

OUT OF THE DUST

KAREN HESSE

WINNER OF THE NEWBERY MEDAL

Beginning: August 1920

As summer wheat came ripe,

so did I,

born at home, on the kitchen floor.

Ma crouched,

barefoot, bare bottomed

over the swept boards,

because that's where Daddy said it'd be best.

I came too fast for the doctor,

bawling as soon as Daddy wiped his hand around

inside my mouth.

To hear Ma tell it,

I hollered myself red the day I was born.

Red's the color I've stayed ever since.

Daddy named me Billie Jo.

He wanted a boy.

Instead,

he got a long-legged girl

with a wide mouth

and cheekbones like bicycle handles.

He got a redheaded, heckle-faced, narrow-hipped girl

with a fondness for apples

and a hunger for playing fierce piano.

From the earliest I can remember

I've been restless in this

little Panhandle shack we call home,

always getting in Ma's way with my

pointy elbows, my fidgety legs.

By the summer I turned nine Daddy had

given up about having a boy.

He tried making me do.

I look just like him,

I can handle myself most everywhere he puts me,

even on the tractor,

though I don't like that much.

Ma tried having other babies.

It never seemed to go right, except with me.

But this morning

Ma let on as how she's expecting again.

Other than the three of us

there's not much family to speak of.

Daddy, the only boy Kelby left

since Grandpa died

from a cancer

that ate up the most of his skin,

and Aunt Ellis,

almost fourteen years older than Daddy

and living in Lubbock,

a ways south of here,

and a whole world apart

to hear Daddy tell it.

And Ma, with only Great-uncle Floyd,

old as ancient Indian bones,

and mean as a rattler,

rotting away in that room down in Dallas.

I'll be nearly fourteen

just like Aunt Ellis was when Daddy was born

by the time this baby comes.

Wonder if Daddy'll get his boy this time?

January 1934

Rabbit Battles

Mr. Noble and

Mr. Romney have a bet going

as to who can kill the most rabbits.

It all started at the rabbit drive last Monday
over to Sturgis
when Mr. Noble got himself worked up
about the damage done to his crop by jacks.
Mr. Romney swore he'd had more rabbit trouble
than anyone in Cimarron County.
They pledged revenge on the rabbit population;
wagering who could kill more.
They ought to just shut up.
Betting on how many rabbits they can kill.
Honestly!
Grown men clubbing bunnies to death.
Makes me sick to my stomach.
I know rabbits eat what they shouldn't,
especially this time of year when they could hop
halfway to Liberal
and still not find food,

but Miss Freeland says

if we keep

plowing under the stuff they ought to be eating,

what are they supposed to do?

Mr. Noble and

Mr. Romney came home from Sturgis Monday

with twenty rabbits apiece. A tie.

It should've stopped there. But

Mr. Romney wasn't satisfied.

He said,

"Noble cheated.

He brought in rabbits somebody else killed."

And so the contest goes on.

Those men,

they used to be best friends.

Now they can't be civil with each other.

They scowl as they pass on the street.

I'm scowling too,
but scowling won't bring the rabbits back.
They're all skinned and cooked and eaten by now.
At least they didn't end up in
Romney and Noble's cook pots.
They went to families
that needed the meat.

January 1934

Losing Livie

Livie Killian moved away.
I didn't want her to go.
We'd been friends since first grade.
The farewell party was
Thursday night
at the Old Rock Schoolhouse.
Livie

had something to tease each of us about,

like Ray

sleeping through reading class,

and Hillary,

who on her speed-writing test put

an "even ton" of children

instead of an "even ten."

Livie said good-bye to each of us,

separately.

She gave me a picture she'd made of me sitting

in front of a piano,

wearing my straw hat,

an apple halfway to my mouth.

I handed Livie the memory book we'd all

filled with our different slants.

I couldn't get the muscles in my throat relaxed

enough

to tell her how much I'd miss her.

Livie

helped clean up her own party,

wiping spilled lemonade,

gathering sandwich crusts,

sweeping cookie crumbs from the floor,

while the rest of us went home

to study for semester reviews.

Now Livie's gone west,

out of the dust,

on her way to California,

where the wind takes a rest sometimes.

And I'm wondering what kind of friend I am,

wanting my feet on that road to another place,

instead of Livie's.

January 1934

Me and Mad Dog

Arley Wanderdale,
who teaches music once a week at our school,
though Ma says he's no teacher at all,
just a local song plugger,

Arley Wanderdale asked
if I'd like to play a piano solo
at the Palace Theatre on Wednesday night.

I grinned,
pleased to be asked, and said,
"That'd be all right."

I didn't know if Ma would let me.
She's an old mule on the subject of my schooling.

She says,
"You stay home on weeknights, Billie Jo."

And mostly that's what I do.

But Arley Wanderdale said,
"The management asked me to

bring them talent, Billie Jo,
and I thought of you."
"You and Mad Dog,"
Even before Mad Dog Craddock? I wondered.
Arley Wanderdale said.
Darn that blue-eyed boy
with his fine face and his
smooth voice,
twice as good
as a plowboy has any right to be.
I suspected Mad Dog had come first
to Arley Wanderdale's mind,
but I didn't get too riled.
Not so riled I couldn't say yes.

January 1934

Permission to Play

Sometimes,
when Ma is busy in the kitchen,
or scrubbing,
or doing wash,
I can ask her something in such a way
I annoy her just enough to get an answer,
but not so much I get a no.
That's a way I've found of gaining what I want,
by catching Ma off guard,
especially when I'm after permission to play piano.
Right out asking her is no good.
She always gets testy about me playing,
even though she's the one who truly taught me.
Anyway, this time I caught her in the
slow stirring of biscuits,
her mind on other things,
maybe the baby growing inside her, I don't know,

but anyhow,
she was distracted enough,
I was determined enough,
this time I got just what I wanted.
Permission to play at the Palace.

January 1934

On Stage

When I point my fingers at the keys,

the music

springs straight out of me.

Right hand

playing notes sharp as

tongues,

telling stories while the

smooth

buttery rhythms back me up

on the left.

Folks sway in the

Palace aisles

grinning and stomping and

out of breath,

and the rest, eyes shining,

fingers snapping,

feet tapping. It's the best

I ever felt

playing hot piano,

sizzling with

Mad Dog,

Swinging with the Black Mesa Boys,

or on my own,

crazy

I've ever felt,

sizzling with
swinging with the Black Mesa Boys,
crazy,
pestering the keys.

That is

heaven.

Playing piano

can be.

January 1934

Birthday for F.D.R.

I played so well

on Wednesday night,

Arley put his arm across my shoulder

and asked me to come and

perform at the President's birthday ball.

Ma can't say no to this one.

It's for President Roosevelt.

Not that Mr. Roosevelt will actually be there,
but the money collected at the ball,
along with balls all over the country,
will go,
in the President's name,
to the Warm Springs Foundation,
where Mr. Roosevelt stayed once when he was sick.

Someday,

I plan to play for President Franklin Delano
Roosevelt himself.

Maybe I'll go all the way to the White House in
Washington, D.C.

In the meantime,

it's pretty nice

Arley asking me to play twice,

for Joyce City.

January 1934

Not Too Much To Ask

We haven't had a good crop in three years,
Not since the bounty of '31,
and we're all whittled down to the bone these days,
even Ma, with her new round belly,
but still
when the committee came asking,
Ma donated:
three jars of apple sauce
and
some cured pork,
and a
feed-sack nightie she'd sewn for our coming baby.

February 1934

Mr. Hardly's Money Handling

It was Daddy's birthday
and Ma decided to bake him a cake.
There wasn't
money enough for anything like a real present.
Ma sent me to fetch the extras
with fifty cents she'd been hiding away.
"Don't go to Joyce City, Billie," she said.
"You can get what we need down Hardly's store."
I slipped the coins into my sweater pocket, the
pocket without the hole,
thinking about how many sheets of new music
fifty cents would buy.
Mr. Hardly glared
when the Wonder Bread door
banged shut behind me.
He squinted as I creaked across the wooden floor.
Mr. Hardly was in the habit

of charging too much for his stale food,
and he made bad change when he thought
he could get away with it.

I squinted back at him as I gave him Ma's order.

Mr. Hardly's

been worse than normal

since his attic filled with dust

and collapsed under the weight.

He hired folks for the repairs,

And argued over every nail and every

little minute.

The whole place took

shoveling for days before he could

open again and

some stock was so bad it

had to be thrown away.

The stove clanked in the corner

as Mr. Hardly filled Ma's order.

I could smell apples,

ground coffee, and peppermint.

I sorted through the patterns on the feed bags,

sneezed dust,

blew my nose.

When Mr. Hardly finished sacking my things,

I paid the bill,

and tucking the list in my pocket along with the

change,

hurried home,

so Ma could bake the cake before Daddy came in.

But after Ma emptied the sack,

setting each packet out on the

oilcloth, she counted her change

and I remembered with a sinking feeling

that I hadn't kept an eye on

Mr. Hardly's money handling,
and Mr. Hardly had cheated again.
Only this time he'd cheated himself, giving us
four cents extra.
So while Ma mixed a cake,
I walked back to Mr. Hardly's store,
back through the dust,
back through the Wonder Bread door,
and thinking about the secondhand music
in a moldy box at the shop in Joyce City,
music I could have for two cents a sheet,
I placed Mr. Hardly's overpayment on the counter
and turned to head back home.
Mr. Hardly cleared his throat and
I wondered for a moment
if he'd call me back to offer a piece of peppermint
or pick me out an apple from the crate,

but he didn't,
and that's okay.

Ma would have thrown a fit
if I'd taken a gift from him.

February 1934

Fifty Miles South of Home

In Amarillo,
wind
blew plate-glass windows in,
tore electric signs down,
ripped wheat
straight out of the ground.

February 1934

Rules of Dining

Ma has rules for setting the table.
I place plates upside down,
grass bottom side up,

napkins folded over forks, knives, and spoons.

When dinner is ready,

we sit down together

and Ma says,

"Now."

We shake out our napkins,

spread them on our laps,

and flip over our grasses and plates,

exposing neat circles,

round comments

on what life would be without dust.

Daddy says,

"The potatoes are peppered plenty tonight, Polly,"

and

"Chocolate milk for dinner, aren't we in clover!"

when really all our pepper and chocolate,

it's nothing but dust.

I heard word from Livie Killian.

The Killians can't find work,
can't get food.

Livie's brother, Reuben, fifteen last summer,
took off, thinking to make it on his own.

I hope he's okay.

With a baby growing inside Ma,
it scares me thinking, Where would we be without
somewhere to live?

Without some work to do?

Without something to eat?

At least we've got milk. Even if we have to chew it.

February 1934

Breaking Drought

After seventy days
of wind and sun,

of wind and clouds,
of wind and sand,
after seventy days,
of wind and dust,
a little
rain
came.

February 1934

Dazzled

In the kitchen she is my ma,
in the barn and the fields she is my daddy's wife,
but in the parlor Ma is something different.
She isn't much to look at,
so long and skinny,
her teeth poor,
her dark hair always needing a wash, but
from the time I was four,

I remember being dazzled by her
whenever she played the piano.

Daddy bought it, an old Cramer,
his wedding gift to her.

She came to this house and found gaps in the walls,
a rusty bed, no running water,
and that piano,
gleaming in the corner.

Daddy gets soft eyes, standing behind her while she
plays.

I want someone to look that way at me.

On my fifth birthday,

Ma sat me down beside her
and started me to reading music,
started me to playing.

I'm not half so good as Ma.

She can pull Daddy into the parlor

even after the last milking, when he's so beat

he barely knows his own name

and all he wants

is a mattress under his bones.

You've got to be something~

to get his notice that time of day,

but Ma can.

I'm not half so good with my crazy playing

as she is with her fine tunes and her

fancy finger work.

But I'm good enough for Arley, I guess.

March 1934

Debts

Daddy is thinking

of taking a loan from Mr. Roosevelt and his men,

to get some new wheat planted

where the winter crop has spindled out and died.

Mr. Roosevelt promises

Daddy won't have to pay a dime

till the crop comes in.

