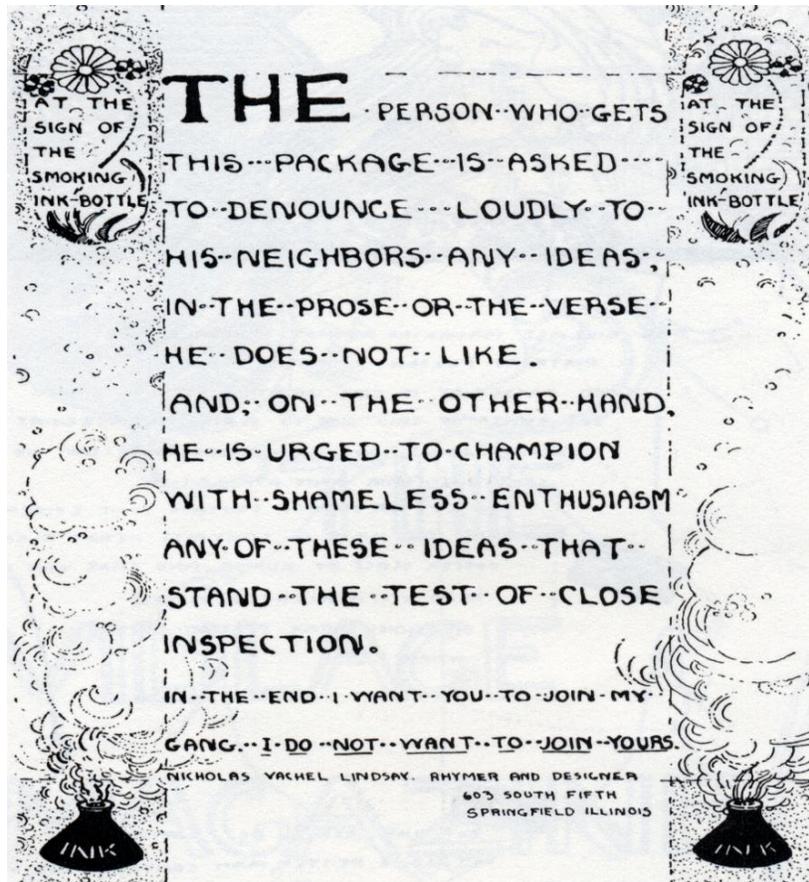


# Uncle Boy

## A Biography of Nicholas Vachel Lindsay: Poet

### Chapter Three

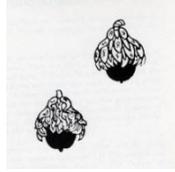


[Vachel's insert introducing his self-published *Village Magazine* (1910)]

by

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[This ongoing biography may be read online at [www.VachelLindsayHome.org](http://www.VachelLindsayHome.org)  
Choose "Biography" and then "Uncle Boy: A Biography of Nicholas Vachel Lindsay."  
The biography and the website are sponsored by the Vachel Lindsay Association.]



### 3. INFANCY AND CHILDHOOD [c. 1879-1888]

“A very seldom child.”

1

Dr. Lindsay’s “towering hopes” soon turned to towering fears, as in a matter of months the life of his “successor” proved to be in extreme danger. “Vachel grew much as other babies for about four months,” Catharine Lindsay recalls in her 1916 memoir, “then became critically ill, and from March until October [1880] his life was often despaired of. For many weeks he was a breathing skeleton carried on a pillow by his mother.” One of Catharine’s personal letters, however, indicates that her son’s illness was intermittent, not continuous. In late June and early July, she and her two children were visiting the Frazee family farm in Indiana. From here, on July 5, 1880, Kate wrote to her husband: “Children both seem well this morning. Vachel only waked once to take his milk. I have entirely weaned him, and have no milk at all. I felt sorry to do it, but he seems the better for it: is good, and eats heartily.” In a postscript, Kate asked that the family’s hired domestic “have the best fresh milk from our cow for Vachel Wednesday morning [the day she planned to be home]. One pint is hardly enough for him” (Blair).

Kate’s letter supports published accounts that she and her husband attributed their son’s early illness to “‘milk poisoning,’ ascribed to the fact that his mother continued to nurse him before she realized she had become pregnant again” (Ruggles 26). Isabel, the family’s third child, was born on March 10, 1881, so that Dr. Lindsay’s diagnosis of “milk poisoning” explains his son’s illness in June 1880, when infant Lindsay was seven months old and his mother was several weeks pregnant. Kate herself, though, places the onset of the illness to the time her son was “four months” old (see above), and that makes Dr. Lindsay’s diagnosis suspect, unless Kate was pregnant and suffered a miscarriage in the spring of 1880, a supposition for which there is no evidence. Three daughters did follow Isabel: Esther (October 4, 1883), Eudora (October 10, 1885), and Joy (August 29, 1889). By the time of Joy’s birth, however, the family had lost Isabel, Esther, and Eudora—and had almost lost Olive and Vachel as well.

Kate offers little additional detail about her son’s frightening first summer, but it is clear from her memoir that Vachel suffered a relapse after the family returned from Indiana: “The season was very dry and intensely hot. When the cool rains came in the fall, he recovered, and, by the time he was eighteen months old, he could walk.” Edgar Lee Masters observes that Vachel’s mother “in after years did not let him forget [her] tender ministrations” (27), and another of Kate’s letters provides evidence in support of Masters’ claim. Writing to her son while he was in his last year at Hiram College, she attempted to explain why she felt compelled to give advice: “I never want the time to come when I can not associate you in my mind with the baby I carried on a pillow and watched as his life flickered for months—I must either write to you whatever I feel and

think—without restraint or fear of criticism,—or not write at all” (February 17, 1900, Virginia).

For most of their lives together, Kate expressed worry over her son’s health, so that her letters normally include solicitous inquiries concerning diet and rest. She could not forget the baby on the pillow; and, in fact, she feared that all of her children had inherited physical weaknesses from their mother. Only a few weeks before the above correspondence, for example, Kate confided to her “Precious Boy” that she had been “alarmed” about his physical well-being throughout the previous summer (1899). She feared that he was suffering from acute “nervous exhaustion”: “You have inherited some excellent qualities from your father and that tendency to nervous exhaustion from your mother. I am deeply grieved that I have given such a burden to my children; and yet, that temperament seems to be inseparably united with the especial talent out of which you hope to make your future. You must, however, recognize the fact that you must at all times guard against that dazed condition. It troubles me often, but only when I am overdone” (December 25, 1899, Virginia). Kate’s anxieties, as expressed here and elsewhere, were not welcomed by her son. Indeed, her concern likely elicited the “criticism” that she alludes to in the February 17, 1900 letter cited above. [Note 1]

Parental concern over their son’s “physical frailty,” in Kate’s words, led them to believe that, when he came of age, he was not strong enough to attend either the public or the private schools. Instead, Kate notes in her memoir: “His mother taught him to read in Grimm’s Fairy Tales. After he knew a few words he became so interested in the stories that he soon taught himself. He was very fond of everything that fed the imagination, but never of war stories.” Vachel’s early love for imaginative reading was matched by his love for art. “He drew many little sketches as soon as he could hold a pencil, usually illustrating some idea,” Kate recalls, “but I did not preserve them.” Vachel’s aunt, Frances Hamilton, whom he saw every summer during his boyhood years, also comments on her nephew’s art: “At an early age he showed talent for art. His childish drawings were full of action. So remarkable was this talent, it was generally conceded by the family that art should be his life’s calling. He was a very unusual child and showed marked intellectual traits at an early age” (451).

Vachel himself contends that his mother “destined” him, “from the beginning, to be an artist” (*Poetry* 946). Contrary to his aunt’s perception, though, he also knew, along with the rest of the family, that his father intended him to be his “successor.” In his retrospective moods, Vachel hinted that his parents’ contrasting intentions had caused him a stressful youth. If so, there was little stress at first, as both parents concurred that, when his health improved, their frail son should attend a private school rather than be exposed to the rough and tumble environment of the public or ward school. Their choice was the Bettie Stuart Institute, a so-called finishing school that was conveniently located at the corner of Springfield’s Fourth and Jackson streets, two short blocks from the family home. The time was likely September 1885, a year or so before the following advertisement for the Institute appeared in the 1886-87 Springfield *City Directory*:

This School for Young Ladies and Children was founded September 8, 1868. It has graduated eighty-eight young ladies. . . .

Besides a full course, Classical and English, German is given, free of charge, to regular pupils. Vocal and Instrumental Music, Drawing, Painting, in oil and water

colors and on china, are thoroughly taught. Elocution and Reading receive special attention.

Many years later, Vachel describes the Bettie Stuart, to use local terminology, as “a breathlessly exclusive private school” (*Poetry* 948); and he maintains that he was sent there to be “taught drawing.” Mrs. M. McKee Homes served as the Institute principal, but Vachel’s teacher in the “preparatory class” was Miss Mary J. Remann, the principal of the “Primary Department.” Vachel himself, however, refers only to his art teacher, “Miss [Mary E.] Sampson,” whose text was *The Aurora Drawing Book*: “At Miss Sampson’s drawing class I filled this book with pictures of peacock feathers, and of clover red and white, and all the strange grasses I could gather in the vacant lots of South Sixth Street. I am fond of clover and wild grass and peacock feathers to this day, and no man shall shame me out of it” (*Poetry* 948). The accuracy of Vachel’s pronouncement is indisputable: his copy of *Aurora*, dated “March 17, 1886,” and filled with the sketches alluded to here, may still be seen in the Clifton Waller Barrett Library at the University of Virginia.

