

# Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child

## African-American Spiritual

arranged for SATB Choir and Orchestra

by Douglas Mears

### Instrumentation

Flute

Alto Flute

Oboe

English Horn

2 Clarinets in A

Bassoon

Timpani

Percussion

Suspended Cymbal, Triangle, Tam-tam, Bass Drum, Chimes

Harp

SATB Choir

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Cello

Contrabass

### Notes

With genius and grace, African-American slaves transformed bitter human experience into a beautiful art form called the “spiritual.” One of the most poignant spirituals, “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child,” was likely borne out of heart-wrenching tragedy: the forcible separation of parent from child.

As Harriet Jacobs, an escaped slave, wrote: “On one of those sale days, I saw a mother lead seven children to the auction block. She knew that some of them would be taken from her; but they took all. The children were sold to a slave-trader, and their mother was bought by a man in her own town. Before night her children were all far away. She begged the trader to tell her where he intended to take them; this he refused to do.”



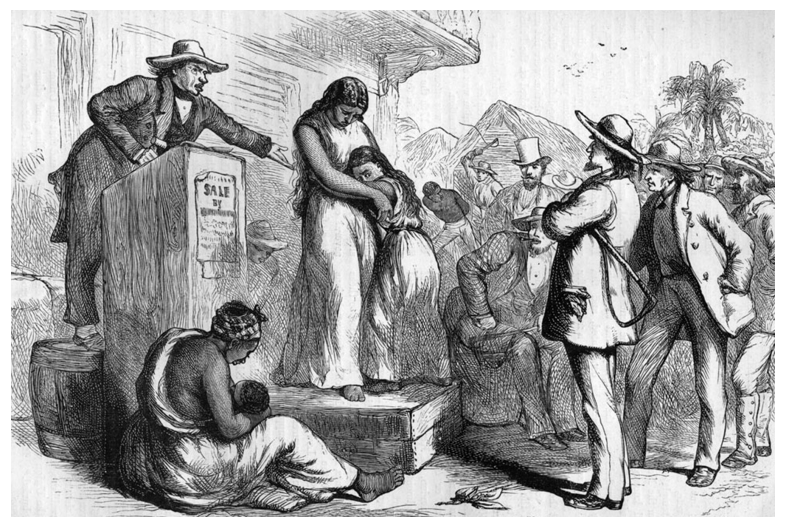
As with most African-American spirituals, the origins of this song are difficult to establish. The first citation appears in *Old Plantation Hymns* by William Barton (1861–1930). From 1880 to 1887 he lived in the South, where he witnessed enslaved people singing spirituals, “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child” in particular. Eventually he wrote the melody and words down, yet the song has survived primarily through oral tradition. “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child” first came to wide public prominence when it was performed by the Fisk Jubilee Singers in the 1870s. Audiences heard it and could not forget it. It has since been performed and recorded by countless singers and instrumentalists, from many different genres.



Like many other spirituals, this song conveys the sadness that many enslaved people felt at being such a “long way from home,” both in the sense of being far away from their native Africa and in the sense of being forcibly separated from family and friends. It can also be interpreted as a longing for death, that other Home, which many slaves saw as their only escape.

Why is “Motherless Child” so powerful? Perhaps because the music and words express deep sorrow and acknowledge utter pain, and this truthful acknowledgment can help transcend suffering. At its core, this spiritual speaks to the profound human need for love, connection, and belonging, and it affirms the power of the human spirit to endure and overcome hardship.

This haunting, new setting for SATB choir and orchestra highlights the spiritual’s sense of loneliness and despair. The repetition of the line “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child” underscores the pain of being lost and alone, amidst an irrepressible hope in the face of adversity.



### Text

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child, a long way from home  
Sometimes I feel like I’m almost done, a long way from home.