Daddy says,

"I can turn the fields over,

start again.

It's sure to rain soon.

Wheat's sure to grow."

Ma says, "What if it doesn't?"

Daddy takes off his hat,

roughs up his hair,

puts the hat back on.

"Course it'll rain," he says.

Ma says, "Bay,

it hasn't rained enough to grow wheat in

three years."

Daddy looks like a light brewing.

He takes that red face of his out to the barn,
to keep from feuding with my pregnant ma.

I ask Ma

how,

after all this time,

Daddy still believes in rain.

"Well, it rains enough," Ma says,

"now and again,

to keep a person hoping.

But even if it didn't

your daddy would have to believe.

It's coming on spring,

and he's a farmer."

March 1934

State Tests

When I got home I told Ma

our school scored higher than the
whole state on achievement tests and
I scored top of eighth grade.

Ma nodded.

"I knew you could."

That's all she said.

She was proud,

I could tell.

But she didn't

coo like Mad Dog's ma. Or

go on

like Mrs. Killian used to do.

Daddy says,

"That's not your ma's way."

But I wish it was.

I wish she'd give me a little more to hold on to than

"I knew you could."

Instead she makes me feel like she's just
taking me in like I was
so much flannel dry on the line.

March 1934

Fields of Flashing Light

I heard the wind rise,
and stumbled from my bed,
down the stairs,
out the front door,
into the yard.

The night sky kept flashing,
lightning danced down on its spindly legs.

I sensed it before I: knew it was coming.

I heard it,
smelled it,
tasted it.

Dust.

While Ma and Daddy slept,
the dust came,
tearing up fields where the winter wheat,
set for harvest in June,
stood helpless.

I watched the plants,
surviving after so much drought and so much wind,
I watched them fry,
or
flatten,
or blow away,
like bits of cast-off rags.

It wasn't until the dust turned toward the house,
like a fired locomotive,
and I fled,
barefoot and breathless, back inside,
it wasn't until the dust

hissed against the windows,
until it ratcheted the roof,
that Daddy woke.

He ran into the storm,
his overalls half-hooked over his union suit.

"Daddy!" I called. "You can't stop dust.

Ma told me to

cover the beds,

push the scatter rugs against the doors,

dampen the rags around the windows.

Wiping dust out of everything,

she made coffee and biscuits,

waiting for Daddy to come in.

Sometime after four,

rubbing low on her back,

Ma sank down into a chair at the kitchen table
and covered her face.

Daddy didn't come back for hours,
not
until the temperature dropped so low,
it brought snow.

Ma and I sighed, grateful,
staring out at the dirty flakes,
but our relief didn't last.

The wind snatched that snow right off the fields,
leaving behind a sea of dust,
waves and
waves and
waves of
dust,
rippling across our yard.

Daddy came in,
he sat across from Ma and blew his nose.
Mud streamed out.

He coughed and spit out
mud.

If he had cried,
his tears would have been mud too,
but he didn't cry.

And neither did Ma.

March 1934

Spring 1934

Tested by Dust

While we sat
taking our six-weeks test,
the wind rose
and the sand blew
right through the cracks in the schoolhouse wall,
right through the gaps around the window grass,
and by the time the tests were done,
each and every one of us

was coughing pretty good and we all
needed a bath.

I hope we get bonus points
for testing in a dust storm.

April 1934

Banks

Ma says,

everything we lost

when the banks closed

'cause they didn't have enough cash to go around,

all the money that's ours

is coming back to us in full.

Good.

Now we have money for a doctor

when the baby comes.

April 1934

Beat Wheat

County Agent Dewey

had some pretty bad news.

One quarter of the wheat is lost:

blown away or withered up.

What remains is little more than

a wisp of what it should be.

And every day we have no rain,

more wheat dies.

County Agent Dewey says, "Soon

there won't be enough wheat

for seed to plant next fall."

The piano is some comfort in all this.

I go to it and I forget the dust for hours,

testing my long fingers on wild rhythms,

but Ma slams around in the kitchen when I play

and after a while she sends me to the store.

Joe De La Flor doesn't see me pass him by;

he rides his fences, dazed by dust.

I wince at the sight of his rib-thin cattle.

But he's not even seeing them.

I look at Joe and know our future is drying up

and blowing away with the dust.

April 1934

Give Up on Wheat

Ma says,

"Try putting in a pond, Bayard.

We can fill it off the windmill.

We've got a good well."

Daddy grumbles, "The water'll seep

back into the ground

as fast as I can pump it, Poi.

We'll dry up our well

and then we'll have nothing."

"Plant some other things, then," Ma says.

"Try cotton,
sorghum. If we plant the fields in different crops,
maybe some will do better,
better than wheat."

Daddy says,

"No.

It has to be wheat.

I've grown it before.

I'll grow it again."

But Ma says, "Can't you see

what's happening, Bayard?

The wheat's not meant to be here."

And Daddy says,

"What about those apple trees of yours, Poi?

You think they are?

Nothing needs more to drink than those two.

But you wouldn't hear of leveling your apples,

would you?"

Ma is bittering. I can see it in her mouth.

"A pond would work," she says,

sounding crusty and stubborn.

And Daddy says, "Look it, Poi, who's the farmer?

You or me?"

Ma says,

"Who pays the bills?"

"No one right now," Daddy says.

Ma starts to quaking but she won't let Daddy see.

Instead, she goes out to the chickens

and

her anger,

simmering over like a pot in an empty kitchen,

boils itself down doing chores.

April 1934

What I Don't Know

My teacher, Miss Freeland,

Is singing

at the Shrine

along with famous

opera stars

from all around the country

in a play called

Madame Butterfly.

I've never heard of that play.

"Most everyone's heard of Madame Butterfly,

Mad Dog says.

How does that

singing plowboy know something I don't?

And how much more is out there

most everyone else has heard of

except me?

April 1934

Apple Blossoms

Ma

has been nursing these two trees

for as long as I can remember.

In spite of the dust,

in spite of the drought,

because of Ma's stubborn care,

these trees are

thick with blossoms,

delicate and

pinky-white.

My eyes can't get enough of the sight of them.

I stand under the trees

and let the petals

fall into my hair,

a blizzard

of sweet-smelling flowers,

dropped from the boughs of the two
placed there
in the front yard by Ma
before I was born,
that she and they might bring forth fruit
into our home,
together.

May 1934

World War

Daddy was just seventeen
when he fought in the
Great War off in France.

There's not much he's willing to
say about those days, except about the poppies.

He remembers the poppies,
red on the graves of the dead.

Daddy says

that war tore France up
worse than a tornado,
worse than a dust storm,
but no matter,
the wild poppies bloomed in the trail of the fighting,
brightening the French countryside.

I wish I could see poppies
growing out of this dust.

May 1934

Apples

Ma's apple blossoms
have turned to hard green balls.

To eat them now,
so tart,
would turn my mouth inside out,
would make my stomach groan.

But in just a couple months,

after the baby is born,
those apples will be ready
and we'll make pies
and sauce
and pudding
and dumplings
and cake
and cobbler
and have just plain apples to take to school
and slice with my pocket knife
and eat one juicy piece at a time
until my mouth is clean
and fresh
and my breath is nothing but apple.

June 1934

Dust and Rain

On Sunday,

winds came,
bringing a red dust
like prairie fire,
hot and peppery,
searing the inside of my nose,
the whites of my eyes.

Roaring dust,
turning the day from sunlight to midnight.

And as the dust left,
rain came.

Rain that was no blessing.

It came too hard,
too fast,
and washed the soil away,
washed the wheat away with it.

Now

little remains of Daddy's hard work.

And the only choice he has
is to give up or
start all over again.

At the Strong ranch
they didn't get a single drop.

So who fared better?

Ma looks out the window at her apple trees.

Hard green balls have dropped to the ground.

But there are enough left;

enough

for a small harvest,

if we lose no more.

June 1934

Harvest

The combines have started moving across the fields,
bringing in wheat,
whatever has managed to grow.

Mr. Tuttle delivered the first load to town
selling it for seventy-three cents a bushel.

Not bad.

Mr. Chaffin, Mr. Haverstick, and Mr. French,
they've delivered their harvest too,
dropping it at the Joyce City grain elevator.

Daddy asked Mr. Haverstick how things looked
and Mr. Haverstick said he figures
he took eight bushels off a twenty-bushel acre.

If Daddy gets five bushels to his acre
it'll be a miracle.

June 1934

On the Road with Arley

Here's the way I figure it.

My place in the world is at the piano.

I'm earning a little money playing,
thanks to Arley Wanderdale.

He and his Black Mesa Boys have connections in
Keyes and Goodwell and Texhoma.
And every little crowd
is grateful to hear a rag or two played
on the piano
by a long-legged, red-haired girl,
even when the piano has a few keys soured by dust.

At first Ma crossed her arms
against her chest
and stared me down,
hard-jawed and sharp, and said I couldn't go.
But the money helped convince her,
and the compliment from Arley and his wife, Vera,
that they'd surely bring my ma along to play too,
if she wasn't so far gone with a baby coming.
Ma said
okay,

but only for the summer,
and only if she didn't hear me gripe how I was tired,
or see me dragging my back end around,
or have to call me twice upon a morning,
or find my farm chores falling down,
and only if Arley's wife, Vera, kept an eye on me.
Arley says my piano playing is good.
I play a set of songs with the word baby in the title,
like "My Baby Just Cares for Me"
and "Walking My Baby Back Home."
I picked those songs on purpose for Ma,
and the folks that come to hear Arley's band,
they like them fine.
Arley pays in dimes.
Ma's putting my earnings away I don't know where,
saving it to send me to school in a few years.
The money doesn't matter much to me.

I'd play for nothing.

When I'm with Arley's boys we forget the dust.

We are flying down the road in Arley's car,

singing,

laying our voices on top of the

beat Miller Rice plays on the back of Arley's seat,

and sometimes, Vera, up front, chirps crazy notes

with no words

and the sounds she makes seem just about amazing.

It's being part of all that,

being part of Arley's crowd I like so much,

being on the road,

being somewhere new and interesting.

We have a fine time.

And they let me play piano, too.

June 1934

Summer 1934

Hope in a Drizzle

Quarter inch of rain

is nothing to complain about.

It'll help the plants above ground,

and start the new seeds growing.

That quarter inch of rain did wonders for Ma, too,

who is ripe as a melon these days.

She has nothing to say to anyone anymore,

except how she aches for rain,

at breakfast,

at dinner,

all day,

all night,

she aches for rain.

Today, she stood out in the drizzle

hidden from the road,

and from Daddy,

and she thought from me,
but I could see her from the barn,
she was bare as a pear,
raindrops
sliding down her skin,
leaving traces of mud on her face and her long back,
trickling dark and light paths,
slow tracks of wet dust down the bulge of her belly.

My dazzling ma, round and ripe and striped
like a melon.

July 1934

Dionne Quintuplets

While the dust blew
down our road,
against our house,
across our fields,
up in Canada

a lady named Elzire Dionne
gave birth to five baby girls
all at once.

I looked at Ma,
so pregnant with one baby.

"Can you imagine five?" I said.

Ma lowered herself into a chair.

Tears dropping on her tight stretched belly,

she wept

just to think of it.

July 1934

Wild Boy of the Road

A boy came by the house today,

he asked for food.

He couldn't pay anything, but Ma set him down

and gave him biscuits

and milk.

He offered to work for his meal,

Ma sent him out to see Daddy.

The boy and Daddy came back late in the afternoon.

The boy walked two steps behind,

in Daddy's dust.

He wasn't more than sixteen.

Thin as a fence rail.

I wondered what

Livie Killian's brother looked like now.

I wondered about Livie herself.

Daddy asked if the boy wanted a bath,

a haircut,

a change of clothes before he moved on.

The boy nodded.

I never heard him say more than "Yes, sir" or

"No, sir" or

"Much obliged."

