

from A Poem for Farish Street
Margaret Walker

A Patchwork Quilt

This street is like my grandma's patchwork quilt
Kaleidoscope, appliqued with multicolored
threads of embroidery.

A golden sun, blue skies, carpeted with the green
the yellow, the red, the white, the black, the brown, and
the checkered.

Bright gingham, fine silk and satin and linen cloth
patterned patches on the faces of these people
the Chinese laundry-man

Black cobbler

Greek grocer

And down the street there used to be
a livery stable with a brown Indian man.

Now there's a taxi stand.

Once street cars passed along the side
up Capitol

to where black slaves built the Capitol
the mansion for the governor
and over there, the city hall.

They made these bricks and laid them too
not knowing some day they would meet
as Black and Tan in 1868.

This patchwork quilt is stitched with blood and tears.

This street is paved with martyred Black men's flesh and bones.

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The House of Prayer

Two undertaking parlors on this street
close to the House of God

have witnessed all the shame of Farish Street.

In another life Sister Sadie Lou

was like that gal from Madame's Fancy House
Bawdy Belle with her tight spanky-baby dress

her cigarette
her blood-red pasted lips on a clown's face
high heeled shoes
and lacquered hair
and her shoulder bag
swinging down her hips
full of tricks.
Hey gal, what you selling
on Farish Street?
And she laughs a hollow joyless sound
Oh, you know you know, I know you know –
 "Mary Mack, dressed in black
 Silver buttons
 All down her back.
 I like sugar
 I like tea
 I love pretty girls
 And they love me.
 Ask my mama
 For fifteen cents
 To see that elephant
 Jump that fence
 Jump so high
 Touched the sky
 Didn't come back
 Till the Fourth of July."

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Black Magic

There's a magic man on Farish Street
Root doctor, hoodoo man
Sells charms and potions
"Cross the river for liquor
And bring your own bottle to the party."
They are playing checkers in the twilight
Before the barber shop
Before the beauty parlor
Before the drug store where the man sells magic:

Love charms and potions and good luck pieces,
powders, and odors, and aphrodisiacs
High John the Conqueror and
Sampson Snake Root;
Across from the YW and the YMCA
Where the saints go marching in
Where the street dead-ends
And the cemetery begins
The other side of the tracks
There's a man selling lucky charms
And he sells bargains too
Choose between God and the devil
Choose between flesh and the spirit
Choose between sacred and the profane
But remember, when you sell your soul to the devil
Prepare to live in hell!
Black man you know well
Lie down with dogs and get up with fleas
There's a man going round taking names
Lawd knows they scandalizing my name
I want Jesus to make up my dying bed
when they carry my coffin down Farish Street
pigeon-toed and wrinkled nosed
Sidling up to fate.