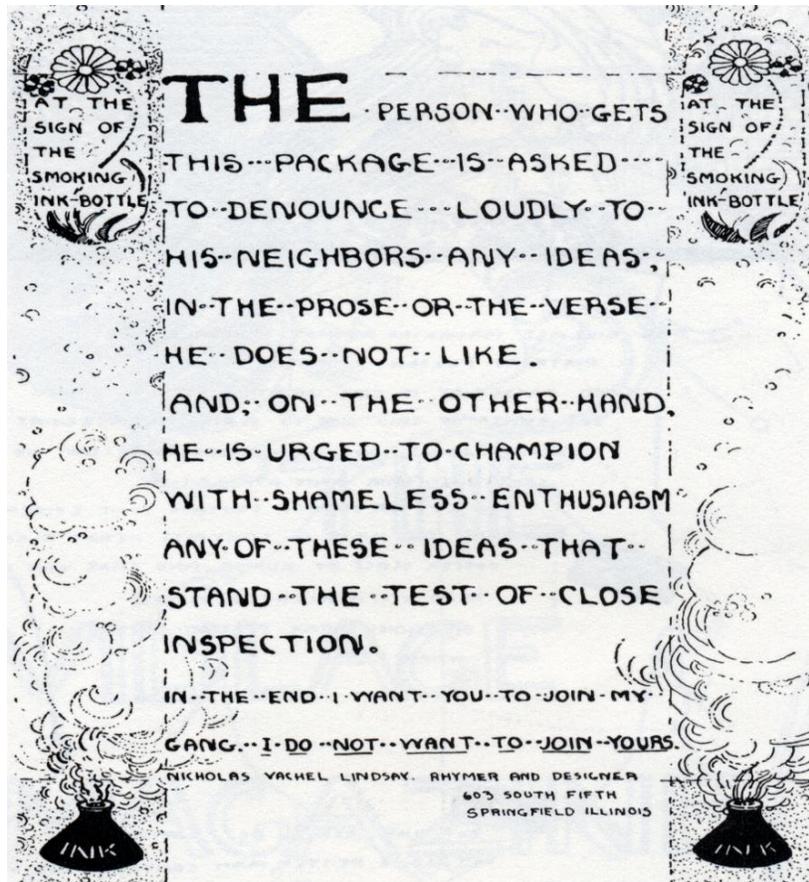


Uncle Boy

A Biography of Nicholas Vachel Lindsay: Poet

Chapter Four

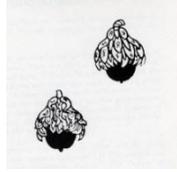


[Vachel's insert introducing his self-published *Village Magazine* (1910)]

by

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[This ongoing biography may be read online at www.VachelLindsayHome.org
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4. WARD SCHOOL [c. 1886-1893]

“It was two grades later that my soul was born, all because of a child woman.”

1

By September 1886, Vachel’s health had improved to the point where his parents felt it safe to enroll him in the second grade at the public ward school. Since Dr. Lindsay’s house was in Springfield Ward 5, his children attended Stuart School, then located at the corner of 6th and Vine Streets, south-southeast of the family home. For young Vachel and for his daily companion, sister Olive (who was in the third grade), the walk was more than eight full blocks—or about two-thirds of a mile. Edgar Lee Masters is rather melodramatic but essentially correct when he contends that Vachel’s “first days at school were rendered unhappy by the attitude of the other boys toward him . . . His mother insisted on keeping him in curls and white piqué past the usual limits for such things; and thus he became an object of derision on the part of rowdy Huckleberry Finns of the hit-and-run variety, against whom the delicate boy was powerless to protect himself. It was only when he found champions in some lusty Irish boys that he was relieved of this tormenting persecution. . . . Eccentricities of dress or manner will always invite teasing; and as Lindsay between six and nine years of age was brilliantly precocious, and a startling conversationalist, it is no wonder that both envy and juvenile sense of the ridiculous preyed upon him” (40). Indeed, a white piqué suit, reportedly worn by Vachel at age six, is among the family artifacts collected at the University of Virginia’s Alderman Library.

As late as December 1921, Uncle Boy himself alluded to his earliest school days in order to illustrate his mother’s preoccupation with his life. Clearly exasperated, he wrote to his tour manager, A.J. Armstrong, and requested a favor: “Please send to my mother, always, when it is perfectly convenient, bits of news about my tour and whereabouts. I send them. But that makes no difference. . . . She must have constant assurances that her six-year old^ son with long golden curls down his infant back is neither naughty, sick nor dying, that he is neither making mud pies nor neglecting his Sunday School lesson, that he has learned his verses for next Sunday in a way to please his Sunday-School teacher, that he is almost ready for the first reader—no—the third reader or he could not learn those verses . . . Well, I am afraid I have ‘sassed’ my mother this morning,” he added, “but since the letter is to you and not to her, it leaves her serene, and greatly relieves my feelings” (Armstrong 49-50, Chénétier 231).

Actually, no matter what his age, Vachel was rarely coy about his feelings. We have already noted his account of his youthful daring at Brooks Seminary, when he stole a kiss from an unwilling girl student. In the unpublished manuscript containing this story, Vachel goes on to narrate a similar incident, one that likely occurred during his first year at Stuart School: “Well—my second flirtation began the same way—there was a little red

headed soubrette I scorned but when she provoked me as I played high spy—not letting me by in a narrow passageway—I left my greeting on one of her eyelids. I am not accurate, in a hurry. But why speak of this? She was my official lady love in that school—our names were linked together thereafter by cancellation, by teasing, by harmless lies and fairy gossip” (“An Essay on the Love Affairs of Children,” Virginia). This story, as most of the others from these early years, manifests the teller’s obsession with girls. Vachel’s boyhood escapades, moreover, seem to have been consistently successful—if we consider them solely in the light of *his* purposes. Since mature relationships, in contrast, proved more often than not to be disappointing and, at times, emotionally devastating, it seems likely that the often-told tales of early triumphs were, in part, ego-saving consolations for later misfortune. For some reason, anyway, adult Vachel seldom lost an opportunity to expatiate on his childhood flirtations: the tales referred to as “the Love Affairs of Children” have only just begun.

Other than the above story, however, Uncle Boy’s first ward school years are not well documented, although we know that something occurred in late summer or early fall, 1887, something that delayed Vachel’s return to Stuart School for one full year. He was not registered for the third grade until the fall of 1888. Either he suffered a regression in health (the probable explanation) or perhaps the harassment by his peers became too intense. In any event, Vachel’s education again came under his mother’s ministrations, as he informed his aunt, Frances Hamilton:

Dear Aunt Fannie,

Olive is at school and mama teaches me at home in the third reader. Olive is in the Fourth Reader. Our fruit came all right. I am in “How To Talk,” a kind of grammar. We want you to come out Christmas. My prettiest pigeon got hurt and died. The rest roost in a box by the barn. It rained all day yesterday and the day before.

Very much love to all. Your nephew, Vachel. (September 27, 1887, Blair)

If Vachel was kept home because of health, the winter of 1887-88 was a catastrophic time for Catharine and Dr. Lindsay. All five of their children were dangerously ill in early 1888, as we have seen, with the three younger daughters succumbing in late March and early April. Olive, however, did manage to complete the fourth grade in June 1888. And, on a brighter note, a letter from Orange, Indiana (from “N. Vachel Lindsay,” June 21, 1888) contains only family news, but is evidence, nonetheless, that Vachel and his sister were again in good health and on summer vacation at the Indiana home of their Frazee grandparents. The following fall, when the two returned to school, Olive entered the fifth grade, while her brother, who was nearing his ninth birthday, was registered in the third.

Once he was back in school, Vachel seems to have picked up where he left off, so to speak. The following story, quoted here in full, is from his “Essay on the Love Affairs of Children.” It is another account of childhood flirtations, but, interestingly, it also foreshadows some of Vachel’s adult emotions and behavior:

The next notable flirtation—was with the belle in the third grade, Brown school. She was a walking blonde doll, with a sugary simper and a drawl. Yet she was a lady. I had an intellectual contempt for her but a reverence for her affected but exquisite manners. I was walking home from school one night with Dan Kenton and Kim Barker. Kim said “Gee but I would like to kiss Maribel Blashfield—[”]

“Why don’t you then?” I asked.

“I’m afraid. I’d get fired from school or her big brother would kick me all around the block.”

“If you will catch her I will kiss her” I said. I really didnt^ mean it. I did not think they would show a vital interest. But instantly those youths got on the ends of their toes and ran after that girl. She was walking with two friends a block ahead. She seemed to divine something for when they were half way there she fled screeching, the other girls close behind. She was light on her feet as a fairy, but the wicked siezed^ her at last. She blubbered and wasnt^ a bit pretty. The other two girls tugged at her captors. “This is a pretty kettle of fish” I thought, but I kissed the lady, according to contract. She walked home howling with her two friends spitting at us like kittens and threatening direful “Ill^ tell the principal etc.” Next morning Maribel’s brother caught me before school. He got me by the back of the neck—just then the bell rang.

I was the hero of the class next day. I became intoxicated with self worship and did one of the unaccountable things. My attitude toward^ my teacher had been one of a nephew toward an awesome but indulgent aunt. But I knew she would be told, and I decided to take time by the forelock. I left a note on her desk: “My Dear Miss Dora—‘I would like to kiss you too. Wont^ you be my sweetheart?’” She found the note and turned purple with wrath. She took out her ruler. Just then the principal entered. Everyone knew he was talking about the sad case of Maribel Blashfield. We were hero and heroine. She showed the note. Her face became wooden. His was absolutely rigid. They did not look at either of us. We did not look at each other.

Teacher called me out in the Hall^ late in the afternoon when scholars were busy. She shook me till my jaws clicked. “Will you ever do that again young man? Write such a note as that?”

“No’m.”

She didn’t mention Maribel—I wonder if she ever knew. And Maribel’s brother let me alone. It snowed next day and we were on the same side of the snowball fight.

All winter Maribel ignored me. Her name was linked with mine in decorous teasing, especially by the girls. I accepted the distinction as a matter of course, as I did my nickname, Sweet Potato. I always felt guilty around Maribel. Kissing a girl was about as bad as getting sent to the Calaboose.

Maribel continued to be the belle of the school. With her taffy curls to her waist she was an angel, and she knew her power. There were always three girls on each side of her looking at the picture books she brought to school, or the white mouse she carried in her sleeve. Her teacher was in the conspiracy. Maribel got high marks in deportment. No wonder on valentines^ day little Foster George brought a valentine big as the desk lid. That desk was full, but George’s was on top. I admired his nerve. If I had not been an outcast in her regard I might have done the same. As it was I had to send my valentines to two or three other girls who still looked on me with kindness. I received one in return, from which of the three I knew not.

Next week there was a party. I hesitate to record we played clap in and clap out. I was so self conscious at church socials I ran home and cried from sheer nerve strain. At parties I was frightened out of my wits.

