for parlor pledges,  
Is more than a name to you now.  
Yesterday you didn't know him —  
Didn't care to meet him —

    To some of you (and I speak to that some of you)  
He was any black man  
Walking the streets of a segregated housing project,  
"keeping in his proper place",  
Staying close to his particular breed  
Of dark-skinned humanity,  
Fenced in by stronger walls than stone and steel,  
Forced in by will—your will, your fears, your hate.  
Squeezed by your financial and legislative strength  
Into a specified, had to be enough, little plot of ground  
To raise his three born and one more on the way  
    safely away from yours.

And after that yesterday,  
When you didn't know him, in that short hour—  
Before he became your favorite obligation,  
Joseph E. Mander died;

    Died proving what so many have tried  
    To obliterate with blood.

        Remember Warsaw—

        Remember Gettysburg—

        Remember blood?

You have poured out years of it!  
Red human-life substance  
Spilling all over your consciences  
Trying to wash away brotherhood—  
And yet  
It lives!



Mander knew it, proved it,  
Died because of it and you  
With the memories of blood.

Yes, one of your infant kind,  
Whose fear of the lone big silence  
Forced out one anguished, strangled plea for help,  
Cared not at all that it was a black  
Fully-clothed Mander  
Whose love-directed body  
Plunged into the river's filth,  
Reaching out with his black hands—  
His life—  
To grasp a small white hand—  
To give back life—  
Even if it meant his own . . .  
And it did.

And it should be said,  
That greater fatherhood has no man than he  
Who would leave those he has conceived  
To return to life one  
Whose so-called "superiority"  
Might one day deny his flesh—  
His infant images—  
Full and equal right to life.

II

Now I have seen monuments:  
Great geometric heaps of stone,  
Lifeless towers raised to keep alive the dead;  
And I have seen you, the people,  
Anxious to write off your obligation to Mander  
And his survivors (there are 16 million of them)  
With a hurried check,  
A few high-sounding speeches:  
And if nothing spectacular happens  
To claim the moments you've allowed for bigness,



You will remember the black man long enough  
To raise a great grey stone thing—  
A feelingless symbol,  
In final-ended payment.

But I ask,

Cannot a monument that breathes be built?  
A grateful people are bigger than all the tall piled stones  
In our wide and waiting world;  
A grateful people are wise  
When their living grows into a growing monument.

And I ask,

Will not a monument breathe for Mander?  
Spring out of the hearts of people who  
Have grown wise in the ways of brotherhood  
As taught by brave dead Mander?

And I ask,

When you walk through the spring that won't come this year for  
Joseph E. Mander, Senior,

Will you turn those fingers that point to say,  
"That's where a hero died"  
back to yourselves —  
point to your hearts  
saying,  
"But this is where he lives!"



*No man an island:*

There is part of me  
That can never go home,  
For I have known men who can never go home:

the dice are thrown,  
the gamblers wait;

I have known men who waited like this,  
who threw and lost —  
and now clutch nothing . . .

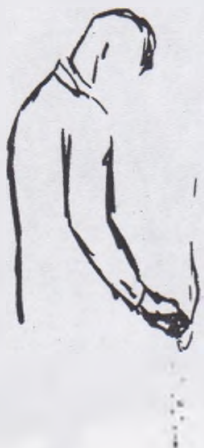
the music blares,  
the dancers spin;

I have known men who spun like this,  
at the impact of a bullet—  
they spin no more.

I sight along the cue,  
I drop it unused;

I have known men who sighted like this  
along the barrel of a gun—  
they sight no more.

There is part of me  
That can never go home,  
Part of me that will always lie still,  
On some lonely beach head  
with the mines still unreaped  
Where the waves of men flowed and ebbed like the tide.  
Because I have known men who can never go home,  
There is part of me  
That can never go home.







© 1984

hat  
up



**if you raise children**





*Conversation with my son—About flowers:*

"Child, look for flowers

In our fields;

they are there.

There is a kind that grows

Out of hungry soil,

In spite of stiffened earth —

In our fields.

"There is a kind that teethes on rock,

Thrives on the trampled leavings;

This is a kind that will not die

Unsunned

In our fields.

"Don't bother your head with roses!

You will not want to go

Where they are trapped to thrive

Outside our fields.

They have sunset faces, for the most,

And, for the most, belong

To a sunset-pampered crowd.

