Twenty Years Later

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Twenty Years Later

Holly Near

When the students at Kent State were killed and then the violence and killings later the next week at Jackson State, I was doing Hair on Broadway in New York City. Hair was an antiwar musical reflecting the discontent and confusion that invaded society as a result of violence and racism. We protested the Kent murders the evening of May fourth by refusing to sing the finale, “Let the Sun Shine In,” and instead invited the audience to participate in a silent vigil. A few years later, I was invited to write and sing a song for a Kent State memorial at which I joined Ron Kovic, Jane Fonda, Dan Ellsberg, Judy Collins, and many other long-time activists who gathered there. The song has grown over the years, new verses being added as violence continues to interrupt human potential.

Students in our country, at Kent and Jackson State
Shot down by nameless fire one early day in May
People cried out angry,
“You should have shot more of them down!”
But you can’t bury youth my friend
We grow the whole world round.

And it could have been me
But instead it was you
So I’ll keep doing the work you were doing as if I were two
I’ll be a student of life, a singer of song
A farmer of food and the righter of wrong
It could have been me but instead it was you
And it may be me dear sisters and brothers before we are through
But if you can die for freedom
Freedom, freedom, freedom
If you can die for freedom I can too

The junta broke the fingers of Victor Jara’s hands
Said to the gentle poet play your guitar now if you can
Victor started singing until they brought his body down
You can kill that man but not his song
Because it’s sung the whole world round
And it could have been me
But instead it was you
So I’ll keep doing the work you were doing as if I were two
I’ll be a student of life, a singer of song
A farmer of food and the righter of wrong
It could have been me but instead it was you
And it may be me dear sisters and brothers before we are through
But if you can sing for freedom
Freedom, freedom, freedom
If you can sing for freedom I can too

Woman in the jungle so many miles away
Studies late into the night, defends a village in the day
Although her skin is golden like mine will never be
Her song is heard and I know the words
And I’ll sing them till she is free

And it could have been me
But instead it was you
So I’ll keep doing the work you were doing as if I were two
I’ll be a student of life, a singer of song
A farmer of food and the righter of wrong
It could have been me but instead it was you
And it may be me dear sisters and brothers before we are through
But if you can live for freedom
Freedom, freedom, freedom
If you can live for freedom I can too

One night in Oklahoma, Karen Silkwood died
Because she had some secrets that big companies wanted to hide
There is talk of nuclear safety and talk of national pride
But we all know it is a death machine and that’s why Karen died

And it could have been me
But instead it was you
So I’ll keep doing the work you were doing as if I were two
I’ll be a student of life, a singer of song
A farmer of food and the righter of wrong
It could have been me but instead it was you
And it may be me dear sisters and brothers before we are through
But if you can die for freedom
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Women shot in Montreal by a man so full of rage
Makes me think of ancient time, back in the Middle Ages
This was not a single incident, this was not a one time tragedy
People all around the world must fight misogyny

And it could have been me
But instead it was you
So I'll keep doing the work you were doing as if I were two
I'll be a student of life, a singer of song
A farmer of food and the righter of wrong
It could have been me but instead it was you
And it may be me dear sisters and brothers before we are through
But if you can fight for freedom
Freedom, freedom, freedom
If you can fight for freedom I can too

The songs of Nicaragua and El Salvador
Will long outlast the singers who face the guns at war
They sing at the line of fire
And they sing from a fire within
All across the land the poets stand
El pueblo unido jamás sera vencido.

And it could have been me
But instead it was you
So I'll keep doing the work you were doing as if I were two
I'll be a student of life, a singer of song
A farmer of food and the righter of wrong
It could have been me but instead it was you
And it may be me dear sisters and brothers before we are through
But if you can die for freedom
Freedom, freedom, freedom
If you can die for freedom I can too
West stairwell entrance to Alexander Hall, a women's dormitory, where Jackson police and Mississippi highway patrolmen fired on a crowd of black students. Photo © by David Doggett.