

KAREN HESSE

WITNESS

SCHOLASTIC INC.

New York Toronto London Auckland  
Sydney Mexico City New Delhi Hong Kong

*The author and editors gratefully acknowledge  
the Walter Dean Myers photograph collection,  
and the families of Edith and Herbert Langmuir, Dean Langmuir,  
and Joan Lacavara, for permission to use their photographs  
to portray the characters herein.*

*The characters portrayed in this book are fictitious  
and not intended to represent specific persons living or dead.*

---

With sincere thanks to the staffs at Brattleboro and  
Springfield, Vermont, libraries; to Randy, Kate, and Rachel  
Hesse; to Bernice Millman; to Liza Ketchum, Eileen  
Chistelow, Bob and Tink MacLean, and Wendy Watson; and  
to Liza Szabla and Elizabeth Parisi.

If you purchased this book without a cover, you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as "unsold and destroyed" to the publisher, and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this "stripped book."

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher. For information regarding permission, write to Scholastic Inc., Attention: Permissions Department, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

ISBN 978-0-439-27200-1

Copyright © 2001 by Karen Hesse.  
Cover images © 2005 by Darren Hopes.  
All rights reserved. Published by Scholastic Inc.  
SCHOLASTIC and associated logos are trademarks  
and/ or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

23 22 21 20 19 18

14 15 16/0

Printed in the U.S.A.

40

Book design by Elizabeth B. Parisi

---

To Jean Feiwel

---

*And in this yard stenogs, bundle boys, scrubwomen, sit on  
the tombstones, and walk on the grass of graves, speaking  
of war and weather, of babies, wages and love.*

*from "Trinity Peace"  
by Carl Sandburg*

---

# The Characters...



Leanora Sutter (aged 12)



Merlin Van Tornhout (aged 18)



Esther Hirsh (aged 6)



Percelle Johnson,  
town constable (aged 66)



Sara Chickering,  
farmer (aged 42)



Johnny Reeves,  
clergyman (aged 36)



Iris Weaver, restaurant owner  
and rum runner (aged 30)



Fitzgerald Flitt,  
doctor (aged 60)



Harvey Pettibone, shop owner,  
husband of Viola (aged mid-50s)



Viola Pettibone,  
shop owner (aged mid-50s)



Reynard Alexander,  
newspaper editor (aged 48)

Setting: Vermont

Time: 1924

---

ACT ONE

leanora sutter

i don't know how miss harvey  
talked me into dancing in *the fountain of youth*.  
i don't know how she knew i danced at all.  
unless once, a long time ago, my mamma told her so.

but she did talk me into dancing.  
i leaped and swept my way through *the fountain of youth*  
separated on the stage from all those limb-tight white girls.

the ones who wouldn't dance with a negro,  
they went home in a huff that first day,  
but some came back.  
they told miss harvey they'd dance,  
but they wouldn't  
touch any brown skin girl.

only the little girl from new york,  
esther,  
that funny talking kid,  
only esther didn't mind about me being colored.

## merlin van tornhout

i pushed the window up in school  
to get the stink of leanora sutter out of the classroom  
where miss harvey brought her to show off  
a dance from last week's  
recital.

mr. caldwell  
chuffed his arms  
faked a shiver,  
ramped the sash back down  
saying the day was too cold to leave a window open

leanora sutter  
turned and stared through me  
    that witchy girl  
    with those fuming eyes  
she meant to put a curse on me.  
she meant to.

i left school right then.  
no amount of air will get the smell of her  
out of my nose,  
the soot of her out of my eyes.

## esther hirsh

i did first meet sara chickering  
when i had comings here last year  
to be a fresh air girl in vermont.

vermont is a nice place.  
they have wiggle fish.  
that is what i did tell daddy in new york  
when i had comings back to him.  
i did ask daddy  
to have our livings in vermont with sara chickering

for keeps.

but daddy did say no.

so i made a long walk all by myself.  
i did follow the train tracks and  
pretty quick daddy did have comings after me.

sara chickering made two rooms to be for us  
in her big farmhouse  
with her dog jerry.  
We have sitting every night at the round table, next to the hot stove.  
and i do catch the wiggle fish through  
a hole sara chickering does make in the ice.



daddy gives helps when  
sara chickering has needs for extra big hands.  
but daddy is a shoe man. he has shoe knowings.  
my friend sara chickering, she has knowings of all things else.

leonora sutter

in school willie pettibone handed me an article  
torn from the town paper.  
it said:

*any person to whom an evening of hearty laughter is poison  
had better keep away from the community club minstrel show  
friday evening at the town hall. all others will be admitted  
for a night of fun brought to you by 22 genuine  
black-faced coons*

felt like skidding on ice as i read,  
felt like twisting steel.

why can't folks just leave me alone?

daddy says:  
how alone you want to be, leanora?  
you're already nothing but a wild brown island.

percelle johnson

roads were bad.  
don't blame me.  
it's not my fault.  
these roads are nothing but hog wallow during a thaw.  
folks ought to know that.

wright sutter should have thought  
before bringing his wife and child along to town with him.  
that wasn't my fault,  
his horse and wagon miring down,  
stuck in the mud.  
i wasn't even on duty.  
not my fault he couldn't get help.  
no one too energetic about helping a colored man hereabouts,  
even if he is a neighbor.  
sutter, making deliveries, left his womenfolk in the wagon too long.  
wife took a chill,  
waiting, she put her wrap around the little girl,  
leanora.  
sick all year, sutter's wife was. doc flitt said  
she ought to go away to a sanatorium to get her health back.  
wright sutter didn't have money for that.  
even if there was a sanatorium for colored folk.  
the sutter woman died this past spring.

don't blame me.  
the roads were bad.

esther hirsh

the preacher man  
johnny reeves  
did have sittings on the riverbank  
where I do make the leaves and  
twigs float by in the ice green water.  
even with my hat down over my ears I did hear him cry  
neighbor,  
oh neighbor.  
so I made my way to see what he did want.

johnny reeves did stand when he had seeings of me  
and a girl did and a girl did stand up in the brown tangle bank  
beside him and run away  
and johnny reeves did yell  
and make fist shakings at me  
and i did yell  
and make fist shakings back  
and we didhave a good game of yellings and shakings

until sara chickering did call me  
and i had runnings back to the house  
to gather the warm chicken eggs  
from the steamy straw nests.

leonora sutter

they made me mad.  
willie pettibone and some of the other boys, they said things  
about me and daddy.

i shouldn't let them get to me but  
i'm flint quick these days.

willie said:

at the klan meeting last night  
the dragons talked about lighting you  
and your daddy up  
to get them some warmth on a cold day.  
you'd be cheap fuel, they said.

i turned my back on willie pettibone and walked out of school.  
i didn't know where i was going.  
i just walked out  
without my coat,  
without my hat or rubbers.  
i didn't feel the cold,  
i was that scorched.

sara chickering

the day was cold,  
bitter, below-zero.  
made-you-wish-you' cl-been-born-inside-a-fur-coat  
cold.

heavy sky, early dark, lamps already lit.  
esther playing in the kitchen with her clothespin dolls,  
and mr. hirsh still at the shoe store. that's  
when leanora sutter, half frozen,  
showed up on my porch.

she wore no coat, her head was bare, no rubbers on her feet,  
nothing but worn-thin school clothes standing between her  
and the teeth of winter.

i brought her in.  
sat her on a chair by the stove.  
put a mug  
the chipped one  
of warm broth in her hands.

esther dragged my best quilt into the kitchen and  
worked it up over leanora's shoulders.  
only esther would go lugging out the company best  
for a colored girl.

i left leanora there with esther,  
ran the half mile to iris weaver's restaurant  
with the coffee flowing and the politics raging around me  
phoned doc flitt and constable johnson,  
let them know i had leanora and she wasn't in any too good shape,  
and they'd better hurry along.

constable johnson said he'd go after the girl's father.  
make sure wright sutter got his child home safe and sound  
to that little place they rent from lizzie stockwell  
out the west end of town.  
constable said he didn't want happening to leanora,  
what happened to the mother.

when i got back to the house,  
esther sat at leanora's feet,  
little round esther leaning against  
that slender brown girl, with her long head and longer limbs.  
gave me some turn  
seeing those two motherless children  
    in my kitchen  
    before the stove,  
esther's hair draped across leanora's lap,  
leanora's dark hand stroking esther's silk face.  
after wright sutter drove away with leanora,  
i looked at the empty chair by the stove,  
the quilt still slung over it, spilling onto the floor.  
    i never had a colored girl in my kitchen before.

leanora sutter

i told daddy i wasn't going back to school  
daddy said:  
of course you are.  
no low-down white boy's gonna stop leanora sutter  
from getting an education.

johnny reeves

some preacher down south  
has himself a following  
of coloreds  
and whites,  
together.  
they trail after him from town to town,  
forgetting their duties to home.

they even tried him, neighbor, they tried him  
before a jury of white men  
for inciting trouble,  
for leading the lord's sheep to stray,  
and still, neighbor, it grieves me to tell you that  
still,  
they let the devil go free.

it's a sorry state, neighbor,  
it's a pitiful state of affairs when a colored preacher  
can lure good white folk from their hearths.