You know how they play clap in and clap out. The girls stand behind chairs in one room, the boys wait in another. Some girl who objects to being kissed gets the job of doorkeeper. When the girls have whispered the right names in her ear, she calls for the boys. Each boy passes in, tries to choose the chair of the girl that called him. If he misses he is clapped out—dismissed with clapping hands. If he guesses right milady bends over and kisses him. There he remains till the chairs are full. Then the boy takes the chair, and the girls are called for. I had just taken off cap and mittens when my name was called. I entered the room in a panic. I looked at the row of schoolmates and strangers. Two of my valentines were there. I wouldn't risk them. Maribel was there with her nose in the air as usual. I said to the company "Well here is a girl who won't kiss me." I sat down in the chair of Proud Maribel and waited for them to clap me out. There was dead silence. She held my head, and before I had time to break away the lady gave me a long long kiss. Christopher Columbus, but I was astonished, as the Widow Bedott would say, flabbergasted. I rose and made her my biggest bow with an elaborate sarcastic overstrained "Thank you." Next day I looked at my poor little valentine. Someone suggested I look under the picture in the middle. It was pasted pretty well down but a pocket knife pulled it up without tearing. The word Maribel was under there in her unmistakable^ scrawl. (Virginia) [Note 1]

Several childhood cards and valentines are included in the back pages of a notebook inscribed "Nicholas Vachel Lindsay. New Year's, 1886. From his Mother" (Virginia). One lacy valentine, very like the one described in the above story, is signed "Minnie Brooks," who almost certainly was the original "Maribel Blashfield." The school was Stuart, not Brown; and it is likely that other names in the story are also fictitious or at least disguised. Vachel's sentiments, however, are real: they receive expression both here and again in one of his later poems, "For All Who Ever Sent Lace Valentines" (*Poetry* 384-386). [Note 2]

The remaining details of Uncle Boy's story, especially the narrator's anomalous combination of nervous shyness and brash daring, is true in spirit if not in minute detail: "Many a child, / His young heart too timid, / Has fled from his princess," Vachel observes in "For All Who Ever Sent Lace Valentines" (*Poetry* 385). But the fondness for girls, the admission of self-worship, even the nickname "Sweet Potato"—all are documentable aspects of Vachel's boyhood. Aunt Fannie, for example, refers to her nephew's "tater patch" head in several of her letters. The hero-victim in "The Potatoes' Dance" poem is "one sweet potato," who "was golden brown and slim." He won the "saucy Irish lady" for a single night. Then, after the lady's departure, the not-so-sweet potatoes "threw him in the coal-bin, / And there he is today, . . . weeping for the lady," rejected by his peers (*Poetry* 57-59). It only takes a little imagination to realize the identity of the rejected sweet potato.

In his mature years, women clapped Uncle Boy out far more often than they clapped him in. "The Potatoes' Dance" is both a child's poem game and a self-conscious parable of an all-too-frequent occurrence in the author's adult life. It seems likely, therefore, that narrating the stories of "Maribel Blashfield" and the nameless "little red headed soubrette" provided "Sweet Potato" Vachel's ego with some comfort and assuagement.

In the late 1920s, after years of retelling the tales of his childhood love affairs, Vachel decided to author a book based on his early experiences. He rejected the idea of a traditional autobiography and instead began a series of vignettes, including a rewrite of the Blashfield story. The name “Maribel” is changed to “Nonamabel,” but the outline of the story is essentially left intact. (Emendations do appear: “Her [Nonamabel’s] brother kicked me the next day. The teacher took me out in the hall, and hit me with a ruler.”) The title also is changed, from “Essay on the Love Affairs of Children” to “The Education of Aladdin.” The choice of “Aladdin,” of course, actually enhances the manuscript’s autobiographical value, since “Aladdin” was one of Vachel’s favorite sobriquets.

As with all his imaginative projects, Aladdin-Vachel labored mightily to bring his idea to fruition, and several finished and half-finished manuscript essays, all with autobiographical content, are housed in the Barrett Library at the University of Virginia—along with a letter to John L.B. Williams, Vachel’s editor at D. Appleton Company. “I have thought of a title for my alleged biography,” Vachel asserts: “‘Gosh Awful Stories.’ I know by the colossal dignity with which Mrs. Lindsay received this thought that there must be something wrong with it, but I pass it on to you. If you convince her all is well. Of course, it is well to have one member of the family with a notion of family dignity” (December 30, 1926). Williams’ frank response was: “I’ll be hanged if I’ll commit myself to a title for your biography until I read it. For the present, GOSH AWFUL STORIES, can serve, though I doubt very much if that would be the title of the biography in its final form. Let’s get the manuscript together before we worry about naming it” (January 14, 1927, Virginia). Williams finally rejected the idea out of hand, and the majority of Vachel’s stories, “GOSH AWFUL” or not, remain only in manuscript form.

The would-be autobiographer proposed other unlikely titles, such as “The Saga of Hearbetter Readrail” and “Why Don’t You Talk United States?”—but without much success as regards publication (not to mention the enhancement of his wife’s dignity). Would-be biographers, however, must use the stories with caution, if at all. In 1927, Vachel submitted one of his “gosh awful” manuscripts to James Henle, editor-in-chief at *McCall’s Magazine*. In the cover letter, the author confesses: “I could write you a hundred stories after this type, for I have told them, by word of mouth, for years. . . . I have been beseiged^ many times for my autobiography. When I start to tell my favorite yarns about my old friends I find I am such a talented liar I might as well start out and call it fiction in the first place, and add all the trimmings to disguise the names of the places, the streets, the towns, the dates and the people” (November 16). The narrative technique, in other words, is reminiscent of Vachel’s warning to his readers in *A Handy Guide for Beggars* (1916). There is autobiographical truth, but it is, in part, impressionistic:

In the prose sketches in this book I have allowed myself a story-teller’s license only a little. Sometimes a considerable happening is introduced that came the day before, or two days after. In some cases the events of a week are told in reverse order.

Lady Iron-Heels is obviously a story, but embodies my exact impression of that region in a more compressed form than a note-book[^] record could have done.

The other travel-narratives are ninety-nine per cent literal fact and one per cent abbreviation. (*Prose* 38)

The unpublished stories in “The Education of Aladdin” also embody “exact impression” (Vachel’s lovely, anomalous phrase). Other documents, however, such as family letters, indicate that these particular tales, at least in broad outline, are based on “literal fact” as well.

Two additional stories from “The Education of Aladdin” may serve as examples, especially since both chronicle experiences that date to Vachel’s third-grade year. One day, the author claims, the “city superintendent” came to the ward school and “drew a map of all the streets to the post office, while we shouted the names of them.” The superintendent also talked politics: “He told us in a simply[^] way about civil service reform which was the insurgency of that time.” The year was 1888, the final year of President Grover Cleveland’s first term in office. Dr. Lindsay, as we have noted, celebrated Cleveland’s election with great exuberance; and civil service reform was one of Cleveland’s urgent priorities. It is unlikely, therefore, that Vachel’s story is “exact impression” devoid of literal fact.

The second story relates another childhood flirtation, and it too suggests actual experience: “Speaking of post offices, I remember a girl next to me I will call Saki breaking my jack-knife and cutting her fingers trying to hack a slot in our empty tin marshmellow[^] box. She was going to hang it by her desk to receive notes. You see we used to write goo goo remarks to each other about every Monday and Wednesday. The rest of the time we would make faces. She frankly welcomed epistles from any boy who sat near. She hung up the box, despite her wounds. There was a crimson smear on the encircling pink ribbon. The box was half full from all sources, the lady even putting in a few letters to herself, when the tin made such a clatter the teacher was compelled to take cognizance. She confiscated the mail. But the soul of Saki could not be confiscated. She is today chief dancer in a comic opera troupe” (Virginia). Whatever her name, this young student and her courage are not simply the creations of Vachel’s imagination. He remembered, celebrated, and loved “Saki” and other spirited girls throughout his life. He disguised their names in his stories, he renamed the schools they attended, he made up their later employments, and he changed the cities they lived in or moved to. Their spirit, however, was a permanent part of his memory: he identified them with his youthful mother, the brave girl/woman who dared to send Venus and Cupid into the hyper-orthodox pulpit of Springfield’s First Christian Church.

Precocious or not, Vachel was very much his mother’s boy. Indeed, his childhood, as his adulthood, manifests an extraordinary mixture of maturity and boyishness. Both aspects of his nature, for example, are obvious in his letter to “Santa Claus,” written for Christmas, 1888. The letter opens, on the one hand, with requests that are characteristic of an ordinary little boy: “If you please send me, a wistle[^], a drum, an engine that runs a blacksmith shop, a soldier suit, a music box, a horn that plays different tunes, a snake that

wiggles, a toy kicking donkey, a panorama, a singing top, a box of paints, a big drum [!], a stocking full of candy, and a coasting sled.” Mature feelings, on the other hand, are also apparent, as Uncle Boy asks Santa “not to forget the poor; send them presents that [are] what they need.” And in return for his own gifts, he promises “to put down hay and sweep off the front porch every morning without being told.” Then he concludes: “Santa do not forget to give these things to me unless you think I deserve them” (December 17, 1888, Ward). He was a dutiful little man who really wanted a drum, “a big drum.”

Boyish maturity is also manifest in a number of documents that Vachel authored the following summer, the summer of 1889, between his third- and fourth-grade years. With his father, he traveled by train to Trinidad, Colorado to visit the doctor’s widowed mother, Martha Ann Cave Lindsay. The trip was the younger Lindsay’s initiation to the West (he had been east to Indiana several times), and he recorded his observations in childish scrawl in a small notebook, the first of his many notebooks and date books. The entries are random and largely topographical: most are accurately excerpted in Masters’ biography (36-38). If nothing else, the notebook manifests a boy’s unusual eye for detail but also his unfortunate propensity for being sick to his stomach.

On July 13, 1889, Vachel borrowed from his notebook and added other descriptions when he wrote a letter home to “Mama.” One of his exact impressions was that Denver “is scattered around on 2 times as much grounds as it needs.” A few days later, the dutiful son also sent “Mama” a typewritten narrative in which he recounts the kind of events in the kind of language that seems only too typical of a nine-year-old boy: “There are ant hills out here a foot high our yard is full of them out on papas^ land are prarie-dog^ houses the land is full of them. I caught two beetles and made them fight one of them was about 4 1/2 inches long the other about 1 1/2 inches. The smallest beat the largest one it broke his leg.” In a droll note typed at the end of the manuscript, Dr. Lindsay explains the run-on sentences, etc.: “Vachel says tell you that this is his first attempt at typewriting & hopes to be pardoned for misstakes^” (Virginia).