*"But now and then you'll find*

*A rebel rose that glows*

*Among sunflowers*

*In our fields.*

*And it is good to see this, too,*

*That family's other side.*

"But look to the growing among us:

Giant sunflower crowd,

Though weaned to a crust

Of the much required,

Grow on—

anyhow."





*Conversation with my daughter—About a star:*

"No, honey!

That star didn't just get there,  
But I am not at all surprised  
This is your first time seeing it;

This is your first night  
Outside of things that do not end with self—  
Your first different kind of night,  
That will end in a different sun.

First hungers, unsatisfied,  
Always bring the darkness  
down

with a question.

No, I am not at all surprised that  
You see our star;

It's always there to light the way  
in a night such as this.

May you have it?

Yes, anybody can have it —  
It's everybody's star.

Does it have a name?

Many names in many lands,  
But all the names mean  
Peace.

What does it feel like, our star?

Like plenty —

like not being scared —

like tomorrow's sun pushing away the darkness —  
like love.

And now I get you up to struggle;

this night is not for napping.

Build star fire against the hungry cold;

You can not sleep away this need.

A whole world full of people awaits

one more who sees the star.

Have a good night, little new one.

Have a bright star-fetching night;

And tomorrow, pray, the sun . . .



you work for a living

IF YOU RAISE CHILDREN





**and you work for a living**





*Case History of a man whom a job has:*

I used to be the kind of guy, Doc,  
That never turned down overtime—  
    the kind of a guy other workers call "hungry"—  
Till all of a sudden  
Something snapped.

I guess it all started  
The day I was home with the grippe:  
My baby kept telling me  
    "Bye daddy bye."  
Why should he say hello?  
    He's never awake when I come home.

All the next day I kept saying to myself,  
    "Overtime  
    overtime  
    what do I need it for?  
    my wife's gripin',  
    my kids don't know me."  
So I cut off my machine at five o'clock;

I walked out of the shop,  
Sighed with relief,  
And said,  
    "thank God  
    the job's behind me."

I walked to the corner,  
Squeezed in a trolley,  
Hung onto a strap  
And held up my paper—  
    Someone was reading over my shoulder.  
    Someone was breathing down my neck.

I got off the trolley,  
Headed toward home—  
    Someone was following close behind.

I ducked down the alley,  
Vaulted over the fence,  
Went into the kitchen  
And slammed the door.

My wife looked at me—  
She said  
    "What's the matter, dear?"





I said

"Nothing."

She looked at me.  
The kids got on my nerves.  
I snapped at them.  
My wife said,

"At the risk of repeating myself,  
what's the matter, dear?"

I said,

"I guess the job's getting me down."

"Not really," said my wife,

"why you used to be crazy about the job —  
you used to eat, drink,  
breathe and sleep the job —

Why,"

she said,

"I was beginning to get jealous of the job."

I went into the living room.

I couldn't read.

I turned on the television.

It bored me,

So I went up to bed —

The footsteps followed.

I hate to bathe with an audience,  
so I just washed my face.

I undressed in the dark,

Pulled the covers over my head.

When the alarm clock rang

I opened one eye.

I reached to shut it off—

I opened the other eye.