leonora sutter

my daddy says  
down in texas  
a reverend by the name of  
*revealed Jesus*  
is preaching so powerful,  
people are leaving their jobs and their houses and  
following him from meeting to meeting

my daddy says  
*revealed jesus* better get his brave behind up north pretty quick because  
what he's doing down there in texas  
is sure to get him lynched.

johnny reeves

oh, neighbor.  
down in that den of the devil  
down in that center of sin,  
down in new york's harlem  
negroes kill other negroes  
    over gambling debts,  
    over women,  
    over gin.

hear me, neighbor.  
if we are patient  
if we are patient, my good neighbor,  
we can stay here at home,  
we can take care of our problems at home  
and down there in harlem, the  
negro problem will  
    settle  
    itself.

esther hirsh

in new york  
i did see someone whose poor head  
did have a bullet inside it  
and he did  
have blood everywhere in the street  
where he did sleep so still.

daddy and sara chickering did talk at the table.  
a man with the name of senator greene did get a bullet in his head, too.  
i did make a whisper sound  
to hear this talk.

    like birds falling.

daddy did say  
don't cry esther. senator greene is getting better again.  
daddy says bullets are a very bad thing.  
but daddy says  
sometimes you can even get a shooting in the head  
and still be okay.  
sara chickering did say yes that is true.  
so it has to be.

percelle johnson

the ku klux klan  
is looking to rent the town hall for their meetings.  
why shouldn't they?

iris weaver

some girls i know have gone out in the world  
but most have married,  
settled down to  
children  
and housework.  
i'm different.  
i have this restaurant.  
i have a secret life, too.  
a life the law is forever dogging me over.

i run booze.

i know every foot of ground  
between boston and montreal.  
i could walk the distance blindfolded.  
i know the names of the customs officers,  
american and canadian,  
where they' re stationed,  
what shift they' re on,  
the tough ones,  
and the ones who can't resist a pretty leg  
or a slice of apple pie.

the officers in vermont are the toughest.  
i've brought loads through highgate and alburg,  
but mostly i go through new york.

rouses point and plattsburg.  
i dnve a good secondhand Packard  
it has plenty of pep, ·  
plenty of room to carry a load.

and it's got damn good springs.

johnny reeves

have you seen the way the girls dance?  
sinful, neighbor, sinful.  
these girls  
doing the unspeakable gyrations of satan.  
with each step they unravel the  
moral fiber of our country.

they must be stopped.  
not by law, neighbor,  
not by legislation. this is no business of the government.  
it is up to us, neighbor.  
it is up to us to lock our daughters in  
until they learn to behave,  
until we destroy in them  
the wanton will of satan.



fitzgerald flitt

the flapper

is not the least bit alarming,  
nor a sign of the declining social standard.  
though she drinks cocktails and shows an inordinate fondness  
for lipstick and the rouge pot,  
we have nothing to fear.

i doctor these women

and i have seen over the last years a transformation in them.  
and what i see,  
the opening of roses kept bud-tight so many years,  
it warms this aging soul.

sara chickering

they say that maple sugar  
is becoming old-fashioned  
as the paisley shawl,  
but to see esther hirsh suck on a lump,  
her face star-blissed with  
sweet delight,  
i think that old-time maple,  
it's still all right.

## harvey and viola pettibone

harvey says:

the ku klux are here, vi.

there's not a thing to stop them. we might as well join them.

why not?

they're not low-down, like some folks say.

they're good men,

100 percent american men.

and they might bring us some business.

viola says:

in texas, harvey,

those "good" men thought a certain fella was  
keeping company with a married lady.

they had no proof of hanky-panky, harv.

they beat him, anyway,

held a pistol to his head,

said they'd kill him if he didn't clear out.

harv, you don't wanna join a group like that.

but harvey says:

that's just rumor.

they have parades, vi,

and picnics,

and speakers from all over.

wouldn't you like that?

picnics and speakers?

viola washes up the dinner dishes,

her hands gloved in soapy water.

they do good, vi. they take care of their women.  
and liquor can't tear up a family with them around.

harvey examines a spot on one of the glasses.  
shouldn't we join, vi?

viola shakes her head slowly back and forth.  
no harv, viola says, i don't think we should.

reynard alexander

this paper is neutral.  
this editor is neutral  
i have attempted to remain neutral  
in the face of the klan question  
and i intend to continue neutral  
until i have reason  
to do otherwise.

leonara sutter

teacher says lewis won't be coming back to school.  
he got himself killed yesterday  
playing in the sandbank. it  
buried him.  
he was alone.  
lewis was always alone,  
down in that sandbank,  
making big sand cities  
that he limped away from when his ma  
called him home for dinner,  
big sand cities willie pettibone and those boys  
came in and wrecked  
so lewis' d have to start again.  
this time the sand slid right down on top of lewis  
and buried him  
in the very city he was building.  
i am being buried, too,  
in all this whiteness.

iris weaver

well how do you like that.  
down in texas  
mrs. miriam ferrguson,  
the wife of the impeached governor  
defeated the klan candidate  
by 80,000 votes  
to win the democratic nomination for her state.

if she wins,  
she'll be the first woman  
governor in  
this whole damn country.

imagine.

harvey and viola pettibone

if we join the klan, harvey says,  
we can wipe out bronson's grocery by next year, vi.  
all the klan members will shop here,  
every if they live closer to bronson.  
bronson's made his feelings about the klan clear.  
if we join up with them, how long could bronson last. six months, nine?

viola says:  
and what about all our regulars, harv.  
we make this store "klan only"  
we lose a lot of business.  
where do you think they'll all go?

harvey says:  
it doesn't matter. that little bit of business,  
it won't be enough to keep bronson flush, vi. you'll see.  
i don't think so, viola says.

sara chickering

folks ask why i never married.  
i watched my  
father swallow his breakfast whole and rush away,  
leaving mother with us children to be readied for school,  
lunch to be prepared for noon,  
washing to be done,  
and the fitting out of a big evening meal.

father would come home late,  
tired out,  
falling asleep in the best chair after supper,  
while mother put the house to rights, .  
got me, my brothers, my sister  
and, finally, father off to bed.

from morning until night,  
every day of the week,  
that was mother's life.  
father got a holiday from time to time.  
mother never did.

that's why i moved out and came to work on the farm.  
soon as i could i bought it for my own.  
all these years i've managed fine without a man.  
i may work as hard as my mother, .  
but i'm drudge to no one.

johnny reeves

we shall reign in the kingdom,  
neighbor,  
we shall form a great fist,  
and we shall still those who oppose us.  
We shall strike them out,  
wipe them out,  
blot them out.  
together we cast a lost shadow, neighbor,  
and with our shadow  
we cast our foes in darkness.  
we cast those who are not like us into the arms of satan.

every one of the lord's lambs wants the light shining on him,  
neighbor,  
every lamb can see the right way when he is  
standing in the light of the lord.  
every lamb, once he has known the light,  
cannot endure the darkness.  
come stand with me in the light, neighbor.

---

---

ACT TWO

## leonora sutter

there was a boy in chicago,  
a rich boy.  
he was kidnapped: \_  
the kidnapers wanted \$10,000  
from the boy's daddy  
to bring the boy back alive. ·  
only he was already dead. . .  
even before the ransom note came,  
the boy was already dead,  
naked in a ditch, miles away from his house.  
that boy was fourteen.  
and now he's dead.  
and he was rich.  
and he was white.

esther hirsh

my brain did get hurt yesterday.  
doc flitt says  
it did get hurt a little like senator greene.

i was having chasing games with margaret  
and i did fall and hit my head on a rock. ·  
the rock made big heart beatings in my eye.  
i did find my way home to sara chickering  
with the good dog jerry helping me ·  
but i didn't feel any good feelings anywhere.  
and then my eyes did see only darks  
and i did get confused and  
thinkings i did drown in sand  
the way lewis did with his lame leg.  
and then lewis did take my hand  
and he gave me showings of the way back home  
to my nice little bed in sara chickering's house.

this morning i did wake up  
and my brain is all good feelings again.  
and i can have seeing again and the darks is all gone  
and the big heart beatings is just a little thump thumps.

doc flitt says  
i am like senator greene  
only i did get better so much faster.

percelle johnson

the chicago police did it.  
they solved the case of that murder  
of fourteen-year-old bobby franks.  
it was the spectacles that  
led detectives to the slayers.

nathan leopold, jr.,  
son of a millionaire manufacturer,  
and richard loeb,  
his companion,  
were taken into custody  
for kidnapping and killing their neighbor.

the reports say both leopold and loeb are smart,  
students at the university in chicago.  
they made full confessions to the charges,  
said they'd been planning the job  
since november.

if leopold had not dropped his spectacles,  
if the spectacles had not been so uncommon,  
they would have gotten away with it.  
they would have gotten away  
with murder.



merlin van tornhout

it took two of them  
my age  
to kill one skinny jew boy.  
two of them.  
planning every detail.  
they rented an automobile, killed the kid,  
dumped the body, buried the boots and belt buckle  
in different places.  
they planned for weeks to kidnap,  
to kill.  
to see how it felt.  
to prove they could.  
it didn't matter about jail,  
or being haunted by a ghost,  
didn't even matter about going to hell.

if I wanted to, i could kill someone all by myself.  
wouldn't need anyone's help,  
and I'd make damn sure i got some money for my trouble.  
but they were rich jew kids.  
what do you expect?