A second Vachel typescript concerning the 1889 Colorado trip was finished many years later (c. 1927). It was intended as another “gosh awful” story, although the tale was finally incorporated into “Thomas Jefferson’s Great Country,” an unpublished chapter that is now part of the “Why Don’t You Talk United States?” manuscript: “I can remember making a journey as a little boy, west from Springfield, Illinois, to Trinidad, Colorado. I was with my father, and we were going to visit my widowed Grandmother Lindsay who had recently moved to Trinidad. The main amusement on the railroad journey that was so eventful then that it seemed to take weeks, was looking out of the window of the Pullman with my father, for the ‘Pike’s Peak or bust!’ covered wagons. They were going straight toward the sunset, parallel with the railroad track, as the automobiles are today. I kept looking for those that would ‘bust,’ so many seemed on the point of doing so. ‘Poor white’ citizens of the U.S., from Maine to Florida were swept into this ‘Pike’s Peak or bust’ funeral of prairie schooners and lean horses. Few of the wagons were of the magnificent covered wagon symmetry and whiteness in the movie of that name, though all attempted that general type of architecture. There were always five or ten children looking out from the end gate of the muddy wagon, and at least two dogs in the train . . . The West is so prosperous and well-tailored today that one wonders what became of that hookworm cavalcade” (Virginia). By the time of his final railroad trip in

late 1931, Vachel was a likely candidate for a world record in regard to hours spent in Pullman cars. He had also lived through unparalleled technological change—from the “prairie schooners” of his boyhood to the airplanes of his maturity. [Note 3]

Meanwhile, at the end of this Colorado vacation, and after another 18 hours in a Pullman, Vachel was enrolled in the fourth grade at Stuart School. There are no surviving “gosh awful” stories from this school year (1889-90), no further examples of precociousness, and no evidence as to the quality of his work. Olive, however, reports that, until the fifth grade, her brother’s grammar school rank “was usually near the upper middle of the class” (Lindsay-Wakefield 84).

According to Disciple doctrine, anyway, young Vachel reached his maturity the following summer, just after completing the fourth grade. On July 1, 1890, he was baptized through immersion and officially enrolled as a member of Springfield’s First Christian Church. The new member’s initial effort at poetry, moreover, may well have been written in honor of the occasion. The poem “Come,” written in Vachel’s childish hand, is dated “July 31, 1890”; but the manuscript seems to be the final product of several days or even weeks of revision and, one suspects, some assistance from “Mama.” In any event, the verses are exceptionally mature in thought, if not in spelling, when we consider that the author was a ten-year-old boy. The poem is an invitation from Jesus the “Master” to the “sinner” to “come to me, / Inherit the kingdom prepared for thee” (*Poetry* 787). The invitation, of course, is consistent with the Disciples’ missionary focus, but it is also consistent with the focus that mature Vachel adapted to his own purposes. Indeed, students of his prose and poetry must know that, from the very beginning to the very end of his artistic career, Vachel’s work is an invitation, an appeal that reflects both the influence of Campbellite theology and the influence of classical literary theory. His purpose was to delight and to instruct. The Lindsay canon was written, for the most part, by a missionary Jesus-Aladdin who wished to enlighten his readers in order to encourage them to seek a new and better world: “Come blessed servant, come to me, / Inherit the kingdom prepared for thee.” Characteristically, then, the essential intent of Uncle Boy’s maturity was initially expressed when he was but ten years old.

4

Although the details of Vachel’s fourth-grade session are lost in time, the following academic year (1890-91), by way of contrast, is one of the better-documented years in his life. This fifth-grade year saw a significant change in his academic status, a change that only served to enhance his image as a child prodigy. In later years, Vachel himself designated the fifth grade as the benchmark of his grammar-school days. For a time, he was “number one,” his sister Olive exults, and she explains why: “Long afterward he revealed the secret and told why he had tried harder to do well at that particular time. The seating of that classroom was rearranged at the beginning of each month when the report cards were distributed. Because he secretly worshiped a very beautiful and shy young lady who was always near the head of the class, Vachel decided that he would pay attention to his studies for awhile, in order to have his seat near her. To cover up the devotion to his idol, he was outwardly all the more attentive to a towheaded and flirtatious young woman in the next row of seats—and never did the object of his adoration, or anyone else, suspect the true situation” (Lindsay-Wakefield 84-85).

Olive's story provides interesting background for reading her brother's own account of the "beautiful and shy young lady," as narrated in "The Education of Aladdin," especially since Vachel's version begins with high drama: "my soul was born, all because of a child woman." The child woman's unlikely name, according to the author, was "Princess Badrulbador." (In *The Arabian Nights' Entertainment*, one of Vachel's favorite books, Badrulbador or Badroulboudour is the wife of Aladdin.) Otherwise, at least in general outline, Vachel's impressionistic story corresponds with Olive's factual narration:

About a month after school started, with six others she [Badrulbador] walked into the school room with a full set of clean new books under her arm. These children she led had all skipped a grade, with her because of extra brilliancy. Skipping was much less common then. As she appeared then, so she remained always. Her complexion was alabaster, her cheeks a Rose[^], her smile rose[^] and ivory, deprecating and apologizing for her unconventional advancement. How my ribs turned to ice, as she was assigned a seat immediately behind me. Then, as always, I spent half an hour summoning courage to look around. I doubt if she ever realized that I was in the world, she was as busy about her affairs. Boys scarcely spoke to her, and as to mingling her name with the teasing flirting school gossip, or sending her an avalanche of valentines, they would have thought it preposterous. Yet I put no trust in this plain social fact and write[^] notes frantically to another girl and printed that lady's initials all through my books so they would not tease me about the real divinity.

She always had her lessons, and, as long as she was with us—so did I. When it came to spelling matches, we beat the room and then with Spartan rigidity, I spelled her down. Two prizes were offered for essays, one for the girls, one for the boys. We won those prizes. Often our marks were so much alike we both ranked first. We were prigs in ex tremis.

In retrospect, Vachel theorizes, scholarship "is to study in the spirit in which I studied then," and education "is to lead the soul to aspire to simple goodness, as I aspired at that time." For once in his life, apparently for the first time, "Arithmetic became a pleasure. Grammar a beloved science," and poetry a deeply emotional experience.

Thomas Westwood's (1814-88) "Little Bell" was the poem of the moment, and Vachel describes how the class was required "to parse and conjugate" the work:

Little Bell sat down beneath the rocks, tossed aside her gleaming golden locks and begged the musical blackbird to sing his sweetest song.

"Low and soft, oh very low and soft
Crooned the blackbird in the orchard croft."

The song of that humble bird, extolling the virgin dignity of a perfect girl-woman filled my heart as completely as spring water fills a cup.

[Badrulbador] never trifled or sniffed or made faces. She was in fact a rosy, radiant New England Brahm[^], unconsciously out of place in raw Illinois. She had been reading St. Nicholas and Miss Alcott's books while we had been sending valentines and going to kissing parties, and disobeying our teachers, and chewing gum and playing base ball[^], and breaking glass in street lamps and doing all other sinful things. ("The Education of Aladdin," Virginia)

In later years, Vachel transformed the blackbird into a “Chinese nightingale”; and “Little Bell” anticipates Sara Teasdale, who, in turn, was disguised as a “Chinese lady of high degree” (*Poetry* 277). In the fifth-grade class, though, Princess Badrulbador was likely Bessie Brinkerhoff. A folder of childish love notes addressed to “Vachel” and signed “Bessie Brinkerhoff” and “Bessie B.” is part of the Lindsay collection at the University of Virginia. Bessie was the daughter of George Brinkerhoff, a realtor and one of Springfield’s richest and most prestigious men. Vachel’s phrase “New England Brahm^,” therefore, is an apt “impression” of Bessie’s social standing.

As for the prizes that Vachel and his princess won, these were the promised awards of what was then the annual Sangamon County Fair essay contest, a contest open to all students in the county. Two prizes were given in each ward and high school class, one for a boy and one for a girl. In 1891, the grand total was 175 prizes. The assigned subject was “Labor and Learning,” and in his winning essay young Vachel argues that both labor and learning are the two great powers that rule the world. One of his ironic conclusions is that “A man ought not to be very much respected unless he has a business” (Virginia). With the other students, Vachel was awarded his silver-coin medal “by the officials of the Illinois State Fair on one of the most crowded days of that exciting fair week,” Olive recalls: “It was truly a great event in our lives” (Lindsay-Wakefield 85). [Note 4]

Finally, Nellie Maxwell, the fifth-grade teacher, wrote on Vachel’s winning essay: “I am much pleased with Vachel’s work. He shows earnestness in whatever he does. N. Maxwell.” Vachel’s report card for the first semester of his portentous fifth-grade year is extant, and his grades reflect the importance of being earnest: “Drawing 89, Writing 89, Reading 87, Spelling 96 [!], Dictation & Composition 94, Arithmetic 90, Geography 88, Grammar 95, Music 95, and Deportment 92” (with 100 indicated as “Perfect,” 90 as “Very Good,” 80 as “Good,” 70 as “Fair,” 60 as “Poor,” and 50 as “Inadmissible”).

5

Following a second trip to Colorado during the summer, 1891, Vachel was again enrolled in Stuart School, this time for the sixth grade. In “The Education of Aladdin,” he relates that “Princess Badrulbador” was also back in school, and that the two of them “were assigned seats next [to] each other as of old.” The rest of his year, however, is summarized rather cryptically: “Badrulbador stayed just long enough for me to win another prize, then was taken out and put under private tutors. I relapsed immediately into an ordinary citizen, learned to swear a bit, and quit writing love notes to lady number two.” If Badrulbador was Brinkerhoff, however, she was not taken from school for any extended period, if at all. She attended high school with Vachel and generally was acknowledged as his “best girl” until he grew enamored, in his junior year, with Mary Tiffany. The reference to “private tutors,” then, may well be another of narrator Vachel’s self-proclaimed “impressions.”

The prize Vachel refers to was again the result of the Sangamon County Fair essay contest, for which, in 1892, the assigned subject was “The Comparative Advantages of Farm and City Life.” In his winning essay, Vachel admits that the city has advantages, but his essential thesis revolves around a Romantic cliché: “The country life

is adapted to man, but man has to adapt himself to the city. Our Creator did not make the city, he made the country.” The conclusion, however, is all Vachel: “Manners may make the dude, but work makes the man and the farmer” (Virginia). The 1892 awards were handed out during ceremonies at the Fair on September 10, just three days after the death of John Greenleaf Whittier, who was already one of youthful Vachel’s favorite poets. Judge J. Otis Humphrey, the father of two of Vachel’s closest lifelong friends, Mary and Maud Humphrey, distributed silver medals to the 180 or so winners. As with the prior year, though, Springfield’s newspapers did not report the names of any winners.

The contents of her son’s prize essays, Catharine Lindsay maintains in her memoir, were entirely his own ideas: “I’ve forgotten the subjects. He would not discuss the subjects with me lest he should be assisted by some suggestion. He was very determined the thoughts should be strictly his own.” Indeed, Vachel’s pride in his thinking is evident from the following notebook entry that was written eight years after he won his second award:

My first essay at ten or eleven—shows—1 an instinct for generalization rather than a power for doing it accurately—2—a tendency to fly off at many tangents of thought that confuses the discussion and makes paragraphs impossible. 3—a sense of climax, and a strong sense of the dogmatic epigram. “(Labor rules the world!)” 4. A sense that the world is a balanced bundle of forces and laws. 5. A sense of the individuality, and strong personal oversight of the Creator. 6. A sense that the laws of the soul of man and the soul of God, and the laws of the roots of the trees are all in common. 7. A sense of the essential beauty of the world. 8. A sense of the presence of the principle of disappointment—decay—as a part of the natural order, not to be feared, but to be understood. 9. A sense that all honest work ought to be respected. 10. A sense that the only social tie, and the only social motive, between citizen and citizen is “to be respected.” God has provided others. But this is all I have recorded there. 11. (Comparison of city & country) A sense that man is fundamentally educated by the phenomena[^] of nature, and that man is the divinely appointed ruler of nature throughout the universe. 12. A fundamental and disastrous irreverence for the paraphernalia[^] of this world, the wrappings and the mannerisms. 13. A reverence for wholesome ruggedness. 14 A mistaken tendency to see differences in the souls of men, consequent upon their environments, or deeds.