We watched him walk away
down the road,
in a pair of Daddy's mended overalls,
his legs like willow limbs,
his arms like reeds.
Ma rested her hands on her heavy stomach,
Daddy rested his chin on the top of my head.
"His mother is worrying about him," Ma said.
"His mother is wishing her boy would come home."
Lots of mothers wishing that these days,
while their sons walk to California,
where rain comes,
and the color green doesn't seem like such a miracle,
and hope rises daily, like sap in a stem.
And I think, some day I'm going to walk there too,
through New Mexico and Arizona and Nevada.
Some day I'll leave behind the wind, and the dust

and walk my way West
and make myself to home in that distant place
of green vines and promise.

July 1934

The Accident

I got

burned

bad.

Daddy

put a pail of kerosene

next to the stove

and Ma,

fixing breakfast,

thinking the pail was

filled with water,

lifted it,

to make Daddy's coffee,

poured it,

but instead of making coffee,

Ma made a rope of fire.

It rose up from the stove

to the pail

and the kerosene burst

into flames.

Ma ran across the kitchen,

out the porch door,

screaming for Daddy.

I tore after her,

then,

thinking of the burning pail

left behind in the bone-dry kitchen,

I new back and grabbed it,

throwing it out the door.

I didn't know.

I didn't know Ma was coming back.

The flaming oil

splashed

onto her apron,

and Ma,

suddenly Ma,

was a column of fire.

I pushed her to the ground,

desperate to save her,

desperate to save the baby, I

tried,

beating out the flames with my hands.

I did the best I could.

But it was no good.

Ma

got

burned

bad.

July 1934

Burns

At first I felt no pain,

only heat.

I thought I might be swallowed by the heat,

like the witch in "Hansel and Gretel,"

and nothing would be left of me.

Someone brought Doc Rice.

He tended Ma first,

then came to me.

The doctor cut away the skin on my hands, it hung in

crested strips.

He cut my skin away with scissors,

then poked my hands with pins to see what I could

feel.

He bathed my burns in antiseptic.

Only then the pain came.

July 1934

Nightmare

I am awake now,

still shaking from my dream:

I was coming home

through a howling dust storm,

my lowered face was scrubbed raw by dirt and wind.

Grit scratched my eyes,

it crunched between my teeth.

Sand chafed inside my clothes,

against my skin.

Dust crept inside my ears, up my nose,

down my throat.

I shuddered, nasty with dust.

In the house,

dust blew through the cracks in the walls,

it covered the floorboards and

heaped against the doors.

It floated in the air, everywhere.

I didn't care about anyone, anything, only the piano. I

searched for it,

found it under a mound of dust.

I was angry at Ma for letting in the dust.

I cleaned off the keys

but when I played,

a tortured sound came from the piano,

like someone shrieking.

I hit the keys with my fist, and the piano broke into

a hundred pieces.

Daddy called to me. He asked me to bring water,

Ma was thirsty.

I brought up a pail of fire and Ma drank it. She had

given birth to a baby of flames. The baby

burned at her side.

I ran away. To the Eatens' farm.

The house had been tracted out,
tipped off its foundation.

No one could live there.

Everywhere I looked were dunes of rippled dust.

The wind roared like fire.

The door to the house hung open and there was
dust inside

several feet deep.

And there was a piano.

The bench was gone, right through the floor.

The piano leaned toward me.

I stood and played.

The relief I felt to hear the sound of music after the
sound

of the piano at home....

I dragged the Eatens' piano through the dust

to our house,
but when I got it there I couldn't play. I had swollen
lumps for hands,
they dripped a sickly pus,
they swung stupidly from my wrists,
they stung with pain.

When I woke up, the part
about my hands
was real.

July 1934

A Tent of Pain

Daddy

has made a tent out of the sheet over Ma
so nothing will touch her skin,
what skin she has left.

I can't look at her,

I can't recognize her.

She smells like scorched meat.

Her body groaning there,

it looks nothing like my ma.

It doesn't even have a face.

Daddy brings her water,

and drips it inside the slit of her mouth

by squeezing a cloth.

She can't open her eyes,

she cries out

when the baby moves inside her,

otherwise she moans,

day and night.

I wish the dust would plug my ears

so I couldn't hear her.

July 1934

Drinking

Daddy found the money

Ma kept squirreled in the kitchen under the
threshold.

It wasn't very much.

But it was enough for him to get good and drunk.

He went out last night.

While Ma moaned and begged for water.

He drank up the emergency money

until it was gone.

I tried to help her.

I couldn't aim the dripping cloth into her mouth.

I couldn't squeeze.

It hurt the blisters on my hands to try.

I only made it worse for Ma. She cried

for the pain of the water running into her sores,

she cried for the water that

would not soothe her throat

and quench her thirst,

and the whole time
my father was in Guymon,
drinking.

July 1934

Devoured

Doc sent me outside to get water.

The day was so hot,
the house was so hot.

As I came out the door,
I saw the cloud descending.

It whirred like a thousand engines.

It shifted shape as it came
settling first over Daddy's wheat.

Grasshoppers,
eating tassles, leaves, stalks.

Then coming closer to the house,
eating Ma's garden, the fence posts,

the laundry on the line, and then,
the grasshoppers came right over me,
descending on Ma's apple trees.

I climbed into the trees,
opening scabs on my tender hands,
grasshoppers clinging to me.

I tried beating them away.

But the grasshoppers ate every leaf,
they ate every piece of fruit.

Nothing left but a couple apple cores,
hanging from Ma's trees.

I couldn't tell her,
couldn't bring myself to say
her apples were gone.

I never had a chance.

Ma died that day
giving birth to my brother.

August 1934

Blame

My father's sister came to fetch my brother,
even as Ma's body cooled.

She came to bring my brother back to Lubbock
to raise as her own,

but my brother died before Aunt Ellis got here.

She wouldn't even hold his little body.

She barely noticed me.

As soon as she found my brother dead,

she

had a talk with my father.

Then she turned around

and headed back to Lubbock.

The neighbor women came.

They wrapped my baby brother in a blanket

and placed him in Ma's bandaged arms.

We buried them together
on the rise Ma loved,
the one she gazed at from the kitchen window,
the one that looks out over the
dried-up Beaver River.

Reverend Bingham led the service.

He talked about Ma,
but what he said made no sense
and I could tell
he didn't truly know her,
he'd never even heard her play piano.

He asked my father
to name my baby brother.

My father, hunched over, said nothing.

I spoke up in my father's silence.

I told the reverend
my brother's name was Franklin.

Like our President.

The women talked as they
scrubbed death from our house

I

stayed in my room

silent on the iron bed,

listening to their voices.

"Billie Jo threw the pail,"

they said. "An accident,"

they said.

Under their words a finger pointed.

They didn't talk

about my father leaving kerosene by the stove.

They didn't say a word about my father

drinking himself

into a stupor

while Ma writhed, begging for water.

They only said,

Billie Jo threw the pail of kerosene.

Birthday

August 1934

I walk to town.

I don't look back over my shoulder

at the single grave

holding Ma and my little brother.

I am trying not to look back at anything.

Dust rises with each step,

there's a greasy smell to the air.

On either side of the road are

the carcasses of jackrabbits, small birds, field mice,

stretching out into the distance.

My father stares out across his land,

empty but for a few withered stalks

like the tufts on an old man's head.

I don't know if he thinks more of Ma,
or the wheat that used to grow here.
There is barely a blade of grass
swaying in the stinging wind,
there are only these
lumps of flesh
that once were hands long enough to span octaves,
swinging at my sides.
I come up quiet
and sit behind Arley Wanderdale's house,
where no one can see me, and lean my head back,
and close my eyes,
and listen to Arley play.

August 1934

Roots

President Roosevelt tells us to
plant trees. Trees will

break the wind. He says,

trees

will end the drought,

the animals can take shelter there,

children can take shelter.

Trees have roots, he says.

They hold on to the land.

That's good advice, but

I'm not sure he understands the problem.

Trees have never been at home here.

They're just not meant to be here.

Maybe none of us are meant to be here,

only the prairie grass

and the hawks.

My father will stay, no matter what,

he's stubborn as sod.

He and the land have a hold on each other.

But what about me?

August 1934

The Empty Spaces

I don't know my father anymore.

He sits across from me,

he looks like my father,

he chews his food like my father,

he brushes his dusty hair back

like my father,

but he is a stranger.

I am awkward with him,

and irritated,

and I want to be alone

but I am terrified of being alone.

We are both changing,

we are shifting to fill in the empty spaces left by Ma.

I keep my raw and stinging hands

behind my back when he comes near

because he

stares

when he sees them.

September 1934

The Hole

The heat from the cookstove hurts my burns,

and the salt,

the water, and the dust hurt too.

I spend all my time in pain,

and

my father spends his time out the side of the house,

digging a hole,

forty feet by sixty feet,

six feet deep.

I think he is digging the pond,

to feed off the windmill,

the one Ma wanted,
but he doesn't say. He just digs.
He sends me to the train yard to gather boards,
boards that once were box cars
but now are junk.
I bring them back, careful of the scabs and the
raw sores on my bare hands.
I don't know what he needs boards for.
He doesn't tell me.
When he's not in the hole, digging,
he works on the windmill,
replacing the parts
that kept it from turning.
People stop by and watch. They think my father is
crazy
digging such a big hole.
I think he's crazy too.

The water will seep back into the earth.

It'll never stay put in any old pond.

But my father has thought through all that
and he's digging anyway.

I think to talk to Ma about it,
and then I remember.

I can almost forgive him the taking of Ma's money,

I can almost forgive him his night in Guymon,
getting drunk.

But as long as I live,
no matter how big a hole he digs,

I can't forgive him that pail of kerosene
left by the side of the stove.

September 1934

Kilauea

A volcano erupted in Ha
Kilauea.

It threw huge
chunks
into the air,
the ground shook,
and smoke
choked everything in its path.
... sounds a little
like a dust storm.

September 1934

Boxes

In my closet are two boxes,
the gatherings of my life,
papers,
school drawings,
a broken hairpin,
a dress from my baby days,
my first lock of hair,

a tiny basket woven from prairie grass,
a doll with a china head,
a pink ball,
three dozen marbles,
a fan from Baxter's Funeral Home,
my baby teeth in a glass jar,
a torn map of the world,
two candy wrappers,
a thousand things I haven't looked at
in years.

I kept promising to go through the boxes
with Ma
and get rid of what I didn't need,
but I never got to it
and now my hands hurt.

And I haven't got the heart.

September 1934

Night Bloomer

Mrs. Brown's

cereus plant bloomed on Saturday night.

She sent word

after promising I could come see it.

I rubbed my gritty eyes with swollen hands.

My stomach grizzled as I

made my way through the dark

to her house.

Ma wouldn't have let me go at all.

My father just stood in the doorway and

watched me leave.

It was almost three in the morning when I got there.

A small crowd stood around.

Mrs. Brown said,

"The blossom opened at midnight,

big as a dinner plate.

It took only moments to unfold."

How can such a flower
find a way to bloom in this drought,
in this wind.

It blossomed at night,
when the sun couldn't scorch it,
when the wind was quiet,
when there might have been a sip of dew
to freshen it.

I couldn't watch at dawn,
when the newer,
touched by the first finger of morning light,
wilted and died.

I couldn't watch
as the tender petals burned up in the sun.

September 1934

The Path of Our Sorrow

Miss Freeland said,
"During the Great War we fed the world.
We couldn't grow enough wheat
to fill all the bellies.
The price the world paid for our wheat
was so high
it swelled our wallets
and our heads,
and we bought bigger tractors,
more acres,
until we had mortgages
and rent
and bills
beyond reason,
but we all felt so useful, we didn't notice.
Then the war ended and before long,
Europe didn't need our wheat anymore,

they could grow their own.

But we needed Europe's money

to pay our mortgage,

our rent,

our bills.

We squeezed more cattle,

more sheep,

onto less land,

and they grazed down the stubble

till they reached root.

And the price of wheat kept dropping

so we had to grow more bushels

to make the same amount of money we made before,

to pay for all that equipment, all that land,

and the more sod we plowed up,

the drier things got,

because the water that used to collect there

under the grass,
biding its time,
keeping things alive through the dry spells
wasn't there anymore.
Without the sod the water vanished,
the soil turned to dust.
Until the wind took it,
lifting it up and carrying it away.
Such a sorrow doesn't come suddenly,
there are a thousand steps to take
before you get there."
But now,
sorrow climbs up our front steps,
big as Texas, and we didn't even see it coming,
even though it'd been making its way straight for us
all along.