After one year at the Bettie Stuart, Vachel was transferred to “Brooks Seminary,” which is advertised in the Springfield *Directory* (1886-87) as “a select school” located at 617 South Fifth Street. The “Seminary” was administered by Andrew M. Brooks, and classes were held in the home of his parents, the Reverend Mr. John F. and Elizabeth M. Brooks, just a few feet away from the Lindsay home at 603 South Fifth. Miss Lou Moody, according to Catharine Lindsay, was one of her son’s teachers, although Vachel himself seems to have been fonder of his peers than he was of his teachers. In 1907, for example, when he was living in New York, he sought to preserve at least one memory from Brooks in an unpublished work entitled, “An Essay on the Love Affairs of Children.” For purposes of biography, the memory is significant, as it offers evidence of Vachel’s youthful courage, his attraction to pretty girls, his irrepressible high spirits, and his truthfulness and candor. It is also his own account of an incident that would become a Lindsay family legend:

. . . there had been flirtations from my sixth year. Let us first dispose of them. I sat down by a lady on the bank of a terrace—this was in a private school, threw my arms around her and kissed her well. It was not stupid. I had a full sense of my boldness. It took reckless courage. It was not her beauty. But I was fully aware I was embracing a grand lady. The students in rows on either side applauded, and our names were linked together as long as I was in that school . . . we got into the local paper. The Lady was heard to say that she would kick my nose off if I tried it again. I was rumored to have replied that the nose would have to go. The rumor was false, manufactured by an over admiring relative. She always maintained that chilly exterior, and I doubt if I would know her face on the street now. (Virginia)

In their memoirs, both Kate and daughter Joy tell of the kiss, the threat, and the witty response. Both, however, attribute the repartee to Vachel himself, not to “an over admiring relative”; and both leave little doubt that the entire incident reinforced the family’s belief that their son and brother was a mental prodigy. [Note 2]

Vachel’s teachers and other acquaintances generally confirmed the family’s opinion. Kate relates that “Old Mrs. Brooks came in one evening and said ‘Mrs. Lindsay,

I have a great desire to live twenty years more: I long to know what that little boy of yours will be: he asks so many and such strange questions. Where does he get such ideas?" Frances Hamilton ("Aunt Fannie") contends that, when some of her nephew's first drawings were shown to the Reverend Dr. Thomas D. Logan, the pastor of Springfield's First Presbyterian Church (1888-1913), the minister responded: "That boy has the most wonderful imagination of any person I have ever known and will, some day, make his mark in the world" (451). And on one occasion, Fannie herself wrote to her nephew: "Your letter was ever so nice. I was surprised to get it. I know lots of little folks older than you that can not write at all" (January 11, 1887, Virginia). The correspondence that Fannie refers to is lost, but Vachel's response to her letter survives and includes the prospective physician's first medical diagnosis:

Your letter came safe to me. I wrote to Lindsay South a few days ago. we were all sick about a week ago. the worms. Olive Isabel and Esther I think. It's very pretty weather I can make my kite go as nice as can be. Isabel's Birthday was on the 10th of March and she got a hansom^ doll in a swing. Your bad boy Vachel. (March 23, 1887) [Note 3]

Whether he was bad or good, the Lindsays and the Frazees seemed to agree that the son of Vachel Thomas and Esther Catharine manifested unusual maturity. References to his precociousness are a consistent feature of the family's correspondence, and additional examples may be seen in the letters from Grandfather and Grandmother Frazee cited in Masters' biography (47-48). Kate herself remarks that, at age seven, when her son witnessed one of her church dramas, "his questions seemed to be unlimited. He seemed to wake up to a consciousness of all history and all the world." She admits that, from her own and her husband's perspective, their son's "peculiar mind did not attract . . . especial attention," because they had "no other boy to compare him with." Her brother John, however, expressed his estimation succinctly and with conviction: "A very seldom child" (Catharine Lindsay).

## 2

In intellectual ability and in behavior, then, young Vachel was often referred to as the proverbial little man. "In appearance," however, according to Kate Lindsay, "he resembled a girl. His skin was pearl white, and he had long yellow curls," the curls, of course, that Grandfather Lindsay equated with effeminacy. To make matters worse for Grandpa, Kate claims that her son's "playmates were usually girls, friends of his older sister, Olive." Aunt Fannie's description of her nephew also hints at delicacy: "As he grew older he became stronger but at no time in life has he been robust. Almost a tow-head when a child, his hair grew continually darker until now it is almost auburn. He has bright hazel eyes and very fair, clear skin." Fannie adds that Vachel was marked by one "noticeable characteristic": he boasted "one fair eyelash, the other dark" (Hamilton 451). She implies but does not state that the contrasting lashes represent her nephew's heritage as a child of the dark-haired Lindsays and the fair-haired Frazees.

Vachel himself describes how, at age "six or seven," with long, blond curls, he acted the tender role of Cupid in one of his mother's church plays. Kate's drama was entitled "Olympus"; and it had been "written and staged," her son observes, "in a Kentucky college [Hocker] where she had taught painting and English literature" (*Poetry*

946). The haircut prompted by Grandfather Nicholas preceded the Springfield debut of “Olympus,” but time passed and the curls returned. For Kate’s histrionic purposes, the hair was ideal: “She put it up in papers for all one night,” Vachel relates, “and when she took out the papers, I did not know myself. She took off most of my clothes. She put a pink slip on me, and sewed dove’s wings to the back of it. I was given silver pasteboard arrows, and a silver pasteboard bow, and a silver quiver on my shoulder, under the wings.” He climbed into the church pulpit with Venus, his Sunday school teacher, who recited from the “Song of Songs”: “I said nothing,” Vachel recalls, “but held tight to one hand of Venus. In her other hand she carried a beautiful golden apple” (*Poetry* 947). The Lindsay son, on this occasion anyway, was what biographer Masters seemingly delights in calling him (to sister Olive’s disgust): his mother’s “curled darling” (21). [Note 4]

Vachel’s love for art, along with his blond curls and fair skin, led family members other than Grandfather Nicholas to fear effeminacy. Vachel himself comments: “All the elegant young ladies in our family had always painted pictures. Some few could draw well. But in general their kind of craftsmanship has been characteristic of the accomplished daughters of pioneer families since the Daughters of Noah embroidered superfluous bibs for the elephants in the ark” (*Poetry* 948). Olive, as one of the family’s “elegant young ladies,” asserts that her father purchased the *Art Treasures of America* and inscribed them: “‘Bought by Dr. Vachel T. Lindsay for his daughters, Olive C. and Isabel Frazee Lindsay.’ And Vachel who liked pictures, wasn’t in it at all! Wasn’t that queer, now? Of course, though, it was because girls were the ones who should paint pictures. Our mother was always at it—but boys grew up to be doctors like their fathers and Vachel was going to be a doctor” (Lindsay-Wakefield 89-90).

Accordingly, Vachel’s gift was, in his sister’s words, “a skeleton to play with—one which his father had had ever since his own student days in Vienna. All the bones were loose in a big wooden box. ‘Learn to put them together,’ our father said, ‘like the new skeleton in the big cabinet.’” With meaning and good humor, Olive then tattles on her brother: “He never succeeded in putting that skeleton together, but he was interested in the varied shapes of the bones, and drew pictures of them” (84).

In point of fact, Vachel’s love of drawing and his idiosyncratic imagination provide the basis for several of his sister’s childhood memories, including the time when “Mrs. Coleman,” their Sunday school teacher, asked her students to draw pictures of the new family church. “I remember just how they looked,” Olive writes: “Mine was straight and square and most evenly drawn, every corner exactly right. Vachel’s was large and sprawling—and rambling all over the big paper, and besides the church he put in people, and he added the walk in front of the church—and another long, path-like walk besides.” When their mother asked for an explanation, Vachel responded: “‘Why, Mama, don’t you see? . . . Right here on the church steps, Papa is saying goodbye to Brother Coleman while the janitor locks the church door. This is Mrs. Coleman in the carriage waiting for Mr. Coleman—and here on the governor’s walk half way home is you, Mama. You just got tired out waiting for Papa to finish talking so you went on home to see if dinner was ready.’” Of all the pictures in the class, Olive remarks, “it was Vachel’s that had to be passed around and showed to all the grownups^ . . .” (93-94).

In her memoir, Kate claims that her son and his sister differed in their reading tastes as well as in their art: “He had a deep dislike for the books that Olive liked best,—

the pretty ‘goodie’ stories of the Sunday School library,—Miss Alcott’s books, and all that class. I can’t definitely say how young he was when he used to lie on his stomach on the floor and pore over a large volume of Dante’s *Inferno* and another of *Paradise Lost*. Later, Edgar Allen<sup>^</sup> Poe was his favorite author.” Lindsay himself states: “In my more helpless infancy when I was seven years old, I had a public library card, but the dour old librarian would not let me take out anything but Jacob Abbott’s Rollo books. I read them all. Also one Lucy book, which I found at home, blistered with my mother’s infant tears, which she had read in her day.” Vachel’s comments were made in 1929, when he was putting together a preface for his new book of poems, *Every Soul Is a Circus*, a book that he asks “precocious children of any age” to read as an answer to all sentimental works. He had not forgotten the “dour old librarian” and the early disappointment: “here is my wreath for the mossy, ivy-clad tomb of little Rollo. . . . Now in the fiftieth year of my age comes my revolt. I come roaring forth with a book which is the opposite of little Rollo and little Lucy” (*Poetry* 981).

Actually, when he was seven, Vachel hardly needed a library card; the family home was filled with books, sentimental and otherwise. Olive, for example, includes a chapter in her memoir in which she points out that her childhood days were dominated by “Mud and Books.” The house on South Fifth, she remembers, was “on a corner of a muddy street in the muddy town of Springfield, Illinois . . . . Outside, to the north, the large, rambling grounds of the governor’s mansion; directly in front, the plain, wooden-spired Congregational Church; and on the remaining corner, a dilapidated Negro tenement house and vacant lots with old rubbish heaps and mud, mud everywhere. To the south of us, behind a high board fence, was another weedgrown<sup>^</sup> space, sufficiently wide for two standard city lots, and then—the plain, one-story, colonial cottage which was the private school kept by our elderly neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Brooks.” Behind the family home, to the west, was Dr. Lindsay’s great barn, in which he kept his two buggies and his two horses: “old” Charlie and “skittish” Tom. (Lindsay-Wakefield 89, 95)

“Outside all was mud. Inside all was books—books and pictures,” Olive declares (94). Today, the substantial Lindsay family library at the University of Virginia has been catalogued and is available for all to see. In her memoir, though, Olive lists only the books that she can recall, and she obviously follows the random order in which they occur to her: Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning, Shelley, Burns, Keats, Byron, Tennyson, Milton, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Ruskin, the latter next to “Lubke’s two volume ‘History of Art.’” The only American poet at first was Edgar Allan Poe, in a “little blue volume” (*Poetry* 945). In addition, there were Emerson’s essays, Lamb, Carlyle, Prescott, and Rawlinson’s *History of Ancient Egypt* (1882): “two thick volumes,” Olive’s brother affirms, “of which I knew every picture by heart, and the substance of every line, when I was very young indeed” (*Poetry* 945). The two volumes are in the Virginia collection and are inscribed: “Vachel Lindsay, From his father, January 1894.”