Now all above I must understand and never expect to get away from. They are a part of me, the essential self. Any of these old opinions I may hope well to defend, and may never feel lost and doctrineless. I can defend them all with a whole heart, and a perfect faith, which will keep me strong. (October 17, 1900, in “What I remember[^] of The Science of English”) [Note 5]

In fact, the majority of “these old opinions” did remain with Vachel, especially his “tendency to fly off at many tangents of thought,” his “sense of the essential beauty of the world,” and his Keatsian perception of “decay—as a part of the natural order, not to be feared, but to be understood.” His first published poem, “The Queen of Bubbles” (*Poetry* 37), for example, is an expression of universal transience. Throughout his life Vachel also manifested a fundamental “irreverence for the paraphernalia[^] of this world,” although, arguably, “disastrous” is something of an overstatement. In addition, the inclination to examine and review his personal past, thoughtfully and introspectively,

continued as he grew older. As late as 1927, in “The Small Town,” another unpublished autobiographical sketch, he speculated that he was on “the right track” with the climactic epigrams (quoted above) that he incorporated into his sixth-grade essay (Virginia). On the other hand, Vachel did “get away from” the idea that there are no differences in the souls of men, his final observation in the above notebook entry. When writing his early essays, he was very much influenced by a Campbellite zeal for Christian unity; but in his more mature thinking, as we shall see, he placed great emphasis on the values of individuality, especially the values that he believed to be unique to individual races and nationalities. It was a belief, after all, that had been a dramatic part of his youth—when his mother had staged her “Colloquy of Nations.”

Vachel’s prize-winning essays and his several other fifth-and-sixth-grade successes were such that he was allowed to skip the seventh grade, “going on into the eighth grade,” Olive relates, “as several other of the brighter youngsters did at that time” (Lindsay-Wakefield 85). In “The Education of Aladdin,” Vachel himself indicates that, after Badrulbador’s departure, his remaining years in grade school were unremarkable. In his words: “Henceforth my ward school life was so common place^ I remember nothing in special except graduation two years later.” His graduation (on the evening of June 15, 1893) was “special,” in part, because he was chosen to give the commencement recitation. The address was entitled “The School Master’s Guests”; and, Vachel alleges, “Princess Badrulbador” herself was in attendance: “for the girls were her chums, yet.” Badrulbador’s presence, of course, made the occasion very “special,” as the honored speaker notes in his conclusion to “The Education of Aladdin”: “So terrible was the lightening^ of her white forehead that I could only bow speechless and trembling. It was the last time I ever saw her” (another claim, however, that should be evaluated in the light of Vachel’s description of his narrative style).

The commencement speaker’s final ward school grades are still on record and demonstrate a certain loss of earnestness: “Drawing 84.25, Writing 78; Reading 82.5, Spelling 88.3, Dictation & Composition 90.7, Arithmetic 85.5, Grammar 79.9, History 91.5, Physiology 92.3, Music 74.4, and Deportment 92” (Virginia). The numbers alone, when compared with those from the fifth-grade report card cited above, suggest the emotional, if not the physical, absence of Badrulbador. She was the first of many young women that the Lindsay family finally referred to as “Vachel’s inspiration girls” (Ruggles 48). [Note 6]

6

Occasionally after school, and all day on Saturdays, young Vachel assisted in his father’s office, then located at 223 South 6th Street, four and one-half blocks north-northeast of the family home. With patent exaggeration, Vachel himself states: “I ‘kept office’ for him [Dr. Lindsay], from babyhood, in the waiting room, on Saturdays” (“The Buggy-Breaking Doctor”). Olive confirms her brother’s claim, although she omits his hyperbole: “Through the early years of his life, he would spend much time in his father’s office, looking at the queer pictures in the medical books or receiving the patients in the outer office if the regular assistant was busy helping mix drugs or wash bottles in the rear office” (Lindsay-Wakefield 84). For many years, this regular assistant was Jennie Jones (later, Jones-Herrin), “the capable English girl who had followed the Lindsays to

America” after one of their summer trips to Europe, according to Eudora South (*Cousin Vachel* 67). Jennie served not only as Dr. Lindsay’s receptionist and pharmacist but also as his nurse and secretary/bookkeeper.

Olive also discloses that there were times when Kate thought her son was at his father’s office, but instead “he was over at the Leland Hotel on the next corner, at Sixth and Capitol Avenue, listening to the Negro waiters telling stories and singing around the woodpile in a big shed-like room where they chopped wood for the open fires after their other work was done. ‘He was a regular nuisance,’ Lewis Wiggins [hotel owner] said, ‘he came so often and stayed so long. He seemed fascinated by the stories and the singing of the men’” (Lindsay-Wakefield 84). At other times, Kate could have found her son on the city square, listening to a Salvation Army band (82-83), or at Stuart’s Confectionery, 109 North 5th Street, eating candy or pastry or ice cream. As we have seen, Vachel remarked to Sara Teasdale that Cortland Stuart’s confectionery store was his “favorite tavern” (January 3, 1914, Yale 18).

Even though Dr. Lindsay’s office was located in downtown Springfield (in the 200 block on the west side of Sixth Street), he remained the archetypal country doctor, a fact of his existence that his son proudly emphasizes in “The Buggy-Breaking Doctor”: “The unique aspect which is the basis of this tribute was his loyalty to those farmers who took care of him when he was a boy doctor in the Cotton Hill region, and this in spite of a very large practice in Springfield. Many a trip over those muddy roads was at a definite loss of money, time, strength and public prestige of a sort in Springfield itself, but he was grateful to Cotton Hill for taking care of a lonely boy from Kentucky, heartbroken from the Civil War. Of course many of them were always extremely generous with him to the end.” Vachel depicts his father’s midnight calls “over a rutted, frozen mud road, maybe twenty miles” and points out how, at times, a buggy wheel or shaft would break and how the doctor would then be forced to continue on horseback. The next morning he awakened his son, harnessed his fresh horse to his second buggy, and returned to the accident site, where father and son, according to son, tied “the remains of the broken chariot back of the good chariot, sometimes with a dragging plank supporting where the wheel had been, and the broken buggy would go back into the mending shop, and the Doctor would go on with his day’s work in town, transferring all medicine and instruments to the fresher chariot.” His son was left to put Charlie or Tom in the barn, while chanting aloud martial rhythms from Tennyson’s *Maud* in an attempt to overcome his fear of horses (Ruggles 43-44). [Note 7]

The buggy itself served as an emergency hospital and a drugstore, as well as a means of transportation. To the end, Dr. Lindsay mixed and carried with him all of his medicines: bitters, castor oil, calomel, mercury, quinine, etc. For miserable sinners, especially for heavy drinkers, according to the Lindsay son, the medicine might be nothing more than the doctor’s “hereditary Kentucky glare” and the sight of his whip: “The Doctor never used the whip for actual whipping except to encourage a horse he dearly loved, at midnight on a frozen road, but he carried the whip in his hand when he stepped into a farmer’s house to give his famous treatment to cure delirium tremens. . . . I recommend the broken buggy and horsewhip treatment to families who are considering giving the patient three years of psycho-analysis^ and petting. The Doctor could scare the vinegar out of any brute on earth in one minute.” Cost of the treatment was generally

nothing for blacks and two dollars for whites. From some patients, though, the doctor took his payment “in cord wood the next spring” (Strong 103-104). [Note 8]

We may assume that the doctor’s glare and his whip were present when he lectured his young son on the evils of tobacco, alcohol, and venereal disease. In one of her memoirs, Vachel’s sister Joy claims: “I have heard Papa say dozens of times that he ‘has yet to take his first drink, to have his first chew of tobacco, and smoke his first cigar.’ He considered dancing and cards equally improper for his family and he was always modest to a degree that would make a present day flapper die of laughing. He was a prohibitionist almost to the point of fanaticism” (Lindsay-Blair). Olive, meanwhile, contends that the era, if nothing else, dictated her father’s expectation that his son would be his successor: “It was a very conventional world into which Vachel Lindsay was born. . . . Much of the world, by tacit agreement, lived after certain set patterns, and expected their sons and daughters, their neighbors and friends to do likewise. Lawyers took it for granted that their sons should study law and become partners in the law firm; doctors expected their sons to be doctors; merchants looked forward to receiving their sons into the business they were conducting” (Lindsay-Wakefield 84). Joy adds that her father “considered medicine the highest calling possible on this earth and never got over his disappointment that Vachel was not a doctor. When our preacher left the ministry and decided to go to medical school he told him he was going one step higher. So the disappointment when Vachel did not study medicine and share his office with him was almost more than he could endure.” In the 1920s, in a dark mood, Vachel doubted that his father “was ever quite as kind to us as he was to his own tribe. He had used himself up almost before he met me. So when I wanted to loaf and be an artist he most had conniptions again” (Chénetier 357). However, the comments were made in distress (April 5, 1925), as one of Vachel’s “inspiration girls,” Elizabeth Wills, had apparently decided that she had said “no” long enough and refused even to acknowledge her lover’s continuing, ardent proposals. Dejected and rejected Vachel, in turn, was playing the role of a coal-bin sweet potato—in a very human and timeless effort to inspire commiseration, perhaps as an initial step toward inspiring or reinspiring love.

Dr. Lindsay’s quick temper, his “conniptions,” nonetheless, were very real and duly feared by his family, especially by his son, whose exact impressions are manifest in the poem, “Doctor Mohawk”:

“Heap-big-chief-the-Mohawk,” with eye like a tommyhawk.
Naked, in war-paint, tough stock and old stock,
Furious swash-buckler, street-brawler, world-breaker, . . .
With a buffalo beard, all beast, yet all human. . . . (*Poetry* 529)

Unfortunately, the doctor’s fierceness, at times, concealed the fact that he was “all human.” His quick temper was balanced by a delightfully dry sense of humor, as he loved to tell droll stories and make witty observations, such as his comment on the beauty of his sick wife-to-be, as they were sailing to Europe. His daughter Joy remembers: “He had quite a sense of humor and I think Vachel got that from him. The only things I have ever read from his pen were letters. They were never too short to contain bits of humor and bits of sentiment” (Blair).

Most of Dr. Lindsay's letters and his other papers are in the Ward collection, and the documents very much support Joy's appraisal. In the Barrett Library at Virginia, however, another document affords an excellent, albeit an inauspicious, example of the doctor's sense of humor. Written during the summer, 1897, while he was on a Colorado vacation with his son, the manuscript is a combination letter-diary addressed to Kate, who had remained behind in Springfield. On August 4, the doctor notes, "I am improving for I can see my writing better & can read some of it. With much love will say good night & go to bed in the wagon." The next morning he continues: "Bright Italian sky—Rain last night—Rested reasonably well after I got the ticking of my watch made out. I heard it for quite a time and thought I heard my heart beating. I felt my puls[^] and it was going all right—but finally I found it was my watch which I heard through my pillow & two mattresses etc. My mind being at rest on that point I had only to wonder how you were doing & how much you would enjoy the wagon for a sleeping place."

