DAUGHTER OF EARTH

A Novel by

AGNES SMEDLEY

Foreword by ALICE WALKER

Afterword by NANCY HOFFMAN

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Cover photograph of Agnes Smedley (c. 1925) provided by Tillie Olsen.
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Foreword

Another Singing Tree

Pour O pour that parting soul in song,
O pour it in the sawdust glow of night,
Into the velvet pine-smoke air to-night,
And let the valley carry it along.
And let the valley carry it along.

. . . . . .

O Negro slaves, dark purple ripened plums,
Squeezed, and bursting in the pine-wood air,
Passing, before they stripped the old tree bare
One plum was saved for me, one seed becomes

An everlasting song, a singing tree . . .

JEAN TOOMER, "Song of the Son"

Daughter of Earth is a precious, priceless book. In it Agnes Smedley lays bare her heart and soul in an effort to understand and heal her life. In the process, she—poor, white, nearly slave-class in the "free," "democratic" United States where all *whites* at least are alleged to have an equal chance at "making it"—connects herself, as if there were no other options, to all people of her class and vision, regardless of color or sex. It is a remarkably rare affirmation.

Agnes Smedley was born in the early 1890s in the "rolling, stony" hills (as she describes them) of north-

ern Missouri to parents who, no matter how hard they worked, remained desperately poor. A farmer in Missouri, a miner in the Rockefeller mines of Colorado, a jack-of-all-trades in places unknown, her father, good-looking, part American Indian, romantic—in his youth—worked "like a slave" much of his life, until futility and alcoholism broke him. Agnes's mother, beautiful, with lovely "blue-black" eyes, worked so hard at the washboard cleaning other people's clothing (and deserted for long periods by Agnes's often abusive father) that her hands became large, swollen, "almost black." Agnes's stylish Aunt Helen became a prostitute, feeding and clothing her sister and her sister's children (Agnes among them) from the money she earned on her back.

This is a profoundly harsh story, not for those who want beauty separate from struggle, or who, indeed, feel it is possible. Yet it is the true story (give or take a few minor changes, deletions, or embellishments) of one woman's life. Marie Rogers of *Daughter of Earth* is Agnes Smedley, and through her story we glimpse the stories of countless others who could not speak, and who, in any event, were never intended to be heard. Indeed, the people that she writes about with such passionate memory would be surprised, I think, to realize how indelibly their every activity was imprinted on the young writer-to-be, who appears to have recorded every nuance of their personalities as well as her own. This acuteness of perception (similar to that which women experience during the monthly crisis of menstruation, but sustained over dozens of years) is, I am convinced, one of the cruelest products of poverty, for it is in fact an indication of unrelieved

pain, a sign of an extremely loving and sensitive soul—virtually helpless before the forces destroying all around it—being tortured to death.

But some of us are given art to save our lives; a skill or craft with which to throw ourselves a rope. The creation of this book was certainly one such rope for Agnes. On it she swung all the way to China and the second half of a committed, revolutionary life.

Daughter of Earth is another of those "plums" of which Jean Toomer wrote, just as Agnes represents what Toomer called "the new race evolving in America: the American race," by which is meant all of those, black and white, who choose to acknowledge the full range of their ancestry, not simply the "black" or the "white." Agnes Smedley's affirmation of her father's American Indian ancestry helped her understand better not only her father, but herself, and she was therefore more easily able to feel a kinship with all the peoples, colored and not, of the world. Her presence became a "plum" and a "seed" among the Indians she befriended (and on whose behalf she suffered and went to jail) in the East Indian Freedom movement, as well as to the "red" Chinese beside whom she joyfully stood in China's fight for independence.

Hopefully it will be through Agnes's "tree" and "trees" like it—and not through the U. S. military—that poor countries around the world will finally know us. Agnes Smedley never forgot the hungers and humiliations of her childhood, the oppression of her parents, the snuffing out of her brothers by the exploitation of the American capitalist system, or her own struggle to remember and to affirm them, even as she fought against falling victim to the poverty that

eradicated them, herself. Everywhere she went she saw herself, her family, her class, her own people's *condition*. Her spirit was darkened at times by all the light in others she saw blotted out. Yet poverty in Chinese or Hindi or black folk speech was recognized as the same language by her; she spoke (and understood) it fluently. This ability then, so far from the capacity of most U. S. white women and men, became for her the gift concealed in the wrappings of pain.

She was a citizen of the planet.

In the cemetery for Chinese revolutionaries outside Beijing where she is buried, "A Friend of the Chinese People" engraved on her tombstone, there are innumerable bright and cheerful hollyhocks. A branch of one had fallen the day I was there in 1982. One pink bloom was left on the ground which I placed on her grave. It was with tears and singing that I did this. It is hard to imagine a more battered, resilient, heroic sister than this woman. Agnes Smedley was a poor white woman who, all her life, continued to think, to act, to write like one. I recognize in her a matriot of my own country.