Olive’s inventory goes on to refer to “a long row of leather-bound books my mother said were Latin—the names were Livy, Sallust, Horace, Cicero, Caesar, and Virgil—the ones I remember, but I couldn’t read the names on that row of guidebooks which came next; ‘Just Europe,’ we said to each other, and Vachel and I were tired of hearing about Europe and art galleries and Scottish lakes and castles and towers.” Alongside the guide books stood “Chambers’ ‘Encyclopedia’ [and] Lamb’s ‘Tales from

Shakespeare' which Vachel and I read a bit later, being admonished not to neglect the real tales in the big leather-bound Shakespeare next to our book . . . . On the lowest shelf in the bookcase were our magazines, *Babyland* and *Our Little Men and Women*, and our very own books. Of these Grimm's 'Fairy Tales' we both loved best of all. It was really Vachel's, and Mama taught him to read from it first instead of from the primers and first and second readers as she had taught me" (90). Finally, the shelf holding the children's "very own books" also boasted *Swiss Family Robinson*, the *Arabian Nights*, and a four-volume set of Hans Christian Andersen that Dr. Lindsay had given to his daughters. [Note 5]

Olive then enumerates the books that her mother chose to read aloud: Dickens' *A Child's History of England*, *The Story of the Bible*, and Charlotte Mary Yonge's *Young Folk's History of Greece* and *Young Folk's History of Rome*. In addition, there was "a row of Walter Scott that Papa read aloud to Mama at night after supper, while she sat and darned, and Vachel and I listened as long as we could stay, to hear about *Ivanhoe* and *Waverly* and other brave heroes" (90). Dr. Lindsay also read *Uncle Remus* to his children, in a "musical voice" that his son later claimed as part of his creative heritage: "he could sing every scrap of song therein and revise every story by what some old slave had told him. He used to sing the littler children to sleep with negro melodies which he loved, and which negroes used to sing to him, when they rocked him to sleep in his infancy" (*Poetry* 952). The "real origin" of "The Congo," Vachel confided to O.H. Myers of the Festival Theatre (Cambridge, England), "was in being sung to sleep, when I was a baby hardly able to talk by my father with songs that had been sung to him by the old mamies^ on the old plantation in the South" (December 31, 1926, Virginia).

On Sunday afternoons, since he was an elder, Dr. Lindsay attended church board meetings, while Kate sat with her children "on the front porch, with a small red box at her side, a most important box, that held a lot of pieces of striped peppermint and lemon stick candy and some peanuts for quiet children" (Lindsay-Wakefield 91). Kate read aloud from Yonge's histories (likely *The Daisy Chain: A Book of Golden Deeds* and *Cameos from English History*) and spoke of the Druids and Odin, Thor, and the other Norse gods. In later years, Longfellow, Whittier, and Lowell were added to the family library; and Vachel and his sister took turns reading aloud from Lew[is] Wallace's *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880), William Ware's *Zenobia, Or, The Fall of Palmyra* (1837), Sir Henry Morton Stanley's *In Darkest Africa* (1890), and the Southern novels of George Washington Cable. "We heard Papa and Mama talking of reading Tolstoi 'after the children went to bed,'" Olive recalls, "and discussing Whitman and the Pre-Raphaelites and people we didn't care about" (91). Vachel himself confirms that his mother "took an especial pleasure in those poets who dealt also in art, and filled me full of the Brownings and Pre-Raphaelites." In his boyhood home, he maintains, "Literature was taken for granted" (*Poetry* 949).

Painting and drawing were also taken for granted, and the Lindsay children heard time and again how their parents, in their son's words, "had done their courting in the art galleries of Dresden, Saxony, and Florence, Italy, and in the gondolas of Venice . . . . So all the stories of this trip were a thousand times retold and re-measured in my infancy. And my father and mother returned throughout their lives to Europe and came back with new improvised unwritten poems about the architecture and the pictures, reappraising the

favorites of their youth . . . it was natural that my infancy should be crowded with oracles about the nations, and the Italian painters, and when I was told I was to be an artist, that was final” (*Poetry* 948-949). Olive concurs. Although she emphasizes that the “dominant note” in her girlhood home was books—“books everywhere, shelves and shelves of books, bookcases and bookcases of books”—she adds that there were also “reproductions and copies of the old masters, photographs of Renaissance sculpture and painting, above the fireplace an alabaster plaque of the head of Michelangelo—with stones from the Forum and the colosseum^, and a lump of lava from Pompeii, barnacles from some old ship, white branching coral;—and on the two ends of the mantel, the small miniatures on porcelain made in Florence which Papa and Mama gave to each other when they became engaged. It was a fascinating and puzzling parlor to small folks who just couldn’t see why grownups^ liked pictures of old white statues, and photographs of dead painters” (89).

Vachel and his sister are in agreement, then, on the large quantity of books and pictures in their young lives. They did not agree, though, as Kate points out, on what books to read; and Olive herself indicates that they did not agree on how to read a book:

. . . after a long time, we began to outgrow the books, to overthrow their power, to think in words and patterns of our own, not in the patterns of the books. But first the books conquered us as mud conquered our city. It was a long, long space of time, a long road from the days of the first beginning of the conquest to the days of the latter cycle, when we were free and truly ourselves.

Always it was Vachel who led in this conquest for freedom from book tyranny. I accepted it. What was in a book, a book of the standard which the world called classic, must be true, was written for our acceptance, and I did accept it. But Vachel questioned, and wondered why, no matter what the book. And he asked me why too, but he himself gave me the answer. For me, the book was sufficient; I was willing to receive it. So through all the years, we two talked over the books we read, I receiving them at face value, Vachel puzzling me by his questions and his own thoughts at variance with those he read.

Olive then alleges that her brother’s response to books echoed his response to parental authority. In her words: “I accepted what our father and mother planned as a matter of course; Vachel wanted to think of why they didn’t plan a different way.” Olive’s metaphor, as we see above, focuses on Springfield’s notorious mud. One day, she explains, “Men came with big wagonsful^ of chopped cedar, nice, round, sweet-smelling, circular blocks, which they fitted together and pounded down, and then filled in with sand and gravel spread through all the cracks; and the mud was conquered. We had paved streets. Springfield became a city instead of a muddy town.” [Note 6] Much as the men conquered the mud, Olive suggests, her brother conquered both “the tyranny of books” and the tyranny of parental authority. And, in several important ways, he did, but with little success until he reached college age. Until then, Vachel seems to have been as dutiful to his strong-willed parents as his older sister was. Of course, his obedience was encouraged, as Olive reminds us, by their mother’s “little pony whip she got to whip Vachel when he was a naughty boy” (Lindsay-Wakefield 94-95).

Vachel's battle with books was not as challenging as his battle with parental authority: his parents, as we have seen, had relatively elaborate expectations for their son. Dr. Lindsay thought of him as his successor; Kate considered him an artist-to-be. It is doubtful, though, that either parent realized their plans could cause conflict. One can be a practicing professional, after all, and also a creative artist, or at the very least an avocational student of the arts. Kate herself ran a household of five children and still found time to paint; Dr. Lindsay loved to read and discuss the classics. Both, moreover, were active in their church and in their community, although Kate's efforts surpassed those of her beleaguered husband. To set Vachel's parents' expectations in perspective, then, we may look ahead to a letter that Kate wrote to her disappointed son (who wanted to study art) just after he registered for his first year in the medical curriculum at Hiram College:

Cultivate your abilities in the line of writing and speaking as much as you can. If you develop yourself all that you can, sometime you may be able to accomplish something in this line, at odd times, for recreation—the best work has been done in that way sometimes—writing under pressure for money is often poorly done—never the best. If we can ever afford it, we'll give you an opportunity to learn the art of illustrating—but—it does not seem to me these things should be your aim as a profession. I think about your future a great deal. Every step is important as leading to a destiny, and I am very anxious that my only son shall make the most possible out of his life—it ought to be a fruitage of several earnest lives—a line of them—that have gone before him—such men of earnest purpose and high endeavor as your father and grandfathers ought to be honored in the results you develop. (October 11, 1897, Virginia)

Nevertheless, in later years, Vachel remained convinced that his parents' hopes for his future were in conflict and that, as we have noted, the conflict had caused him a stressful childhood. In despairing moments, he went so far as to claim that, in sending him to college to study medicine, his mother had betrayed him.

Less than four weeks after his mother's death (February 1, 1922), Vachel attempted to express his feelings in a retrospective letter addressed to his two surviving sisters, Olive and Joy. He was reading Elizabeth Browning's "A Musical Instrument," and he believed that the story of Pan and Syrinx captured the essence of the Lindsay family life, especially in regard to what he felt were the manipulative attitudes of their parents. The key lines of the poem are in the closing stanza:

Yet half a beast is the great god Pan,  
     To laugh as he sits by the river,  
 Making a poet out of a man:  
 The true gods sigh for the cost and pain,—  
 For the reed which grows nevermore again  
     As a reed with the reeds in the river.

Vachel's commentary is: "It has haunted me day and night. If there ever were children of destiny, blown like reeds, like the Pipes of Pan, that can never more be reeds, we are those children" (February 26, 1922, Blair). He was convinced, moreover, that, of the two parents, his mother was the more controlling. Her influence dominated his earliest years,

when he was most susceptible and most obedient. “I am practically the person she made of me when I was eight,” Vachel announced to A.J. Armstrong in December 1922 (94, also Chénétier 264). And Harriet Moody was advised: “It took me till my thirtieth year to get under her guard, and dodge or smash Mrs. Lindsay’s adroit finalities” (Chénétier 191).