sara chickering

caught a  
german  
carp  
just below  
the falls.  
measured  
two  
and  
one-half  
feet and weighed  
37 pounds.

caught it on  
plain old  
silk line.

esther helped.

leonora sutter

my daddy said mr. field, the uncle of miss stockwell, our landlady,  
was feeling poorly  
and i might take myself over to see  
if i could be of any use.

when i got there i washed up his dishes  
and swept his floor  
and boiled some potatoes for his supper.

while i worked he talked.  
at first i didn't-listen.  
mr. field is a white man  
with cheeks shrunk in enough to make his  
ears and his eyes too big for the rest of his face.  
and a neck so scrawny,  
not a collar exists that could tighten around it.

he started in on war stories.  
civil war.  
he told me about being a bugler for his regiment.  
but he said that didn't keep him out of danger.  
he was standing right beside a colonel who was shot through the  
middle.

mr-field said: i saw the brigade of negroes under general burnside.  
like a long streamer of dark silk they were.

he stared off through his wire spectacles,  
the lenses so dirty  
even if his eyes were clear  
he couldn't have seen much.

they were a sight, he said.  
that line of negroes,  
marching toward the rebels,  
straight as a dress parade.

what happened to them, i asked,  
expecting nothing good.  
mr. field said: why,  
those negro soldiers chased the rebels out.  
every one.

i made a pie for mr. field.  
he kept talking.  
i don't know if he could see me well enough  
to judge the color of my skin. . . .  
i don't know if my color mattered one whit to him.  
he just said:  
you come by anytime, miss sutter.  
you move nice and quiet  
and you make my kitchen smell like it .  
did when i had a wife here. and i do  
like a flaky apple pie.

i marched home in a straight line,  
with my back tall,  
and thought about that regiment of men  
like a streamer of dark silk.

esther hirsh

when the barn cat did have her six little kittens  
sara chickering had takings of the baby kittens  
away from their mamma.

what did you do with the little things?  
i did ask sara chickering.

sara chickering said the kittens did go far away.

that is what they said about my mamma, too. she did go  
far away on the train to heaven.

will the kittens come back? i did ask.

no, sara chickering said. the kittens won't come back, esther.  
if the kittens come back they will eat the birds.  
if the birds are eaten they can't catch the bugs.  
then the bugs will come and kill my crop.  
that's why the kittens are gone.

i do like the little kittens. even when they are blind  
and have no fur and move around like  
pink baby tongues and smell like  
warm rubber balls. i do like to watch them  
i did go along the railroad tracks to find where  
sara chickering left the little kittens. i did think i could find them

before they had leavings on the train to heaven and  
i could be their mamma and keep them in the woods  
and make them eat only warm milk and biscuit.

but i could have no findings of the little kittens.

harvey and viola pettibone

hey, vi, harvey says.  
did you know the average woman  
is happiest when she prepares food in her own kitchen  
and sits down with the family to enjoy it?

viola is cutting up chicken in the back room.  
where'd you hear that, harv?

harvey says: johnny reeves was in the store  
picking up groceries for old mrs. reeves.  
he had a crowd gathered around him  
and he was preaching. he said we'd all be better off if we  
got the family  
out of the restaurant  
and back to the dinner table.  
he said the average woman,  
she loves her home and family first.  
she might have got distracted  
when she was earning wages  
while her man fought in the great war.  
but the trend is the other way now.

viola says:  
was iris weaver in the store when he was doing this preaching?

harvey says:  
no. matter of fact he waited until she left.

viola nods and smiles.  
i guess he did.

sara chickering

it's not hard putting up with mr. hirsh.  
he isn't like my father.

maybe because he's so young.

he washes dishes,  
helps with chores,  
he even does a turn at the stove every few days.

he bathes esther,  
reads to her in all manner of voices,  
makes us both laugh till our sides hurt.  
he washes her clothes,  
gets her to school and helps with her homework.

best man i ever saw.

iris weaver

i know i shouldn't be running liquor  
and maybe i'll end up in jail.  
but i paid for this restaurant  
by transporting hooch  
and i've made enough  
to fork out tuition for two of my brothers  
and my baby sister, who is as smart as sateen  
and would have been trapped in this valley forever.

leonora sutter

when i was taking care of mr. field,  
doing the light chores,  
keeping him alive with my plain  
cooking and housekeeping,  
i told him about helen keller and how she was blind all the way  
and how i wrote her a letter.  
and he showed me a  
remington portable typewriter,  
almost new.

you have any use for that? he asked.  
for your letter writing and all?

no sir, i said.

i would have liked a machine like that to write on.  
but if i went carrying a big old  
typewriter home from  
dickenson street  
all the way to  
mather road,  
constable johnson,  
he'd get ten calls before i got halfway to the covered bridge,  
telling him how the colored girl  
stole some  
expensive machinery.

not worth the trouble.

## merlin van tornhout

mary said:  
what about we get married, merle?  
you're almost done with school,  
you got that night job at the paper,  
we could live on that.  
come bust me out of this place, merle.

i like mary find.  
maybe enough to marry her.

but i don't know.

she wrote a letter to johnny reeves  
asking if he'd do the ceremony and  
if we could get married in ku klux robes,  
with flowers embroidered over the fiery cross.  
and johnny reeves said, yes.

but i never have yet  
paid my 10 dollars to the klan,  
and mary,  
well, i don't know what the klan would make of her.  
when she was still down here,  
she bought all her shoes  
from the jew store.

## iris weaver

merlin van tornhout  
just can't keep himself out of trouble.  
with all the talk about  
Jeopold and loeb  
he goes driving off to  
rescue his 15-year-old girlfriend  
from an orphanage in burlington  
and gets hauled into jail for kidnapping.

boy's got spirit, i'll give him that.  
his girl told him she wanted out,  
and he drove up there to spring her.  
they were caught in vergennes,  
mary placed in custody  
of a policewoman,  
merlin arrested and held in the lockup.

/'

he should be back in a few days.  
reynard alexander went and pitched for him.  
it helps having reynard alexander for a friend.  
i should know.

## merlin van tornhout

constable Johnson told me it'd be better  
if i watched my step after the trouble  
i got in  
trying to help mary.

## harvey and viola pettibone

did you have to buy so many, viola says,  
looking at the stack of phonograph records.

harvey closes his eyes and breathes deeply.  
when i go in the music store,  
i want everything, he says.

viola says:  
if you would only sit in the booth and try out half a dozen records  
before you buy, you'd know exactly what  
you're getting, you'd  
get exactly  
what you want.

harvey says:  
i did get what i wanted. why should i spend half my life  
squeezed inside a soundproof cubby,  
when i can come home  
and listen in peace in my own chair.

viola says:  
we'll see how much peace you get, mr. pettibone.  
i was hoping to put  
new linoleum on the floor this month.  
now it looks like we might just have to  
nail your records down  
instead.

johnny reeves

we took a pine  
40 feet high and  
lashed a cross arm  
to it and set the  
cross in the ground,  
its arms stretching above the town, we soaked burlap bags  
in kerosene and wrapped the bags around the wood.  
at the foot of the  
cross i smashed  
a railroad torch.  
the fire took off  
so fast. a divine  
sight, neighbor,  
the flames spread  
from the base to the  
top. in a matter of  
minutes the cross arm  
pulsed with fire. the  
flames leaping  
seeking heaven,  
neighbor, the white  
crucifix scoring  
the night  
blazed perfect.  
perfect.

merlin van tornhout

i don't care what constable johnson says.  
before i left for work,  
i went up with johnny reeves and them  
and we lit up prospect hill  
with a fiery cross.  
the kerosene took off so fast.  
burned so fierce. christ.  
i can still see it when i close my eyes



leonora sutter

i woke up saturday night  
because the light coming through  
my bedroom window changed.

on the hill across the valley  
i saw  
a flame  
rising  
but it was  
no wild fire. it  
was a  
cross,  
burning.

silently,  
silently,  
i crept down the hall,  
into the closet  
where,  
at the back,  
mamma's cotton dress  
still dangled over her shoes,  
and the walls smelled of hair oil and oranges.

in that dark and narrow place,  
i opened a hole for myself  
but no matter how i turned, -  
the light from the cross  
curled its bright claws under the door.

reynard alexander

down in town,  
families listened to the independence day concert,  
while up on the hill a fiery cross was set ablaze.  
it started burning about the time the band finished  
*the star-spangled hanner.*

only a lunatic  
would ignore the dry conditions,  
or the fact that a crackling fire  
could spread so easily out of control.

or perhaps it was the work of children  
stirred by griffith's *birth of a nation*,  
that racist rubbish,  
which will not fade away.

esther hirsh

sara chickering did take me for a walk  
on the other side of flat rock  
from where the cross did burn  
the other night.

sara chickering did grumble about men in their nightshirts  
with their filthy wet hems  
and i did laugh at her  
    so serious  
and ask her for the names for all the flowers,  
all the growing plants like  
ebony spleenwort and  
rusty woodsia.

as we did walk through the meadow  
back to sara chickering's house  
we did see flowers with more good names  
like violet and saxifrage and cowslip,  
and we did see birds with the most happy namings like  
meadowlark  
and bobolink  
and savanna sparrow.  
they did make a music in the shimmery air  
and there were flickers and  
orioles and  
bluebirds turning circles.