September 1934

Autumn 1934

Hired Work

My father hired on
at Wireless Power on Tuesday,
excavating for towers.

He said,

"I'm good at digging,"

and everyone who knows about our hole
knows he's telling the truth.

He might as well earn a couple dollars.

It doesn't look good for the winter crop.

Earning some cash will make him feel better.

I don't think he'll drink it up.

He hasn't done that since Ma

It's hard to believe I once brought money in too,
even if it was just a dime now and then,
for playing piano.

Now I can't hardly stay in the same room with one.

Especially Ma's.

October 1934

Almost Rain

It almost rained Saturday

The clouds hung low over the farm.

The air felt thick.

It smelled like rain.

In town,

the sidewalks

got damp.

That was all.

November 1934

Those Hands

The Wildcats started practice this week.

Coach Albright used to say I could play for the team.

"You've got what it takes, Billie Jo.

Look at the size of those hands," he'd say. "Look at how tall."

I'd tell him, "Just because I'm tall doesn't mean I can play basketball, or even that I want to.

But he'd say I should play anyway.

Coach Albright didn't say anything to me about basketball this year.

I haven't gotten any shorter.

It's because of my hands.

My father used to say, why not put those hands to good use?

He doesn't say anything about "those hands" anymore.

Only Arley Wanderdale talks about them, and how they could play piano again, if I would only try.

November 1934

Real Snow

The dust stopped,

and it

snowed.

Real snow.

Dreamy Christmas snow,

gentle,

nothing blowing,

such calm,

like after a fever,

wet,

clinging to the earth,

melting into the dirt,

snow.

Oh, the grass, and the wheat

and the cattle,

and the rabbits,

and my father will be happy.

November 1934

Dance Revue

Vera Wanderdale

is putting on a dance revue at the Palace

and Arley asked

if I'd play a number with the Black Mesa Boys.

It's hard, coming on to Christmas,

just me and my father,

with no Ma and no little brother.

I don't really feel like doing anything.

Still, I told Arley I would try,

just because it looked like it meant a lot to him.

He said he'd be dancing then,

so he needed a piano player,

and Mad Dog would be singing,

and he knew how I'd just love to be
connected with anything Mad Dog's doing.

The costumes Vera ordered
come all the way from the city, she said.

Special,
the latest cuts.

I wish I could go with her
to pick them up.

During rehearsals,
Mad Dog comes off the stage after his numbers
and stands by the piano.

He doesn't look at me like
I'm a poor motherless thing.

He doesn't stare at my deformed hands.

He looks at me like I am
someone he knows,
someone named Billie Jo Kelby.

I'm grateful for that,
especially considering how bad I'm playing.

December 1934

Mad Dog's Tale

Mad Dog is surrounded by girls.

They ask him how he got his name.

He says, "It's not because I'm wild,

or a crazy, untamed boy,

but because fourteen years ago when I was two

I would bite anything I could catch hold of: my ma,

my brother, Doc Rice, even Reverend Bingham.

So my father named me Mad Dog.

And it stuck."

When I go home

I ask my father if he knows Mad Dog's

real name.

He looks at me like I'm talking in another language.

Ma could have told me.

December 1934

Art Exhibit

We had an art exhibit last week
in the basement of the courthouse,
to benefit the library.

Price of admission was one book
or ten cents.

I paid ten cents the first time,
but they let me in the second and third times for free.

That was awful kind,
since I didn't have another dime
and I couldn't bring myself to
hand over Ma's book of poetry
from the shelf over the piano.

It was really something to see the oil paintings,
the watercolors,

the pastels and charcoals.

There were pictures of the Panhandle in the old days

with the grass blowing and wolves,

there was a painting of a woman getting dressed

in a room of curtains,

and a drawing of a railroad station

with a garden out the front,

and a sketch of a little girl holding an enormous cat

in her lap.

But now the exhibit is gone,

the paintings

stored away in spare rooms

or locked up

where no one can see them.

I feel such a hunger

to see such things.

And such an anger

because I can't.

December 1934

Winter 1935

State Tests Again

Miss Freeland said

our grade

topped the entire state of Oklahoma

on the state tests again, twenty-four

points higher

than the state average.

Wish I could run home and tell Ma

and see her nod

and hear her say,

"I knew you could."

It would be enough.

January 1935

Christmas Dinner Without the Cranberry Sauce

Miss Freeland

was my ma

at the school

Christmas dinner.

I thought I'd be

the only one

without a

real ma,

but two other motherless girls came.

We served turkey,

chestnut dressing,

sweet potatoes, and brown gravy.

Made it all ourselves

and it came out

pretty good,

better than the Christmas dinner I made for my

father

at home,
where we sat at the table,
silent, just the two of us.
Being there without Ma,
without the baby,
wouldn't have been so bad,
if I'd just remembered the cranberry sauce.
My father loved Ma's special cranberry sauce.
But she never showed me how to make it.

January 1935

Driving the Cows

Dust
piles up like snow
across the prairie,
dunes leaning against fences,
mountains of dust pushing over barns.
Joe De La Flor can't afford to feed his cows,

can't afford to sell them.

County Agent Dewey comes,
takes the cows behind the barn,
and shoots them.

Too hard to
watch their lungs clog with dust,
like our chickens, suffocated.

Better to let the government take them,
than suffer the sight of their bony hides
sinking down
into the earth.

Joe De La Flor
rides the range.

Come spring he'll gather Russian thistle,
pulling the plant while it's still green and young,
before the prickles form, before it breaks free
to tumble across the plains.

He gathers thistle to feed what's left of his cattle,
his bone-thin cattle,
cattle he drives away from the dried-up Beaver River,
to where the Cimarron still runs,
pushing the herd across the breaks,
where they might last another week, maybe two,
until it
rains.

January 1935

First Rain

Sunday night,
I stretch my legs in my iron bed
under the roof.
I place a wet cloth over my nose to keep
from breathing dust
and wipe the grime tracings from around my mouth,
and shiver, thinking of Ma.

I am kept company by the sound of my heart
drumming.

Restless,

I tangle in the dusty sheets,

sending the sand flying,

cursing the grit against my skin,

between my teeth,

under my lids,

swearing I'll leave this forsaken place.

I hear the first drops.

Like the tapping of a stranger

at the door of a dream,

the rain changes everything.

It strokes the roof,

streaking the dusty tin,

ponging,

a concert of rain notes,

spilling from gutters,
gushing through gullies,
soaking into the thirsty earth outside.

Monday morning dawns,
cloaked in mist.

I button into my dress, slip on my sweater,
and push my way off the porch,
sticking my face into the fog,
into the moist skin of the fog.

The sound of dripping surrounds me as I
walk to town.

Soaked to my underwear,

I can't bear to go

through the schoolhouse door,

I want only to stand in the rain.

Monday afternoon,

Joe De La Flor brushes mud from his horse,

Mr. Kincannon hires my father
to pull his Olds out of the muck on Route 64.
And later,
when the clouds lift,
the farmers, surveying their fields,
nod their heads as
the frail stalks revive,
everyone, everything, grateful for this moment,
free of the
weight of dust.

January 1935

Haydon P. Nye

Haydon P. Nye died this week.

I knew him to wave,
he liked the way I played piano.

The newspaper said when Haydon first came
he could see only grass,

grass and wild horses and wolves roaming.

Then folks moved in and sod got busted
and bushels of wheat turned the plains to gold,
and Haydon P. Nye

grabbed the Oklahoma Panhandle in his fist
and held on.

By the time the railroad came in
on land Haydon sold them,
the buffalo and the wild horses had gone.

Some years

Haydon Nye saw the sun dry up his crop,
saw the grasshoppers chew it down,

but then came years of rain

and the wheat thrived,

and his pockets filled,

and his big laugh came easy.

They buried Haydon Nye on his land,

busted more sod to lay down his bones.

Will they sow wheat on his grave,

where the buffalo

once grazed?

January 1935

Scrubbing Up Dust

Walking past the Crystal Hotel

I saw Jim Martin down on his knees.

He was scraping up mud that had

dried to crust

after the rain mixed with dust Sunday last.

When I got home

I took a good look at the steps

and the porch

and the windows.

I saw them with Ma's eyes and thought about

how she'd been haunting me.

I thought about Ma,
who would've washed clothes,
beaten furniture,
aired rugs,
scrubbed floors,
down on her knees,
brush in hand,
breaking that mud
like the farmers break sod,
always watching over her shoulder
for the next duster to roll in.

My stubborn ma,
she'd be doing it all
with my brother Franklin to tend to.

She never could stand a mess.

My father doesn't notice the dried mud.

Least he never tells me,

not that he tells me much of anything these days.

With Ma gone,

if the mud's to be busted,

the job falls to me.

It isn't the work I hate,

the knuckle-breaking work of beating mud out of

every blessed thing,

but every day

my fingers and hands

ache so bad. I think

I should just let them rest,

let the dust rest,

let the world rest.

But I can't leave it rest,

on account of Ma,

haunting.

January 1935

Outlined by Dust

My father stares at me
while I sit across from him at the table,
while I wash dishes in the basin,
my back to him,
the picked and festered bits of my hands in agony.

He stares at me
as I empty the wash water at the roots
of Ma's apple trees.

He spends long days
digging for the electric-train folks
when they can use him,
or working here,
nursing along the wheat,
what there is of it,
or digging the pond.

He sings sometimes under his breath,

even now,

even after so much sorrow.

He sings a man's song,

deep with what has happened to us.

It doesn't swing lightly

the way Ma's voice did,

the way Miss Freeland's voice does,

the way Mad Dog sings.

My father's voice starts and stops,

like a car short of gas,

like an engine choked with dust,

but then he clears his throat

and the song starts up again.

He rubs his eyes

the way I do,

with his palms out.

Ma never did that.

And he wipes the milk from his
upper lip same as me,
with his thumb and forefinger.

Ma never did that, either.

We don't talk much.

My father never was a talker.

Ma's dying hasn't changed that.

I guess he gets the sound out of him with the
songs he sings.

I can't help thinking

how it is for him,

without Ma.

Waking up alone, only

his shape

left in the bed,

outlined by dust.

He always smelled a little like her

first thing in the morning,
when he left her in bed
and went out to do the milking.

She'd scuff into the kitchen a few minutes later,
bleary eyed,
to start breakfast.

I don't think she was ever
really meant for farm life,
I think once she had bigger dreams,
but she made herself over
to fit my father.

Now he smells of dust
and coffee,
tobacco and cows.

None of the musky woman smell left that was Ma.

He stares at me,
maybe he is looking for Ma.

He won't find her.

I look like him,

I stand like him,

I walk across the kitchen floor

with that long-legged walk

of his.

I can't make myself over the way Ma did.

And yet, if I could look in the mirror and see her in

my face.

If I could somehow know that Ma

and baby Franklin

lived on in me ...

But it can't be.

I'm my father's daughter.

January 1935

The President's Ball

All across the land,
couples dancing,
arm in arm, hand in hand,
at the Birthday Ball.

My father puts on his best overalls,
I wear my Sunday dress,
the one with the white collar,
and we walk to town
to the Legion Hall
and join the dance. Our feet flying,
me and my father,
on the wooden floor whirling
to Arley Wanderdale and the Black Mesa Boys.

Till ten,
when Arley stands up from the piano,
to announce we raised thirty-three dollars
for infantile paralysis,

a little better than last year.

And I remember last year,

when Ma was alive and we were

crazy excited about the baby coming.

And I played at this same party for Franklin D.

Roosevelt

and Joyce City

and Arley.

Tonight, for a little while

in the bright hall folks were almost free,

almost free of dust,

almost free of debt,

almost free of fields of withered wheat.

Most of the night I think I smiled.

And twice my father laughed.

Imagine.

January 1935

Lunch

No one's going hungry at school today.

The government

sent canned meat,

rice,

potatoes.