Kate’s “adroit finalities” were based on her firm belief that she and her family had something very special to offer to the world, in part because of their Disciples upbringing and in part because of an uncommon family tradition. Vachel himself summarized his mother’s perspective in one of his letters to Sara Teasdale: “There has been in one branch of my people a peculiar tradition. My great Grandfather [Austen] used to have peculiar and very confidential interviews with my mother when she was only six years old and of course—later—as the only one of his grandchildren who showed symptoms of ‘Carrying on the light.’ He laid his hands on her head and blessed her and enjoined her—endowed her as it were with her office. She has been a passionate religious^ leader all her life—meaning nothing to those living next door—who do not live in that world” (December 18, 1913, Yale 13). At least on one occasion, Kate herself cautioned her son “not to bury your light,—but—do try to find the place where it will help others the most possible.” The letter is dated “August 26, 1918”; and, like so many other mothers in 1918, Kate feared that her son would become “a private soldier” in the great European war and lose his life, along with his chance to participate in what she called “the moulding^ of the future”:

My Father, Mother, Grandfather Austen, followed the same gleam,—Grandfather in thought, vision, but Father and Mother in practical, often very humble work. It is my great longing that each of my children take up the torch lighted by the prophets and Christ carried by Grandfather Austen and Grandmother Frazee, and run with it, from mountain top to mountain top, awaking the soldiers of the King of Kings to the great conflict.

Now, my precious, only boy, think and pray, and do not let any narrow Lindsay prejudices hold you back from your best possibilities,—nor—lead you into a place where your life is unnecessarily exposed to danger. (Virginia)

One day later, Kate wrote to her daughter Joy: “I remember my great-grandfather Brown, a poet; my Grand-father^ Austen, a philosopher; my own dear father and mother, and my old Grandmother Frazee, who each ‘followed the gleam’ as it appeared afar in their day.” She exhorted Joy to “study the laws of health, take the best care possible of yourself, your husband and your children, ‘follow the gleam,’ and may you be finally an example to all who know you, rich in years of usefulness, service, vision, and an example of one whose ‘light shineth more and more unto the perfect day’” (August 27, 1918, Blair). [Note 7]

“Follow the gleam” and “follow the call,” then, were Frazee and, finally, Lindsay family commonplaces—long before their son’s earliest days. Indeed, less than three months after the above letters, when Eleanor Dougherty wrote Vachel an especially spirited letter, he responded: “The girl there revealed is just such a person as my mother was when she was young—in high determination to be herself and follow her call” (November 12, 1918, Ward). In another mood, though, he could be disdainful on the subject:

Here's to Old Rushville and Connersville (Indiana)  
 Where Alexander Campbell's stern rod  
 Made the Frazees talk only to Austens  
 And the Austens talk only to God.

(Letter to John Weatherwax, March 21, 1928, Virginia)

"I am an utter heretic," Vachel blustered to Sara Teasdale, "but [my mother] began on me when I was six years old—with this tale of the Light, and of grandfather Austen. Till I was seventeen I was under the complete domination of her most powerful mind. Then for years I had to fight for myself and my personality—it was a bloody heart-breaking struggle—but having conquered that noble lady and won her loyalty—I am not afraid of anything in heaven or on Earth^ and can say 'boo' to—New York—for instance. . . . If what I say sounds noisy, remember it is my muffled great Grandfather—beating me till I talk" (December 18, 1913, Yale 13). And with pride of heritage, he scribbled into his 1923 date book: "I am a prophet and the son of a prophet" (March 4).

Several early poems illustrate how Vachel transformed his mother's exhortation to "follow the gleam" into one of his more important poetic images, namely, Aladdin's lamp. In "The Sorceress!" poem, for example, the inquiring narrator is told by the sorceress herself where he may find the lamp:

I asked her, "Is Aladdin's lamp  
 Hidden anywhere?  
 "Look into your heart," she said.  
 "Aladdin's lamp is there."  
 . . .  
 "Follow the thistledown," she said,  
 "Till doomsday, if you dare,  
 Over the hills and far away.  
 Aladdin's lamp is there." (*Poetry* 54, see also 60)

"Follow the gleam," Kate admonished her children: "run with it, from mountain top to mountain top." Meanwhile, according to Eleanor Ruggles, "Vachel, when grown, once placed a woman friend on a low stool, sat himself down on another and reenacted a scene of his childhood when his mother, seating him on such a stool and herself close by, told him: 'Vachel, there's a streak of genius in the Frazees, and YOU HAVE IT!' . . . 'From that time on,' acknowledged adult Lindsay, 'I was marked'" (Ruggles 35). The sorceress in Uncle Boy's early life, in every important respect, was his mother.

Sadly, Kate's married life was divided into two parts, with the spring of 1888 serving as her personal watershed. Prior to that tragic spring, she was, in her son's mind anyway, the epitome of art and joy and energy. She was mother to five children in less than nine years of marriage, she read to and taught and cared for those children, she painted pictures and wrote poetry, she was active in church and community affairs, and she was a devoted wife and homemaker. She was "a student of the arts," Vachel boasted to A.J. Armstrong (93, also Chénétier 263); and he described to Harriet Moody how, from his earliest years, his young-minded mother "filled" the family home "with

European Photographs, especially the standard European art stuff of the day, and all my childish years were filled with reminiscences of Europe” (Chénetier 119). In the autobiographical preface to *Collected Poems*, “Adventures While Singing These Songs” (written in 1922), Vachel elaborates on this perception: “In infancy I never heard of New England. I heard of Europe every day. History, tragic and awful, was a straight path in war and cartoon and politics and pioneering and preaching, and fighting the Methodists in debate, and University building and all similar activities along the Daniel Boone trail, from a Scotland we left millions of years ago” (*Poetry* 945). Indeed, in the “Adventures” essay, Vachel declared to Armstrong, “I have pictured our household when I was seven years old, especially my mother’s extraordinary interest in Art Galleries of Europe and Europe generally” (December 27, 1922, Armstrong 93, Chénetier 263).

Six months before his letter to Armstrong, Vachel recorded similar thoughts in his diary-date book (March 21-22, 1922), including the following: “I am much more charmed with old fashioned speculations on pre-natal influence than psycho-analysis<sup>^</sup>. And let me contribute to the pre-natal discussion by saying my father and mother did their courting in the art Galleries of Europe—especially the Dresden Gallery, but most anywhere in Europe the summer of —” (it was 1875, but he apparently could not remember the year). Vachel was writing just a few weeks after his mother’s death, in a state of shock, but still reliving his earliest days, when his mother was “a young girl,” that is, before his mother lost three children in less than three weeks’ time. In fact, when he first learned of Mama’s death, Vachel only recorded a few fragmentary reminiscences, reminiscences that in themselves speak of his emotional paralysis and his sense of loss: “Am on the way to my mother’s funeral”—and he was unable to continue the thought. He could only jot down vague memories of Mama’s youthful days:

The young girl on the edge of Vesuvius burning her shoes off, and torturing her lover.

The young girl who would not marry the richest farmer in two counties.

The young girl who refused to stay at home, though blind. The young girl who loved log cabins and barefoot boys.

The young girl so arrogant she offended her poor relation, my great aunt. The young girl who read half-through Shaw.

The bride and groom with two thousand photographs, glistening photographs of Europe, Michaelangelo to Corregio’s<sup>^</sup> softest. The girl still painting when I first knew her—who sent me to art school at six. That is in 1886 when she was 37. She was 31 years old when I was born. (1922 date book, February 5-7)

One month later, Vachel considered writing an article for the *Century* magazine “on ‘My Adventures as an Art Student,’ beginning with Miss Sampson and wax flowers.” The article, he added, would be “really a tribute to my mother” (date book, March 16). The article was not published in the *Century*, but Vachel’s notes did provide the basis for “Adventures While Singing These Songs,” the autobiographical preface in which a proud and grateful son recounts his childhood days and his mother’s joyful influence.

At the time he was recording his reminiscences in his 1922 date book, Vachel summarized his thoughts in a letter to his younger sister Joy, especially his memories of

his mother's artistic influence: "Springfield after all was simply the Springfield Mama made in her house, and within three or four blocks of her house. With that Springfield abolished, there is very little Springfield left. It is a city she made, unconsciously, much of it she made when I was a child, from her 31 to her 37 year, long before you ever knew her. Much of it is locked up or packed in the old art pictures and portfolios she brought back from Europe in 1876 and 7. The young woman who sent me to art school when I was 6, long before I went to public school, and had me taught to draw clover-blossoms and peacock feathers and had it pumped into me with every photograph from Europe that I was to be a great artist, that young lady is still present in the house for me" (February 26, 1922, Blair). It is obvious, then, that Vachel's spontaneous memories of his mother, especially in his time of grief, reverted to her "young girl" days. More than once, he expressed his dream: "Wisht I had a girl like my Ma when she was young. A real lady, a brilliant intellect, but raised on a farm, and a real American" (Chénetier 115). Sara Teasdale was praised for her beauty and potential compatibility but she was also informed: "There is one very very great objection to you. You are not a daughter of the soil. My mother has more culture than any woman I ever knew—and more talent—and essential civilization. Yet she is still a farmer's daughter. She has spoiled me in a way—for none of the Darling Saraphims have any of the Kansas Harvester<sup>^</sup> in them" (Carpenter 191).

Vachel especially enjoyed telling about his mother's courage when she put on her college plays in the austere environs of Springfield's First Christian Church. One of these plays, of course, was "Olympus," with Vachel starring as Cupid. The second presentation expressed Kate's politics and was called "The Colloquy of Nations":

I know my mother called her show "Colloquy." It takes an epic poetess to call a heathen show a "colloquy" and have the associated elders and deacons openly approve. But my mother was already flushed with victory. She had recently read a famous paper on the great Italian Madonnas. This had been before the Illinois Art Association assembled in annual conclave in the State House I have mentioned. She was flaming with many such great days in her youth, including many oratorical triumphs, which were, in their fashion, spoken epics, in frank imitation of her forensic and senatorial Kentucky and Virginia ancestors. It now becomes plain that I was pumped as full of ambition by this aggressive lady as my silly little hide could hold.

Nonetheless, he left no doubt as to his approval: "My mother was a riot in those days. How she did it in the midst of that rigor I do not know." And with the loyalty of a loving son, he speculated that, if people "would only live up to her 'Speeches' as she humbly called them, it would be a kinder, a more literary, a more sapient, a wittier, a more motherly and a far more resplendent world" (*Poetry* 946-947).