and as i did look up to give thanks to sara chickering for all the  
    namings  
a whipporwill had singings  
and the music did come from sara chickering's mouth

iris weaver

i was born protestant. . .  
but i'd join the catholic church .  
before  
i'd throw my lot in with the klan.

sara chickering

i never thought much about it before.  
if esther hadn't needed a place the last minute  
with all those fresh air kids coming to town,  
i never would think of it still.  
i might have joined the ladies' klan.  
become an officer, even.  
klan can seem mighty right-minded, with their talk of family virtue,  
mighty decent, if you don't scratch the surface.  
there's a kind of power they wield,  
a deceptive authority.

i think a lot about it these days.  
the klan says they don't stand against anyone.  
    but a catholic, a jew, a negro,  
    if they got arrested,  
    and the judge was klan,  
    and the jury was klan,  
    you can't convince me they'd get a fair trial.

it took having the hirshes here  
to see straight through  
to the end of it.

esther hirsh

someone did wrap a letter over a stone and they did send it  
through sara chickering's kitchen window.  
i have not knowings what the letter said.  
daddy would not give readings of the words to me.  
he did say-a hiss word like steams coming from the teakettle  
and make slow shakings of his head.  
sara chickering,  
when she did read the letter,  
she made angry sayings.  
    when sara chickering does get angry she is  
    walking  
    so fast,  
    like a dog who has needs for squats.  
    she does go so fast sparks are coming on the braided rug.  
daddy did say he would sit at the table and not have sleeps.  
sara chickering let me have sleeps in her bed.  
daddy did say nobody not anybody not even klan is hurting little  
girls\_  
and  
i can have sleeps with no fearing.

i like  
having sleeps with sara chickering  
except it does make me  
hungry in the hot night  
when sara chickering is all  
smelling  
of spicy green tomatoes.

sara chickering

ira hirsh  
saw in the paper  
an ad for a flat on main street.  
    five rooms,  
    completely furnished.  
he asked if he should take it.  
get the klan to leave me alone.  
i can't imagine life without that child under my feet,  
asking a thousand questions  
with that odd way of hers,  
talking to the animals  
and the plants  
and the furniture  
as if everything  
was talking back.  
i can't imagine life without that child.  
i told mr. hirsh so in so many words.

damn klan.  
to think of what they could drive from my life  
with their filthy  
little  
mjnds.

---

---

ACT THREE

esther hirsh

sara chickering did come with me  
and we did gather  
sticks and sticks of rhubarbs from the garden.  
we did put the rhubarbs in my wagon  
and have squeaks, squeaks to town,  
pulling the rhubarbs behind us all the places  
and we did sell sara chickering's rhubarbs,  
ten sticks a nickel.  
and we had comings back with the.rattle-empty wagon,  
and five jingle nickels.

percelle johnson

caught iris weaver  
with twenty bottles of bootleg whiskey in her car.  
but the man she was with  
said it was his hooch and iris didn't know what all she was carrying.  
now i know it was iris running that booze,  
but the gentleman's going to jail for her,  
serving the sentence she ought to serve.  
if you ask me,  
a girl goes and bobs her hair and her head starts  
filling with nothing but monkey business.

sara chickering

heard talk around town that  
the hearse of a slain klansman  
caught fire on its way to the cemetery.

what do you suppose the lord  
was trying to say about that?

johnny reeves

neighbor,  
as the hearse drove  
past hundreds of persons  
lining the sidewalks,  
an act of god,  
a thunderbolt  
struck the car itself,  
sparking it to  
smoke and flames.

an act of god,  
neighbor,  
to express the lord's anger  
that one  
of his special children  
had fallen.

reynard alexander

on arrival in a town,  
the klan appears to serve the best interest of  
the greater community,  
“cleaning” it up, keeping a vigilant eye out for  
loose morals and lawbreakers.  
they deliver baskets to the needy,  
and money to the destitute,  
but the needy the klan comforts are white protestant needy,  
the destitute white protestant, too.

a catholic with troubles, a negro, a jew, a foreigner?  
their problems are of no concern to the klan.

from state to state,  
from town to town,  
men join who cannot be trusted.  
    unscrupulous men  
    who work in the dark  
    behind hoods and masks.  
it takes but ten dollars.

and when that sort of scoundrel  
starts hiding under hood and robes,  
no good can come of it. \_



johnny reeves

i have reached the pinnacle, neighbor.  
tapped by the exalted dragons.  
i, neighbor, led the klan  
in their opening prayers.

the gathering prayed with me,  
neighbor, in the summer morning  
with the bees humming in the clover.  
they prayed with me as i declared the klan a  
movement of god.

heads uplifted, we offered ourselves to the, almighty,  
calling all .  
protestants  
to band together  
for the sake of home and country

and we sang

*amenca.*

leonora sutter

i was on my way up main street when i saw esther.  
she was picking stands of dandelion, talking her strange talk  
about birds and kittens, about lewis and  
stopping the train  
so she could take flowers to heaven and visit her mother.

i walked with her a while, listening,  
then waved goodbye at the bottom of main street hill.  
i hadn't gone far  
when i heard the train whistle.  
i couldn't see the tracks  
or esther  
but

                  i saw my mother,  
                  running  
and i  
started running, too, toward her,  
racing between buildings.

then my mother was gone, but there was esther,  
looking up,  
still as a rock,  
gazing at  
that big train,  
rushing down on her,  
expecting it to stop and let her on.

i pretty near flew

it didn't seem i could ever move fast enough  
but i ran

as the whistle shrieked  
as the brakes screamed  
as the fireman crawled out onto the grinding locomotive.  
the train was nearly on top of her when i leaped,  
grabbed esther, and rolled her to safety,  
locked in my arms,  
the two of us cradled in a mess of seed and dandelion.

sara chickering

leanora sutter  
snatched esther from the path of the maine central locomotive,  
racing the engine while the fireman crawled out  
in the hope of a rescue,  
an impossible rescue.

they saw esther on the tracks.  
set their brakes\_  
but the train was so heavy,  
it ran a quarter mile more  
before  
screeching  
to a  
stop.

in that wrenching stretch  
the men were certain they'd killed her.

can't hardly think of anything  
but leanora sutter  
in my kitchen last winter, wrapped in my best quilt,  
and yesterday esther, wrapped in  
leanora,  
inches from the railroad tracks,  
safe in a nest of dandelion.

esther hirsh

i do have the prickle scratches on my legs and on my arm  
from where

leanora did push me down in the tangle grass  
and sara chickering says in a big scold voice  
that i am never, never, ever stopping a train  
not ever, never, never on the train tracks.  
but

i do miss my mama and her summer  
skin.

reynard alexander

wright sutter  
received a letter  
in the mail  
warning him to leave town.

whoever wrote that letter said  
they saw the article about leanora  
saving the hirsh child from the train.  
said,  
they'd tie them both to the tracks next time,  
make sure neither walked away.

fearing for leanora,  
sutter took the letter to percelle johnson.  
johnson  
asked the head of the local klan what they knew about such threats.  
klan said,  
we didn't send it.

reynard alexander

put a colored girl in the paper,  
call her a hero,  
just cause she saved a kid  
from being hit by a train.  
a jew kid.

i could have saved the kid.  
i saw it, too. that train  
tearing along the track.  
i saw it, too.

i didn't run like that colored girl did.  
i didn't try.  
maybe i was thinking no one could.  
no one could beat that train.

but the colored girl,  
i never saw anyone move so fast.  
she ran like a deer,  
like a deer in a rifle sight,  
one you let go  
cause there's no way to hit  
a swift brown rush weaving through the trees like that.

i'm not saying she did anything i couldn't have done  
but when i think on it,  
niaybe i didn't try because something,  
something kept me in my place,  
watching that colored girl run.

esther hirsh

bossie did stray from the pasture  
into mr. hobart's garden  
where she had eatings of all the good green stuffs  
and she did have happy goings up and down the garden rows.  
when mr. hobart had wakings up,  
he did see our bossie  
in his garden,  
and he did take his gun and fire at  
bossie.

bossie is a smart cow  
and right away she had runnings home to us.  
the animal doctor did make a good promise that  
bossie does not ever have the living coming out of her.  
and i am having big glads to hear this -  
because i do like it better to play with  
bossie with the living in her.

## fitzgerald flitt

some klansmen, goosed on bootleg whiskey, broke  
into the basement  
of the roman catholic cathedral in burlington  
expecting to find  
tanks and guns,  
airplanes and acid,  
ammunition enough to level new england.

all they found was dust,  
some worn vestments,  
and a dented chalice,

which they stole.

## reynard alexander

what is.the ku klux klan?  
is it the patriotic organization it claims to be?  
100 percent americans  
what is a 100 percent american?  
what of catholics, jews, negroes,  
citizens of any other race or color born here,  
whose fathers were born here,  
and grandfathers.  
are they not every bit as 100 percent American as the klan?