The bakery

sent loaves of bread,

and

Scotty Moore, George Nail, and Willie Harkins

brought in milk,

fresh creamy milk

straight from their farms.

Real lunch and then

stomachs

full and feeling fine

for classes

in the afternoon.

The little ones drank themselves into white

mustaches,

they ate

and ate,

until pushing back from their desks,

their stomachs round,

they swore they'd never eat again.

The older girls,

Elizabeth and LoRaine, helped Miss Freeland

cook,

and Hillary and I,

we served and washed,

our ears ringing with the sound of satisfied children.

February 1935

Guests

In our classroom this morning,

we came in to find a family no one knew.

They were shy,

a little frightened,

embarrassed.

A man and his wife, pretty far along with a baby

coming,

a baby

coming

two little kids

and a grandma.

They'd moved into our classroom during the night.

An iron bed

and some pasteboard boxes. That's all they had.

They'd cleaned the room first, and arranged it,

making a private place for themselves.

"I'm on the look for a job," the man said.

"The dust blew so mean last night

I thought to shelter my family here awhile.

The two little kids turned their big eyes

from Miss Freeland

back to their father.

"I can't have my wife sleeping in the cold truck,

not now. Not with the baby coming so soon."

Miss Freeland said they could stay

as long as they wanted.

February 1935

Family School

Every day we bring fixings for soup

and put a big pot on to simmer.

We share it at lunch with our guests,

the family of migrants who have moved out from dust

and Depression

and moved into our classroom.

We are careful to take only so much to eat,

making sure there's enough soup left in the pot for
their supper.

Some of us bring in toys
and clothes for the children.

I found a few things of my brother's
and brought them to school,
little feed-sack nighties,
so small,
so full of hope.

Franklin
never wore a one of the nighties Ma made him,
except the one we buried him in.

The man, Buddy Williams,
helps out around the school,
fixing windows and doors,
and the bad spot on the steps,
cleaning up the school yard

so it never looked so good.

The grandma takes care of the children,
bringing them out when the dust isn't blowing,
letting them chase tumbleweeds across the field
behind the school,
but when the dust blows,
the family sits in their little apartment inside our
classroom,
studying Miss Freeland's lessons
right alongside us.

February 1935

Birth

One morning when I arrive at school
Miss Freeland says to keep the kids out,
that the baby is coming
and no one can enter the building
until the birthing is done.

I think about Ma

and how that birth went.

I keep the kids out and listen behind me,

praying for the sound of a baby

crying into this world,

and not the silence

my brother brought with him.

And then the cry comes

and I have to go away for a little while

and just walk off the feelings.

Miss Freeland rings the bell to call us in

but I'm not ready to come back yet.

When I do come,

I study how fine that baby girl is. How perfect,

and that she is wearing a feed-sack nightgown that

was my brother's.

February 1935

Time to Go

They left a couple weeks after the baby came,
all of them crammed inside that rusty old truck.

I ran half a mile in their dust to catch them.

I didn't want to let that baby go.

"Wait for me," I cried,

choking on the cloud that rose behind them.

But they didn't hear me.

They were heading west.

And no one was looking back.

February 1935

Something Sweet from Moonshine

Ashby Durwin

and his pal Rush

had themselves a

fine operation on the Cimarron River,

where the water still runs a little,

though the fish are mostly dead
from the dust floating on the surface.

Ashby and Rush were cooking up moonshine
in their giant metal still on the bank
when Sheriff Robertson caught them.

He found jugs of finished whiskey,
and barrels and barrels of mash,
he found two sacks of rye,
and he found sugar,
one thousand pounds of sugar.

The government men took Ashby and Rush off to

Enid

for breaking the law,
but Sheriff Robertson stayed behind,
took apart the still,
washed away the whiskey and the mash,
and thought about that sugar,

all that sugar, one-half ton of sugar.

Sheriff decided

some should find its way

into the mouths of us kids.

Bake for them, Miss Freeland, he said,

bake them cakes and cookies and pies,

cook them custard and cobbler and crisp,

make them candy and taffy and apple pandowdy.

Apple pandowdy!

These kids,

Sheriff Robertson said,

ought to have something sweet to

wash down their dusty milk.

And so we did.

February 1935

Dreams

Each day after class lets out,

each morning before it begins,

I sit at the school piano

and make my hands work.

In spite of the pain,

in spite of the stiffness

and scars.

I make my hands play piano.

I have practiced my best piece over and over

till my arms throb,

because Thursday night

the Palace Theatre is having a contest.

Any man, woman, or child

who sings,

dances,

reads,

or plays worth a lick

can climb onto that stage.

Just register by four P.M.

and give them a taste of what you can do

land you're in,

performing for the crowd,

warming up the audience for the

Mazel Hurd Players.

I figure if I practice enough

I won't shame myself.

And we sure could use the extra cash

if I won.

Three-dollar first prize,

two-dollar second,

one-dollar third.

But I don't know if I could win anything,

not anymore.

It's the playing I want most,

the proving I can still do it.

without Arley making excuses.

I have a hunger,

for more than food.

I have a hunger

bigger than Joyce City.

I want tongues to tie, and

eyes to shine at me

like they do at Mad Dog Craddock.

Course they never will,

not with my hands all scarred up,

looking like the earth itself,

all parched and rough and cracking,

but if r played right enough,

maybe they would see past my hands.

Maybe they could feel at ease with me again,

and maybe then,

I could feel at ease with myself.

February 1935

The Competition

I suppose everyone in Joyce City and beyond,
all the way to Felt
and Keyes
and even Guymon,
came to watch the talent show at the Palace,
Thursday night.

Backstage,
we were seventeen amateur acts,
our wild hearts pounding,
our lips sticking to our teeth,
our urge to empty ourselves
top and bottom,
made a sorry sight
in front of the
famous Hazel Hurd Players.

But they were kind to us,
helped us with our makeup and our hair,
showed us where to stand,
how to bow,
and the quickest route to the
toilet.

The audience hummed on the other side of the
closed curtain,
Ivy Hurford
kept peeking out and giving reports
of who was there,
and how she never saw so many seats
filled in the Palace,
and that she didn't think they could
squeeze a
rattlesnake
into the back

even if he paid full price,

the place was so packed.

My father told me he'd come

once chores were done.

I guess he did.

The Grover boys led us off.

They worked a charm,

Baby on the sax,

Jake on the banjo,

and Ben on the clarinet.

The Baker family followed, playing

just like they do at home

every night after dinner.

They didn't look nervous at all.

The tap dancers,

they rattled the teeth in their jaws

and the eyeballs in their skulls,

their feet flying,
their arms swinging,
their mouths gapping.

Then Sunny Lee Hallem
tumbled and leaped onto the stage,
the sweat flying off her,
spotting the Palace floor.

Marsh Worton struggled out,
his accordion leading the way.

George and Agnes Harkins ran their fingers over the
strings of their harps,

made you want to look up into the heavens for
angels,

but only scenery

and lights

and ropes and sandbags hung overhead,

and then there was me on piano.

I went on somewhere near the backside of middle,
getting more and more jittery with each act,
till my time came.

I played "Bye, Bye, Blackbird"

my own way,

messing with the tempo,

and the first part sounded like

I used just my elbows,

but the middle sounded good

and the end,

I forgot I was even playing

in front of the packed Palace Theatre.

I dropped right inside the music and

didn't feel anything

till after

when the clapping started

and that's when I noticed my hands hurting

straight up to my shoulders.

But the applause

made me forget the pain,

the audience roared when I finished,

they came to their feet,

and I got third prize,

one dollar,

while Mad Dog Craddock, singing,

won second,

and Ben Grover

and his crazy clarinet

took first.

The tap dancers pouted into their mirrors,

peeling off their makeup and their smiles.

Birdie Jasper claimed

it was all my fault she didn't win,

that the judges were just being nice to a cripple,

but the harpin' Harkins were kind
and the Hazel Hurd Players
wrapped their long arms around me
and said I was swell
and in the sweaty dim chaos backstage
I ignored the pain running up and down my arms,
I felt like I was part of something grand.
But they had to give my ribbon and my dollar to my
father,
cause I couldn't hold
anything in my hands.

February 1935

The Piano Player

Arley says,

"We're

doing a show at the school in a week, Billie Jo.

Come play with us."

If I asked my father

he'd say yes.

It's okay with him if I want to play.

He didn't even know I was at the piano again till the
other night.

He's making some kind of effort to get on

better with me now,

Since I "did him proud" at the Palace.

But I say, "No.

It's too soon after the contest.

It still hurts too much.

Arley doesn't understand.

"Just practice more," he says.

"You'll get it back,

you can navel with us again this summer

if you'd like."

I don't say

it hurts like the parched earth with each note.

I don't say,

one chord and

my hands scream with pain for days.

I don't show him

the swelling

or my tears.

I tell him, "I'll try."

At home, I sit at

Ma's piano,

I don't touch the keys.

I don't know why.

I play "Stormy Weather" in my mind,

following the phrases in my imagination,

saving strength,

so that when I sit down at a piano that is not Ma's,

when everyone crowds into the school

for Arley's show,
no one can say
that Billie Jo Kelby plays like a cripple.

March 1935

No Good

I did play like a cripple at Arley's show,
not that Arley would ever say it.

But my hands are no good anymore,
my playing's no good.

Arley understands, I think.

He won't ask again.

March 1935

Snow

Had to check
yesterday morning
to make sure that was
snow

on the ground,

not dust.

But you can't make a dustball

pack together

and slam against the side of the barn, and

echo across the fields.

So I know

it was snow.

March 1935

Night School

My father thought maybe

he ought to go to night school,

so if the farm failed

there'd be prospects to fall back on.

He's starting to sound like Ma.

"The farm won't fail," I tell him.

"Long as we get some good rain."

I'm starting to sound like him.

"It's mostly ladies in those classes," he says,

"they take bookkeeping and civics,

and something called business English."

I can't imagine him

taking any of those things.

But maybe he doesn't care so much about the classes.

Maybe he's thinking more about the company of

ladies.

I'll bet none of the ladies mind

spending time with my father,

he's still good looking

with his strong back,

and his blondy-red hair

and his high cheeks rugged with wind.

I shouldn't mind either.

It's dinner I don't have to

come up with,

'cause the ladies bring chicken and biscuits for him.

I'm glad to get out of cooking.

Sometimes with my hands,

it's hard to keep the fire,

wash the pans,

hold the knife, and spread a little butter.

But I do mind his spending time with all those

biddies.

I turn my back on him as he goes,

and settle myself in the parlor

and touch Ma's piano.

My fingers leave sighs

in the dust.

March 1935

Dust Pneumonia

Two Fridays ago,

Pete Guymon drove in with a
truck full of produce.

He joked with Calb Hardly,

Mr. Hardly's son,

while they unloaded eggs and cream
down at the store.

Pete Guymon teased Calb Hardly about the Wildcats
losing to Hooker.

Calb Hardly teased Pete Guymon about his wheezy
truck sucking in dust.

Last Friday,

Pete Guymon took ill with dust pneumonia.

Nobody knew how to keep that produce truck on the
road.

It sat,

filled with turkeys and heavy hens
waiting for delivery,

it sat out in front of Pete's drafty shack,

and sits there still,

the cream curdling

the apples going soft.

Because a couple of hours ago,

Pete Guymon died.

Mr. Hardly

was already on the phone to a new produce supplier,

before evening.

He had people in his store

and no food to sell them.

His boy, Calb,

slammed the basketball against the side of the house

until Calb's ma yelled for him to quit,

and late that night a truck rattled up to the store,

with colored springs,

dozens of hens,

filthy eggs,
and a driver with no interest whatsoever in young
Calb Hardly
or his precious Wildcats.

March 1935

Dust Storm

I never would have gone to see the show
if I had known a storm like this would come.
I didn't know when going in,
but coming out
a darker night I'd never seen.
I bumped into a box beside the Palace door
and scraped my shins,
then tripped on something in my path,
I don't know what,
and walked into a phone pole,
bruised my cheek.

The first car that I met was sideways in the road.