A few days later, the doctor returned to his manuscript: "Woe be to the trout that nibbles this evening for we have a book on how to catch trout—which says fish up stream—but it is all right to fish down if more convenient. The book suits us." In fact, he went fishing the very next night and, in his words, "about dark we had enough for all & I started for camp. I thought I wanted another drink and stepped on a nice smooth stone in the river when casplash I went headlong into water—I did not stay long as I knew the cook wanted the trout. While he was cooking it I made an entire change of my wardrobe in the moonshine & mountain breeze. The fire feels quite pleasant since my plunge—" (Virginia). Twenty-one years later, in August 1918, Dr. Lindsay again went "casplash" in an icy Colorado stream, but the second impromptu swim was not amusing. Several weeks later, on September 20, 1918, he died of pneumonia.

Despite occasional sarcasm and "conniptions," Dr. Lindsay seldom denied financial assistance to his children. He seemed to understand and even to enjoy some of the antics of his unusual son: "[your father] always chuckles over Vachel's scrapes," Kate wrote to Olive and her brother while they were at Hiram College (May 20, 1898, Virginia). A year and a half later, when his son wrote home from college about his escapades with girls, Dr. Lindsay responded in mock seriousness: "Your letter received yesterday and was a reminder of boyhood days—but be careful don't presume too much on your standing with the young ladies. You may slip up on it and get a tumble that would be more disasterous[^] than falling into a ditch filled with leaves" (November 15, 1899, Virginia). And notwithstanding an occasional outburst or two, Vachel's overriding appraisal of his father can only be described as unequivocal appreciation: "In the roll-call of the general practitioners he will stand near the head, for all those that knew him. Quacks feared him, patent-medicine men feared him, liars feared him with a deadly fear, mothers and sons loved him" ("The Buggy-Breaking Doctor"). The loving son, moreover, had a special message for anyone who credited his mother for what he had accomplished:

. . . they are wrong. My father has a nicer sense of the particular word than my mother, who is more lavish and eloquent. In his middle age he used to be a much more musical reader of prose or orations than Mama. When he was young and full of fire, he just loved to read the Speech of the Jury—at the Cronin Trial, for instance—or some such thing. And in every practical task to this day, he goes at everything with

a certain pioneer ingenuity, which I think I inherit when I approach the problems of versification. Everything cold or mystic or Buddhistic or non-human I get from my mother (though she has many other qualities), while I get from him everything romantic, individual, lonely and rebellious. (Chénétier 117)

“Every evening that there wasn’t company,” Joy affirms, her father and her mother “invariably read aloud to one another. He liked historical romances the best for he was romantic and sentimental underneath.” [Note 9]

Vachel himself advised Harriet Moody that his parents were “much alike” in character, “though not in outlook.” His father, he believed, “within his own province [was] more of an original He is an absolutely unconquered Ishmaelite, in his determination to do everything his own way to the last ditch. A man with a most restless energy, great self denial—absolutely preoccupied with his family and his work, and believing in hard work, both in theory and practice—though he goes at his hard work with a great deal of fidget and slambang—and has not much patience with a job that requires any kind of delicate pains taking. ‘Get it through with’ is his one thought—be it visiting Nuremberg[^]—or driving out at midnight to the sick, over a frozen road” (Chénétier 117). When the doctor was young, Vachel bragged to Harriet Monroe, “he used to bounce like a rubber ball” (Chénétier 99). And even in old age, Vachel added to Harriet Moody six months later, the doctor would rather let his “nigger sit still in the basement while he goes out and sweeps the walk in front. Until his age had reduced him to what might be called human moderation—he would much prefer to kick the barn-door open—rather than push it—any time” (Chénétier 119). “Papa in his prime,” Vachel proclaimed to Sara Teasdale, “was a whirlwind of Rooseveltian energy—a paralyzing marvel to normal folks” (December 21, 1913, Yale 14). “I could write a book on my father’s life and not be ashamed,” Joy avers: “My mother said to me hundreds of times, ‘Your father is a great man’” (Lindsay-Blair).

After his father’s death, Vachel sadly described life at home without the doctor for the benefit of his sister Olive: “Mama and I are gradually taking up the routine of life again as well as we can without Papa. I miss the warmth of him, the house is a colder place, and I miss the sense of vigor he must have dispensed even in his last day here, for everything is less vital. All this besides missing him. I dream of him often, and wake up startled in the midst of a conversation” (October 26, 1918, Ward). “If you want to know my father and mother as I see them in myself,” Vachel informed Eleanor Dougherty, “everything in ‘Booth’ comes from my mother, everything in ‘The Congo’ from my father. ‘Legree’ is my father’s mood; ‘The Chinese Nightingale’ more my mother’s. ‘King Solomon’ has an equal share of both. I am speaking of my parents’ souls. And as for actual experience, my father used to sing plantation songs to us when we were children—and read Uncle Remus. He was the heir of a Kentucky plantation with its proper apportionment of Negro slaves, all of which was wrecked by the war, and he had to start life on his own, with nothing. He, more or less, educated all his brothers and sisters for a start, five brothers, two sisters. . . . I could write on and on—but the end of the matter must come—for it is midnight. . .” (September 29, 1918, Lindsay-Wakefield 111).

In the end, it was his father’s courage, his fierceness, that Vachel returned to time and time again with fearful admiration. “I have not many fixed ideas in my personal

religion or religious practice outside the boundaries of the Lord's Prayer," he declared to Dougherty, "but I find one insistent thing in my soul after my father's death: He will help me to fight. I can almost feel his hand on my shoulder, and all it says is 'Fight.' He was a most courageous and indomitable, as well as a most modest and unselfish, man. . . . 'Fight, fight, fight,' says Vachel Thomas Lindsay to his son Nicholas Vachel" (Lindsay-Wakefield 111).

7

As with his father, Vachel's relationship with his mother was a continuing interchange of love and support, on the one hand, and vexation and rebellion, on the other. Although the fractious occurrences provide interesting reading, they tended to be of short duration and had little or no lasting influence on either party. Indeed, with the possible exception of several difficult years, perhaps from 1909 to 1911, Vachel harbored little animosity toward either parent. Even in time of stress, his love for his mother, as well as for his father, was very near the surface, ready to manifest itself in some manner on some occasion. His affection, as theirs, was profound and durable, although his contrariness, as theirs, could be explosive. Still, when he reached the age for serious relationships with women, his mother stood as his ideal—as a woman, as a wife, and as a mother.

Like her husband, Catharine Lindsay was energetic and exceptionally courageous. In late 1913, when Sara Teasdale sent a copy of her poem, "A Poet's Mother," Vachel informed her that the poem "might very well apply to any mother in general—and very beautifully":

But not mine b-gosh. But I told you about her the last letter. She is Roman, Spartan, and a Delphic Sibyl. A driver, a big houskeeper^—a rousing cook of the old fashioned farm style, a cool judicial executive, and a straight forward diplomat. Also she goes to all the Springfield parties. Also for two years she lectured the literary Society of which she is a humble member here—on Moulton's Modern Readers^ Bible, from the Purely Literary standpoint, suppressing her religion^ entirely. She did it so well they kept her at it two years—one for the old the other the new Testament. And they are one half of them pagans of the deepest dye.

With all deference to Edwin Markham's mother—or whatever mother your very lovely and most sweet poem had in mind [it was John Hall Wheelock's mother]—my mother does not lean back in big blue eyed wonder at the things sonny is doing. Sonny does very well to keep the cherries on her bonnet in sight as she keeps ahead of him a quarter of a mile on the dusty road. I think she is absolutely right on every question in the world except in matters where I disagree with her. There it pains me very much to correct her, and since it is a rather elaborate process, I have ceased doing it of late. And since I agree with her on most matters from the infallibility of the ten commandments to the worth-whileness of the Anti-Saloon league—little differences on the Higher Criticism seldom affect us any more. She still drives the orthodox tandem to Sunday school hitched to her chariot—viz: Baalam's^ Conversational Jackass and Jonah's whale—but she can get more spiritual profit out of them than some folks can out of Tennysons^ Poems. (December 21, 1913, Yale 14) [Note 10]

The “literary Society” that Vachel refers to was the Sunnyside, one of several organizations that Kate either founded or actively participated in, especially following the deaths of her three daughters. In the First Christian Church, she taught the Adult Bible class for nearly 43 years. She was a member of the Sunnyside Club for 30 years and a member of the Authors’ Club for 15. In 1904, she organized the Via Christi study class, teaching and serving as one of its leaders until her death (February 1, 1922). Her copy of Louise Manning Hodgkins’ seminal book, *Via Christi: An Introduction to the Study of Missions* (New York: Macmillan, 1901), is among the Lindsay books at the University of Virginia. In 1892, after several years as President of the Woman’s Missionary Society of her own church, she organized the Women’s Christian Social Union, an ecumenical effort to unite all the Protestant women’s missionary societies of Springfield. With the exception of the first two years, she was Social Union president until her death. She published pamphlets and articles, most of them in Disciple-Christian publications: *Missionary Tidings*, *The Christian Evangelist*, and *The Christian Century*. On several occasions she addressed the annual National Convention of Disciples; and, in 1910, she was selected as a delegate to the Ecumenical Congress of the World, which met that year in Edinburgh, Scotland.

In 1914, Catharine’s admiring son advised Harriet Moody: “I haven’t given you the right notion of my Mama. She is unquestionably the most powerful personality I have ever known, and one of the literary intellectuals of the first rank. She has taught me most all I know and I am still acquiring information from her” (Dunbar 117). Eight years later, on December 22, 1922, again writing to Moody, Vachel speculated on which of Mama’s particular strengths he had likely inherited: “I am said to be like my mother—and few knew what a thundering egotist she was. But both of us were far fonder of solitude and meditation than our little world knew, and our secret thoughts—harmless enough—were far far indeed from the advertisements and few understood her pride, or egotism, and few know mine, though this letter almost unveils it!” (Chénetier 260). “The twelve apostles might impress her,” he claimed on another occasion, “but they are all dead” (Chénetier 190). [Note 11]

Inevitably, the thundering egos clashed, especially since Kate was even more intent on catechizing her children than she was on instructing the members of her church and community. As a present for her son’s eleventh birthday (November 10, 1890), for example, she purchased a small notebook in which he was expected to paste inspirational materials from wherever he found them. As a dedication, she quoted the lines traditionally attributed to Charles Reade (1814-84):

Sow an act, and you reap a habit;
Sow a habit, and you reap a character,
Sow a character, and you reap a destiny.