## viola pettibone

i accompanied oscar scott to the train station  
to meet john philip souza  
and bring him to the auditorium  
to play with his band of eighty musicians.  
i handed mr. souza a bouquet of flowers and  
the key to the city,  
which he accepted grandly.

the band played nine numbers though they  
had just three hours here in town.  
they gave a full concert,  
and a number of encores,  
all mr. souza's compositions.

they saved for last  
*stars and stripes forever*  
and took the house by storm.

harvey held a seat for me.  
but  
i watched the concert from the wings,  
as mr. souza'-s guest.

## reynard alexander

viola pettibone, who mothers that cat of hers  
the way only viola pettibone can,  
found her maltese stuck way- up in the crotch of a tree  
on the bank leading down to the railroad track.

she tried coaxing it out,  
tried getting her boy willie to go after it, but that boy's good for  
nothing,  
and her customers wouldn't climb that tree.  
danged cat.  
pretty near everyone with a place backing the river came out,  
vexed from listening to it yowl.

guess it was scared 60 feet up in the air,  
too scared to consider coming down on its own and no one  
willing to go up after it.

fire department came.  
they sized up the scene and  
called me.

i wasn't going up in my uniform.  
pulled on a pair of overalls,  
placed a ladder against the lowest part of the tree.  
12 feet i covered that way.  
the remaining 48 had to be shinnied up,  
one inch at a time in the pouring rain.

blasted cat wouldn't come.  
not even when i reached it.  
i tried sweet talking it into letting go of the bark.

finally had to pry it loose, ·  
put the thing on my shoulder, its claws stabbing into my back

slowly we came down.  
6 feet from the ground the cat ripped my shirt, climbed my face  
and leaped  
into viola's arms.

put my uniform back on and wrote up a ticket handing it to  
harvey pettibone  
next time, i said,  
keep your cat to home.

## fitzgerald flitt

mr. clarence darrow,  
the lawyer defending those chicago boys,  
believes  
that under no circumstances  
should the state take a  
human life.  
that's why he's shouldering this case  
the guilt of leopold and loeb,  
the two young murderers of bobby franks,  
is without question.  
it is darrow's intention ·  
not to prove their innocence,  
but to cheat the hangman  
    in spite of their guilt  
and perhaps in so doing  
remove the underpinnings  
of every gallows across this land

a civilized man in america.  
how refreshing.

reynard alexander

leopold and loeb  
who had stuck together  
through the hearing,  
snickering and laughing  
as they moved to and from the courtroom,

sat silently,  
avoiding each other  
as they heard for the first time,  
their separate confessions read aloud  
each accusing the other of  
stunning young franks with a chisel  
and snuffing out his life.

esther hirsh

i did watch with daddy at the railroad tracks this morning  
as the circus had their summer comings. daddy did keep a tight  
hold on my hand and he did tell me-again the ways of trains  
while the circus people did roll their big wagons  
off the flat cars.  
they did have elephants pushing the wagons  
and horses pulling.

all the circus people and animals  
had knowings of the job they must do.  
men and men with big hammerings.  
tent poles did stand up so quick  
and a cookhouse did nearly put itself together  
with breakfast sizzling inside it  
pancakes and fried eggs flipping  
and that good breakfast smell filling the meadow  
~ the same as is always in sara chickering's kitchen.

by the time sara chickering did come to get me  
the big tent did fill the meadow  
and the smaller tents did look like spiderwebs  
traced in raindrops.

sara chickering and i did rush to watch the parade pass by  
on main street.  
we did see lions and tigers,  
hippos and kangaroos,  
monkeys and zebras and bears,  
and the beautiful ladies in their sparkly clothes,  
and acrobats and tightrope walkers and clowns



who did make us laugh as they flopped past  
in their big shoes  
and i did tell sara chickering we must be bringing those clowns to  
daddy  
so he can give them better fittings for their feet.

## merlin van tornhout

i've had this job with the paper nearly six months now,  
working the hours after the night men leave,  
before the day men come on and i have to  
get to school.

the klan doesn't think much of the paper.  
or its editor.  
but mr. alexander,  
he gave me this job,  
he got me out of jail,  
he made a set of three keys: the back door, the storeroom, the truck.  
no one ever trusted me like that before.

i could climb pretty high with the klan, handing them those keys,  
but i wouldn't do it.  
they'd use those keys,  
i don't know what for.

reynard alexander

clarence darrow pleaded for the life of leopold and loeb. he said:

*why did they kill little bohhy franks?  
not for money.  
not for hate.  
they killed him  
because somewhere  
in the infinite processes  
which go into the making of the boy or the man,  
something slipped.*

something has slipped  
not only in chicago.  
something has slipped in towns everywhere across america,  
in maine and in kansas,  
in oregon and indiana and vermont,  
something has slipped and as a result  
we are all  
sliding  
back toward the dark ages.

johnny reeves

nathan leopold, jr.  
scratched out his last will  
and testament, neighbor,  
beneath the arc light  
in the prison cell  
where, if there is justice in the land, he will soon end his days.

he thanked his lawyer  
and  
he thanked his friends  
and  
he promised to contact them  
when he entered the afterlife.

but neighbor, his friends will be waiting  
a long time to hear from him. there are plenty \_  
taking that slippery path from chicago to hell.  
but there are none,  
neighbor,  
there are no souls who upon reaching the flaming inferno  
make the return trip from the devil's clutches ·  
hack up  
to  
chicago.

iris weaver

chief justice caverly says  
he doesn't believe in capital punishment for minors  
and for that reason,  
leopold and loeb  
broke a date with the hangman.

not too many satisfied  
with a sentence that lets  
two cold-blooded murderers live.

caverly says  
his decision holds  
with the dictates of enlightened humanity.

enlightened humanity,  
now there's something the klan could discuss at their next  
cross burning.

sara chickering

first there was the circus,  
which esther still jabbars on about.  
so when the fair came,  
i knew i had to take her.  
esther never saw anything like a fair before.  
she said the midway reminded her of new york.  
and at the age of six,  
she knew already that games of chance  
were just that.  
she felt little affection for the sideshows, furious  
at the booth where people took shots at the "nigger's head."

she did like the horse races.  
for a while.  
but what she loved most was  
the livestock.  
she wanted the names of the cows:  
holstein, guernsey, jersey,  
ayrshire, hereford, angus.

she wanted the names of the horses, too,  
and the sheep.  
she cuddled one little lamb, whispering in its ear that funny way she  
does,  
telling the lamb that  
she'd be looking for it to come be counted tonight when  
she tunneled between her sheets,  
and i wouldn't be surprised at all  
to hear bleating from her bedroom come midnight  
and find droppings down the hall tomorrow morning.

## harvey and viola pettibone

harvey says:  
how was i to know  
they'd be so pushy over a broom sale?  
stinking stampede it was, vi.

viola says:  
you never will learn, harv.

harvey says:  
i thought putting those brooms out for one cent would be good  
business.  
viola says:  
twelve women taken to doc flitt, harv,  
with cuts and bruises. we'll be  
lucky if they don't ask us to cover the doctor bills.

harvey says:  
doc flitt wouldn't charge us for that.

viola says:  
doc flitt hasn't been too  
happy with you lately, harv, you and your klan. he might just  
charge us double.

harvey says:  
klan will see to him if he does.

viola says:  
oh fine, harv. you looking to drive away the  
one good doctor we got here?  
what happens if you need doctoring?

the two stand facing off, each as stout and solid as a house.

harvey says:  
nothing's going to happen to me, vi.

viola shakes her head in disgust . . .  
and makes up baskets of food  
and a free broom  
for each of the women who got hurt.

## merlin van tornhout

i was driving to the klan meeting  
when i picked up a man, his hood and robe in a paper bag.  
we were heading to the same place.  
but we hadn't gone far  
when he pulled a knife on me  
and made me get out.

i never have been out-bullied before  
but i thought about that boy in chicago,  
that bobby franks,  
and i looked at the drifter in my automobile,  
and i knew  
he would gladly do to me  
what leopold and loeb had done to that boy.  
in chicago.

and i got out.

## percelle johnson

halfway across the country,  
the body of a polish man was found  
hanging in an oak tree.

the sheriff's report ruled the man's death a suicide. they said there  
was a bottle of liquor in the man's coat pocket.

but certain neighbors made no secret of the fact. that they  
were not pleased to have a polish national  
in their valley.  
night riders beat him up the month before.  
the bruises and cuts weren't half healed when the letter arrived  
saying:  
we' re coming for you.  
signed, k.k.k.

dang,  
young merlin van tornhout is walking everywhere  
because he "gave" his car to a klansman.  
if the riffraff joining the klan these days  
can take the one thing most loved from an awestruck boy,  
why couldn't they plant a bottle of liquor  
in the pocket of a hanged man?

esther hirsh

daddy says this is the high holidays  
and i do need to come with him  
to the synagogue  
so we can have thinkings about  
what we did in the year that did just go by,  
and make a plan to do better in the year that is to come.  
he says mr. levin is locking up his shoes  
for the holiday.  
i did ask sara chickering if she will have locking up in the  
barn and in the field  
and have all the animals and the plants think about  
what they did last times and plan for the next times.

sara chickering says,  
the animals and the plants are too young for such things  
and esther is, too.

daddy says sara chickering is right.  
but he says  
i still have to come to the synagogue and  
have some deep thinkings and talkings to God.

i do have talkings to God and deep thinkings  
every day.  
but i will come with daddy,  
even if i can't go fishing there.

