

# *Sketch*

---

*Volume 19, Number 1*

1952

*Article 5*

---

## The Tree

Martha Stevens\*

\*Iowa State College

Copyright ©1952 by the authors. *Sketch* is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).  
<http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch>

# The Tree

Martha Stevens

## **Abstract**

Rosie threw the dishwater out the back door and watched it trickle over the rutted ground, which was covered with a gray frothy crust from the washwater and the dishwasher that had been thrown there for years...

## *The Tree*

ROSIE THREW the dishwater out the back door and watched it trickle over the rutted ground, which was covered with a gray frothy crust from the washwater and the dishwater that had been thrown there for years.

“Zekiel saw de wheel a-comin’,” she sang in a thin, piping voice, as she dried the warped dishpan and hung it on a nail. “Way up in de middle of de air — Hey, Ma, Ah’m through.”

“Okay, honey. You can go play now, but don’t go too far away,” came Ma’s voice from the bedroom where she was nursing Rosie’s little brother, Georgie.

Rosie smiled to herself when she thought of Georgie. His head with the tight little black curls was so small that it would fit in Rosie’s two hands.

Rosie grabbed her doll from the chair and ran out the back door. She jumped over the rivulets of dishwater and ran across the bare dirt, out to her special tree. The roots were big and gnarled and began way up above the ground. The tree was Rosie’s playhouse; between the roots were the rooms.

“Cah’lyn, honey. Are y’all gettin’ hungry?” she crooned to her doll as she sat down on the little root that served as the “couch” in her living room, and tucked her dark, skinny legs under her.

She cuddled the doll in her arms for a moment, humming softly. When she cuddled Georgie, he kicked his dark little legs and waved his arms, and when she blew gently on his ear, he would wrinkle up his little brown button-nose and laugh at Rosie.

Rosie looked across the sagging wire fence into Mrs. Dodd’s back yard. A fat brown baby was splashing in a tubful of water, and he laughed gleefully as Rosie called, “Hi, Billy Lee. Are y’all swimming?” She smiled tenderly. Some day Georgie would be cute and fat like Billy Lee.

From the shed back by the alley came voices. The Dodd kids were playing “Annie Over.” Rosie dropped

Carolyn in the middle of the dishes and ran toward the alley, but slowed down as she approached the four running, shouting kids. She stood shyly watching them, her hands behind her back and one toe making a pattern, back and forth in the dust.

The ball, which was being thrown across the shed, hit a corner, and bounded toward Rosie. She threw her thin arms around it, and began to jump up and down.

"Ah caught it. Ah caught it," she shrilled excitedly. Rosie found herself looking at four silent kids. They had lined themselves up and were staring at her silently. The silence grew louder until it roared in Rosie's ears. She dropped the ball and took a step backwards.

She smiled, her lips trembling a little. "C'n Ah play Annie Over with y'all?"

"Git out'n our yard," said the biggest boy.

"Yeah. Git out," chimed in a smaller one. "This is our yard."

"But . . ." Rosie tried to speak. Her lips were trembling more now. "But, Ah kin ketch the ball."

"We don't want y'all ketchin' our ball," the biggest one said.

"Why," began Rosie, but she stopped terrified. Now they would say it. She turned and began to run, but they taunted her, calling, "You can't play with us cause your Ma's white. Your Ma's white."

Rosie ran, fighting back nausea. In her ears roared the shouts of the children. "Your Ma's white. Your Ma's white."

She reached her tree, and flung herself down, panting, trembling.

"Ah'm not different. Ah'm not," she said fiercely to herself as she picked up Carolyn from the ground.

"Cah'lyn, honey. Ah know what we'll do. We'll go to the grocery store and get us an ice-cream cone, and then we'll go to the park and play on the swings. We don't need to play Annie Over."

Rosie picked up the doll and ran to the street, and began skipping toward the park. She always played a game when she went down this sidewalk, the beautiful sidewalk.

It was lovely, gray cement that felt hot on her bare feet. It was cracked and humped up, and there was green grass growing between the cracks.

“Step on a crack, and y’ll break yer mammy’s back,” she chanted as she bounced rhythmically down the walk. “Step on a hole, and y’ll break yer mammy’s bowl.”

“My Cah’lyn. Isn’t this ice cream cone good?” She held her hands as if it were curled around a cone, and smacked her lips. “Choclit’s my fav’rit, isn’t it yours?”