And there was that damn job

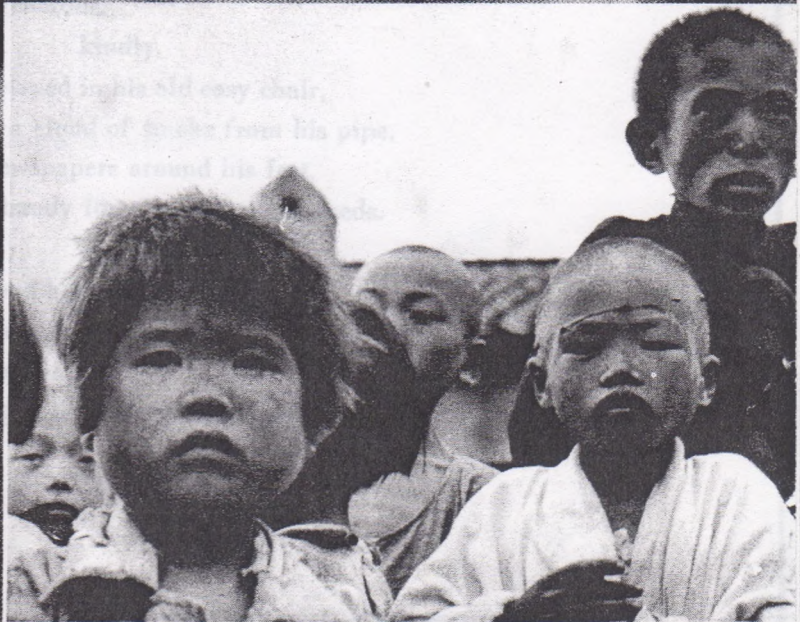
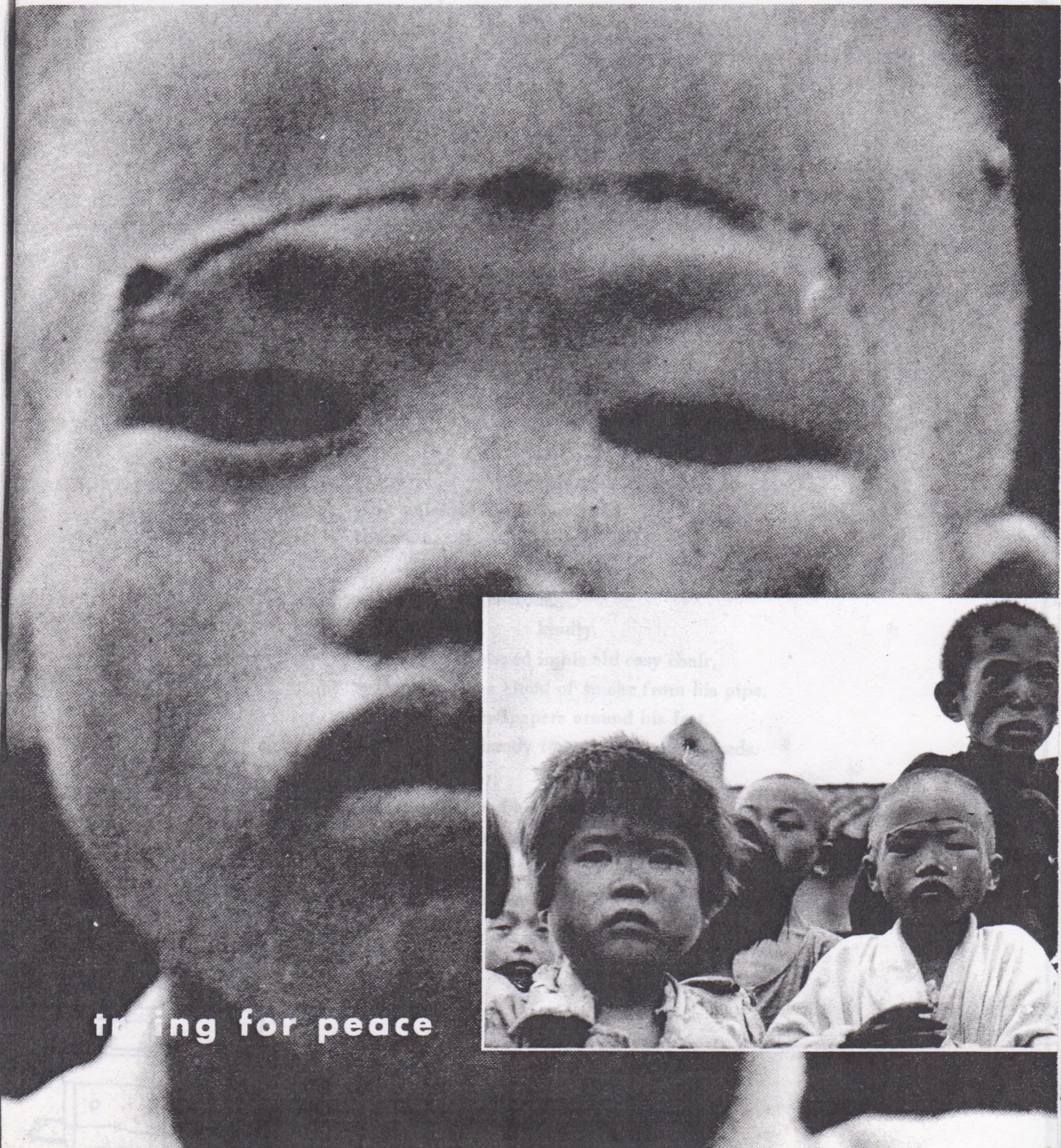
Sitting on the foot of my bed,

Telling me it was time to get up and go to work.