Bowed down, my eyes near shut,

trying to keep the dust out,

I saw his headlights just before I reached them.

The driver called me over and I felt my way,

following his voice.

He asked me how I kept the road.

"I feel it with my feet," I shouted over the

roaring wind,

"I walk along the edge.

One foot on the road, one on the shoulder."

And desperate to get home,

he straightened out his car,

and straddled tires on the road and off,

and slowly pulled away.

I kept along. I know that there were others

on the road,

from time to time I'd hear someone cry out,
their voices rose like ghosts on the howling wind;
no one could see. I stopped at neighbors'
just to catch my breath
and made my way from town
out to our farm.

Everyone said to stay
but I guessed
my father would
come out to find me
if I didn't show,
and get himself lost in the
raging dust and maybe die
and I
didn't want that burden on my soul.

Brown earth rained down
from sky.

I could not catch my breath
the way the dust pressed on my chest
and wouldn't stop.

The dirt blew down so thick
it scratched my eyes
and stung my tender skin,
it plugged my nose and filled inside my mouth.

No matter how I pressed my lips together,
the dust made muddy tracks
across my tongue.

But I kept on,
spitting out mud,
covering my mouth,
clamping my nose,
the dust stinging the raw and open
stripes of scarring on my hands,
and after some three hours I made it home.

Inside I found my father's note
that said he'd gone to find me
and if I should get home, to just stay put.

I hollered out the front door
and the back;
he didn't hear,

I didn't think he would.

The wind took my voice and busted it
into a thousand pieces,
so small
the sound
blew out over Ma and Franklin's grave,
thinner than a sigh.

I waited for my father through the night, coughing up
dust,
cleaning dust out of my ears,
rinsing my mouth, blowing mud out of my nose.

Joe De La Flor stopped by around four to tell me
they found one boy tangled in a barbed-wire fence,
another smothered in a drift of dust.

After Joe left I thought of the famous Lindberghs,
and how their baby was killed and never came back
to them.

I wondered if my father would come back.

He blew in around six A.M.

It hurt,

the sight of him

brown with dirt,

his eyes as red as raw meat,

his feet bruised from walking in worn shoes

stepping where he couldn't see

on things that bit and cut into his flesh.

I tried to scare up something we could eat,

but couldn't keep the table clear of dust.

Everything I set
down for our breakfast
was covered before we took a bite,
and so we chewed the grit and swallowed
and I thought of the cattle
dead from mud in their lungs,
and I thought of the tractor
buried up to the steering wheel,
and Pete Guymon,
and I couldn't even recognize the man
sitting across from me,
sagging in his chair,
his red hair gray and stiff with dust,
his face deep lines of dust,
his teeth streaked brown with dust.
I turned the plates and glasses upside down,
crawled into bed, and slept.

March 1935

Broken Promise

It rained

a little

everywhere

but here.

March 1935

Motherless

If Ma could put her arm across my shoulder

sometime,

or stroke back my hair,

or sing me to sleep, making the soft sounds,

the reassuring noises,

that no matter how brittle and sharp life seemed,

no matter how brittle and sharp she seemed,

she was still my ma who loved me,

then I think I wouldn't be so eager to go.

March 1935

Following in His Steps

Haydon Parley Nye's wife,

Fonda,

died today,

two months after she lost her man.

The cause of death was

dust pneumonia,

but I think

she couldn't go on without Haydon.

When Ma died,

I didn't want to go on, either.

I don't know. I don't feel the same now,

not exactly.

Now that I see that one day

comes after another

and you get through them

one measure at a time.

But I'd like to go,

not like Fonda Nye,

I don't want to die,

I just want to go,

away,

out of the dust.

March 1935

Spring 1935

Heartsick

The hard part is in spite of everything

if I had any boy court me,

it'd be Mad Dog Craddock.

But Mad Dog can have any girl.

Why would he want me?

I'm so restless.

My father asks what's going on with me.

I storm up to my room,

leaving him alone

standing in the kitchen.

If Ma was here

she would come up and listen.

And then later,

she would curl beside my father,

and assure him that everything was all right,

and soothe him into his farmer's sleep.

My father and I,

we can't soothe each other.

I'm too young,

he's too old,

and we don't know how to talk anymore

if we ever did.

April 1935

Skin

My father has a raised spot
on the side of his nose
that never was there before
and won't go away.

And there's another on his cheek
and two more on his neck,
and I wonder
why the heck is he fooling around.

He knows what it is.

His father had those spots too.

April 1935

Regrets

I never go by Arley's anymore.

Still,

every week

he comes to school to teach and

sometimes

I bump into Vera, or

Miller Rice,

or Mad Dog.

They are always kind.

They ask after my father.

They ask how my hands are feeling.

I cross my arms in front of me

tight

so my scars won't show.

These days Mad Dog looks at me

halfway between picking a fight and kindness.

He walks with me a ways some afternoons,

never says a word.

He's quiet once the other girls go off.

I've had enough of quiet men.

I ought to keep clear of Mad Dog.

But I don't.

April 1935

Fire on the Rails

I hate fire.

Hate it.

But the entire Oklahoma Panhandle is so dry,

everything is going up in flames.

Everything too ready to ignite.

Last week

the school caught fire.

Damage was light,

on account of it being caught early.

Most kids joked about it next day,

but it terrified me.

I could hardly go back in the building.

And this week

three boxcars
in the train yard
burned to ash.

Jim coin and Harry Kesler
spotted the fire,
and that was a miracle
considering the fierceness of the dust storm
at the time.

The fire boys
tore over,
but they couldn't put the blaze out without water,
and water is exactly what they didn't have.

So they separated the burning cars
and moved them down a siding,
away from any little thing that might catch
if the flames hopped.

It was all they talked about at school.

The dust blew,
they say,
so you'd think it would have smothered the fire out,
but the flames,
crazy in the wind,
licked away at the wooden frames of the three box
cars,
until nothing remained but warped metal,
and twisted rails,
scorched dirt, and
charred ties.

No one talks about fire
right to my face.

They can't forget how fire changed my life.

But I hear them talking anyway.

April 1935

The Mail Train

They promised
through rain,
heat,
snow,
and gloom
but they never said anything about dust.

And so the mail got stuck
for hours,
for days,
on the Santa Fe
because mountains of dust
had blown over the tracks,
because blizzards of dust
blocked the way.

And all that time,
as the dust beat down on the cars,
a letter was waiting inside a mail bag.

A letter from Aunt Ellis, my father's sister,
written just to me,
inviting me to live with her in Lubbock.

I want to get out of here,
but not to Aunt Ellis,
and not to Lubbock, Texas.

My father didn't say much when I asked
what I should do.

"Let's wait and see,"
he said.

What's that supposed to mean?

April 1935

Migrants

We'll be back when the rain comes,
they say,
pulling away with all they own,
straining the springs of their motor cars.

Don't forget us.

And so they go,

fleeing the blowing dust,

fleeing the fields of brown-tipped wheat

barely ankle high,

and sparse as the hair on a dog's belly.

We'll be back, they say,

pulling away toward Texas,

Arkansas,

where they can rent a farm,

pull in enough cash,

maybe start again.

We'll be back when it rains,

they say,

setting out with their bedsprings and mattresses,

their cookstoves and dishes,

their kitchen tables,

and their milk goats
tied to their running boards
in rickety cages,
setting out for
California,
where even though they say they'll come back,
they just might stay
if what they hear about that place is true.

Don't forget us, they say.

But there are so many leaving,

how can I remember them all?

April 1935

Blankets of Black

On the first clear day

we staggered out of our caves of dust

into the sunlight,

turning our faces to the big blue sky.

On the second clear day
we believed
the worst was over at last.

We flocked outside,
traded in town,
going to stores and coming out
only to find the air still clear
and gentle,
grateful for each easy breath.

On the third clear day
summer came in April
and the churches opened their arms to all comers
and all comers came.

After church,
folks headed for
picnics,
car trips. No one could stay inside.

My father and I argued about the funeral
of Grandma Lucas,
who truly was no relation.
But we ended up going anyway,
driving down the road in a procession to Texhoma.
Six miles out of town the air turned cold,
birds beat their wings
everywhere you looked,
whole necks
dropping out of the sky,
crowding on fence posts.
I was sulking in the truck beside my father
when
heaven's shadow crept across the plains,
a black cloud,
big and silent as Montana,
boiling on the horizon and

barreling toward us.

More birds tumbled from the sky

frantically keeping ahead of the dust.

We watched as the storm swallowed the light.

The sky turned from blue

to black,

night descended in an instant

and the dust was on us.

The wind screamed.

The blowing dirt ran

so thick

I couldn't see the brim of my hat

as we plunged from the truck,

fleeing.

The dust swarmed

like it had never swarmed before.

My father groped for my hand,

pulled me away from the truck.

We ran,

a blind pitching toward the shelter of a small house,

almost invisible,

our hands tight together,

running toward the ghostly door,

pounding on it with desperation.

A woman opened her home to us,

all of us,

not just me and my father,

but the entire funeral procession,

and one after another,

we tumbled inside, gasping,

our lungs burning for want of air.

All the lamps were lit against the dark,

the house dazed by dust,

gazed weakly out.

The walls shook in the howling wind.

We helped tack up sheets on the windows and doors
to keep the dust down.

Cars and trucks

unable to go on,

their ignitions shorted out by the static electricity,

opened up and let out more passengers,

who stumbled for shelter.

One family came in

clutched together,

their pa, divining the path

with a long wooden rod.

If it hadn't been for the company,

this storm would have broken us

completely,

broken us more thoroughly than

the plow had broken the Oklahoma sod,

more thoroughly than my burns
had broken the ease of my hands.
But for the sake of the crowd,
and the hospitality of the home that sheltered us,
we held on
and waited,
sitting or standing, breathing through wet cloths
as the fog of dust filled the room
and settled slowly over us.
When it let up a bit,
some went on to bury Grandma Lucas,
but my father and I,
we cleaned the thick layer of grime
off the truck,
pulled out of the procession and headed on home,
creeping slowly along the dust-mounded road.
When we got back,

we found the barn half covered in dunes,
I couldn't tell which rise of dust was Ma and
Franklin's grave.

The front door hung open,
blown in by the wind.

Dust lay two feet deep in ripply waves
across the parlor floor,
dust blanketed the cookstove,
the icebox,
the kitchen chairs,
everything deep in dust.

And the piano ..
buried in dust.

While I started to shovel,
my father went out to the barn.

He came back, and when I asked, he said
the animals

weren't good,
and the tractor was dusted out,
and I said, "It's a wonder
the truck got us home.
I should have held my tongue.
When he tried starting the truck again,
it wouldn't turn over.

April 1935

The Visit

Mad Dog came by
to see how we made out
after the duster.
He didn't come to court me.
I didn't think he had.
We visited more than an hour.
The sky cleared enough to see Black Mesa.
I showed him my father's pond.

Mad Dog said he was going to Amarillo,
to sing, on the radio,
and if he sang good enough,
they might give him a job there.

"You'd leave the farm?" I asked.

He nodded.

"You'd leave school?"

He shrugged.

Mad Dog scooped a handful of dust,
like a boy in a sandpit.

He said, "I love this land,
no matter what."

I looked at his hands.

They were scarless.

Mad Dog stayed longer than he planned.

He ran down the road
back to his father's farm when he realized the time.

Dust rose each place his foot fell,
leaving a trace of him
long after he'd gone.

April 1935

Freak Show

The fellow from Canada,
James Kingsbury,
photographer from the Toronto Star,
way up there in Ontario,
the man who took the first pictures of
the Dionne Quintuplets,
left his homeland and
came to Joyce City
looking for some other piece of
oddness,
hoping to photograph the drought
and the dust storms

and
he did
with the help of Bill Rotterdaw
and Handy Poole,
who took him to the sandiest farms and
showed off the boniest cattle in the county.
Mr. Kingsbury's pictures of those Dionne babies
got them famous,
but it also got them taken from their
mother and father
and put on display
like a freak show,
like a tent full of two-headed calves.
Now I'm wondering
what will happen to us
after he finishes taking pictures of our dust.