ALICE WALKER

DAUGHTER OF EARTH

Part 1

Before me stretches a Danish sea. Cold, gray, limitless. There is no horizon. The sea and the gray sky blend and become one. A bird, with outspread wings, takes its way over the depths.

For months I have been here, watching the sea—and writing this story of a human life. What I have written is not a work of beauty, created that someone may spend an hour pleasantly; not a symphony to lift up the spirit, to release it from the dreariness of reality. It is the story of a life, written in desperation, in unhappiness.

I write of the earth on which we all, by some strange circumstance, happen to be living. I write of the joys and sorrows of the lowly. Of loneliness. Of pain. And of love.

The sky before me has been as gray as my spirit these days. There is no horizon—as in my life. For thirty years I have lived, and for these years I have drunk from the wells of bitterness. I have loved, and bitterness left me for that hour. But there are times when love itself is bitter.

Now I stand at the end of one life and on the threshold of another. Contemplating. Weighing. About me lie the ruins of a life. Instead of blind faith,–directness, unbounded energy; and instead of unclearness, I now have the knowledge that comes from experience; work that is limitless in its scope and significance. Is not this enough to weigh against love?

I gaze over the waters and consider. There have been days when it seemed that my path would better lead into the sea. But now I choose otherwise.

I recall a crazy-quilt my mother once had. She made it from the remnants of gay and beautiful cotton materials. She also made a quilt of solid blue. I would stand gazing at the blue quilt for a little time, but the crazy-quilt held me for hours. It was an adventure.

I shall gather up these fragments of my life and make a crazy-quilt of them. Or a mosaic of interesting pattern–unity in diversity. This will be an adventure.

To die would have been beautiful. But I belong to those who do not die for the sake of beauty. I belong to those who die from other causes–exhausted by poverty, victims of wealth and power, fighters in a great cause. A few of us die, desperate from the pain or disillusionment of love, but for most of us "the earthquake but discloseth new fountains." For we are of the earth and our struggle is the struggle of earth.

The first thing I remember of life was a strange feeling of love and secrecy. I was a baby so young that I recall only the feeling–nothing else. My father was holding me close to his huge body in sleep. Was it the dawn of memory . . . or was it a dream!

I must have been no more than a year old—for it was much earlier than those beautiful sunny days of my babyhood in the middle 1890's that I spent playing with my older sister Annie under a wide-spreading walnut tree down in the sun-flecked meadows. Above on the hill I heard the voice of my father, the deep beautiful voice, as he labored in the hayfields. My mother came walking down the long path, carrying two pails of water to our tiny log home on the hill. She was barefoot and the wind caught her loose-flowing calico dress and wrapped it close to her slender body.

If you went two steps beyond the well you came to a ditch shadowed by thick bushes and tall elm trees. On the further bank, far back under the clustering bushes, grew flowers so fat and velvety that a ray of sunshine withered them. They grew singly, and the blossoms hung in gentle sprays. Delicate secret thoughts of flowers they were. They were as living beings to my child soul and I talked to them as I talked to the wind in the top of the walnut tree down in the meadows.

We were very poor. But that I did not know. For all the world seemed to be just like our home—at least that world of ours that stretched for some two hundred miles across northern Missouri. The rolling, stony earth that yielded so reluctantly seemed to stretch far beyond the horizon and to touch the sky where the sun set. For us, this world was bounded on one side by the county seat and on the other by the Missouri River. The northern frontier was a town of a few hundred people. The south ended at—well, my father's imagination reached to a mysterious city called St. Joseph on the Missouri River. But then he was a man with the soul and

imagination of a vagabond. People listened to his stories, filled with color and adventure, but they did not always believe. For he was not one of them; he was almost a foreigner, in fact. His family was unknown to our world. They were not farmers, and some said they were unsteady, unreliable—a shiftless crew; that was the Indian blood in their veins . . . you never could trust foreigners or Indians.

Later the horizon of our world was extended to Kansas City. That was when the whole countryside was aroused by a young cousin of mine who ran away. In three months he returned—an educated man. He had learned to be a barber . . . and he wore store clothes!

As I sit here I think vaguely of love . . . of fire . . . of the color red. Was it that red bird that came to our cherry tree . . . was it the red cloak I wore as a child . . . now I remember, it was long ago:

I was building a fire—a lovely fire. My stove was made of stones but its back was the wall of our two-room log home. I built the fire on the side near the two tall cedar trees with the swing hanging between them. It burned brilliantly and beautifully, and would have been still more beautiful if my mother had not found it and tapped me on the head with her steel thimble. She was always tapping me with a hard steel thimble that aroused all my hatred. My beautiful fires, my glorious fires that she stamped out when she found them . . . it was like stamping out something within me . . . when the flame flared up it was so warm and friendly! Now I know the spiritual link between fire and the instinct of love. But my mother did not know it. She had gone

only to the sixth grade in school. My father did not know—he had gone only through the third: a man didn't need more, he said. Education was only for women and men who were dudes.