Kate estimates that her son was "about seven years old" when she "wrote and put on the local stage here for the benefit of the Missionary Fund 'The Colloquy of Nations.' It occupied an entire evening and created quite a sensation: was given three times. It was a highly symbolic representation of all the leading countries, and what they had accomplished. [Vachel] attended every rehearsal, and was simply carried away by the entire performance." The "Colloquy" depicted the nations in terms of their discrete racial and cultural qualities, and each nation was "impersonated," in Vachel's words, "by the best and handsomest actors in Springfield." Vachel also points out that his mother's plays

“were written in a similar style to [his own poem] Litany of Heroes, and I suppose that is where I found the idea.” He differed with his mother, though, in his memory of why and where her “Colloquy” was staged: “It was ostensibly to celebrate Washington’s Birthday. It was given once in the Church of the Disciples, once in the Y.M.C.A. Hall.” Still, he left no doubt as to his impression of his mother’s work: “My mother was epic poet enough to write the speeches for the nations” (*Poetry* 946-947).

Although Kate’s politics were not as meaningful for her son as her husband’s were, Vachel does list among his earliest memories “a series of recollections of the Blaine and Logan campaign, when I was about four years old. After much scrutiny of the colored cartoons in Puck, I attended, with my mother, a staunch Republican at the time, the speeches of James G. Blaine and Black Jack Logan, delivered from a platform erected temporarily in the Governor’s Yard. Through the great driveway of that yard I have seen the dazzling and earnest pageants of the Democratic and Republican parties pass.” (In Chicago, June 1884, the Republicans nominated James G. Blaine for president and John A. Logan for vice-president; Blaine lost the election to Dr. Lindsay’s choice, Democrat Grover Cleveland.) Years afterward, Vachel proclaimed that he was, “in spite of maternal thunders,” a Democrat, like his father. But he also acknowledged that, with his brave young mother, he shared a belief in the greatness of Republican Abraham Lincoln and a vision of “a far more resplendent world” (“What It Means to Be a Poet in America” 12).

## 5

Kate Lindsay’s high spirits and “young girl” joy passed out of her life abruptly and terribly in the spring of 1888. And, as fate would have it, one of her own early poems now serves as an unintentional but poignant preface to her tragic loss. The verses are entitled “October,” and they describe a buggy ride taken with two friends, Mrs. Charles Ridgely and Mrs. Paul Selby, on a fall afternoon in 1887:

One afternoon, it seems an age ago,  
 (And yet that year was numbered ’87)  
 When I was weary from, not of, the care  
 Of five young children, I went out to ride:  
 To see the autumn fields, and rest awhile.  
 I left the merry, laughing voices and sweet lips  
 That said, “Dood-bye, Mama, we’ll all be dood,”  
 And with eyes vacant from their weariness  
 Passed by unnoted the old “Mansion House,”  
 The plain, historic “Lincoln Residence”  
 The “Wabash Station,” and the suburb lines.

While gliding eastward on the “Clear-Lake Road”  
 My mind’s eye half-awakened, and I saw  
 October coming down o’er Sangamon.  
 She wrapped the fields in hazy robes of blue  
 All radiant with reflection from her face.

The topographical description of the landscape east of Springfield continues for many more lines, until, finally, a vision appears and the poem is brought to its conclusion:

And from a cloud of glory far above  
 The face of Lincoln, as a dream, appeared—  
 His eyes of truth still wore the old, sad look,  
 The marks of earth life making him himself,  
 But over it a benediction smiled.

October, after all the weary work  
 Of planting-time and harvest, brings a dream,  
 A prophecy of blessings yet to come.  
 She whispers of the spirit-life within  
 Which all these earthly harvests come to feed:  
 She hints of the hereafter, where the soul  
 Of all that has been reapt on earth will  
 Meet us glorified  
 To those who grieve the loss of earthly flowers  
 Or later fruitage she thus brings hope.  
 All ye who mourn, listen to her; be comforted.

The work is signed “Catharine F. Lindsay,” and a manuscript note written in Kate’s hand reads: “Not poetry, or literature, but a hasty sketch of real life” (Virginia).

The following spring, 1888, the five children who bade their mother “Dood-bye” fell ill, first with typhoid fever, diphtheria, and “milk poisoning,” then with deadly scarlet fever. On March 20, the family’s fourth child, Esther, not yet five years old, died; on April 3, the family lost baby Eudora (“Dodo”), who was two and a half. Finally, on April 7, a third child, Isabel, succumbed—less than a month after her seventh birthday. Cousin Eudora South reminds us that “Vachel and his sister Olive lived their childhood under the cloud of this tragedy. The two children,” she observes, “devoted playmates already, grew closer to each other in consequence. The cloud was scarcely lightened until the birth of the youngest daughter, Joy, whose name indicates what she meant to that household. She became the pet of the family, most of all the pet of her brother eleven years her senior” (*Cousin Vachel* 29). Years after the tragedy, Kate Lindsay told “one of her son’s friends”: “I thought I should go mad” (Ruggles 25). [Note 8]

In December 1922, Vachel contrasted his mother’s emotions before and after the tragedy for the benefit of A.J. Armstrong. In the early years, Kate’s son contended, there was an ambition for art, especially European art: “But my mother lost three children in three weeks thereafter, and was never the same. She moved from a student of the arts to a religious fanatic and thereafter till her death only people who held some church office were welcome to the house.” [Note 9] Vachel’s memory in the 1920s, however, was seldom precise; and, no matter what his age, he tended to exaggerate his mother’s emotions. Records show, for example, that Kate welcomed many of her son’s distinguished friends to her home: Jens Jensen, Gutzon Borglum, Lorado Taft, Sara Teasdale, Jessie Rittenhouse, Stephen Graham, and John Drinkwater, to name only a few. Throughout her life, she also maintained her interests in literature and art, in European and Chinese cultures, in equal rights for women, and in her church and missionary societies. Nonetheless, her son was convinced that the 1888 tragedy had a lasting deleterious effect on his mother; and, in fairness, she seems to have lost, and understandably to have lost, the spontaneous gaiety that Vachel identifies with her youth,

the gaiety he writes about with elation and gusto in “Adventures While Singing These Songs.”

In the privacy of his 1922 diary-date book, Vachel recorded his mother’s perceived metamorphosis cryptically, while he also tried to capture her strength of character: “I appeal from Caesar sober to Caesar drunk.” Still, with obvious pride, he added: “Her last drunk was to start [George Bernard Shaw’s] *Back to Methuselah* and to read the *Early History of the Church at Prayer Meeting*” (February 7: the entry was made on the day of his mother’s funeral). “After the death of her three little girls,” Eleanor Ruggles avers, Kate’s “one longing was, like the Israelites of old, to fast and weep. Instead, she threw herself with fanatical ardor into every church and public opening” (35). Ruggles, however, is in error here: Kate’s few extant letters reveal only too clearly the depth of sorrow that she shared with “the Israelites of old.” Years passed before the poet of “October,” having lost three of her own “earthly flowers,” could “be comforted.” On the other hand, she did indeed throw herself with something like “fanatical ardor” into a variety of church-related activities, but an account of these will be a part of the next chapter in her son’s life, the chapter that concerns his years in ward school.

Meanwhile, in the spring and summer of 1888 (and for several years thereafter), Saturdays brought a new ritual to the Lindsay family. Returning home from his morning rounds, Dr. Lindsay “hitched gentle Charlie to the big carriage” and “took skittish Tom for his buggy,” so that his wife and surviving children, Olive and Vachel, could bring flowers to the cemetery: “All three of our little sisters slept in one little bed with a nice white marble edge to it and the head of the bed was divided with curves to divide the names. There was a nice little story for each little sister with dates to it. And all together in one place it said ‘Beloved daughters of Vachel T. and Catharine F. Lindsay.’ There was beautiful shiny myrtle all over the little bed. It was a green bed, you see, with a white border all round, and when we put the blue flowers under Isabel’s name and the yellow flowers on the other outside place under Esther’s name, and the lovely mixed-up flowers in the middle under Dodo’s name and another longish wide platter of touch-me-nots and pink English daisies at the foot of the bed in the middle, and our Mama watered the myrtle and the flowers with her watering can that she hid behind the rosebush, it was a beautiful bed and we knew our sisters liked it” (Lindsay-Wakefield 95).

These cemetery visits further established the important bond between Olive and her brother, the bond that cousin Eudora South refers to above. Like their sisters, but with a different fate, they shared a bed in their first years. In fact, in his 1922 date book, Vachel jotted down another early reminiscence from the cave-like depths of infancy: “When Olive used to shout: ‘Look under your pillows’ and how we did—and described with our eyes shut and a mouth full of pillow—What we saw” (February 20). In his maturity, Vachel had few peers when it came to imaginative description, both in literature and in art. This memory, if nothing else, begs us to remember that the child indeed is father of the man. “Children’s games are not games,” Montaigne observes, “and must be judged in children like their more serious actions” (“Of Custom,” Donald M. Frame, translator).

Dr. Lindsay's life, according to his son, like Kate's life, was comprised of two eras; and the dividing line fell at the time of or very near the time of the tragic losses of March-April, 1888. Contrary to his wife, however, Dr. Lindsay largely withdrew from public activities, especially from politics, whereas before the tragedy he had participated in various elections with relish and effectiveness. In February 1922, again just after his mother's death, Vachel wrote in his date book: "The real years were 1880-1886—the first six years at 5th and Edwards. These were the years that counted—the years of debate—of Cleveland's Election [1884]—of the last really red debates of the Civil War—of my father's last political activity, of his riding in the ratification parade in a silk hat and big sash—of a Republican Illinois in a Democratic America" (February 8). And in his "Adventures While Singing These Songs," Vachel relates how his father went to Cleveland's "nominating convention, and on the night of the parade ratifying the election the streets were really ours for the first time." Vachel and his cousin Ruby cheered as their fathers "rode in that torchlight parade that was millions of miles long. Our papas had on big sashes, and the Democratic hats of that time, and their horses cavorted splendidly" (*Poetry* 945).

