

Before the Bread

2-part or 4-part treble choir



Elizabeth Alexander

Seafarer Press

*Before the bread the mill,
Before the mill the grain,
Before the grain, the sun and rain,
The beauty of God's will.*

English folk blessing



When setting a pre-existing lyric to music, I typically refrain from changing, omitting or “modernizing” words. So you can imagine my dismay when I discovered that I had accidentally substituted the word “bread” for the word “flour” when setting the following folk blessing:

*Before the flour the mill,
Before the mill the grain,
Before the grain, the sun and rain,
The beauty of God's will.*

I found myself strongly resisting the correction, for I had become thoroughly attached to the sound of the word “bread.” Could I leave the mistaken word unchanged, I wondered, since this was after all a folk blessing?

I decided to delve deeper, and soon discovered that I was just one in a long line of liberty-takers! My first searches yielded these three-line versions:

*Before the flour the mill,
Before the grain the earth and rain,
The beauty of God's will.*

*Before the flour the mill,
Before the mill the grain,
Before the grain the sun, the earth, the rain.*

Furthermore, subsequent searches revealed that I was also not the only person to use the word “bread.” Interestingly, these versions contained alternate names for God as well:

*Before the bread the mill,
Before the mill the grain,
Before the grain the sun and the rain,
The beauty of Nature's will.*

*Before the bread is the snowy flour,
Before the flour, the mill,
Before the mill, the field of wheat, the rain,
And the Father's will.*

So much for discovering the “original version” of this blessing! Emboldened by these various folk variations, I left my own inadvertent bread/flour word substitution unchanged.

No matter what words speak most strongly to you, I invite you to try to sing and engage with the words I chose to set, keeping in mind the universal sentiment behind this blessing.

for Jennifer Haywood

Before the Bread

2-part or 4-part treble choir*

English Folk Blessing

Elizabeth Alexander

Simply, lyrically

mp

Tutti

Be - fore the bread the mill, Be - fore the mill the___

for rehearsal only

5

Tutti

grain,___ Be - fore the grain the___ sun and rain, the beau - ty of God's

9

I/II

III/IV

A

will. Be - fore the bread the mill, Be - fore the mill the___

will. Be - fore the bread the

* Choirs wishing to sing this song in 2 parts may simply sing parts I and II, omitting parts III and IV.

Opal Palmer Adisa, poet • Paul Adams, technological hero • Stephen Alexander, lyric consultant • Ginny Allen, Agile coach and friend • The great people at American Composers Forum • Yehuda Amichai, poet • A. R. Ammons, poet • Jennifer Anderson, conductor and composer advocate • Scott Bates, poet • Abbie Betinis, initiator of collaborative endeavors • Beth Norton, conductor and composer advocate • Dennis Blubaugh, more than just a music dealer • Michael deVernon Boblett, poet • Edna Busby, my first piano teacher • Ray Bradbury, writer • Augustin Cadena, translator • Norbert Capek, minister and advocate for religious freedom • Jessica Corbett, editor • David Cummings, poet • Philip Dacey, poet • Catherine Dalton, composer and serum partner • Emily Dickinson, poet • Evelyn Dudley, poet and caregiver • Rob Eller-Isaacs, minister and composer advocate • Ralph Waldo Emerson, philosopher and poet • Louise Erdrich, writer • David Allan Evans, poet • Sophia Lyon Fahs, writer • Richard M. Fewkes, minister and writer • Pasha Gertler, poet • Jack Gallagher, composer and teacher • Paul Gerike, proofreader • Jocelyn Hagen and Michael Hagan, founders of Graphite Marketplace • Steve Harper, just about everything • Steve Harkins, web designer • Edie Hill, composer and friend • Langston Hughes, poet • Margaret and George Heald, piano technician • Karel Husa, composer and teacher • David Ignatow, poet • Kabir, mystic • Linda Kachelmeier, composer and serum partner • Ruth Palmer, conductor and composer advocate • Joan Wolf Prefontaine, poet • Paul Rardin, conductor and composer advocate • Kalidasa, poet • Steve Kaul, recording engineer • Søren Kierkegaard, philosopher and poet • Dorothy Knost, piano teacher • Ben Krywosz, artistic director of Nautilus Music-Theater • Denise Levertov, poet • George Ella Lyon, poet • Jonathan Machen, vocalist • Dawna Markova, writer • Anne Matlack, conductor and composer advocate • Nancy Menk, composer advocate • Edna St. Vincent Millay, poet • Jane Ramseyer Miller, conductor, composer, social activist • Joe Mish, conductor and composer advocate • J. David Moore, composer • Gerald Rich, poet • Carl Sandburg, poet • friend • King Sigismund III, religious reformer • Ann Silsbee, composer, poet and friend • Simon Alexander-Adams, sounding board, fellow creative, and awesome son • Steven Stucky, composer and teacher • Rabindranath Tagore, poet • Sister Peronne Marie Thibert, teacher and writer • Oliver Alexander-Adams, unconventional thinker and light of my life • Howard Thurman, civil rights leader and writer • Everyone whose work supports the Association for Unitarian Universalist Music Ministries • Charles Varney, high school choral director • Anna Vonhuben, illustrator and graphic designer • Nancy White, poet • John Greenleaf Whittier, poet • Theodore Chickering Williams, poet • Daniel Winter, pianist and teacher • Nancy Wood, poet • Yehudi Wyner, composer and teacher

**A lot of hard work
and creativity went
into bringing this
music to you...**



**...and some of it
was even mine.**

**This page has been intentionally omitted.
(You know why.) A complete perusal score may be
purchased through any music store or dealer.**

Elizabeth Alexander
Seafarer Press
The Music of Elizabeth Alexander
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I grain, Be - fore the grain the sun and rain, the beau - ty of God's