*maps,*  
*model planes,*  
*Comdex,*

**in the midst of war**



**trying for peace**



*Home is the warrior:*

*Maps,*  
    *model planes,*  
        *framed diploma on the wall,*  
*School sweater with letters for football and track;*  
*Comics,*  
    *adventure stories,*  
        *Lives of Famous Men . . .*  
*I am stifled by feathers and cotton wool.*

I am as a stranger in my own hometown —  
    guest in the home of the boy I once was,  
Meeting half-familiar people of whom I have heard,  
Walking down streets I have heard described.  
    The man I have become  
    walks these half-familiar streets  
    so often recalled by the boy I once was.  
I stay in the boy's room,  
In his corner of the nest,  
Filled with belongings preserved for his return.  
    (Have they guessed the boy will never return?)

A stray lock of hair that must be pushed into place,  
Chin smudged with flour from biscuits or pie,  
His mother is as he remembered her—  
    warm,  
        generous,  
            kindly.

His father is relaxed in his old easy chair,  
Surrounded by a cloud of smoke from his pipe,  
An island of newspapers around his feet,  
Wallet always handy for a boy's urgent needs.

Stuffed with good home cooking  
I walk out for a hair cut—  
    same familiar barber,  
        gesturing with lather-filled brush,



same familiar customers,  
listening to the game.

The boys hang out on the same old corner—  
engrossed in crap games or penny ante,  
clustered around the juke box,  
dropping in nickels,  
whistling long and low at passing girls.

I take the boy's girl to the local movie—  
double feature,  
dishes Wednesday night.

I recognize the cashier in her glass box—  
brassy blond hair,  
tiny mole by her mouth,  
steadily wisecracking,  
steadily chewing gum.

The boy's girl is sweet—  
meltingly sweet.

I kiss her in the swing on the porch of her home,  
Submerged in a sea of honeysuckle and roses,  
Fireflies flickering in the fragrant dark.

I kiss her hungrily,  
urgently;

She responds,  
greatly disturbed—

She has never been kissed by a man before—  
She has been kissed by no one since the boy kissed her goodbye.

I too am disturbed,

I tell her goodnight.

I walk home alone though the dark empty streets.

I raid the icebox—  
cold chicken and pie.

I walk up the stairs,  
Skipping the step that creaks.

I toss all night between the cool fragrant sheets.





I awaken in the morning at last unrefreshed;  
My unrelaxed body stiffened against being ensnared.

The parents of the boy would take me for their own—  
wrap me in cotton wool,  
provide me a nest:

the hometown would welcome me into its bosom,  
as the serene placid surface of the lake takes a pebble  
that falls to the bottom,  
integrates itself,  
leaving no lasting trace on the waters above.

*But I am no pebble:*

*I am a rolling stone,*

*A feather on the breeze,*

*A boy become man,*

*A man home from the wars—*

*A displaced person in my own hometown.*

*Play on a witch:*

*(Julia is a woman who exists: "Julio," the witch,  
is a matter of opinion)*

She is so much a part of talk  
That spins itself a web  
Of neighborhood proportions  
Inside of Charlie's super store  
At four o'clock, P. M.  
    These are today's threads,  
    Slippery, delicatessen delights,  
    Expertly woven  
As only the experienced perform:

"Oh" and "Ah" and "Oh so cute"—  
"But what strange marks it bears!"  
"Its mother looked at Julio in the first fetal month!"  
"I bet she remembers the day  
When her flesh was covered with bruises.".....  
"The children made good work of her.".....  
"But! The two-cent deposit bottles."  
"All broke—And pregnant Mary saw her  
and ran away in fright,"  
"The baby came complete with scars  
that forceps did not make!"

"And the suicide"—"A strange one like herself  
was last seen talking to Julio."

"The stiff neck that Vicks salve and nothing else will cure  
Is bent exactly as her own"

"And the sounds of cats crying in the night!"  
"Clawing at her door—scratching for the light"  
"It will be so again tonight"

"And the smell—"  
"Of dung!" — "No!"

"It's something never named."  
"It belongs to death, I say."  
"And tonight she'll brew again."

IN THE MIDST OF WAR TRYING FOR PEACE





At first she pinned the white stars  
 And the red stripes high upon her chimney,  
 Then the heart shaped candy box,  
 Red as the devil's eye, and then  
 The Christian flag!  
 And then, for last, she flew  
 The black rag of a dress  
 She mourned her only born in,  
 And then —  
*"the community started going down."*

What a sight these things make  
 Caught in her roof top winds.  
 How did an old woman get them there?  
 Surely it took a strength  
 Not in keeping with her years.  
 Can it be what children say  
 She drinks, "*Juice of hearts,  
 Dead man's tears,  
 Dung of cats,  
 Wax of ears;  
 Stir them once,  
 And half of thrice;  
 Grab a child,  
 'n dip him twice?*"

Strange woman—perfect sedative  
 For the too-young to stay up late;  
 But then, of course, no one  
 In this day and age believes it—  
 Except the children.