April 1935

Help, from Uncle Sam

The government
is lending us money
to keep the farm going,
money to buy seed,
feed loans for our cow,
for our mule,
for the chickens still alive and the hog,
as well as a little bit of feed
for us.

My father was worried about
paying back,
because of what Ma had said,
but Mrs. Love,
the lady from FERA,
assured him he didn't need to pay a single cent
until the crops came in,

and if the crops never came, then he wouldn't pay a
thing.

So my father said

okay.

Anything to keep going.

He put the paperwork on the shelf,

beside Ma's book of poetry

and the invitation from Aunt Ellis.

He just keeps that invitation from her,

glowering down at me from the shelf above the piano.

April 1935

Let Down

I was invited to graduation,

to play the piano.

I couldn't play.

It had been too long.

My hands wouldn't work.

I just sat on the piano bench,

staring down at the keys.

Everyone waited.

When the silence went on so long

folks started to whisper,

Arley Wanderdale lowered his head and

Miss Freeland started to cry.

I don't know,

I let them down.

I didn't cry.

Too stubborn.

I got up and walked off the stage.

I thought maybe if my father ever went to Doc Rice

to do something about the spots on his skin,

Doc could check my hands too,

tell me what to do about them.

But my father isn't going to Doc Rice,

and now

I think we're both turning to dust.

May 1935

Hope

It started out as snow,

oh,

big flakes

floating

softly,

catching on my sweater,

lacy on the edges of my sleeves.

Snow covered the dust,

softened the

fences,

soothed the parched lips

of the land.

And then it changed,

halfway between snow and rain,

sleet,

glazing the earth.

Until at last

it slipped into rain,

light as mist.

It was the kindest

kind of rain

that fell.

Soft and then a little heavier,

helping along

what had already fallen

into the

hard-pan

earth

until it

rained,

steady as a good friend
who walks beside you,
not getting in your way,
staying with you through a hard time.

And because the rain came
so patient and slow at first,
and built up strength as the earth
remembered how to yield,
instead of washing oh,
the water slid in,
into the dying ground
and softened its stubborn pride,
and eased it back toward life.

And then,
just when we thought it would end,
after three such gentle days,
the rain

came

slamming down,

tons of it,

soaking into the ready earth

to the primed and greedy earth,

and soaking deep.

It kept coming,

thunder booming,

lightning

kicking,

dancing from the heavens

down to the prairie,

and my father

dancing with it,

dancing outside in the drenching night

with the gutters racing,

with the earth puddled and pleased,

with my father's near-finished pond filling.

When the rain stopped,

my father splashed out to the barn,

and spent

two days and two nights

cleaning dust out of his tractor,

until he got it running again.

In the dark, headlights shining,

he idled toward the freshened fields,

certain the grass would grow again,

certain the weeds would grow again,

certain the wheat would grow again too.

Mar 1935

The Rain's Gift

The rain

has brought back some grass

and the ranchers

have put away the
feed cake
and sent their cattle
out to graze.

Joe De La Flor
is singing in his saddle again.

May 1935

Hope Smothered

While I washed up dinner dishes in the pan,
the wind came from the west
bringing--
dust.
I'd just stripped all the gummed tape from the
windows.
Now I've got dust all over the clean dishes.
I can hardly make myself
get started cleaning again.

Mrs. Love is taking applications
for boys to do CCC work.
Any boy between eighteen and twenty-eight can join.
I'm too young
and the wrong sex
but what I wouldn't give to be
working for the CCC
somewhere far from here,
out of the dust.

May 1935

Sunday Afternoon at the Amarillo Hotel

Everybody gathered at
the Joyce City Hardware and Furniture Company
on Sunday
to hear Mad Dog Craddock
sing on WDAG
from the Amarillo Hotel.

They hooked up speakers
and the sweet sound
of Mad Dog's voice
filled the creaky aisles.

Arley Wanderdale was in Amarillo with Mad Dog,
singing and playing the piano,
and the Black Mesa Boys were there
too.

I ached for not being there with them.

But there was nothing more most folks in Joyce City
wanted to do
than spend a half hour
leaning on counters,
sitting on stairs,
resting in chairs,
staring at the hardware
and the tableware,

listening to hometown boys

making big-time music

on the radio.

They kept time in the aisles,

hooting after each number,

and when Mad Dog finished his last song, they sent

the dust swirling,

cheering and whooping,

patting each other on the back,

as if they'd been featured

on WDAG themselves.

I tried cheering for Mad Dog with everyone else,

but my throat

felt like a trap had

snapped down on it.

That Mad Dog, he didn't have

a thing to worry about.

He sang good, all right.

He'll go far as he wants.

May 1935

Baby

Funny thing about babies.

Ma died having one,

the Lindberghs said good night to one and lost it,

and somebody

last Saturday

decided to

give one away.

Reverend Bingham says

that Harley Madden

was sweeping the dust out of church,

shining things up for Sunday service,

when he swept himself up to a package

on the north front steps.

He knelt,
studying the parcel,
and called to Reverend Bingham,
who came right by and opened the package up.
It held a living baby.
Reverend Bingham took it to Doc Rice.
Doc checked it, said it was fine,
only small,
less than a five-pound sack of sugar,
and a little cold from
spending time on the north front steps,
but Mrs. Bingham
and the reverend
warmed that baby with
blankets and sugar water,
and tender talk,
and the whole of Joyce City came forward with gifts.

I asked my father if we could adopt it,
but he said
we stood about as much chance
of getting that baby
as the wheat stood of growing,
since we couldn't give the baby anything
not even a ma.

Then he looked at me
sorry as dust.

And to make up for it,
he pulled out a box with the rest of the clothes
Ma had made for our new baby
and told me to drop them by the church if I wanted.

I found the dimes Ma'd been saving,
my earnings from the piano,
inside an envelope,
in the box of baby Franklin's nighties.

She had kept those dimes to send me

to Panhandle A and M.

To study music.

No point now.

I sat at her piano a long time after I

got back from the church,

imagining

a song for my little brother,

buried in Ma's arms on a knell overlooking the

banks of the Beaver,

imagining a song for the Lindbergh baby

stiff in the woods,

imagining a song for this new baby

who

would not be my father's son.

May 1935

Old Bones

Once
dinosaurs roamed
in Cimarron County.

Bones
showing
in the green shale,
ribs the size of plow blades,
hip bones like crank phones,
and legs running
like fence rails
down to a giant
foot.

A chill shoots up my spine
imagining a dinosaur
slogging out of an Oklahoma sea,
with turtles swimming around its legs.

I can see it sunning itself on the swampy banks,

beyond it a forest of ferns.

It's almost easy to imagine,

gazing out from our house

at the dust-crushed fields,

easy to imagine filling in all the emptiness with green,

easy to imagine such a beast

brushing an itchy rump against our barn.

But all that remains of it

is bone,

broken and turned to stone,

trapped in the hillside,

this once-upon-a-time real-live dinosaur

who lived,

and fed,

and roamed

like a ridiculous

long-necked cow,

and then fell down and died.

I think for a moment of Joe De La Flor

herding brontosaurus instead of cattle

and I

smile.

I tell my father,

Let's go to the site

and watch the men chip away with ice picks,

let's see how they plaster the bones.

Please, before they ship the whole thing to Norman.

I am thinking

that a dinosaur is getting out of Joyce City

a hundred million years too late to

appreciate the trip,

and that I ought to get out before my own

bones turn to stone.

But I keep my thoughts to myself.

My father thinks awhile,
rubbing that spot on his neck.
He looks out the window,
out across the field,
toward the knell where Ma and the baby lie.
"It's best to let the dead rest," he says.
And we stay home.

June 1935

Summer 1935

The Dream

Piano, my silent
mother,
I can touch you,
you are cool
and smooth

and willing

to stay with me

stay with me

talk to me.

Uncomplaining

you accept

the cover to your keys

and still

you make room

for all that I

place there

we close our eyes

and together find that stillness

like a pond

a pond

when the wind is quiet

and the surface

glazes

gazing unblinking

at the blue sky.

I play songs

That have only the pattern

of my self in them

and you hum along

supporting me.

You are the companion

to myself.

The mirror

with my mother's eyes.

July 1935

Midnight Truth

I am so filled with bitterness,

it comes from the dust, it comes

from the silence of my father, it comes

from the absence of Ma.

I could've loved her better.

She could've loved me, too.

But she's rock and dust and wind now,

she's carved stone,

she's holding my stone brother.

I have given my father so many chances

to understand, to

reach out, to

love me. He once did.

I remember his smile,

his easy talk.

Now there's nothing easy between us.

Sometimes he takes notice of me,

like coming after me in the dust.

But mostly I'm invisible.

Mostly I'm alone.

My father's digging his own grave,
he calls it a pond,
but I know what he's up to.
He is rotting away,
like his father,
ready to leave me behind in the dust.

Well, I'm leaving first.

July 1935

Out of the Dust

This is not a dream.
There's no comfort in dreams.
I try to contain the ache as I leave my bed,
I try to still my heart as I
slip from my room with my kerchief of dimes.
Moving slowly down the stairs,
I cross through the kitchen, taking only some
biscuits,

and leave my father's house.

It's the middle of the night and I hear every sound
inside me, outside me.

I go,
knowing that I'll die if I stay,
that I'm slowly, surely
smothering.

I walk through the calm night,
under the stars.

I walk to
where the train stops long enough
for a long-legged girl to latch on
and as my heart races

I feel the earth tremble beneath me and then
the sound of sharp knives,
metal against metal,
as the train pulls up to the station.

Once I might've headed east,

to Mr. Roosevelt.

Now I slip under cover of darkness

inside a boxcar

and let the train carry me west.

Out of the dust.

August 1935

Gone West

I am stiff and sore.

In two endless days on this train, I have

burned in the desert,

shivered in the mountains,

I have seen the

camps of dust-bowl migrants

along the tracks.

There was one girl.

I saw her through the slat in the boxcar.

She stared up at the passing train.

She stood by the tracks watching,

and I knew her.

August 1935

Something Lost, Something Gained

He climbs into my car.

He's dirty and he has a sour smell.

His eyes are ringed by the soil that comes from riding
trains.

But there's a deeper shadow to those eyes,

like ashes,

like death.

He needs a hair comb and a shave,

and a mending needle applied to his pants.

He speaks to me,

"Where you from, miss?" he wants to know.

He shows me a picture of his family.

A wife. Three boys.

The photograph is all he carries.

That and the shredding, stinking clothes on his back.

I feed him two of the stale biscuits I've been hoarding
and save the rest.

I'll be hungry tonight,

what with giving my day's biscuits away.

But I can see the gaunt of hunger in his cheeks.

He asks if I have water and I shake my head,
my tongue thick with thirst.

He eats the biscuits.

He doesn't care they're caked with dust.

He finishes eating and crumbs stick to his mustache.

He's staring hard at me and his eyes water.

"I've done it again," he says.

"Taken food from a child."

I show him my cloth bag with more biscuits.

"At home," he said, "I couldn't feed them,
couldn't stand the baby always crying.

And my wife,

always that dark look following me.

Couldn't take no more.

Lost our land, they tractored us out so's we had to

leave,

rented awhile, then moved in with Lucille's kin.

Couldn't make nothing grow."

I nodded. "I know.

We talked as the train rocked,

as the cars creaked,

as the miles showed nothing but empty space,

we talked through the pink of the setting sun,

and into the dark.

I told him about Ma dying.

I told him about my father,

and how the thing that scared us both the most
was being left alone.

And now I'd gone and left him.

I told him about the piano,

and Arley Wanderdaie,

and how I wasn't certain of the date,

but I thought it might be my birthday,

but he was sleeping by then, I think.

He was like tumbleweed.

Ma had been tumbleweed too,

holding on for as long as she could,

then blowing away on the wind.

My father was more like the sod.

Steady, silent, and deep.

Holding on to life, with reserves underneath

to sustain him, and me,

and anyone else who came near.

My father

stayed rooted, even with my tests and my temper,

even with the double sorrow of

his grief and my own,

he had kept a home

until I broke it.