---

## ACT FOUR

## leonora sutter

the more time i spend with mr. field  
the more i learn.

he never went to school after sixth grade.  
he had to work.  
and then he went to fight in the civil war  
on account of his strong feelings about slavery.  
and when he returned, he built  
carriages and sleighs.  
but what he loved most was to paint them  
with little flowers and scenes,  
and didn't anyone need to show him how.  
just like most things he does,

he sits and thinks about it a while,  
till he figures it out.  
i wash his dishes in the basin  
and he sits at the table,  
his bald head the brightest  
spot in the room.  
he's thin as a broomstick,  
gangling tall,  
his eyes cloudy.  
he holds a palette up close to his face  
and then he hawks his shoulders and touches his brush to the  
waiting canvas.

i asked if i could look through his paintings  
instead of just dusting them.  
he said i could have one if i wanted. he said the pickings were

kind of slim these days,  
that the best had long gone.  
i remember when he offered me the typewriter.  
i wondered if someone would say i stole a painting  
if i carried one home.

mr. field, i said,  
watching as he  
sprinkled a meadow with bluets under a cloudy sun.  
we could go out sometime so you could remember things to paint.  
i never do like being seen with white folks,  
but mr. field is different.  
anyway, he said he didn't need to go out.  
he couldn't see well enough anyway to make a difference.  
besides, he said, he  
could just sit down and think about a mountain he once saw  
or the end of a forest road  
and that was enough.  
i guess that comes of being around since civil war days.  
i have a lot more seeing to take in  
before i can sit down and rest with it.

percelle johnson

got my work cut out for me.  
more than 200 negroes  
have moved into the state  
to build the dam.  
i'll have to protect them  
from the ku klux.  
i'll have to protect them  
from themselves.

this job sure doesn't pay  
enough.



## harvey and viola pettibone

viola says:

harvey pettibone, how could you do such a thing?

harvey says:

they had booze in that hotel, vi. they were breaking the law,  
serving liquor.

viola says:

so you go in, dressed in those ku klux nightclothes of yours and you  
think you'll save the world from the  
evils of drink ·  
by raiding the place and smashing a few bottles?

harvey says:

it felt so good breaking that glass, vi.

viola says:

did it feel \$400 good, harv? did it?

harvey runs his hand over the bulge of his belly  
beneath the straining vest,  
sits down on the steps,  
and sighs.

## reynard alexander

i did not anticipate

when word of the klan first arrived from the south,  
that they'd ever trace their way here to vermont,  
but

this is no longer a problem  
facing some other community.  
the klan is in our homes,  
our schools,  
our factories, and stores.

it has worked its

fingers through the fabric of the state  
and if we do not mend the rents soon,  
we'll fall to pieces.

## sara chickering

i rest my head against bossie 's side  
and the thrush,  
the white rush of milk hitting the pail,  
esther singing in the pear tree beside the barn,  
how silent the world would be without cows and birdsong.  
how silent my world would be  
without esther.

## esther hirsh

jerry  
the dog that did make me feel happy here first  
when i did get my fresh air with sara chickering,  
jerry  
went away to have the long sleep.

i could have standings upstairs and  
call downstairs  
things for jerry to do  
and he did do what i say.

after i did leave the fresh air of sara chickering the first time  
to have seeings of daddy in new york,  
jerry had leavings too.  
sara chickering says he did go to find me.  
sara chickering did have such sad feels when jerry did  
leave and i did leave too. she  
did ask all people who  
do love dogs to bring home her jerry  
but no one had knowings where jerry did go.  
then a lady did send a letter from connecticut,  
and sara chickering did go all that way to see  
if the lady had jerry.

when sara chickering did come to the house in connecticut  
she made callings from outside  
and jerry did bark all the happy feels in his heart  
and sara chickering knew she did find her own jerry.  
and he did come home to wait with sara chickering for me.  
and when i did come again to stay

and i did bring my daddy,  
jerry did come with me every day to the post office  
to fetch sara chickering her mail.  
but today i did go to the post office without my friend jerry.  
i did have to tell my feet every time to make one step  
and one step more.  
my feet did feel so lonely.

johnny reeves

if a dog dies between night and morning,  
neighbor,  
it is blamed on the  
klan.

reynard alexander

a threat came from the klan, in the form of a letter,  
advising me to be careful what i print  
and what i say,  
or the day would come  
when i would not print or  
say anything again.

it has come to pass that ordinary,  
sensible,  
hardheaded vermonters  
are entertaining these  
kluxers.

but surely the moment will pass,  
and the same ordinary,  
hardheaded,  
folks who invited them in  
will sensibly suggest the klan  
pack up their poison  
and go.

sara chickering

the president and his wife  
will be coming through town soon  
on their way to plymouth  
to visit the grave of their young son,  
taken this year from them,  
the same year that brought me esther.

esther hirsh

sara chickering helps me dress up  
like i am a goblin  
and i do dance through the doors of the schoolhouse  
and i do sing a goblin song  
in my clothes of green that sara chickering did sew for me.  
leanora sutter did dress like a gypsy  
and she had sittings by a cauldron  
where she did stir the air inside with a big shovel  
and she did tell the fortunes to the bob-haired  
chatterbox girls  
and now they do not have fearings  
of being old maids  
because leanora did tell them  
it would not be so.

the room did have streamers of black and orange. . .  
and owls and black cats and witches on their brooms had flyings  
up the walls. . .  
we did eat of carrot cake and cheese sandwiches and . .  
we did drink pots and pots of cocoa  
and i don't ever have rememberings of so much fun.

sara chickering

one of the things i like best about mr. hirsh is  
that he didn't move himself up here  
thinking how rich he would get  
on the backs of some rustic vermonters.

he just came up to keep his daughter happy  
and to sell shoes.

harvey pettibone

johnny reeves' mother  
slipped me a letter  
when she came in the store to do her shopping.

i think johnny's in trouble,  
she wrote. i caught him with  
a schoolgirl, she wrote. he said he was teaching her  
about the good book,  
but it looked like something different to me.

he's a good son, she wrote,  
but he's been awful  
quick to anger lately.

i know how important that klan is to my johnny,  
she wrote.  
maybe you men could see to helping him,  
lost lamb that he is,  
maybe  
you  
could lead him back to  
god's pasture.

harvey pettibone

we threw johnny reeves  
out of the klan.  
imagine a grown man  
a preacher  
forcing himself on a child.

## harvey and viola pettibone

viola says:  
what you looking at, harv?

harvey turns from the mirror to look at viola.  
would you say my head is small?

viola looks at the enormous  
locust stump of a head on harvey's shoulders.

yes, harv, your head is small.

harvey grins.  
it doesn't matter, he says. small heads can have  
as many brains in them as big heads.  
i happen to know i have a very well-filled head.

viola smiles and says:  
harvey, that sounds like the reasoning of a man  
with a small head.

## merlin van tornhout

meeting of the klan  
and every man standing  
demanding those coloreds, the sutters,  
get out of town,  
and the hirshes,

worse for the hirshes,

who stained a pure  
christian woman  
by mixing their jew selves  
up with her.

but the shoe man and his kid; they're just living there.

in private, harvey pettibone handed me rat poison  
from his store.  
pour it in sutter's well,  
he said.

but it'll kill them!

no, he said, though  
it will make them pretty  
sick.  
and he didn't look too happy about any of it,  
but the exalted cyclops was looking on  
so harvey pushed the poison at me.

that's when the roar started inside my head

johnny reeves

there is only one way  
to redeem myself  
with my klan brothers.  
only one way  
to redeem myself  
with god.

esther hirsh

someone did shoot my daddy  
right through sara chickering's door.  
and my daddy did have so much  
blood rushing out of him  
and sara chickering did leave me alone with my daddy  
and i had so quiet talkings to my daddy and  
sittings on the floor  
next to his poor head  
and he did listen to every thing i did whisper in his big white ear  
but he had the bad kinds of breathings  
and all the blood kept  
rushing out of my daddy  
and the bullet went clink in  
the water pail.



fitzgerald flitt

i was called to see to ira hirsh,  
who moved here from new york with his little girl.

i found a soft-nosed rifle ball had passed  
through ira's left arm above the elbow,  
scratched a two-inch gouge across his chest,  
then passed through his right arm  
to land in a  
waterbucket beside the table.

sara chickering sounded rattled enough  
when she phoned from iris weaver's.  
sara chickering, who never gets rattled.  
    doc, i left him with esiher. i'm sure he's bleeding to death.  
    hurry.

when i got to sara's kitchen,  
she had ira on the floor and she and  
esther were holding handkerchiefs tightly to the wounds.

sara said he was sitting at the table after dinner  
and in his lap was esther, not leaning back in his arms as usual,  
but leaning forward,  
studying the crossword puzzle he'd just finished.  
someone came onto the porch, so silent, and sara's dog  
dead.

the curtain was shut. they must have aimed their rifle  
through the keyhole.

why would someone do such a thing?  
i asked sara

klan,  
sara answered.

harvey pettibone

viola sleeps,  
she is so soft and warm when she sleeps,  
and i am silent as i come in  
from night riding.

sent a boy to do a man's job.  
then i wasn't man enough  
to finish it. i never thought it'd come to  
this. thought i' d be helping the law,  
not breaking it.