*"Julio'll get you if you don't nappy nap  
 Tie you up forever in her big black sack.  
 Take you inside of her big black door,  
 With so many locks she can't add one more:  
 Oh, she lives on stinky swallowing-up ground,  
 And you'll never see out,  
 Cause the shades are nailed down—  
 Tight!"*



## ACT II

Go to sleep now, Julia,  
Calculate a brew  
For unlocking rheumatic joints slowly.  
You should be "able to beat the pain"?

Clutch the ragged string that holds  
The legendary bag that children fear—  
That *really* holds  
The molded, fly specked rolls  
You stole from Charlie's garbage can  
During the four o'clock time  
Of his distraction.

Sleep, sleep, old woman  
Widowed, weary woman;  
Sleep can conjure a dream  
As long as the gone persists.  
Sleep knows the way to yesterday,  
If the guided don't resist.  
Soft is the way to  
sink

to

*Ta rum tum tum and rum tum tum,  
Till Sonny comes marching home again,  
Till Sonny comes living home to remain;  
Oh the Stars and the Stripes for the meanwhile!*

**WINDOW FLAGS SOLD HERE — \$1.00 each**

*Ta rum tum tum and rum tum tum,  
Till Sonny comes living home to remain;  
Oh the Stars and the Stripes for the meanwhile!*  
"Peppermints and chocolates  
Cherry treats;  
Box itself pretty 'nough to eat.  
Candy's for remembering  
Sonny's sweet."

IN THE MIDST OF WAR TRYING FOR PEACE





*WELCOME HOME SIGNS — \$2.00 each*

*Ta rum tum tum and a rum tum tum,  
Till Sonny comes living home to remain;  
Oh the Stars and the Stripes for the meanwhile!  
Help the Church  
Help the boys Over There.  
Send a box!  
Buy a flag! Make a prayer.*

*CHRISTIAN FLAGS AVAILABLE — Donation*

*Ta rum tum tum and a rum tum tum,  
“Mailman, Mailman,  
Why are you waiting at my door?  
I always get the mail from the box?  
Pray, what do you want me for?  
Gone!  
Where?  
Up there.  
The sky is not hope; it's grey.  
Pray. Pray?  
Oh God! bring back yesterday”.*

*It is not clear just when death began for you—  
Somewhere in a long prayer it came finally—  
And nobody knows just when  
Your substitutes for Sonny  
Became your rooftop souvenirs—  
But they all know  
How you went about,  
Slipping to strange conversion,  
Mumbling odd words  
In dirty clothes:  
“Innocent! My son is innocent!  
You cried, “Unjustified!”  
Nobody ever said he was guilty;  
He was not killed for doing anything!  
He was killed in a war.  
Your son's a hero.  
Julia! Julia! awake!  
Don't whine so for the gone  
That keeps insisting.  
If they hear you outside  
The neighborhood will know  
For sure, tomorrow,  
You brewed with cats again tonight!*



*Russell Meek*

*Black and Lilac:*

She had a face that storms had come to,  
 most of which had passed  
 to where all memory respire—  
 and some  
 that had simply come to quiet,  
 but never died.

She was black,  
 grey framed,  
 and tired—  
 tired to the very bone;  
 but still the flesh hung on,  
 suffering the slow surrender.

She sat so still with lilacs—so still for peace with lilacs,  
 recalling years of storming—  
 years of bitter coming:  
 to compromise—  
 to lilacs.



IN THE MIDST OF WAR TRYING FOR PEACE







*Face of poverty:*

No one can communicate to you  
The substance of poverty—  
Can tell you neither the shape,  
Nor the depth,  
nor the breadth,  
Of poverty—  
Until you have lived with her intimately.

No one can guide your fingers  
Over the rims of her eye sockets,  
Over her hollow cheeks—  
Until perhaps one day  
In your wife's once pretty face  
You see the lines of poverty;  
Until you feel  
In her now skinny body,  
The protruding bones,  
The barely covered ribs,  
The shrunken breasts of poverty.

Poverty can be a stranger  
In a far off land:  
An alien face  
Briefly glimpsed in a newsreel,  
An empty rice bowl  
In a skinny brown hand,  
Until one bleak day  
You look out the window—  
And poverty is the squatter  
In your own backyard.