When I woke,

the man was gone, and so were my biscuits,

but under my hat I found the photograph of his

family,

the wife and three boys.

Maybe the photograph was

left in trade for the biscuits,

maybe it was a birthday gift,

the one thing he had left to give.

The children in the picture were clean and serious,

looking out with a certain longing.

The baby had his eyes.

On the back of the photograph,

in pencil,

was the address of his family in

Moline, Kansas.

First chance, I'd send the picture back,

let his wife know he was still alive.

I got off the train in Flagstaff, Arizona.

A lady from a government agency saw me.

She gave me water and food.

I called Mr. Hardly from her office and asked him to

let my father know ...

I was coming home.

August 1935

Homeward Bound

Getting away,

it wasn't any better.

Just different.

And lonely.

Lonelier than the wind.

Emptier than the sky.

More silent than the dust,

piled in drifts between me

and my

father.

August 1935

Met

My father is waiting at the station

and I call him

Daddy

for the first time

since Ma died,

and we walk home,

together,

talking.

I tell him about getting out of the dust
and how I can't get out of something
that's inside me.

I tell him he is like the sod,
and I am like the wheat,
and I can't grow everywhere,
but I can grow here,
with a little rain,
with a little care,
with a little luck.

And I tell him how scared I am about those spots on
his skin
and I see he's scared too.

"I can't be my own mother," I tell him,
"and I can't be my own father
and if you're both going to leave me,

well,

what am I supposed to do?"

And when I tell Daddy so,

he promises to call Doc Rice.

He says the pond is done.

We can swim in it once it fills,

and he'll stock it with fish too,

catfish, that I can go out and

catch of an evening

and fry up.

He says I can even plant flowers,

if I want.

As we walk together,

side by side,

in the swell of dust,

I am forgiving him, step by step,

for the pail of kerosene.

As we walk together,
side by side,
in the sole-deep dust,
I am forgiving myself
for all the rest.

August 1935

Autumn 1935

Cut It Deep

I went in with Daddy to see Doc Rice.

Doc said,

"Why'd you wait so long

to show someone those spots, Bayard?"

I scowled at Daddy.

He looked at the wall.

I think

he didn't care much,

if he had some cancer

and took and died.

Figured he'd see Ma then,

he'd see my brother.

It'd be out of his hands.

He'd be out of the dust.

Now he's going to wear bandages

where Doc cut the cancer out

the best he could.

And we have to wait

and hope Daddy didn't

get help too late.

I ask Doc about my hands.

"What, "I say,

'can I do with them?"

Doc looks carefully at the mottled skin,

the stretched and striped and crackled skin.

"Quit picking at them," he says.

"Rub some ointment in them before you go to bed,"

he says.

"And use them, Billie Jo," he says.

"They'll heal up fine if you just use them."

Daddy sits on my bed

and I open the boxes,

the two boxes

that have been in my closet

for years now.

The dust is over everything,

but I blow it off,

and Daddy is so quiet

when he sees

some of the things

that're still so strong of Ma,

and we end up keeping everything but a palmful

of broken doll dishes.

I thought once to go through these boxes with

Ma,

but Daddy is

sitting on the edge of my bed.

My mouth feels cottony.

I fix dinner

and Daddy tells me about

when he was a boy.

He says, "I wasn't always sure

about the wheat,

about the land,

about life in the Panhandle.

I dreamed of running off too,

though I never did.

I didn't have half your sauce, Billie Jo," he says.

And it's the first time I ever knew

there was so much to the two of us,
so much more than our red hair
and our long legs
and the way we rub our eyes
when we're tired.

October 1935

The Other Woman

Her name is Louise,
she stayed by Daddy the days I was away.
The first time I met her she came to dinner bringing
two baskets of food.
She's a good cook
without showing off.
She has a way of making my father do things.
When Louise came to dinner,
Daddy got up and cleaned the kitchen when we were
done eating.

He tied an apron around his middle

and he looked silly as a cow

stuck in a hole,

but Louise ignored that,

and I took a lesson from her.

We walked around the farm

even though she'd probably already seen it

while I was gone.

She didn't ask to be taken to my favorite places,

the loft in the barn,

the banks of the Beaver,

the field where you can

see Black Mesa on a clear day.

She told me

she knew Daddy and I had a history before her,

and she wished she'd been there for the whole thing,

but she wasn't and there wasn't anything to do

but get over it and get on.

We both stared in wonder

at the pond my daddy made

and she said,

a hole like that says a lot about a man.

I didn't intend to, but I liked her,

because she was so plain and so honest,

and because she made Daddy laugh,

and me, too, just like that,

and even though I didn't know

if there was room for her

in me, I could see there was room for her in Daddy.

When I asked him if he wanted me

to go off to Aunt Ellis after all,

Daddy said he hadn't ever wanted it,

he said I was his own and he didn't like to

think about what Aunt Ellis might do with me.

And we laughed, picturing me and Aunt Ellis
together,
and it wasn't a nice laugh, but it was
Aunt Ellis we were talking about after all.
The thing about Louise,
I'll just have to watch how things go and hope
she doesn't crowd me out of Daddy's life, not now,
when I am just finding my way back into it.

October 1935

Not Everywhere

I walk with Daddy
up the slope and look out over the Beaver River.
Louise is back at the house.
She wanted to come
but this is Ma's place,
Ma's grave,
Franklin's too,

and Louise has no business here.

She wants to come everywhere with us.

Well, I won't let her.

Not everywhere.

Daddy says,

"She could have come.

There's room enough for everyone, Billie Jo."

But there's not.

She can come into Ma's kitchen.

She can hang around the barn.

She can sit beside Daddy when he drives the truck.

But Ma's bones are in this hill,

Ma's and Franklin's.

And their bones wouldn't like it,

if Louise came walking up here between us.

October 1935

My Life, or What I Told Louise

After the Tenth Time She Came to Dinner

"I may look like Daddy, but I have my mother's hands.

Piano hands, Ma called them, sneaking a look at them any chance she got.

A piano is a grand thing," I say.

"Though ours is covered in dust now.

Under the grime it's dark brown,

like my mother's eyes.

I think about the piano

and how above it hangs a mirror

and to either side of that mirror,

shelves,

where Ma and Daddy's wedding picture once stood,

though Daddy has taken that down.

"Whenever she could,

Ma filled a bowl with apples," I tell Louise.

"I'm crazy about apples,
and she filled a jar with wildflowers when she
found them,
and put them on that shelf above the piano.
On the other shelf Ma's book of poetry remains.
And the invitation from Aunt Ellis,
or what's left of it.
Daddy and I tore it into strips
to mark the poems we thought Ma liked best.
"We weren't always happy," I tell Louise.
"But we were happy enough
until the accident.
When I rode the train west,
I went looking for something,
but I didn't see anything wonderful.
I didn't see anything better than what I already had.
Home."

I look straight into Louise's face.

Louise doesn't flinch.

She looks straight back.

I am the first one to back down.

"My hands don't look real pretty anymore.

But they hardly hurt. They only ache a little,

sometimes.

I could play right now,

maybe,

if I could get the dust out of the piano,

if I wanted to get the dust out of the piano.

But I don't. I'm not ready yet."

And what I like best about her,

is Louise doesn't say what I should do.

She just nods.

And I know she's heard everything I said,

and some things I didn't say too.

November 1935

November Dust

The wheat is growing

even though dust

blows in sometimes.

I walk with Daddy around the farm

and see that

the pond is holding its own,

it will keep Ma's apple trees alive,

nourish her garden,

help the grass around it grow,

enough to lie in and dream

if I feel like it,

and stand in,

and wait for Mad Dog

when he comes past once a week

on his way from Amarillo,

where he works for the radio.

And as long as the

dust doesn't crush

the winter wheat,

we'll have something to show in the spring

for all Daddy's hard work.

Not a lot, but more than last year.

November 1935

Thanksgiving List

Prairie birds, the whistle of gophers, the wind

blowing,

the smell of grass

and spicy earth,

friends like Mad Dog, the cattle down in the river,

water washing over their hooves,

the sky so

big, so full of

shifting clouds,
the cloud shadows creeping
over the fields,
Daddy's smile,
and his laugh,
and his songs,
Louise,
food without dust,
Daddy seeing to Ma's piano,
newly cleaned and tuned,
the days when my hands don't hurt at all,
the thank-you note from Lucille in Moline, Kansas,
the sound of rain,
Daddy's hole staying full of water
as the windmill turns,
the smell of green,
of damp earth,

of hope returning to our farm.

The poppies set to

bloom on Ma and Franklin's grave,

the morning with the whole day waiting,

full of promise,

the night

of quiet, of no expectations, of rest.

And the certainty of home, the one I live in,

and the one

that lives in me.

November 1935

Music

I'm getting to know the music again.

And it is getting to know me.

We sniff each other's armpits,

and inside each other's ears,

and behind each other's necks.

We are both confident, and a little sassy.

And I know now that all the time I was trying to get

out of the dust,

the fact is,

what I am,

I am because of the dust.

And what I am is good enough.

Even for me.

November 1935

Teamwork

Louise and I take walks after dinner

every time she comes.

By the time we get back

the kitchen looks pretty good,

Daddy only leaves a few things he doesn't

understand,

like big pans,

and wooden spoons,
and leftovers,
and that makes me a little irritated
but mostly it makes me love him.

And Louise, knowing exactly what's left to be done,
helps me finish up.

She was my father's teacher at the night school class.

She never married.

She went to college for two years
and studied and worked,
and didn't notice how lonely she was
until she met Daddy and fell into the
big hurt of his eyes.

She knows how to keep a home,
she knows how to cook,
she knows how to make things
last through winters

and drought.

She knows how to smooth things between two
redheaded people.

And she knows how to come into a home
and not step on the toes of a ghost.

I still feel grateful she didn't make cranberry sauce
last month, at the first Thanksgiving we
spent together.

Louise made sweet potatoes and green beans,
and turkey and two pies, pumpkin
and chocolate.

I was so full

my lids

sighed shut and Daddy walked with Louise instead of
me

out to Ma and Franklin's grave,

where he let Ma know his intentions.

And Ma's bones didn't object.

Neither did mine.

And when they came back to the house,

Daddy still cleaned the kitchen.

December 1935

Finding a Way

Daddy

started talking

about planting

the rest of the acres in wheat,

but then said, No,

let's just go with what we've got right now.

And I've

been playing

a half hour

every day,

making the skin stretch,

making the scars stretch.

The way I see it, hard times aren't only

about money,

or drought,

or dust.

Hard times are about losing spirit,

and hope,

and what happens when dreams dry up.

The tractor's busted,

we don't have the cash to fix it,

but there's nothing saying Daddy can't do the work

by hand.

It can't be any harder than digging a hole

forty by sixty by six feet deep.

Daddy bought a second mule with Louise's help.

Her betrothal gift to him.

He walks behind the team,

step by step, listing the fields to fight the wind.

Maybe the tractor lifted him above the land,

maybe the fields didn't know him anymore,

didn't remember the touch of his feet,

or the stroke of his hand,

or the bones of his knees,

and why should wheat grow for a stranger?

Daddy said he'd try some sorghum,

maybe some cotton,

admitting as how there might be something

to this notion of diversification folks were

talking about,

and yes, he'd bring the grass back

like Ma wanted,

where he wasn't planting anything else.

He'd make new sod.

And I'm learning, watching Daddy, that you can stay

in one place

and still grow.

I wipe dust out of the roasting pan,

I wipe dust off Ma's dishes,

and wait for Daddy to drive in with Louise,

hoping she'll stay a little later,

a little longer,

waiting for the day when she stays for good.

She wears a comical hat, with flowers,

in December,

and when she smiles,

her face is

full enough of springtime, it makes

her hat seem just right.

She brings apples in a sack,

perfect apples she arranges

in a bowl on the shelf,

opposite the book of poetry
Sometimes, while I'm at the piano,
I catch her reflection in the mirror,
standing in the kitchen, soft-eyed, while Daddy
finishes chores,
and I stretch my fingers over the keys,
and I play.

December 1935

KAREN HESSE is the author of ten books for
children, among them *The Music of Dolphins*
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end of book