II mill, Be - fore the mill the grain, Be - fore the grain the

III Be - fore the bread the mill, Be - fore the mill the

IV Be - fore the bread the

25

C

I will, Be - fore the bread the mill, Be - fore the mill the

II sun and rain, the beau - ty of God's will. Be - fore the bread the

III grain, Be - fore the grain the sun and rain, the beau - ty of God's

IV mill, Be - fore the mill the grain, Be - fore the grain the

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**A lot of hard work
and creativity went
into bringing this
music to you...**



**...and some of it
was even mine.**

**The rest of this piece is not available online.
(You know why.) A complete perusal copy may be
purchased through any music store or dealer.**

Elizabeth Alexander

Seafarer Press

The Music of Elizabeth Alexander

www.seafarerpress.com

A special note about the phrase “God’s will”

For those of you who wince at the oft-abused phrase, “God’s will,” I’d like to share my memory of a story I heard many years ago, which was told by Rev. Max Coots in a sermon entitled, “The Rabbit, the Radish Bag, and God’s Will.” His story went something like this:

Max was walking through the woods with a friend when they spotted a dead rabbit by the path. They inspected it briefly and then walked on. Later on the same path they spotted a plastic bag that had formerly held radishes, probably discarded by a thoughtless hiker. They thought little of these discoveries until they took the same walk on subsequent days. They noticed the radish bag each time, but the rabbit’s body gradually decomposed and disappeared altogether.

Max realized that the natural order of things was what God intended – for living beings to reach the end of their days and then be folded back into the cycle of life. On the other hand, he was not at all sure that the manmade plastic radish bag was working within this natural order. In this one tiny way, *Max actually knew the will of God*. Not an arrogantly manufactured “will of God” like “God wants us to win this war” or “God wanted this child to recover from cancer.” But a true and humble glimpse of the cosmic mind, a small rare certainty in a mostly uncertain world.

Cover art: Illustration from *The Little Red Hen*,
written & illustrated by Florence White Williams (1918)



Selected Choral Music by Elizabeth Alexander

A Palette To Paint Us As We Are (Gerald Rich)
SATB, piano • SEA-014-01
SSA, piano • SEA-014-02

Beware the Winter Settin' In (Alexander)
SATB, Celtic band, opt. children's choir • SEA-139-00

Blessed Be the Flower That Triumphs (Boblett)
SATB • SEA-078-00

Cherish Your Doubt (Alexander)
SATB, piano • SEA-063-01
SSAA, piano • SEA-063-02

Die Gedanken Sind Frei (German protest song, arr.)
SATB, piano • SEA-087-00

Do Not Leave Your Cares at the Door (Norman Naylor)
SATB • SEA-071-00

Even a Fist Was Once an Open Palm (Yehuda Amichai)
SATB • SEA-026-01

Faith Is the bird that feels the light (Tagore)
SSA • SEA-068-00

Fighting Over What We Believe (Alexander)
SATB, soloists, piano • SEA-099-01

Finally On My Way To Yes (Pesha Gertler)
SSATB, piano • SEA-019-00

Folks, I'm Telling You (Langston Hughes)
SSATB, piano • SEA-027-00

Glen Song (Scott Bates)
SSATB, piano • SEA-025-00

Handles (Alexander)
SSA, piano • SEA-148-00

How To Sing Like a Planet (Alexander)
SATB, piano • SEA-105-01

If You Can Walk You Can Dance (Zimbabwean Proverb)
SAB, piano, claves • SEA-022-03
TBB, piano, claves • SEA-022-05
SSA, piano, claves • SEA-022-06
SATB, piano, claves • SEA-022-07

Immortal Love (John Greenleaf Whittier)
SATB • SEA-017-00

Infant Holy, Infant Lowly (Polish carol, arr.)
SSA • SEA-020-00

Jump! (Ray Bradbury)
SSA, string quartet • SEA-090-00

Kindling (Alexander)
SATB, chamber ensemble • SEA-123-00
SATB, piano • SEA-123-09

Let it Matter (Alexander)
SSA, piano • SEA-125-03
SATB, piano • SEA-125-04

No Other People's Children (Alexander)
1-4 part choir, soloist, piano • SEA-141-03

...or a musician (Philip Dacey)
SATB, orchestra • SEA-007-00

A Palette To Paint Us As We Are (Gerald Rich)
SA, piano • SEA-014-00
SATB, piano • SEA-014-01

Praise Wet Snow Falling Early (Denise Levertov)
SATB, piano • SEA-015-00

Reasons for the Perpetuation of Slavery (Alexander)
SSAA • SEA-091-00

Same Birds (David Allen Evans)
SATB • SEA-128-00

Song of Kabir (Kabir)
SATB • SEA-119-00

The Gate is Open (Sister Peronne Marie Thibert)
SATB • SEA-097-01

They Have Freckles Everywhere (Alexander)
SSAA, piano • SEA-076-00

To Make a Prairie (Emily Dickinson)
SSA, piano • SEA-016-00

We Lift Up Our Hearts (Richard Fewkes)
Unison children's choir, SATB, piano • SEA-021-00

We Remember Them (Sylvan Kamens, Jack Riemer)
SATB, piano • SEA-083-01

Where there Is Light in the Soul (Chinese proverb)
SAB • SEA-070-00
SATB • SEA-070-01
SSA • SEA-070-02
TBB • SEA-062-03

When the Song of the Angels Is Stilled (Thurman)
SATB • SEA-062-00
TTBB • SEA-062-02
SSAA • SEA-062-04
SATB, flute • SEA-062-05

Why I Pity the Woman Who Never Spills (Prefontaine)
SSAA • SEA-058-00