Poverty wails in the night for milk,  
Not knowing the price of milk a quart.

It is the stark desperation in your teen-ager's face,  
Wanting a new evening gown for the junior prom,  
After going through school in rummage store clothes.  
It is the glass of forgetfulness sold over the bar.





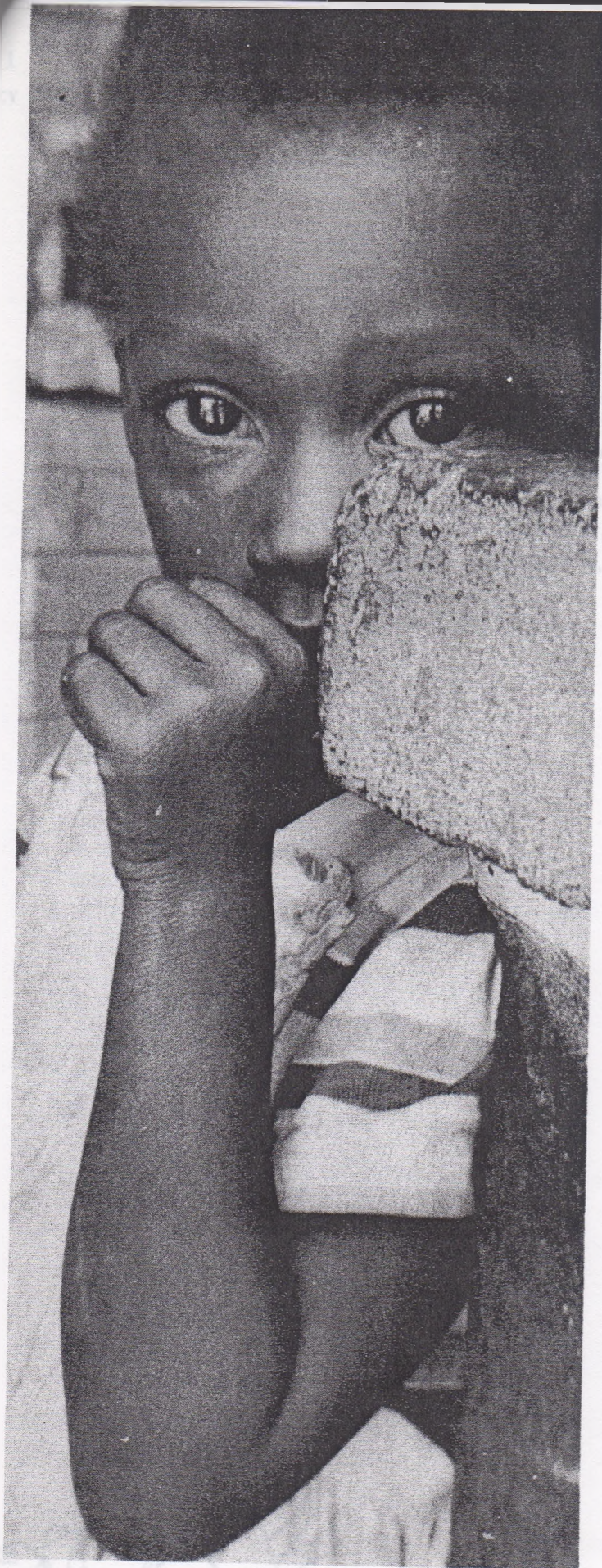
And poverty's voice is a jeer in the night—  
"You may bring another child  
Into the rat race that is your life;  
You may cut down on food  
To buy contraceptives;  
You may see your wife walk alone down some back alley  
route  
To a reluctant appointment with an unsterile knife—  
Or you may sleep alone."

And one morning shaving  
You look in the mirror—  
And never again will poverty be alien,  
For the face of poverty is not over your shoulder,  
The face of poverty is your own.

And hearing the break in your wife's voice  
At the end of a bedtime story,  
You realize that somewhere along the way  
The stock ending in your own story went wrong.  
And now you no longer ask  
That you and your wife  
Will live happily ever after—  
But simply that you  
And your wife  
And your children  
Will live.

knowing  
democracy  
is for  
all the people  
eagerly  
looking forward





Edward Wallowich

**knowing  
democracy  
is for  
all the people  
eagerly  
looking forward**



Death of a matron:

Mrs. Fitzhugh-Sykes  
 Died suddenly of a heart attack in her home  
 When her perfect gem of a maid—  
 Always smiling,  
 never complaining,  
 Who always answered with a sweet "Yes Ma'am",  
 When asked if she would like to wash the dishes,  
 scrub the floor,  
 bathe the children,  
 or clean up after the dog—  
 Today, totally unexpectedly,  
 And wholly unaccountably,  
 Answered,  
 "Hell no."



