

Excerpts from *Out of the Dust*
by Karen Hesse

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.

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

Rules of Dining

Ma has rules for setting the table.
 I place plates upside down,
 glasses 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.

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

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.

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.

July 1934Wild 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.

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.

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.

Lunch

No one's going hungry at school today.
 The government
 sent canned meat,
 rice,
 potatoes.
 The bakery
 sent leaves 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.

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.

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.

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?

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.