The revelry was especially grand, as Democrats had not elected a president in 23 years, although consensus seems to be that (Stephen) Grover Cleveland's campaign against Republican nominee James G. Blaine was among the dirtiest in American political history. Actually, Cleveland's first victory occurred at the nominating convention in Chicago, July 8-11, 1884, with Dr. Lindsay in attendance. As the reform-minded governor of New York State, Cleveland had fiercely opposed Tammany Hall, the New York City Democratic machine. In winning the nomination, Cleveland not only overcame party infighting but also determined much of the party platform, including the call for liberal reforms in administrative departments, in the civil service, and in national finances, issues that would surface in Vachel's life, as we shall see, when he attended ward school.

During the ensuing campaign, the Republican opposition disclosed that Cleveland, a bachelor, had fathered an illegitimate son. He was also alleged to be immoderately pro-Southern, as he had avoided service in the Civil War. With scorn, the Republicans labeled Cleveland and his party as the advocates of "Rum, Romanism, and Rebellion." On the other hand, election politics led to the discovery of a damaging number of Blaine's political and financial misdealings, especially in regard to vote buying. Blaine's chances were further impaired by the Republican Party split between the so-called Halfbreeds and the Stalwarts. Another group of reform-minded Republicans, the Mugwumps, openly supported Cleveland.

In a very close election, Cleveland was finally declared the victor, almost two weeks after election day (November 6). And on the night of November 20, 1884, Springfield Democrats had their night of jubilee. The Republican *Illinois State Journal* reports that the event was "a stupendous fizzle": "Yes, the celebration occurred, but it was hard to find where it was." The Democratic *Illinois State Register*, on the other hand, trumpets in a front-page headline: "The Streets Thronged with People—Fire Works, Bon Fire and Music." The *Register* reporter estimates 6000 people in downtown Springfield, "an immense crowd of people, all cheering and shouting for Cleveland." In contrast to Vachel's reminiscence, however, both newspapers report that the Democrats were denied

their torchlight parade and instead had to settle for a regular parade and a bonfire. (Adult Vachel likely remembered the two torchlight parades Springfield Democrats enjoyed after the national elections in 1892, and confused these with the 1884 celebrations.)

Meanwhile, when the glow of the Democratic bonfire dimmed, the city of Springfield returned to normalcy. It was then and “is still,” Vachel notes in 1922, “a Republican state capital, and I am still a kind of intrusive Kentuckian, though it was long before I saw Kentucky” (*Poetry* 945). The feeling of intrusiveness reflects his father’s politics, for at the very time Kate dressed her son in a pink slip in order that he could play Cupid, Dr. Lindsay filled his son, in his son’s own words, “with the notion that, way down in Kentucky, once upon a time a certain Abraham Lincoln came, with many soldiers. According to this tale they stole all the horses from my Grandfather Lindsay’s estate, drove off all the negroes forever (my grandfather’s personal property and mine), burned the crops, and then, in a way not mentioned, stole the farm, and left us all to begin again by studying medicine by a solitary candle” (*Poetry* 952).

Later, Dr. Lindsay’s son liked to tell his own stories, such as the notion of himself as an “intrusive Kentuckian” submerged in a Republican state capital:

I tell tales out of school  
Till these Yankees hate my style.  
Why should the young cad cry,  
Shout with joy for a mile?

Why do I faint with love  
Till the prairies dip and reel?  
My heart is a kicking horse  
Shod with Kentucky steel.

(“My Fathers Came from Kentucky,” *Poetry* 403)

Another of Uncle Boy’s tales, this one told in a letter to Elizabeth Wills, concerns the time when, at “about” age seven, he was given a ten cent ticket and, “in tender innocence,” asked his father if he could go to see the stage version of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*: “The roof nearly fell in, right then and there. Dear Papa started in to roar, boil, explode and fume and so forth in the most approved Southern Fashion<sup>^</sup>. He surely gnashed his teeth and Legree had nothing on him. But when I consider now what that book and play had cost him in toil and heart break I am not so astonished! But surely I was the most surprised little boy that ever was scared out of his wits!” (Chénetier 357). Sometime later, Vachel continued, his mother “sneaked” a copy of the book into the house for her children to read, notwithstanding the fact that her husband felt anyone who read Harriet Beecher Stowe “was worse than an infidel.” Kate also challenged her husband’s “general view of history.” She had “many Southern ideas,” her son knew, but she was “all for Lincoln.” And he admitted, as we already have noted, “I have in many ways agreed with her” (*Poetry* 952). [Note 10]

The election of Cleveland, Vachel informed Elizabeth Wills in the letter cited above, “sort of eased [his father] down some! Dear old boy he had had his heart broken long before I ever saw him! He poured his whole youth and strength into helping that blind father and that long string of brothers and sisters, long before I ever met him. But

he got them all up out of the wreck and started them all right, and the Lindsay side of the house is as happy as the Frazee now, and you could not guess which cousins were which” (Chénétier 357). A few years before, in his 1922 date book, Vachel inventoried his father’s earliest political activities, those dating to years prior to the doctor’s “broken” heart: “I was reared on stories of Virginia—and Maryland—125 years ago—of Kentucky 100 years ago—of Kentucky and Southern Indiana—very near Kentucky—75 years ago and of the Democratic Party. My father in his youth was in the thrill of the Kentucky Democrats’ first victory after a long wait. He was a Delegate to the Convention that nominated Grover Cleveland at Cincinnati the first time—1883— and I remember yet seeing him ride by in his rush in the great Ratification parade in Springfield—in 1884. He took such a furious interest in Politics etc.” Vachel is in error as to the place (it was Chicago) and the year (it was July 1884) of the nominating convention. His point, though, is clear: he wished to emphasize that his father’s “furious interest in Politics” had largely ended by 1888, the year of the family’s tragic loss.

Finally, contrary to his son’s memory, Dr. Lindsay did not drop out of politics completely, even after 1888. He played an active role in the elections of 1892, for example, when Democrat Cleveland was reelected president and Democrat John Peter Altgeld was elected governor of Illinois. On the other hand, Vachel seems generally accurate in his perception that, after 1888, his father dedicated more of his energies to his occupation than to his politics. As with the story of Kate’s “fanatical ardor” for church activities, however, the story of Dr. Lindsay’s Springfield professional life—and its implications for his son—must wait until the next chapter. One aspect of the doctor’s life, though, is relevant to his son’s earliest years. About 1880, Springfield boasted not one, but two Dr. Lindsays.

## 7

Johnson Cave Lindsay (1845-1921), Vachel Thomas’s younger brother, joined the Springfield practice soon after he was graduated from medical school. With his wife Emma and three children (later to be five), Johnson “lived next to the Lincoln home, four blocks away from our house,” Vachel wrote in 1922. “His daughter, Ruby Vachel [b. November 15, 1878], was my favorite playmate. We made a Christmas tree of the lilac bush in the shadow of that home, and we kept it up all the year round” (*Poetry* 944). The custodian of Lincoln’s house, Osborn H. Oldroyd, allowed the two cousins to play in the home. Oldroyd was a collector of Lincoln memorabilia, and he papered the walls of Lincoln’s house with Civil War political cartoons cut from both Northern and Southern papers. Thus, the young Lindsays were able to see firsthand the variety of opinions occasioned by the Great Emancipator. In Vachel’s words, Lincoln “was a profound volcano, producing, incidentally, ferocious debate. We saw the cartoons of his enemies, showing the alleged rank, slack, ungrammatical, sweating, thieving person. We saw the cartoons of his friends which expressed every kind of devotion to the rail-splitter and lawyer from the vast prairie circuit.” Oldroyd himself was a Republican; but, Vachel proudly asserts: “Ruby and I . . . remained Southerners. The inexplicable Mason and Dixon line, deep-dyed and awful, ran straight through our hearts” (*Poetry* 944-945). He also claimed, as we have seen, that it ran straight through his parents’ home. [Note 11]

Ruby Vachel and Nicholas Vachel were joined in play, at times, by Olive, who confesses to having thrown a toy block at cousin Ruby—in a fit of childish temper: “and it didn’t hit Ruby at all but it nearly hit my little baby cousin, Elyvon [Ruby’s sister], in the head right by her eye” (Lindsay-Wakefield 95). Olive’s impromptu weapon was one of 200 given to her brother by the Reverend Dr. Frederick W. (not “H.,” as Vachel indicates below) Wines (1838-1912), pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Springfield (1865-69). In fact, these are the same blocks that Vachel refers to in his late poem, “Twenty Years Ago”:

When I was eight years old, I had two hundred building blocks,  
 Given to me by The Reverend Fred H. Wines.  
 And I gave them to his grandson, in due time afterward,  
 Remembering I had made out of them,  
 A Springfield built of silver blocks, and towers and vines and valentines,  
 And a paper doll with a paper diadem.  
 A Sangamon palace of the soul,  
 With the American flag upon a fishing pole.  
 And kite-lines rose to dizzy heights, and underneath were caves and mines and  
                   coal,  
 And those who came to view the sights paid five cornelian marbles for the toll.  
(*Poetry* 724)

Written in late 1928, the above lines depict not only Vachel’s childhood but also the day in October 1909, when Dr. Wines asked that the blocks be returned for his own grandson’s benefit. Vachel was only too pleased, and he sent a few verses with the blocks, verses that he later copied for Nellie Vieira. They read, in part:

These are the diamond blocks that made  
 A Springfield bright as fire:  
 You should have seen each gleaming door,  
 Each glittering clean spire!

So take them child and use them well  
 And make no common house—  
 No cattle-barn, no bear trap,  
 No trap for mister mouse;

But build me Springfield magical  
 Lofty and strange and good:  
 Child you can do it if you pray.  
 These blocks are not of wood. (Fowler 184)

The blocks were returned to Wines just a year after Vachel had written “On the Building of Springfield” [*Poetry* 168-169]. Wines’s request, moreover, led to the related poem, “Springfield Magical” [*Poetry* 71], another work based on Vachel’s earliest days and on his childhood visions for the resplendent Springfield of the future. [Note 12]

Meanwhile, Olive’s less constructive use of the toy blocks did not go unnoticed: “I might have killed her, Mama said. And it was on a woman’s missionary society day,

and Mama was all dressed to go to the church, with her hat on and everything, and she had to take off her hat and take me upstairs to the front spare bedroom, and take along the little pony whip she got to whip Vachel when he was a naughty boy; only she hardly ever had whipped him with it, only showed it to him sometimes.” Kate asked how she could “go down to the church and try to talk to the missionary society ladies about the kingdom of God, and only be thinking all the time about my naughty little girl at home who let herself get so angry she nearly hit her baby cousin?—And our mama just felt so bad and looked so solemn and I was so sorry I didn’t know what to do with myself anyway. And my mama didn’t whip me. She just looked very sad and disappointed with me and told me to stay in that spare bedroom and be quiet and think what I’d done” (95-96).