KNOWING DEMOCRACY IS FOR ALL THE PEOPLE  
 EAGERLY LOOKING FORWARD





Thinking of them...

And every bodywrecking blow  
Was a body blow at slavery.  
And every driving jarring left  
Jarred the superman theory;  
Rocking it on its foundations  
Of Aryan superiority,  
Of white supremacy  
And crushing of the weak.

I have seen lines of men  
Crossed miles from the  
Front of the nation  
That had been  
Of the old program  
Lines of men  
Facing the world

Remember that night?  
You can bet your life  
We remember that night.

They were the first  
Men

Out from the world  
Out from the world  
Out of the world  
Out of the world

Or every building was  
Shattered by the heavy sea wave of freedom

I have seen a crowd  
That gathered for words  
Behind an unbroken line  
Stand fast for the word of mounting feet  
The world was  
Alive and burning for words of truth

I have seen the lines of men  
Crossed by the sea

In the unshaking heart of a politician's heart  
I have seen the face of a soldier's heart  
And I have seen the face of a man's heart

I have seen the face of a man  
Sleeping

With eyes  
Lines of children  
Lines of children

Lines of children  
Lines of children

*Speaking of lines:*

I have seen lines of soldiers  
Come home from the war—  
Proud in the uniform of the blue-tailed fly,  
That had lately stung the flanks  
Of the old grey mare—  
Lines of freedmen who fought for their freedom,  
Free men who would die for their freedom.

I have seen lines of my people —  
Moving,  
    Spreading,  
Out from the cotton fields,  
Out from the rice fields,  
Out of the slave quarters,  
Out of the Big House —  
    Stunned  
    Silent,  
Or joyously bubbling over,  
Intoxicated by the heady new wine of freedom.

I have seen a funeral line  
That stretched for blocks,  
Behind an assassinated leader;  
Silent but for the sound of marching feet.  
Silent tearless grief —  
Above and beyond the range of sound.

I have seen solid lines of strikers  
Broken by tear gas,  
    blackjacks,  
By the down-plunging hoof of a policeman's horse.  
I have seen solid lines of strikers broken  
And I have seen them close ranks again.

I have seen lines of children,  
Skipping,  
    hopping,  
With open faces —  
    open minds;  
Lines of children,  
Eager to learn,  
Impatient to live.





toward a spring of spring

I have seen lines that moved slowly,  
    reverently,  
To the altar —  
To break bread together,  
To drink wine together,  
In brotherhood and goodwill.

I have seen so many lines —  
So many faces,  
So many feet,  
Moving,

    Halting  
Always moving;  
Lines of my people  
That deepened my pride  
In being a Negro,  
In being an American.