I remember my mother's thimble taps, and I remember a tough little switch that cut like a knife into the flesh. Why she whipped me so often I do not know. I doubt if she knew. But she said that I built fires and that I lied. What business that was of hers I was unable to see. As the years of her unhappy married life increased, as more children arrived, she whipped me more and more. At first I did not know that I could sometimes hit back at a person who deliberately struck me; but as time passed I learned that only by virtue of her size she had the power to do what she would with me. I longed to grow up.

She developed a method in her whippings: standing with her switch in her hand, she would order me to come before her. I would plead or cry or run away. But at last I had to come. Without taking hold of me, she forced me to stand in one spot of my own will, while she whipped me on all sides. Afterwards, when I continued to sob as children do, she would order me to stop or she would "stomp me into the ground." I remember once that I could not and with one swoop she was upon me—over the head, down the back, on my bare legs, until in agony and terror I ran from the house screaming for my father. Yet what could I say to my father—I was little and could not explain. And he would not believe.

My mother continued to say that I lied. But I did not know it. I was never clear. What was truth and what was

fancy I could not know. To me, the wind in the tree tops really carried stories on its back; the red bird that came to our cherry tree really told me things; the fat, velvety flowers down in the forest laughed and I answered; the little calf in the field held long conversations with me.

But at last I learned to know what a lie was: to induce my mother to stop beating me I would lie—I would say, yes, I had lied and was sorry, and then she would whip me for having withheld the admission so long. As time went on, to avoid a whipping, I learned to tell her only the things I thought she wanted to hear.

"I have but one child who is stubborn and a liar, and that is Marie," she would tell strangers or neighbors. At first I was humiliated to tears; later I became hardened; later still I accepted it as a fact and did not even try to deny it.

It has been one of the greatest struggles in my life to learn to tell the truth. To tell something not quite true became almost an instinct. In pain and tears I have had to unlearn all that my mother beat into my unformed mind. It was difficult for her to beat my need of her love out of me. It took years, for with the least return of kindness in her my love swept back. I see now that she and my father, and the conditions about us, perverted my love and my life. They made me believe I was an evil creature . . . I accepted that as I accepted the statement that I lied; for they seemed infallible. Still there are tears I have never forgotten . . . childish tears that are said to have no meaning, and pain that children are said to forget. I am weary of memories of tears and pain.

In the west a deep blue cloud was rising and riding on the wind in our direction. It became black and a sinister yellow streak in the center grew and swept onward with it. In terror we watched the yellow streak—my older sister Annie, six, my toddling baby sister Beatrice, and I; for the yellow streak meant danger. A cyclone was coming.

My father and mother were not at home. I had been building another fire behind the house when Annie's cry had interrupted me. She started to drag us across the big cornfield to a farmhouse far away, but suddenly she stood still and screamed with joy. We looked: there, turning a distant curve and sweeping down the long white lane my father and mother came, riding the two snow-white horses of which my father was so proud. Down the lane, faster than the approaching storm they came, and I heard the drum of the horses' flying feet on the hard white road. It grew louder and louder. They swung in at the gate, dashed up to the door, my mother sprang from the saddle and my father, without halting, dashed away with the horses to the stable.

In a few moments we were in the underground cave, my father following with mattresses, feather beds, blankets and an ax. My mother was screaming to him to bring the new sewing machine and the clock—her two most valued possessions—and to bar the door of the house. The wind before the approaching storm had already reached us. My father rushed down the steps, drew the cave door down against the flat earth and bolted it. Then we waited.

The cave was lighted only by a lantern. About us hung the damp odor of earth, of jars of canned fruits, of

melons, apples, sweet butter and thick cream in crocks. It was just like going to a picnic to have a cyclone like this and to lie down in the soft warm featherbed and smell and hear and see and feel everything!

There came a great roaring, as of rain and wind, and something fell against the cave door.

"Be quiet," said my father to my mother. "If we're buried, I've got the ax."

"Suppose somethin' falls on the air-hole?" and she glanced up at the little wooden air escape in the middle of the cave roof.

"I'll cut us out, I'm tellin' you. There ain't no need losin' your head until somethin' happens."

I listened to his voice and knew that I could put him up against any cyclone that existed.

The roaring continued. My father's voice came from the passage leading up the steps to the door. "It ain't no cyclone"; and he unlocked the door and peered through the crack. "The house's still standin'. The cedars break the wind." A long silence. "The wind's goin' down. There ain't no danger."

"You never can tell."

"I know. I know the cyclone that struck St. Joe. It sucked up cattle an' horses in it, an' men an' houses an' fences, an' set 'em down miles away. It cut right across country fer sixty miles an' they tried to dynamite it to break it up. You could see it comin' fer miles, a long black funnel . . . it sucked up a smokehouse in one place an' left the house, ten feet away, standin' as clean as a whistle! I think there must 'a' been well nigh a hundert people lost in that there cyclone."