viola pats the bed for me to  
join her.  
she makes room for me in her sleep.

i cannot get in bed with viola.

merlin van tornhout

when i couldn't put the poison in sutter's well,  
i went to harvey. he said they'd come after me, the klan would.  
i don't have any choice but to run.

sara chickering

esther might have heard- the gunman  
with those ears of hers,  
but she won't talk about it.

how grateful i am that she was leaning forward  
over mr. hirsh's crossword puzzle.  
if not she would have taken the bullet herself,  
straight through,  
and she wouldn't be alive now,  
clinging to my nightgown,  
even as she sleeps.

esther hirsh

sara chickering did feel afraid this morning  
to go out and do the milkings  
and deliverings of her creams and butters.  
i did come out in my chore clothes to help her  
and she had smilings for me  
and chasings off of her afraid  
like a big horse, rolling off the itchings.

it did take a long time  
for all the people who wanted to have talkings with us  
but we did finally have done all the chores  
and i did stay home from school.

percelle johnson

been interviewing people all day,  
trying to figure who stood on sara chickering's porch  
and fired a shot through her kitchen door.

mr. hirsh is at the randolph sanatorium,  
resting comfortably.

how's the child resting i keep asking myself?  
how's the person resting who fired that shot?

and where the hell is merlin van tornhout?

reynard alexander

persecution is not american.  
it is not american to give the power of life and death  
to a secret organization.  
it is not american to have our citizens judged by  
an invisible jury.  
it is not american to have bands of night riders  
apply the punishments of medieval europe to  
freeborn men.

the ku klux klan must go.

leonora sutter

daddy says:  
the k.k.k.  
went and burned down the great bethel african church in chicago.

i feel that old rope of dread  
dragging up the ridge of. my spine

daddy, i say,  
the klan burns down a negro church in illinois,  
they rob a catholic church in burlington,  
they try killing a jew right here.  
well, they're just giving white folks a b~d  
name.

giving white folks a bad name, daddy repeats  
and he starts to laughing, and then,  
i'm laughing, too.  
until the laughter turns on us and we are wringing grief,  
our faces touching,  
our hands entwined.

first time we' re right together like that  
since mamma's gone.

percelle johnson

i hate calling for help.  
but i just couldn't get to the bottom  
of ira hirsh's shooting  
and i couldn't let go,  
especially with things in town the way they  
are with the klan.

detective came over from boston, a mr. wood.  
it didn't take him long to uncover all the dirty little  
things that were going on here,  
the letters sent to mr. hirsh  
threatening to tar and feather him  
if he didn't move out of sara's place.

it was merlin van tornhout wrote those letters.  
i thought i knew merlin. he's got some roughness to him,  
but i never thought he'd try killing anyone.  
especially with that little girl on mr. hirsh's lap.  
but merlin disappeared the night of the shooting.  
what else can i think?  
detective wood says it was merlin for sure.  
says he come up on foot around dusk,  
peered through the keyhole in the kitchen door,  
saw mr. hirsh seated at the table  
with esther on his lap.  
thought he could get two with one shot.  
says merlin fired through the door  
as soon as sara left the kitchen to put the dishes away in the pantry.

just doesn't sound like merlin van tornhout.

harvey and viola pettibone

harvey says:

viola, what have you done with my phonograph and records?

viola is silent. she simply hands harvey a thank-you note.

*it is with sincere appreciation  
that we accept these useful gifts.  
the residents at the winslow home for the aged  
will get such pleasure from your donation of  
a phonograph  
and fine record collection.*

harvey says:

what did you do, viola?

viola says:

i'm trying to buy back your good name, harvey pettibone,  
you with your broom sales  
and your liquor smashing  
and your klan.  
but you don't make it easy.

harvey turns like a slow mule  
and lumbers back into the room  
where his phonograph once sat.  
he touches the table where the feet of the  
phonograph left a divet in the lace cloth.

---

## ACT FIVE

leonora sutter

merlin van tornhout couldn't have shot ira hirsh.  
i know  
because he was here  
standing by the well.

i know merlin was here.  
he looked straight at me,  
i looked straight back  
it happened the same time someone  
shot a bullet through  
sara chickering's kitchen door.  
whoever fired that shot,  
it couldn't have been merlin

johnny reeves

i saw them  
in their hoods,  
in their robes,  
like ghosts.  
they were like ghosts. But

it was the klan who  
knocked at my door.  
who came after me.  
why come after me?  
i am redeemed.

esther hirsh

they do say that merlin van tornhout  
did shoot my daddy.  
i think merlin did go on the heaven train  
after the bullet did come through sara chickering's door.  
no one can see merlin since that night.  
he did go like the kittens, and lewis, and my mamma.  
but he did not come onto sara chickering's porch with a rifle  
before he left on the heaven train.

merlin didn't make a bullet shoot through my daddy.  
i know.  
i did see who did.



fitzgerald flitt

percelle johnson found  
johnny reeves  
wandering,  
exhausted,  
hungry.

he was branded on the back  
with the letters  
k.k.k.  
and was suffering from shock,  
unable to give  
any  
explanation of his condition.

percelle johnson

it's been weeks now  
since merlin van tornhout disappeared.  
i don't know where he's gone.  
darn that boy.

the radio station over in schenectady  
broadcast his description.  
but it didn't bring him back.  
merlin's got family down near boston.  
they put the word out on the boston stations, too. \_  
no reply.

we got word that a boy was found, but  
it wasn't merlin.  
that boy went home to  
his true family,  
and merlin's still missing.

viola pettibone

percelle johnson found  
a baby girl,  
two days old,  
stuffed in a shoe box,  
wrapped in newspapers,  
tied with a heavy cord,  
and left behind a tree to die.  
what is this world coming to?

i always wanted a baby girl.

harv caught me sniffing over the pork chops.  
there, there, vi, he said, patting my shoulder with his beefy hand.  
there, there.

i wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry.

reynard alexander

thirty years ago  
the people of this country  
tolerated 200 lynchings a year.

now, though the klan does its best to stir up racial strife,  
there have been  
only five lynchings reported.

we have antilynching laws on the books.  
but that isn't why necks  
are less often  
swinging in nooses.

it is the people  
saying no.

iris weaver

i swear i saw merlin van tornhout yesterday.  
he was walking along a back road in plattsburg, new york.  
i slowed down, called "hey, merle."  
he looked up.  
called "hey" back.

i turned the packard around,  
even though she was filled with bootleg liquor and i  
could have been sent to prison for my kindness.  
i turned the packard around and told the boy  
his family was undone over his disappearance.  
they wanted him home, no matter what.  
at least give them word, i said.  
the boy denied he was merlin van tornhout and  
walked away.

i thought about going straight to the van tornhouts when i  
got back in town.  
but i couldn't tell the family i saw the boy  
without giving out what i was doing in plattsburg.  
and sorry as i am to know the worry of the family,  
there's some things you just can't do anything about.

reynard alexander

three keys came to me  
in a package  
postmarked  
stamford, connecticut.

the keys were wrapped in  
a piece of gray shirting,  
snug in a nest  
of brown paper.

one key fit the storeroom,  
one the back door,  
and one started the truck.

\  
i made this set last year  
for merlin van tornhout.  
so he could work the graveyard shift.

well, merlin,  
at least you didn't give them to the klan.

leonora sutter

johnny reeves climbed  
to the highest point of the arch  
of the steel bridge across the connecticut river  
and said nothing.  
johnny reeves,  
who always has something to say to the crowd  
stood,  
swaying in the air,  
silent.  
no traffic moved from one shore to the  
other while constable johnson  
climbed to the top of the bridge  
on an extension ladder.  
he balanced, 70 feet from the roadway,  
trying to talk johnny reeves down.  
constable johnson asked  
what reverend reeves was doing up there.  
johnny reeves looked at him,  
said,  
i'm afraid of the klan.  
and then he jumped  
just like that.

esther hirsh

i did go inside the church of johnny reeves  
while sara chickering and doc flitt did swap stories outside.  
i did go inside to warm my face and talk to God about daddy being  
shot  
and how the bullet  
might have had goings through sara chickering or me  
or it might have had goings through daddy's heart and  
made the living run out of him.  
i did go inside the church of johnny reeves  
and have talkings with God  
about all the good thinkings and feelings that do race around inside  
me  
and that it didn't matter that someone didn't like us  
so  
much that they did take a gun to kill us  
because so many people did like us  
and did come to sara chickering's house to help us.  
and no one did hear my little talks with God  
because no one is supposed to know the  
thinkings of little girls  
but just the little girl and God.  
but i did come inside the church of johnny reeves  
because even if i did not tell constable johnson  
what i did see,  
i can tell God that i saw johnny reeves .  
that night daddy did get a bullet through him.  
and i did think  
if i tell God in johnny reeves' own church,  
God does know what to do.

fitzgerald flitt

couldn't find johnny reeves' body.  
river running pretty fast after the fall storms.  
folks say maybe he didn't die.  
but the way he hit,  
no one could survive.

esther hirsh

sara chickering does bundle me  
in my coat and boots  
and hat and scarf and gloves.  
and i do go down western avenue  
knocking on doors,  
selling christmas seals  
and eating cookies  
while sara chickering  
does stand outside each door  
waiting for me to come back out  
so she can bring me safely home.  
    she is so funny, sara chickering.  
    i have thinkings she is like a hen over the warm eggs  
    since i tried to take the heaven train.