The essential principle of all her moral teaching was straightforward, as Kate herself explains in her 1916 memoir: “After [Vachel] started to school, it was my habit to go to his room when he went to bed and ask him for an account of his day. He was very conscientious in his confessions, and frequently discussed the points of right and wrong in his play and experiences, sometimes in doubt about matters that would have seemed very amusing to older people. I always asked him to decide by the rule—‘Have all the good time you can, provided you don’t injure anyone else or yourself in anyway, or

disobey the teacher or break the rules of the School.” Of course, once her son achieved high marks in the fifth grade, Kate’s reaction was predictable: “Vachel, you know you can do well in school when you try” (Lindsay-Wakefield 84).

In later years, discussions between mother and son were not always models of amenity. In 1913, Vachel attempted to pry Sara Teasdale away from New York and back to the St. Louis she had come to detest. As usual, he seems to have had his mother’s example in mind: “I wish you would give this passionate little heart of yours to the Middle West—instead of always to particular persons—or your own moods. I wish you would turn clover-fields^ into throbbing song—the corn-field^ in the hottest day of August sizzling up to the sky. We accept the proposition that you are an individual, you have abundantly proved it—now show us that you are a voter and a citizen. I think you ought to be cook in a farm house one whole season and then write it all in poems from the dishwashing to weeding the radishes. Give the sunflowers your golden tongue for they as yet, are dumb.” For the sake of truth, however, he was forced to add: “Yes—when my Mama used to say these things to me—or things like them—I was roaring mad. Spiritually speaking—I was ready to chase her all around the block” (November 20, 1913, Yale 9). In fact, even after his mother’s death, if he were in a dark mood, Vachel could be disturbed all over again, just at the memory of their conflicts: “I only want to say that I enormously respect and revere my mother’s memory but she was never the mushy mellow and rabbit-like mother that appears in all movies. She was a holy terror to all those who were not prepared to dispute every inch of the way with her. To live with her was like being valet to the Pope in the Vatican and being a Protestant at the same time, and making tactful efforts to conceal it” (Armstrong 91-92). Like the Mary Baker Eddy portrayed in Ida Tarbell’s biography, Vachel informed Armstrong, Kate required “enormous long-range activities to keep from overmanaging all those nearby” (91). [Note 12]

More than anything else, Vachel resented what he thought was his mother’s refusal to recognize his maturity. We have already noted his sardonic request that his mother be kept informed of his touring schedule. Earlier, as a college boy, he complained to his father: “[Mama] talks so very far down occasionally, that she misses me. She writes to, and I believe verily imagines the sleepy and purposeless youth that went to the Stuart school when he was ten. If she imagined I was thirty—and wrote up to it, I might grow up to it—but I will not grow down into the premature brilliant inspired erratic baby that she seems to think I am sometimes. Why—I shave a little, and play with boys my own age—fill as large a place among the Hiram people as any student here—and am able to carry on an intelligent conversation with my elders” (February 5, 1900).

Another matter of contention between mother and son was the question of his future occupation. Vachel believed, as we have seen, that his mother “destined” him, “from the beginning, to be an artist” (*Poetry* 946, 948). She arranged for his attendance at a private finishing school during his earliest years, and she taught various arts at home herself, including, in her son’s words “the high arts of making wax flowers and painting. She was always passionately interested in the arts and could even make the silly old wax flowers interesting. I can remember her wax flower outfit and she used to show me how to make roses and petunias. Most anyone can make a rose out of pink wax, but it takes an artist to make a petunia.” Vachel claimed that all finishing schools teach “such

things,” but added proudly that “occasionally one of the ladies emerges with an intellect and her books tightly grasped in her hands” (letter to Calvin Wilson, February 7, 1927). He believed that his mother was one of those ladies.

Without doubt, however, Kate concurred with her husband in sending their son to college to study medicine, even though, as we have seen, Vachel announced in later years that he had felt betrayed. Olive maintained throughout her life that both parents expected their son to be a doctor. Where Masters suggests that the parents differed in their expectations, Olive wrote her objection in the margin of her copy of the biography: “Both agreed on this” (29). Moreover, Olive is the likely family source that Trombly credits for his claim that “the parents were agreed from the outset that Vachel should take up his father’s profession” (16). In time, of course, hurt feelings heal; and when Vachel’s premedical studies foundered, his mother was his primary means of support in the family decision to send him to art school. [Note 13]

Actually, Kate’s expectations for her children were considerably greater than either art or medicine. More than anyone else, she instilled in her son his perception of the unique ability and the moral obligation that so dominated his self-image and, in consequence, his life’s work. On Christmas day, 1899, for example, Kate related to her son: “Our People [the Disciples] are in the line of God’s work for the 20th century. If they remain true to their calling, they will grow into vast multitudes.” She had just returned from the annual National Convention of Disciples, where she had been impressed with her People’s “undeveloped strength of youth—a beginning of growth—this is the strongest characteristic of our People.” She admonished her son that God had great plans for the next 50 years, and if he were obedient, God would use him “as his instrument in some good work” (Virginia). As late as one week before her death, Kate exhorted her daughter Joy:

You have not common blood,—develop your ability, and don’t be afraid of anything in your line of ability. Try to look on the bright, calm side of every day, and keep your health. You really are unusually blessed.—The Doniphans, Austens, Frazees and Lindsays were, none of them, ordinary people. If Vachel keeps his health and hope, and is not hypnotized into a crank,—he’ll not attain his level for thirty years yet,—and—you can develop for forty years, at least. (January 24, 1922, Blair)

There can be little doubt that youthful Vachel was deeply impressed by his mother’s views. In later years, however, he grew skeptical, even suggesting that, in certain moods, his mother was “drunk” with rhetoric and religious inspiration. He reports having once told a Canadian audience: “I am not only sophisticated, but all my ancestors were sophisticated. My people were not only important but they were self-important. The family conceit is hereditary from a long way back. It is the hardest thing I have to overcome” (*Poetry* 971). Even with this skepticism, in the end his mother’s death from pneumonia, as his father’s death before her, was finally devastating for Vachel. More than ever, he realized how much Mama had meant to him, not only as a parent but also as a confidante, an Egeria. When he learned of her illness, he wrote immediately:

I cannot travel with any spirit or hope or get any fun out of the game with you sick at the other end. Travel gets to be a terribly abstract distant kind of a revelation to the

human race and you hold the rope of intimacy at the other end. (January 31, 1922, Blair)

He was in Seattle, Washington, however, and his mother died before she had a chance to read this final expression of her son's love and concern.

Three weeks after his mother's death, Vachel wrote to his missionary sister and brother-in-law, Olive and Paul: "I am terribly lonesome without Mama, and nothing seems worth doing without Mama to report to." He left his sister Joy in Springfield to straighten up the house for the tenants after the funeral: "I was utterly incapable of meeting the situation and was most thankful for her. . . . My life is most desolate without Mama, and it seems utterly impossible to go on without her. I cannot say any more" (February 24, 1922, Ward). Two years later he was similarly speechless when writing to Sara Teasdale upon learning of the death of her mother: "What shall I say? I miss my own mother every day. That is what I will say." He added in closing: "And my heart to you in your trouble. How can I talk of that?" (March 19, 1924, Yale 207). In life, at times, his mother angered him to the point where he dashed off pages of what only can be described as fulmination. Her death, however, found him speechless with grief.

Vachel himself best knew the nature of his family's interactions. Writing to his two sisters on June 8, 1923, he reminisced: "Papa and Mama had in many ways a tragic life, we wounded them terribly, they wounded us terribly, but we all loved each other, blindly, and forgave each other in the end. And as I look back I know of no more successful or heroic lives. We are their blood, and we cannot expect to do a bit better. We will wound and confuse each other, but we must consider the Lindsay way of living a final success. We must have faith in the vital spark and the fighting courage they gave us. We may take our battle to a higher plane. We need not be in such despair over one another" (Ward). Jennie Jones, Dr. Lindsay's assistant, worked in the very midst of the family for many years. In 1935, she wrote to Olive to express her indignation concerning the Masters' biography. Jennie (now Jones-Herrin) especially objected to Masters' portrayal of Vachel's parents: "I felt that your Mother & Father were much more responsible for Vachel's greatness—than any one else & this was an honor to him" (October 8, Ward). When he was not angry or otherwise upset, Vachel himself felt very much the same way. He seldom lost an opportunity to praise his parents.

Historical Postscript

Vachel's "John L. Sullivan, the Strong Boy of Boston" (*Poetry* 340-342) provides one of the best postscripts for the American scene in "simple sheltered 1889." The poem is essentially an inventory for the year—from the Sullivan-Kilrain, bare-knuckle boxing match to the Gibson Girl, Nick Carter, the Elsie books, *St. Nicholas Magazine*, Rogers groups, and much, much more, including the Cronin murder trial that gave Dr. Lindsay the opportunity to practice his elocutionary talents. The year brought tragedy to Johnstown and a new daughter, Joy, to the Lindsay family. On April 22, 1889, the Oklahoma land rush officially began, as former Indian land was opened to white settlers. In 1889, Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr rented an abandoned mansion at 800 South Halsted Street, Chicago, and the social settlement called Hull House was born. Across the Atlantic, in 1889, the French completed the Eiffel Tower as the literal high point of the Paris Exposition: at 954 feet, it was the world's tallest structure.

On July 2, 1890, the Sherman Antitrust Act was passed, outlawing industrial monopolies and initiating the era of “trust-busting.” The same month streetcars were introduced to Vachel’s Springfield, and when two competing companies disagreed on right-of-ways, the ensuing fight was dubbed the “Great Streetcar War of 1890”: “The bickering continued until 1893 when all of the lines were consolidated into a monopoly” (Veach 36). In December 1890, at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, United States troops massacred 200 to 300 of the Sioux Indians they were originally sent to disarm, bringing to a bloody end the last Indian war in the West. About 30 soldiers were killed. On July 6, 1892, company guards (Pinkerton detectives) fired on strikers at the Carnegie Steel Company in Homestead, Pennsylvania. Seven strikers were killed in what came to be known as the Homestead Massacre. American labor problems were exacerbated by immigrants (the Ellis Island Immigrant Station formally opened on January 1, 1892).

In the elections of 1892, John Peter Altgeld was chosen the first Democratic governor of Illinois since Joel A. Matteson (1853-57). After Altgeld’s four years, the Lindsays waited until 1913, before they had another Democratic neighbor in the Illinois governor’s mansion. In the national election, Democrat Grover Cleveland regained the White House, the only U.S. President ever to serve two, non-consecutive terms. His election success was attributed, in part, to the public outcry generated by the Homestead Massacre.

In 1889, Germans Joseph Von Mering and Oskar Minkowski proved that the pancreas secretes insulin, leading, in 1921, to the use of insulin as a remedy for diabetes. On October 1, 1889, Dr. William Worrall Mayo and his two sons, William James and Charles Horace, accepted responsibility for the patients of the new St. Mary’s hospital in Rochester, Minnesota. The group practice would later be named the Mayo Clinic and would boast Nicholas Vachel Lindsay as one of its distinguished patients. In 1890-92, German Emil von Behring and Japanese bacteriologist, Shibasaburo Kitasato, developed a tetanus antitoxin (the tetanus vaccine waited until 1930). Soon afterward, the same duo developed a diphtheria antitoxin (although this disease too was not fully controlled until after 1930). In 1893, American black physician Daniel Hale Williams became the first surgeon to operate successfully on a wounded pericardium (the sac around the heart). The same year German chemist Felix Hofmann, employed by the Bayer Company, introduced aspirin (salicylic acid) as an analgesic.