Kate’s methods for chastising children stand in interesting contrast to those of her husband, at least in regard to one momentous occasion. When her son was very young, he and a companion were playing with matches and accidentally set fire to a neighbor’s barns. Eleanor Ruggles alleges: “The powerful Dr. Lindsay flogged his white-faced little son, flogged him in a manner very different from the mother’s rare whippings with a light pony whip. The punishment was something the son never forgot or entirely forgave, and possibly this was the moment of metamorphosis of the dutiful parent into the admirable but terrible figure that his father became to Vachel Lindsay” (33). Ruggles’ claim, though, is only partially correct—and more than a little misleading. That Vachel “never forgot” the whipping is true; that he never “entirely forgave” his father is not true. In the first place, despite violent disagreements, there was a deep-seated, lasting love between father and son, as we shall see. In the second place, the younger Vachel’s ready sense of humor made it impossible for him to experience anything at all like permanent enmity. Indeed, in a letter to his Aunt Fannie, with whom he enjoyed a genial and confidential relationship, Vachel suggested that she give her own son “several good whalings^ so that he will be civilized enough for me to associate with when I come out [to her home in Rushville]. Take my word for it,” he added, “the beautiful and saintly character I possess^ is wholly due to the few good lickings I experienced when young and tender” (April 1, 1896, Blair).

On the other hand, there is little doubt that the flogging was very much in Vachel’s mind when he portrayed his father as “Doctor Mohawk.” The fearsome Mohawk is:

Doctor, and glorious Ancestral Protector,  
Exhorter, reprover, corrector. (*Poetry* 532)

But the exhorting, reproving, and correcting end; the Mohawk departs, and the boy narrator turns for consolation to the Mohawk’s tender counterpart:

I wept with my mother. I kissed and caressed her.  
Then she taught me to sing. Then she taught me to play:—  
The sibyl, the strange one, the white witch of May.  
Creating diversion with slow-talk and long-talk,  
She sang with girl-pride of her Spanish ancestor,  
The mighty Don Ivan, Quixotic explorer:—  
Friend of Columbus, Queen Isabel’s friend,  
Conquistador!

Great-great-great grandfather. (*Poetry* 531)

“Not the facts,” Vachel wrote on a manuscript copy of the poem, “but the exact atmosphere of my early childhood” (Virginia—quoted by Ruggles 34).

To date, however, critics have failed to notice the most important aspect of “Doctor Mohawk.” When the Mohawk departs, the boy narrator’s “glory” also departs (l. 531). The poem originated at an inglorious time in Vachel’s life, the time (1923-24) when he was distraught with unrequited love for Elizabeth Wills. “Doctor Mohawk” is a prayer for strength, a desperate attempt to create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Vachel depicts himself as the son of the “Mohawk,” who “Breathed Mohawk fire through me, gave long claws to me” (l. 530). He has inherited, he suggests, the Mohawk’s force of character and is therefore able to withstand the distress of unrequited love: at least he should be able to withstand it. Unfortunately, when viewed in the events of the poet’s personal life, the poem reflects little more than wishful thinking. As Vachel’s letters to Wills reveal, he could not control his painful emotions, not, that is, until he married Elizabeth Conner in May 1925. “Doctor Mohawk” should not be read as an attack on Dr. Lindsay by an unforgiving son. The work instead expresses a son’s pride in and love for his father’s strength of character. It also expresses a son’s wish, albeit a vain wish, to claim that strength of character for himself. [Note 13]

On several occasions, Vachel announced that “Doctor Mohawk” was his imaginative portrayal of his father, as “The Hearth Eternal,” a poem that features a warmhearted widow protagonist, “learned and devout,” was the imaginative portrayal of his mother. [Note 14] “Doctor Mohawk,” however, depicts both parents and suggests the meaning that they had for their son. In fact, the most significant idea in the poem may be the one-line stanza: “But my life was all planned” (l. 531). Vachel was the child of strong-willed and devoted parents, people who were determined that their children should have a positive effect on their world. To that end, these parents were willing to carry their children on a pillow or to flog them, as the occasion demanded. Somehow the children were always to remember, in Kate’s words: “When God has an idea he wants to give to the world, he has to express it through the mouth of a man or he puts it on two legs and sends it into the world” (Lindsay-Wakefield 82). Those “two legs” were theirs. They were God’s ideas afoot. They were the very seldom children of very seldom parents.

### ***Historical Postscript***

In January 1880, Edison purchased a patent for his incandescent light bulb, one of a thousand or more Edison patents, including the stock ticker; phonograph; electric vote recorder; electric pen (forerunner of the duplicating machine); electric railway; and a variety of motors, dynamos, and other machines. Later the same year, 1880, streetlights were first installed in New York City. In 1882, the first “central station,” New York City’s Pearl Street station, began generating electric power, having been constructed in accord with Edison’s specifications. By 1898, nearly 3000 such stations would be in service. The night of December 11, 1882, Boston’s Bijou Theatre presented Gilbert and Sullivan’s *Iolanthe*, in America’s first playhouse performance exclusively lighted by electricity.

The first electric light in Vachel's Springfield was installed by Albert L. Ide, in the Ide Engine Works, July 4, 1881. Ide had visited Edison in Menlo Park and returned to Springfield to make his fortune in manufacturing a high-speed automatic engine for electric lighting purposes. By late December 1882, most of the city's large public buildings were lighted by Springfield Electric Light and Power, the local holding company (Bateman 1334-36). Thanks to the new technology, Kate Lindsay's concept of carrying the light "from mountain top to mountain top" had begun to take on a whole new meaning.

Meanwhile, throughout the 1880s, telephone systems continued to be built. By the end of the decade, no less than 440,000 instruments were in use in the country's larger cities. By 1882, Springfield's central exchange boasted some 400 subscribers (Veach 34). In this same year, Gottlieb Daimler demonstrated the first gasoline engine. In 1885, Daimler went on to invent the internal combustion engine, and Karl Benz had built a single-cylinder automobile. On March 26, 1885, the Eastman Dry Plate and Film Company of Rochester, New York, announced the manufacture of the nation's first commercial motion-picture film. Later in 1885, on August 10, in Baltimore, Leo Daft began operating America's first commercial, electric streetcar. In subsequent years, 1886-88, German physicist Heinrich Rudolf Hertz, following up on discoveries by James Clerk Maxwell, demonstrated the practical use of the electro-magnetic waves that were to become the basis for radio communication. And on September 4, 1888, George Eastman patented his roll-film camera and registered his trademark: Kodak.

In 1880, two Englishmen, Henry Faulds and William James Herschel, suggested using fingerprints to identify criminals. On February 19, 1881, Kansas became the first state to prohibit the sale of alcoholic beverages. The following July 2, President James A. Garfield was shot, having been in office less than four months (he died September 19). Later in 1881, on October 26, Wyatt Earp, his two brothers, and "Doc" Holliday shot it out with Ike Clanton's gang at the OK Corral in Tombstone, Arizona. Three gang members were killed; Earp's brothers were wounded. The next summer, on August 7, 1882, the Hatfield family of Southern West Virginia and the McCoys of Eastern Kentucky began their disagreements. By the time the fighting had ended, approximately 100 men, women, and children had been killed or wounded.

In 1882, John D. Rockefeller formed the Standard Oil Trust, giving him control over nearly 90% of the nation's oil refining. The year 1882 also saw the world's first "skyscraper": Chicago's Montauk Building, all of ten stories high. (Credit is often given to Chicago's Home Insurance Company of New York, a ten-story building constructed a year later.) On January 16, 1883, the Pendleton Act created the basis for the present federal service system. Later in the year, the United States postal system introduced the two-cent letter; and on November 18, 1883, the railroads fixed the standard time zones in the United States and Canada. (Standard time was adopted throughout the United States on March 13, 1884.)

Across the Atlantic, on August 9, 1884, the electrically-powered "La France" became the world's first airship to exhibit enough control to take off and land from the same point. Its inventors and pilots, Charles Renard and A.C. Krebs, completed a circular flight of five miles at Chalais-Meudon. The following year, on May 2, 1885, King Leopold of Belgium established the Congo Free State. Exactly one year later, on May 4,

1886, someone threw a bomb during an anarchist-labor demonstration in Chicago's Haymarket Square, killing seven policemen and wounding 70 people. Four months afterward, on September 4, 1886, the Apache Indian War ended in the Southwest with the capture of Geronimo, just a few weeks before sculptor Frederic Auguste Bartholdi's "Statue of Liberty" was formally dedicated on Bedloe's Island (October 28). Two months after the dedication, December 8, the American Federation of Labor organized at a convention in Columbus, Ohio. And two months after the convention, on February 4, 1887, the Interstate Commerce Act legalized federal control of the railroads.

Clara Barton founded the American Red Cross on May 21, 1881. In 1884, Austrian (later U.S.) ophthalmologic surgeon Carl Koller used cocaine as a local anesthetic, thus introducing modern methods of local anesthesia. On January 4, 1885, Dr. William W. Grant of Davenport, Iowa, performed what some believe to have been the first appendectomy—on 22-year-old Mary Gartside. Unfortunately for the Lindsays and their ill-fated daughters, an anti-toxin for scarlet fever was not found until 1923. The discoverer, Dr. George Frederick Dick (with assistance from his wife Gladys), was himself not quite seven years old when the Lindsay girls died. Although the typhoid bacillus was identified as early as 1880 by Koch and Eberth, no effective treatment emerged until well into the 20th century (1948). In 1884, Friedrich Löffler, with Edwin Klebs, successfully cultivated and identified the diphtheria bacillus; and, in 1888, Pierre Roux and Alexandre Yersin demonstrated the toxin involved. By 1890, Emil von Behring developed antitoxins for both diphtheria and tetanus, but it was not until after 1930 that diphtheria finally could be controlled. On July 6, 1885, Pasteur inoculated nine-year-old Joseph Meister, who had been bitten by a rabid dog. Joseph survived and Pasteur's vaccine effectively removed the rabies threat.

