

To Angelo Herndon

(On the Third Anniversary of his release from Fulton Towers Prison).

By WALTER LOWENFELS

Angelo now you're free I want you to know
a little girl named Angela
was born the day you went free
named for you so she'll know
what it means to have a birthday
the day we freed Angelo.
She has blue eyes and down instead of hair
and she squeals in her crib and doesn't know
why we call her Angela
doesn't know the cells
the prisoners' songs—the chains
the bars—the hates—the long slow
—battles through the years
the million names we signed
to give her a name that's free.

Who are the winners Angelo?
In Marakesh where the Arab kids
sit in the sun all day
pick flies from their eyelids
till evening comes
and put jasmine in the hair?
In the mills—on the streets
in the sharecroppers' cells
who says Yes to the Steel's No?
Who are the winners in the cribs?
Who are the yes-sayers Angelo?

Angela cries for milk
like babies everywhere at feeding time
and doesn't think
18 years on a chain gang go slow
and how many years do we win?
when we win back 18 for Angelo?
and how many Mooneys
we have still to go?
Who are the winners? But say
in the cribs—in the jails—in the tombs
the people have no losers Angelo.

Once we broke the Bastile
and the kings of Miletus also fell
and we know the catacombs
and all the bones and we know
the stones the pharoahs hide in
as we piled the sphinx by sphinx
ten thousand years ago.
And we count them
closer than Egyptians counted stars
to clock the rise and fall of floods
that made their corn wither and grow
and we know
the years it took and what it took
to move
18 years and the chains from Angelo.

We know a tide Egyptians didn't dream:
Of all the Niles we churn up in our blood
and we know it moves
among the rise and fall of days and days
closer to the season of our change.
And we know it takes
balmy days that fool us in winter
and freezes that comes sometimes in spring
for the flood of all our blood
to break and break
human and inhuman chains.

We called her Angela
for you
and the others we make free.

And others have other names
all clocking the blood the people know
and the people know by cribs and graves
all the life and death it takes
to free each dionysus of the age.

—From "Steel," a book of poems by Walter Lowenfels.