On August 6, 1890, convicted murderer William Kemmler was executed in an electric chair in Auburn, New York, the first person to die in civilization’s newest attempt to be uncivilized. In New Orleans, on September 7, 1892, James J. Corbett knocked out John L. Sullivan in the 21st round to win the world heavyweight crown. It was the nation’s first major prize fight conducted under the civilized rules of the Marquis of Queensberry, rules which called for, among other things, the use of “boxing gloves.” The very next day, September 8, an early version of “The Pledge of Allegiance” was published in *The Youth’s Companion*. And a month later, on October 5, the Dalton Gang, notorious for bank and train robberies, was essentially annihilated while attempting to rob a pair of banks in Coffeyville, Kansas.

Visitors to Chicago’s Columbian Exposition (1892-93) saw the Masonic Temple (built during 1892), towering 21 stories in the air. For 13 years the world’s tallest structure, the Temple was the focal point of what was commonly described as the world’s

most impressive skyline. In 1892, engineer Rudolf Diesel purchased a German patent for an oil-fueled, compression-ignition engine that he would finally complete, in Augsburg, in 1897. Although Diesel attracted worldwide attention, his work was anticipated as early as 1890, when British inventor Akroyd Stuart purchased a similar patent. On March 26, 1892, Walt Whitman died—on Robert Frost’s 17th birthday.

With the addition of North and South Dakota, Montana, and Washington (all in November 1889), and Idaho and Wyoming (both in July 1890), the nation expanded to 44 united states. Two years later, on February 12, 1892, Springfield and the Lindsay family joined the rest of the nation in celebrating, for the first time, Abraham Lincoln’s birthday as an official, national holiday.

Notes for Chapter Four

[Note 1] The “Widow Bedott” was the pseudonym of Frances M[iriam] Whitcher (1814-52), New York author of humorous sketches of Yankee characters speaking in colloquial dialect. Whitcher’s work is among the first to portray feminine comic figures at some length. Many sketches appeared in *Godey’s Lady’s Book* and were later collected in *The Widow Bedott Papers* (1856) and in *Widow Spriggins, Mary Elmer, and Other Sketches* (1867). Two of the stories in this chapter were edited and published in *Collier’s: The National Weekly* 46 (March 18, 1911): 36-37, under the title, “The Education of Aladdin.” Because this publication is difficult or impossible for most readers to obtain, an annotated typescript copy is included as an appendix to this chapter.

[Note 2] By naming his ward school Brown, rather than Stuart, Vachel may have had in mind prominent Springfield citizen Stuart Brown, master in chancery at the federal court in Springfield and one of the city’s better-known men. Among the ten Springfield ward schools, none was named “Brown.” Minnie Brooks was the granddaughter of Vachel’s schoolteacher neighbors.

[Note 3] On a return visit to Trinidad in 1891, young Vachel recorded in his notebook that he and his father left Springfield on Wednesday, July 22, at 10:00 p.m. and did not arrive in Trinidad until Friday, 1:15 p.m., July 24: more than 39 hours for a trip of approximately 800 miles. Curry reports that Lindsay’s high school teacher, Susan Wilcox, believed that young Lindsay “recorded the interesting events of the journey with such precision that his father was impressed by the observations of his son” (5).

[Note 4] Although the students wrote their essays in the spring, the awards were not given until Fair week, the following September. The Springfield newspapers report that, on September 11, 1891, at 1:30 p.m., the Honorable Alfred Orendorff gave silver-coin medals to each of the 175 winners at the Springfield Exposition and Sangamon County Fair. Unfortunately, none of the winners is named, so that we cannot be certain about the identity of “Princess Badrulbador.” In her memoir, Olive confuses both the titles and the years of her brother’s essays (Lindsay-Wakefield 85); Ruggles follows Olive’s account (45).

[Note 5] Masters also cites this passage (67). However, where Vachel writes: “Now all above I must understand and never expect to get away from,” Masters quotes: “Now all above I must never expect to understand and get away from.” There are other misquotations as well, such as Vachel’s “reverence for wholesome ruggedness,” and

Masters' "reverence for wholesale ruggedness." The worst example of Masters' misquoting is Vachel's "A mistaken tendency to see differences in the souls of men," and Masters' "A mistaken tendency to see indifference in the souls of men."

[Note 6] The report card is part of the Barrett Library at the University of Virginia. Masters notes Vachel's low grade in music and theorizes "that the technical theories of music baffled him [Vachel] to some extent. As a mature poet he confessed to understanding very little of the technique of rhythm" (41). The low grade, however, should be considered in the light of Stephen Graham's comment: "At school at Springfield the teacher used to say: 'All sing except Vachel,' the reason being that he has his own voice entirely" (192).

[Note 7] In one of her memoirs, Vachel's sister Joy writes: "He [Dr. Lindsay] would get up on a cold winter night, hitch his horse to his buggy and go rattling away to some place miles in the country to see some sick person whom he knew would never pay him a cent. Half of his work was never payed[^] for. Sometimes for a month at a time he wouldn't have a night's rest" (Lindsay-Blair).

[Note 8] William Curry summarizes a 1938 conversation with Susan Wilcox, Vachel's high school teacher, as follows: "For his service to the white portion of the population, Doctor Lindsay charged two dollars a call. His apparently eccentric characteristics placed him in disrepute with nearly all the other members of his profession; and his practice suffered among the paying patients, for they did not care to seek the services of a doctor who administered medical aid to the colored race. It was not unusual for a doctor to continue practices which were considered out of date to the average layman" (2).

[Note 9] On November 11, 1935, Paul Wakefield offered his appraisal of Dr. Lindsay to Masters: "Those who knew Doctor Lindsay intimately had a profound admiration for his mental ability and of his affection and generosity to his family. To his very last days he was a reader of good books. When his eyes got so bad he could not read himself, there was always a book on the library table that the family read to him in odd moments. For example, he read Scott for years, retained the details of the stories in his mind, saved his money and then went over [to] Scott's country, knowing intimately the history of every foot of the ground. Personally, I feel that much of Lindsey's[^] ability came from his father. Although a very diffident man, it was his duty to take the Communion talk in his turn at the Church. As soon as one talk had been given he began to prepare the next one, taking his theme carefully. He developed it, wrote it, and polished his writing time and again until he had all perfectly memorized. I have been in a position to judge such matters and I have never heard any series of such talks so well given, so accurately expressed and such perfect English. The fact is, they were classics and it is a great loss that they were not saved" (Virginia).

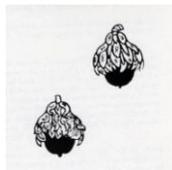
Vachel's high school teacher, Susan Wilcox, seems to have been in basic agreement. Curry summarizes a 1938 conversation with Wilcox as follows: "Although one biographer [Masters] has inferred that the father and son were incompatible, there is evidence to prove that this assumption is erroneous. No doubt there were times when the Doctor did misunderstand the tendencies of his son. But this is not unusual. A man who had hoped for a son who would follow the medical profession, and a man of the rugged individualism that was characteristic of Doctor Lindsay, would scarcely approve of a concentrated interest in the arts" (3).

[Note 10] Vachel wrote Harriet Moody (December 17, 1914): “They [the Sunnyside Literary Society] let her lecture them two years straight—once, which is a remarkable thing for old grey-headed friends to do. She used Moulton’s Literary Bible—the first year The Old Testament—the second year The New. By the time she was through with them she had filled them up with what I had before I was thirteen years old” (Chénetier 118). Richard G[reen] Moulton (1849-1924) was a professor, critic, and biblical scholar; he is credited with enhancing the study of the Bible as literature. While at the University of Chicago, Moulton edited *The Modern Readers’ Bible* (20 volumes, 1896-1906).

[Note 11] Compare Paul Wakefield’s appraisal of Kate Lindsay: “Of course, Mrs. Lindsay overshadowed Doctor Lindsey^ in Springfield. She was as aggressive as he was retiring. When I came to know her I admired her very much, but it was only in the later years that I came to have an understanding of the conflicting forces that she had to fight in herself. With an understanding of these I developed a very deep affection for her. Much of Vachel’s theatrical style came from his mother, the love of the spotlight, the hunger for appreciation which was deserved, an almost abnormal desire for sympathy which in Vachel’s later years almost dominated him” (November 11, 1935, Virginia).

[Note 12] In 1909, while stumping for the Anti-Saloon League, Vachel wrote to Nellie Vieira: “I am in my room in the hotel where I have been sleeping off my mornings^ speech and dreaming about my Grandmother [Frazee], and dreaming I could fly and could walk like I was on invisible roller skates, and I know not what. The last dream I was crying by my Grandmothers^ fire place^ behind my mothers^ chair for the days of long ago, when there was a housefull^ of happy grandchildren and aunts and Uncles^ every summer, and my four little sisters and all that. And there was grandma^ asleep in her room, and Mama reading by the fire-place^, and I hating her, and it made me cry—(in my sleep). Now I wake up it does not seem so sad, though I remember last time I was there—(alone with Grandma) I cried over every empty corn-crib and barn and weed choked fence-corner all by my lonesome. I could see Grandpa long dead, stomping around ordering his hands to drive the cattle here and there, and all that, and Granpa^ is dead years and years” (November 8, Fowler 263). Grandfather Frazee died June 14, 1896.