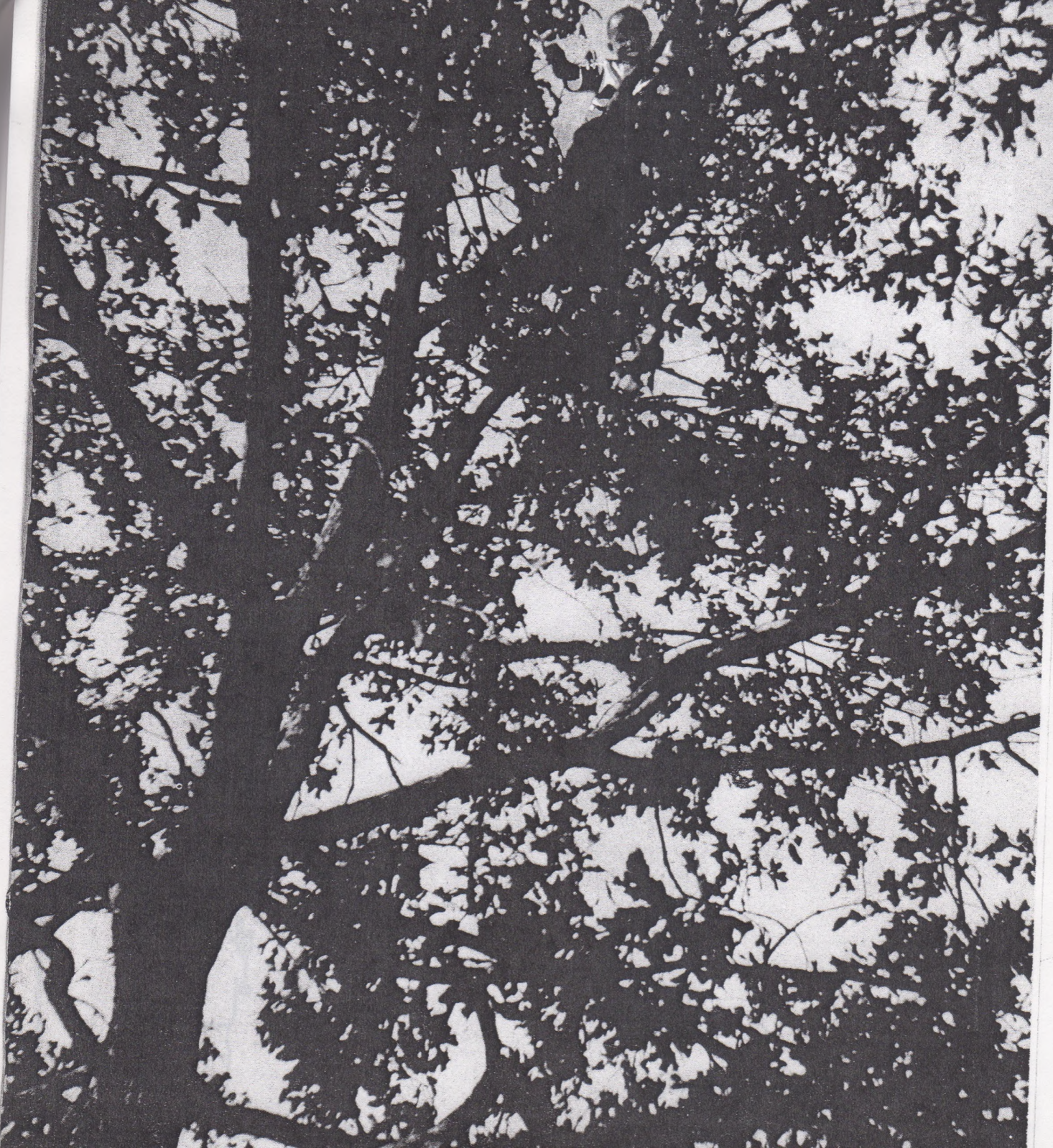
But I have seen one line  
That strengthened my faith,  
Gave food to my hope  
That America would yet have a government of the people:  
A line of voters queued up in the South—  
Negro voters,  
    Incorruptible —

For a man who may pay for his vote with his life  
Will not barter it for a handful of jingling coins.  
The back still raw from the Klansman's lash  
Will not welcome a politician's jovial slap.

I have seen many lines —  
But never a line so glorious as this,  
Never heard a marching song like this,  
So full of promise and hope for our land:  
    "I will vote if I die,  
    And if I should die —  
    I will die with the ballot in my hand."



toward a making of spring





*Spring is a small boy:*

Spring rushes in like a mischievous boy—  
grubby-faced,  
wide-eyed,  
pockets stuffed with marbles  
and minor miracles,  
Treading on plodding old Winter's heels;  
Racing the wind,  
Leaping over a stump,  
Giggling from the top of the highest tree;  
Wriggling out of his jeans,  
diving naked in the creek,  
leaving his clothing a tangled heap on the bank;  
Sneaking a smoke behind the barn,  
stringing up wire to trip up dignity,  
kicking up his heels like this year's colt;  
Bursting breathlessly into my life —  
briar scratched fingers gripping my shoulder,  
impatiently,  
eagerly urging me out —  
"Hurry up!  
we're choosing teams.  
I pick you—  
C'mon c'mon!"



Give me a child:

"It is lonely," he said,  
 "Waiting for a soldier,"  
 (thinking of the children —  
 all gone,  
 all sold down the river,  
 all but the youngest,  
 freed in death.)

"I'll be neither lonely nor afraid —  
 Only,"

she spoke with quickening emotion,  
 "Since you must go —  
 go quickly,  
 If you would remember me without tears."

Then she drew him back,  
 held him close in her arms,  
 "Give me a child,"  
 she whispered fiercely.  
 "give me a child to wear close to my heart  
 during the long winter  
 when you are gone;  
 a child that will grow as freedom grows —  
 a child born as freedom is born —  
 conceived in hope and born out of struggle.

Give me a child."