but since the bullet did come through her kitchen door  
she does jump when a tree cracks,  
she does stand and watch me in my bed when  
she thinks i am having sleeps  
and i pat my bed  
and i do say good things to sara chickering  
so she can sleep.  
i do tell her stories about the animals in the woods  
and the animals on the farm  
and the animals in the circus  
and at the fair.

but i still have wakings and she is watching me in my  
sleeps.

iris weaver

senator greene sent a letter to the press  
urging every man and woman  
to get out and vote for coolidge and dawes.  
well, i would have cast my vote without being told.  
women have waited far too long for the vote  
to stay out of it now.  
but i'll vote for the man *i* choose.  
i don't need anyone, not even senator greene,  
telling me what to think.

reynard alexander

by the most tremendous majority  
ever known in the country  
the voters of the united states  
went to the polls  
and elected a vermonter.  
  
never before has a presidential candidate  
conducted himself during the campaign as did mr. coolidge.  
he remained in washington  
and did the day's work.  
he did not make what can be termed  
campaign addresses.  
he totally disregarded all attacks made upon him  
by his political opponents.  
he did not even defend himself against  
a personal attack on his record.  
he ignored all criticism directed either at him  
or at his party.  
he was the most silent candidate the country has ever seen.  
and he won by a landslide.  
  
let the future take note.

leonora sutter

that crazy mr. field.  
i've been taking him out for an airing  
most days, lately. says he likes the smell outside this. time of year.  
wood smoke and leaf rot.  
we had stopped to rest on the courthouse steps  
when three klansmen decked out in their robes came by  
with a wreath of flowers for  
armistice day.

mr. field, he attacked those klansmen  
as they tried placing their wreath for white men  
on the courthouse lawn.  
he got so worked up  
he snatched the wreath  
and threw it down the courthouse  
basement,  
then chased the klansmen away with  
his cane,  
    made from the timbers of andersonville prison,  
and that's the first I knew he could see.  
even through those grimy glasses, he had pretty dead aim.

mr. field stood guard at the courthouse  
the rest of the evening.  
i had to bring him his dinner.  
and sit  
and eat with him.  
right there,  
in front of everyone. and wasn't he in the best mood he's been in  
for months.

fitzgerald flitt

walked with sara chickering,  
and little esther to  
rehearsal  
of the choral society.

caring for that merry child has changed sara.  
she's lost her hard edges.  
and that bitter sag to her lips looks almost kind.  
and she smiles.

merlin van tornhout

i wasn't home ten minutes  
when constable johnson showed up and  
brought me in on charges of attempted murder.

i didn't shoot any bullet through sara chickering's keyhole.  
the man who works at the jew store,  
ira hirsh,  
if he got shot,  
i didn't do it. i was supposed to poison the sutters' well.  
i couldn't even do that.

i should be scared, but i don't care what happens anymore.  
i just couldn't run another day.  
figured facing the trouble i left behind  
couldn't be worse than dodging  
the klan preacher,  
johnny reeves  
    following two steps behind me  
    shadow-eyed,  
    smelling of river slime,  
showing up every place i stopped.

reynard alexander

the secretary of state of vermont  
has rejected the application  
received from the k.k.k.  
to do business here.

good.



merlin van tornhout

if i had done what the klan sent me out to do,  
i'd be in jail a long time. but i didn't. i couldn't.  
leanora sutter was looking straight at me.

i remembered her  
racing that train  
and she was still a colored girl  
but she wasn't just a  
colored girl,  
and i couldn't poison her well,  
so i ran.

and now instead, i'm accused of doing something worse.  
of trying to shoot mr. hirsh.

i wouldn't hurt mr. hirsh.  
he gave me galoshes to bring to  
my girl, mary, when he heard about her walking halfway across the  
state,  
trying to get back home.

they were good galoshes.  
mary grinned when she saw them and threw her arms  
around me.  
they' re the ones the girls wear open so they flap,  
mary was so pleased she strutted around the orphanage  
like she was some kind of queen.  
i wouldn't shoot someone who did that for  
mary.

but i'm not going to jail at all.  
leanora sutter came to constable johnson  
and told him i couldn't have put that bullet in ira hirsh  
because she saw me at her well that night  
constable johnson asked if that was true.  
yes, sir, i said.  
and what were you doing at the sutters' well?  
the klan told me to poison it.  
you poisoned the sutter's well?  
no, sir, i told him.  
i couldn't. that's why i left town.

leonora sutter

a long time ago i wrote miss helen keller  
about how maybe we'd be better off  
if no one could see.  
then nobody would mind about  
a person's skin color.  
i sent the letter to her when i first started looking after mr. field.  
and now, in the mail comes this book,  
*the world i live in*,  
and it's signed to me,  
to leanora,  
from miss helen keller  
herself.  
i curled right up  
and started reading  
and my chores weren't even started.  
when daddy came home.

merlin van tornhout

i keep looking over my shoulder  
since constable johnson let me come home.  
but the hoods and robes have vanished from vermont.  
guess after everything else, when the government threw out the  
    klan's petition  
they figured vermont wasn't such a good place for them  
    after all.  
can't say i' m sorry about that.

fitzgerald flitt

there are always those  
who think the world is  
going to the dogs  
and that everything  
approached perfection  
only in the  
good old days.

they say winters today demand less of us, . . .  
and summers now are meek.  
and yet little has really changed.  
those who move away remember  
the massive town hall,  
the solid stone church,  
the imposing brick schoolhouse.  
yet when they return after many years,  
they find the buildings  
though identical in reality,  
strangely shrunken in size and majesty  
from the impression  
memory produced.

to those who swear our young are on the road to perdition  
take comfort in this –  
every generation  
has felt somewhat the same  
for two or three thousand years  
and still the world goes on.

johnny reeves

i stand in the pulpit.  
the round-faced child  
listens a moment,  
then laughs,  
covering her mouth with the tips of her fingers  
before she turns and walks out.

esther hirsh

i did give helpings to sara chickering.  
we did dip all the keys in oil and put the oil keys in  
the locks  
and then  
    openshutopenshut

we did take feathers and we did oil those  
and we did move through the house,  
out to the barn,  
tickling hinges with our oiled feathers.  
we did oil every little place but the porch steps.  
sara chickering has thinkings that the porch steps  
should make creaky creaks.  
she says she does like to know when company  
is about to call.

harvey and viola pettibone

harvey, have you ever seen anything like it? viola asks,  
dancing in harvey's arms  
at the grange.

harvey looks up at the lights  
swirling around the room  
from the new myriad reflector,  
the enormous cut-glass sphere suspended from the ceiling,  
revolving horizontally while  
beams of colored lights  
play upon it.

it's like a snowstorm in may, viola, harvey whispers.

and for a moment  
viola remembers  
why she fell in love with the great mule of a man in the first place,  
and all he's done lately to make things right.  
and she nuzzles closer  
and they dance to joe ladner's orchestra.

merlin van tornhout

found a young buck trapped  
between cakes of ice  
on the west river.  
dogs chased the buck to the water  
and it tried crossing the ice jam  
but it fell  
into a narrow break  
between the cakes of ice.  
constable johnson came.  
we got hold of the buck and  
pulled it up  
out of the crevice. lord that thing was big.

the buck was too cold to move at first.  
it stood on the ice  
staring at us. finally  
it scrambled to its feet  
gave a jump

and plunged back into the same dang hole we just pulled it from.

constable johnson and i hauled it out again.  
this time  
the buck stayed clear,  
beat it across the ice  
stopping on the far bank  
taking one last look

before it bounded away through the woods.  
it snorted once.  
you could hear the echo all through the valley.

leonora sutter

when i saw merlin at the well that night,  
i knew he meant no good.  
when our eyes met he looked like  
he'd been caught in a trap.

i could have come forward and cleared his name from the first.  
i could have told that detective from boston.  
i could have leveled with constable johnson.

i didn't.  
someone had to pay for me being a colored girl in a white world  
i thought.  
merlin ought to pay. so i waited.

but then mr. field said,  
leanora, no way to pay a debt  
by stealing from someone else to do it.

he's pretty smart, mr. field,  
for a skinny, half-blind, old white man.

so i told my story to constable johnson,  
and told it again inside the courtroom.

funny thing merlin said the other day when i asked him why he  
came back.  
i didn't know if he'd talk to me at all.  
but he did.  
he said he came back to town cause johnny reeves  
had been tailing him, showing up in every town he stopped.

should have seen merlin's face when he heard the news  
about johnny reeves jumping from the top of the arch bridge.

looked like he'd seen a ghost.

## About the Author

KAREN HESSE is the Newbery Medal-winning author of many acclaimed books for young readers, among them *Out of the Dust*, winner of the 1998 Newbery Medal and the Scott O'Dell Award; *Letters from Rifka*, winner of the Christopher Medal and the International Reading Association Award for Young Adult Fiction; *Phoenix Rising*, an ALA Best-Book for Young Adults; and *The Music of Dolphins*, a *School Library Journal* and *Publishers Weekly* Best Book of the Year. Her most recent books include *Stowaway* and *The Cats in Krasinski Square*. She lives with her family in Brattleboro, Vermont.