Rosie slowed down to a walk as she caught sight of a group of big white boys playing on the school yard. Her teeth chattered a little, but she hugged Carolyn to her, and she hoped they wouldn’t see her.

But they had. She heard their voices as they came toward her.

“Hey, ain’t that the little nigger kid that goes to our school?”

“Yeah, she’s in the third grade. She’s in my room.”

“Hey,” they were calling to her now. Rosie stopped and looked at the boys. She gave them a trembly smile and said, “Yes?”

“Hey, you go to our school because yer Ma’s white, don’t you?” said the red-haired one.

She stared at him silently.

“Yeah. How come you got a white Ma?”

Rosie began to run. She heard the boys laughing as they went back to their game. She ran around a corner, and felt the nausea coming.

“Yer Ma’s white. Yer Ma’s white,” kept booming in her ears, and Rosie was sick.

When she felt all right again, she walked on toward the park. There was a sour taste in her mouth, and she clenched her fists. “Ah’m not different.”

The park stretched out, shady and inviting. There were weather-beaten, grayish-white tables, and rusty looking water fountains. Rosie started towards the swings, but there were some little kids playing there. She stopped in sudden panic.

“We’ll have to wait to play on the swings, Cah’lyn. They won’t want us. We’ll wait till they go away.”

Where could she go so they wouldn't see her and shout at her? "Yer Ma's white. Yer Ma's white. You ain't like nobody else."

Rosie remembered the little lagoon down by the trees. Nobody would see her there. It was all hidden away and quiet, and she could hide.

She ran quickly over the grass until she reached the trees that surrounded the lagoon. She threw herself down on the ground and panted quickly, trying to catch her breath.

"Here, Cah'lyn. We'll pretend we're at the lake on a picnic, and nobody knows us. Nobody thinks we're diff'rent."

She stared at the still water, which was covered with green scum, and leaves. A little boy, Washington Clayton, had fallen in here last summer. They had put him in a little white box; a casket, her Ma had said, and everyone had cried. Rosie cried, too, when she remembered.

"Ah wonder if they'd cry if we fell in, Cah'lyn? Ah wonder if they'd put us in a pretty white casket, with that soft, pink stuff inside?"

Wouldn't those Dodd kids be sorry if she fell in the water 'cause they hadn't let her play with them?

"Ah bet they'd cry, Cah'lyn. Ah bet they'd sure cry if we did."

She sat staring at the green scummy water, clutching Carolyn to her. They wouldn't make fun of her any more. The water was so green and pretty, and the mud was so cool and slippery.

Rosie looked down at her doll, Carolyn, and saw the brown-button nose, and the round black eyes. Why, Carolyn looked like Georgie! Rosie thought of Georgie's little black eyes, and how they screwed up when he cried.

Georgie. Why, he was just like Rosie. She wasn't different from everyone else. Georgie would miss Rosie most of all if she fell in the water.

Catching back a sob, Rosie jumped up and began running home. Past the swings, out of the park. Past the place where she got sick, past the deserted school yard. Running, sobbing, stumbling over the bumpy, cracked sidewalk.

"Rosie, honey. Yer Ma's been calling you." It was old

Mr. Simmons from down the street. "Better hurry home, honey." But she was gone, and he stared after her, shaking his head. "Po' little kid."

She saw Ma standing on the porch. Over the last bump, and into the yard. She was home. Home at the gray, weather-beaten house with the rickety front porch. Home where she most wanted to be, and where she wasn't different.

As she held Georgie, she giggled to herself. His little fat arms, with his fingers curled up, waved in the air, and his little brown legs kicked against Rosie's thighs. She blew on his ear, and laughed as Georgie wrinkled up his little button-nose and laughed at Rosie.

*Martha Stevens, Sci. Jr.*



## *Mallards*

I pause and watch the mallards spear  
The air in long, ragged V-lines,  
Ragged like the stalk-littered fields  
And the dead yellow stubble.  
The wedges crumble and the ducks  
Swing singly in circles over brush set low  
Like blinds lining the flat gray river.  
I wonder if they are not afraid to land thus  
In a curl of wings,  
To stand and preen white feathers,  
Knowing the rotting winter earth breeds claws  
To snare flying feet,  
Or, if they must wheel over gaunt fields,  
Till the Spring comes alive again.

*Ervin Krause, Sci. Sr.*