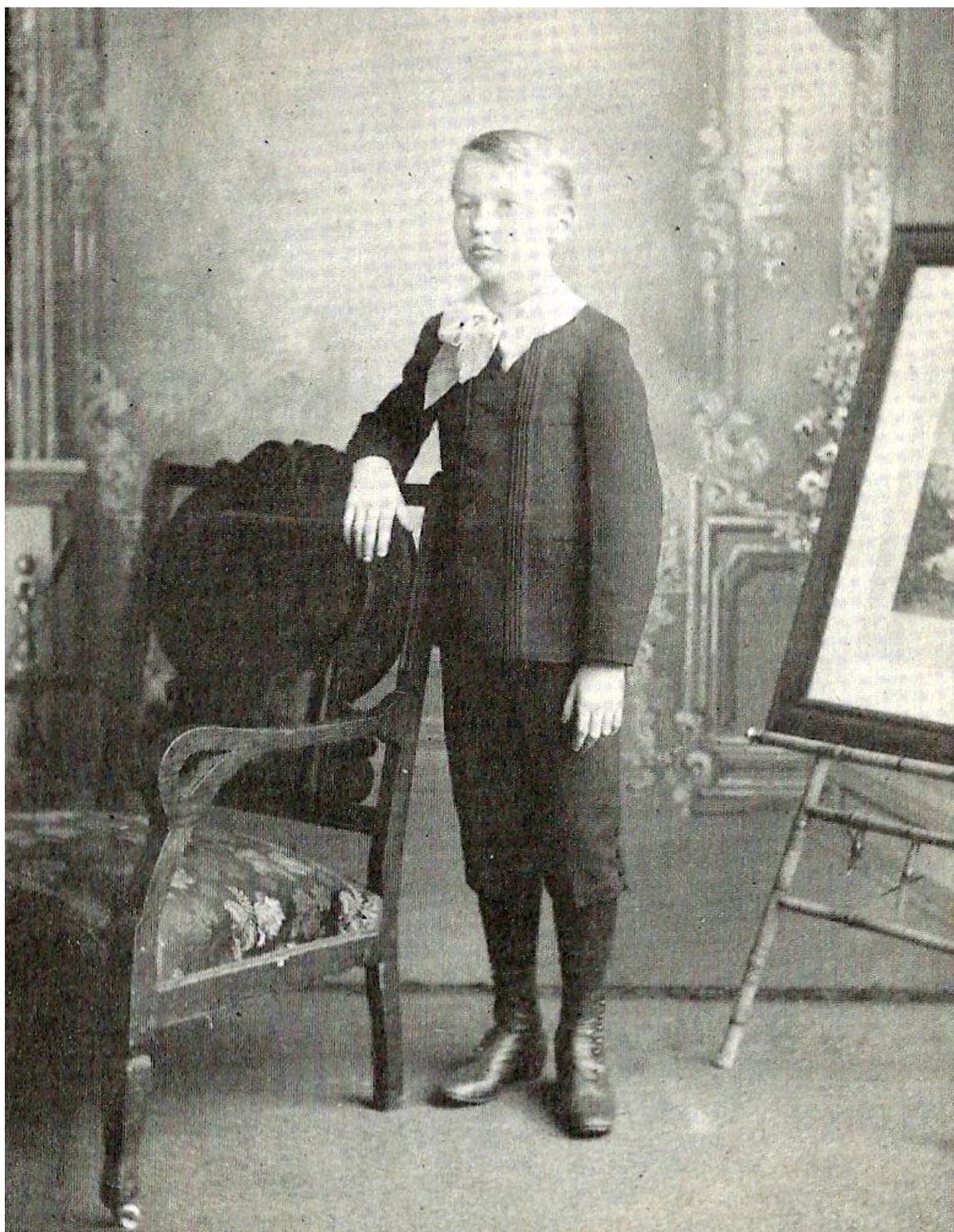
[Note 13] On January 12, 1939, Olive praised Trombly’s biography to William S. Curry: “This volume written while Vachel was still living, and with his knowledge and approval is the one which I can recommend to you as trustworthy. . . . Mr. Trombly really desired to present the facts, and took great care in writing at length to a host of Vachel’s old friends, fellow students, and members of the family to ask for facts. So far as I know many people who have written of Vachel have used their own imagination or some sort of indefinite rumor instead of asking the family or friends for facts” (79-80).



Photographs for Chapter Four



Olive Lindsay and Uncle Boy about 1884.
Photo from South, *Cousin Vachel*.



Uncle Boy about age 10 (1888). Photo from South, *Cousin Vachel*.

The Education of Aladdin

Nicholas Vachel Lindsay (1879-1931)

[First published in *Collier's: The National Weekly* 46 (March 18, 1911): 36-37. See Note 1 above.]

ALADDIN, a second-hand lamp dealer of Springfield, is my chum. We grew up in the same schools here. We were reminiscent yesterday.

“Do you remember,” I asked, “the third grade of the ward school, when the city superintendent came? He drew a map of all the streets between the school and the post-office, while we shouted the names of them. He told us in a simple way about civil-service reform, which was the Insurgency of that time.”

“I remember,” said Aladdin. “And, speaking of post-offices, I remember a girl next to me—I will call Saki—breaking my jack-knife and cutting her fingers trying to hack a slot in an empty tin marshmallow box. She was going to hang it by her desk to receive notes. You see, we used to write goo-goo remarks to each other about every Monday and Wednesday. The rest of the time we would make faces. She frankly welcomed epistles from any boy who sat near. She hung up the box, despite her wounds. There was a crimson smear on the encircling pink ribbon. The box was half full from all sources, the lady even putting in a few letters to herself, when the tin made such a clatter the teacher was compelled to take cognizance. She confiscated the mail. But the soul of Saki could not be confiscated. She is to-day chief dancer in a comic-opera troupe.

“Which reminds me,” continued Aladdin, “of St. Valentine’s Day, and a much more important person—Nourmahal we will call her. She seldom recited well, but was the teacher’s pet. She cried easily, and pouted. Yet, with her languid head on one side, her affected, sugary, drawling speech, her unsophisticated grace, she was somehow the queen bee of our little democratic hive. All had a pride in her. No one claimed her in especial. It would not please her to write notes. Once a year we all sent her valentines. Wherever the sound of her voice was heard there was a children’s dressed-up party, even when she recited the multiplication table. Once she brought a white mouse to school in her sleeve. She wanted to be awfully bold and spoiled, that day. Yet no one made a fuss. She was a still white mouse herself, carried in the sheltering sleeve of Allah. [Note 1]

“A few days before St. Valentine’s Day two of the boys dared me to kiss Nourmahal. I thoughtlessly agreed to do it, if they would catch her. She and her maids of honor, with arms entwined, were half a block in front. To my astonishment, the boys made for her.

“Now we ran past that group of girls every day. Why did they screech and scatter this time? When my minions reached the darling she was deserted and helpless. Feeling like a pirate, I coldly kissed her tearful chin. How did she know what was going to

happen, and get all those tears ready? She went home almost in convulsions in the arms of her guard, who had rallied, and were spitting at us like wildcats.

“Her brother kicked me the next day. The teacher took me out in the hall and hit me with a ruler. She was speechless with wrath, because, anticipating the worst, and deciding to be a real devil, I had left a note on her desk early in the day, telling her I would make love to her, too, if I only had the chance.

“Early St. Valentine’s morning Nourmahal’s desk was full to the lid, and not a comic among them. I saw a red-headed boy roof the pile with a lacy marvel, big as the desk lid. He sneaked away, while Nourmahal watched with lazy eyes from afar. That was his sufficient reward—to have those lazy eyes watch him, a moment, from afar. Nourmahal would not look at me, under any circumstances. I wished I had been good, so I could put in a valentine. But mark the ways of girl children. Nourmahal sent me a valentine by mail. It cost her only a penny, but was quite a penny’s worth. Her initials were inscribed in approved fashion, under the embossed picture of Cupid. One had to lift him up and almost break off his feet to find the writing.

“I felt it was a forgery until that night I sat in Nourmahal’s chair at a kissing party, to which we had both been invited. I thought, of course, she had not called for me. But I was wrong. She bent over and gave me the kiss of forgiveness, amid shrieks of applause from those very girls who had been crying, ‘Shame, shame!’ at me in school the day before. They took special pains to inform me Nourmahal had sent one valentine that year—a penny one.

“It was a penny one, indeed, for two days later the gentle Nourmahal slapped my face and stepped on my toes. We drifted apart after that.”

“Your favorite poet,” I said, is probably Thomas Moore. “Do you remember his confession:

*My only books,
Were woman’s looks,
And folly’s all they taught me?”*

[“The Time I’ve Lost in Wooing,” ll. 8-10]

“Not so,” said Aladdin. “Not so. It was two grades later that my soul was born, all because of a child woman. I will call her Princess Badroulboudour.” [Note 2]

“About a month after school started, with six others she walked into the school room with a full set of clean new books under her arms. These children she led had all skipped a grade with her because of extra brilliancy. Skipping was much less common in those days. As she appeared then, so she remained always. Her complexion was alabaster, her cheeks a Venus-rose, her smile rose and ivory. How my ribs turned to ice, as she was assigned a seat immediately behind me! Then, as always, I spent half an hour summoning courage to look around. I doubt if she ever realized that I was in the world, she was so busy about her affairs. Boys scarcely spoke to her: and as to mingling her name with the teasing, flirting school gossip, or sending her an avalanche of valentines, they would have thought it preposterous. Yet I took no heed of this plain social fact and wrote notes frantically to another girl, and printed that lady’s initials all through my books so they would not tease me about the real divinity.

“She always had her lessons, an—as long as she was with us—so did I. When it came to spelling matches, we beat the room, and then with Spartan rigidity I spelled her down. Two prizes were offered for essays—one for the girls, one for the boys. We won those prizes. Often our marks were so much alike we both ranked first. We were prigs in extremis.

“Yet—what is *scholarship*? It is to study in the spirit in which I studied then. What is *education*? It is to lead the soul to aspire to simple goodness, as I aspired at that time.

“Arithmetic became a pleasure, grammar a beloved science. And now I remember a poem concerning Little Bell we used to parse and conjugate. Little Bell sat down beneath the rocks, tossed aside her gleaming golden locks and begged the musical blackbird to sing his sweetest song:

*Low and soft, oh, very low and soft,
Crooned the blackbird in the orchard croft.*

[Thomas Westwood, “Little Bell,” ll. 65-66]

The song of that humble bird, extolling the virgin dignity of a perfect girl-woman, filled my heart as completely as spring water fills a cup.

“She never trifled or sniffed or made faces. She was, in fact, a rosy, radiant New England Brahman, unconsciously out of place in raw Illinois. She had been reading ‘St. Nicholas’ and Miss Alcott’s books while we had been sending valentines and going to kissing parties, and disobeying our teachers, and chewing gum and playing baseball, and breaking the glass in street lamps, and doing all other sinful things.

“The year following, when we returned to school, Badroulboudour and I were assigned seats next each other as of old. How did that new teacher read my soul? Badroulboudour stayed just long enough for me to win another prize, then was taken out, and put under private tutors.

“I relapsed immediately into an ordinary citizen; learned again to swear a bit, and quit writing love notes to lady number two. Henceforth my ward-school life was so commonplace I remember nothing in especial except graduation two years later. Badroulboudour attended, for the girls were her chums yet. So terrible was the lightening of her white forehead that I could only bow speechless and trembling. It was the last time I ever saw her.

“Is she dead?” I asked Aladdin, reverently.

“Why, no. She is supposed to be somewhere back in Massachusetts, but I am not going to look her up. She was never actually alive. She was only a child’s vision of perfect childhood. You do not need to call her Badroulboudour. You can call her Santa Claus’s daughter. . . . Her forehead and her throat were like new snow.”

Nicholas Vachel Lindsay

Springfield, Ill.

Notes

[Note 1] Nourmahal is likely named after the leading figure in Michael J[oseph] Quin (1796-1843), *Nourmahal: An Oriental Romance* (1838), three volumes, available online at Google Books. The “Advertisement” for volume one reads: “The reader is to suppose that the following romance is related by a story-teller of Cashmere. Itinerant reciters of prose and poetical fictions are still, as is well known to travellers, as common in the East as they were in the days of Homer.” Nourmahal is also (1) the empress in John Dryden’s last rhymed play, *Aureng-Zebe: A Tragedy* (1676), and (2) the wife of emperor Selim in Thomas Moore’s “The Light of the Haram,” one of the tales in *Lalla Rookh* (1817).

[Note 2] In *One Thousand and One Nights* or, more popularly, *The Arabian Nights’ Entertainment*, one of Vachel’s favorite books, Badrulbador or Badroulboudour is the wife of Aladdin.