Dr. Lindsay's Vienna studies alerted him to the lethal potential of all kinds of contamination. Shortly after the deaths of their three daughters, the Lindsays planned and built an addition to their home. A new bathroom installed just inside the back door speaks for itself. Here the doctor could cleanse himself when he returned from his rounds—before entering the family living quarters. His lasting concern was that he had transmitted the organisms that had caused his family's tragedy.

### Notes for Chapter Three

[Note 1] Although Kate Lindsay spoke freely about her physical problems, Doctor Lindsay was nowhere near as candid. He certainly possessed "excellent qualities," as Kate comments here; but Dr. Lindsay was also a diabetic, as Eudora South points out in *Cousin Vachel* (p. 29). In addition, he suffered severe eye problems: "one [eye] had become permanently injured by the coughing of a diphtheria patient early in his practice. He was never out of pain from this and always kept his eyes partly closed and often shaded by his hand, but he never complained" (South 29).

[Note 2] Catharine Lindsay's version of the incident is: "When he was a very small boy he came home one afternoon and told his father that he had kissed a girl, and she threatened to knock his nose off if he ever did it again. 'Then what will you do?' asked his father. He replied—'I guess the nose will have to go.'" In one of her memoirs, Joy Lindsay-Blair's version is: "In first grade: walking to school with Olive and with Lucy

Wilson, Vachel said, ‘What would you do if I kissed you, Lucy?’ ‘I’d knock your nose off, that’s what I’d do.’ ‘Well, Lucy, the nose will have to go.’”

[Note 3] Vachel’s cousin, Lindsay South, was the son of Eudora Gray Lindsay (1852-1918), Dr. Lindsay’s younger sister, and her husband, James K. Polk South (1844-1921).

[Note 4] Where Masters asserts, “he was conditioned as a Campbellite, petted as a curled darling” (pp. 162-163), Olive recorded the following marginal note, apparently in exasperation with Masters’ repetitious derision: “Frequent phrase—why?”

[Note 5] Vachel observes: “Another heavy treasure was a battered Chambers’ *Encyclopaedia of English Literature* that did not mention any Americans, and stopped about 1830. From it I knew Chatterton and Shelley and Byron and Coleridge and Dryden as very special discoveries, like the Kings of Egypt” (*Poetry* 946).

[Note 6] Two days after Vachel was born, the editor of Springfield’s *Illinois State Journal* commented: “Better a little mud than a lot of dust.” Thirty-five years later, journalist George Fitch welcomed Vachel to Peoria and remarked in an editorial that Vachel was from Springfield “in the centre of the state—that is, the horizontal centre. In the spring the pedestrian could often get within a few feet of the centre of the state downwards before paving was introduced. Springfield being located in the famous black mud belt. Now, however, the streets are paved and there is hardly enough mud in the city to supply the politicians during a good, hot session of the Legislature” (collected in Hamilton). In his *Lumberjack Philosophy*, a series of essays published in the *Spokane Daily Chronicle* (August 1, 1928 to January 30, 1929), Vachel asserts: “Springfield streets are many of them unpaved and those that are paved have often been done badly and are full of holes” (“Joy Found in Spokane,” January 16, 1929, Gilliland 151).

[Note 7] Catharine’s daughter Joy recalled: “Some people have thought Vachel has a psychic power in the way he can hold the attention of an audience; if this is true then that also was from Mama for I have heard her tell of how a hypnotist was very anxious to teach her and told her that she could do many strange things if she would let him teach her. She also believed she could do it because she could make a Planchette (similar to a modern OIJA^ board) write anything she wished it to. However she did not study hypnotism, as this man desired, because she said such things were not normal and inducive^ to ordinary healthy living. To draw a sharp distinction between her and my father, he did not believe that any one on earth could move a PLANCHETTE. He not only did not possess any such power but denied that anyone else could have it” (Lindsay-Blair).

[Note 8] On April 27, 1888, Catharine Lindsay’s father, Ephraim Samuel Frazee (the “proud farmer”), struggled to express his condolences to his bereaved daughter. He included the observation: “I thought the younger ones, more rugged^, and promising, than those that are left [Olive and Vachel]” (Blair). Vachel seems to have been especially close to Isabel. In 1904, he wrote his parents from New York: “Not many mornings ago I woke up dreaming of Isabel and that old song we used to sing together ‘The Kingdom is Coming Oh tell ye the Story.’ It is very seldom I have a vivid living memory, but that came back like a moment of my childhood with all tenderness and beauty and I wanted to write you of it right away. It made me love my Papa and Mama like a very small boy did once, in the childlike way, not the grown up way” (January 19, misdated 1903).

The three girls were not the first family members to die in the South Fifth Street home. On November 4, 1881, Doctor Lindsay's younger brother, Elijah Ross (born December 10, 1854), died of typhoid fever. The following day the Lindsays purchased their plot at Springfield's Oak Ridge cemetery, the same plot in which the three girls and Vachel himself were finally buried (letter, Catharine Ward, May 12, 1987).

[Note 9] In Armstrong, p. 93, reprinted in Chénétier, p. 263. Vachel apparently forgot that in 1901, when he was a student at the Chicago Art Institute, he twice urged his mother to increase her efforts for religion. On March 11, he wrote his parents: "I really think that the simplest possible plans for flowers [in the yard] are the best things for Mama's health, the best for the sake of the Missionary Union and the centralization of her energy and powers. Do conserve your strength and centralize your anxiety on the major matters. If you will be distributing nosegays—believe me the nosegays of sincere rhetoric will go the farthest, and thoughts sowed among women go farther for the anxiety and nerve force required than pansy seeds in the dirt. I would welcome the day when there was not a flower in the yard if it meant an inch more of organization or effectiveness in the Union, and kindred work." On August 8, Vachel advised his father of his pride in his mother's work for the Missionary Social Union: "She must put most of her religious^ thought and energy in that direction if she desires to do something that will count in the next generation. She is capable of much more concentration and success in that line of Missionary Union than she has ever saved her strength to do." In fact, Vachel's many letters from Hiram, Chicago, and New York (1897-1908) reveal strong support for his mother's work.

While teaching at Hocker College, Kate participated in debate. One of her presentations (dated April 3, 1874) survives: "Affirmed that a woman has the right to preach the Gospel publicly" (Ward).

[Note 10] Vachel also informed Richard Watson Gilder (1844-1909), editor of *Century* magazine: "I was taught in the Springfield ward schools, and the Lincoln patriotism triumphed over the political opinions of a Southern-feeling household. If there ever were two things my father wanted me to do they were to hate Lincoln and the Republican Party. My school training was enough to counteract this, though it was well through High School before the prejudice was all gone" (Chénétier 29).

[Note 11] In his *Lumberjack Philosophy*, Vachel avers: "every cartoon of Lincoln before he was elected, whether it was for him or against him, whether it was from north or south, east or west, showed him as a gigantic rail splitter. Some cartoonists made him an awkward clown, a stupid baboon^, some made him a rough hero, but all of them showed him towering, lanky, muscular, yes, 20 or 30 feet high, with a rail splitter's axe in his hand, big enough to cut down a woods" ("Abraham Lincoln Lumberjack," January 2, 1929, Gilliland 147).

For additional detail concerning Vachel's interaction with cousin Ruby Vachel and her family, see Schroeder, where Ruby's childhood memories are detailed (*passim*). Dr. Johnson Lindsay and his family left Springfield for Los Angeles about 1896. At their home in fall, 1912, Vachel finished writing "General William Booth Enters into Heaven."

[Note 12] For Vachel and "Springfield Magical," see Fowler, pp. 95, 131, and 184. A revised copy of the verses concerning the Wines blocks is in Fowler, pp. 194-195.

[Note 13] A week after his father's death (September 20, 1918), Vachel wrote Eleanor Dougherty: "The limits to his courage were never reached, and one of my greatest fears of him was that he would try to drive out, making doctor's calls at midnight, and with only one dim eye left in his head. All his faults and all his virtues turned on his courage, and I cannot escape the fixed belief that he will put more fight into me, and more patience, the kind of patience that is itself battle. All his mistakes were obvious. His courage was profound" (Lindsay-Wakefield 111).

[Note 14] See *Poetry* 123. To Professor Calvin Dill Wilson of Glendale College, Vachel wrote: "You will find many tributes to my mother scattered through the prefaces to the Illustrated Collected Poems. "'The Hearth Eternal' is written as a sort of allegory of her most advertised ideas, also 'Foreign Missions in Battle Array' represents her most advertised ideas, especially those of her old age. But all my writings are mere rhymed paraphrases of the hereditary ideas of my father and mother, and the people that came before them" (February 7, 1927). Four years later, Vachel wrote to Sara Teasdale: "The Hearth Eternal expresses my mother. Doctor Mohawk, a very bad piece of writing, nevertheless represents vaguely my father" (February 21, 1931, Yale 252).

### Photographs for Chapter Three



**Mama's "curled darling"; Grandfather Lindsay's troubling grandson.** The photo is published in South, *Cousin Vachel*. Two envelopes of Uncle Boy's curly hair survive,

one in the University of Virginia's Alderman Library (Barrett Library holdings), one in Springfield's Lincoln Library, Sangamon Valley Collection, included in one of two scrapbooks created by Frances "Aunt Fannie" Hamilton.



**The first five children of (Esther) Catharine and Vachel Thomas Lindsay.** Uncle Boy is top left, standing next to Isabel (b. March 10, 1881 and d. April 7, 1888) and Esther (b. October 4, 1883 and d. March 20, 1888). Seated below is Olive, holding baby Eudora "Dodo" (b. October 10, 1885 and d. April 3, 1888). The photo is published in *South, Cousin Vachel*.



**Isabel and Esther Lindsay, ill-fated daughters of (Esther) Catharine and Vachel Thomas Lindsay.** This water-color picture, copied from a photograph by Catharine, currently hangs in the northeast bedroom of the Vachel Lindsay Home State Historic site. This is the bedroom in which Uncle Boy and four of his sisters were born. Olive, the oldest Lindsay child, was born in a rented cottage one-year before the family purchased their 603 South Fifth Street home.

