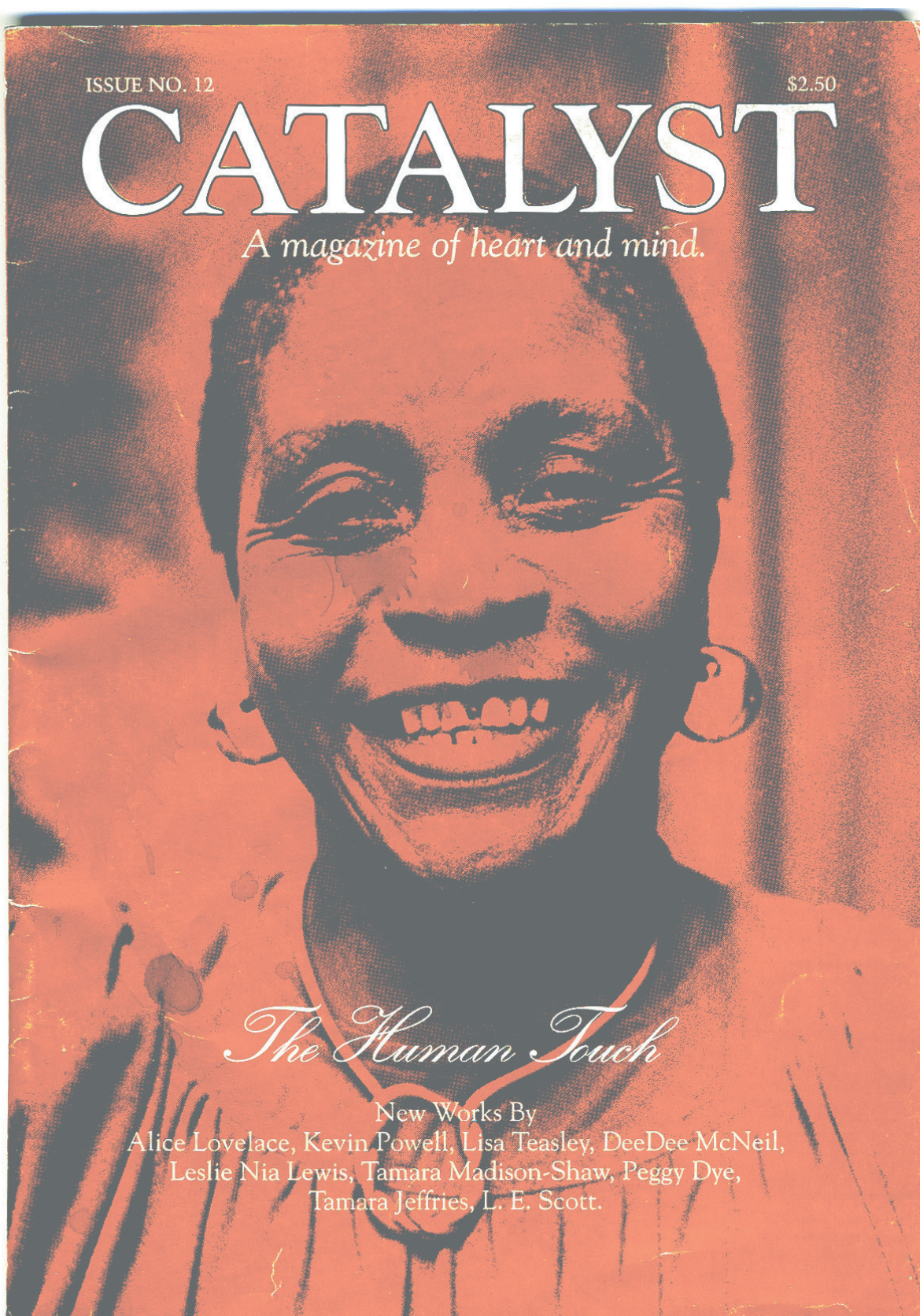


An Article by Peggy Dye

Peggy Dye (January 4, 1943-December 4, 2007)



ISSUE NO. 12

\$2.50

CATALYST

A magazine of heart and mind.

The Human Touch

New Works By

Alice Lovelace, Kevin Powell, Lisa Teasley, DeeDee McNeil,
Leslie Nia Lewis, Tamara Madison-Shaw, Peggy Dye,
Tamara Jeffries, L. E. Scott.

Words For Journey Under Seige

by Peggy Dye



photo: Jim Alexander

The fear came up again, as soon as the white man got on the bus. Oliver looked at me and started to cry.

"Don't let him see you, boy!" I whispered, squeezing Oliver's thin cotton shirtsleeve and feeling the skinny arm hot under it.

"Oiwee!, you hurt me, Peggy Anne," he bawled.

The white man curled his lip at us as he flopped his wide butt down on the seat opposite. His lips, where they turned under, were purple like Uncle Jim's German shepherd, Jumbo. And the white man, with his unshaven face, pointy ears, and sprawling behind suddenly reminded me of Jumbo.

"Oliver, he looks like a dog, see him!" I whispered, trying to sound light-hearted, but the sour in my stomach was rising as I braced my back against the bus seat. "Just think of him saying those things like an old dog barking. He's just an animal." I raised my head to sniff at the white man the way my mother sniffed at Jumbo when the dog got out of line. Jumbo would whimper when my mother Alice tossed her head a certain way and sniffed down at him as if he were the lowest dog in Evanston, Illinois.

"Dog bites. I'm scared," Oliver said, shaking. "I want to go back home."

"Don't be a scaredy cat. We're going to school."

"Don't want to go over there with all them white kids."

"Hush! You do. You want a good education. Learn the truth and everything. Your mother told mine."

"My mamma don't ride this bus." He wailed.

The other white people glanced at us and shook their heads. Nobody said a word though. Except the white dog across the aisle. He started growling, as he'd been doing for the previous four days. "Nigger, nigger, eeny meeny miny mo, catch a pair of children by the toe, nigger, nigger nigger," he sang softly, just loud enough so we could hear in the front, and the bus driver too.

The first day he'd done this, at the beginning of the week, I went home and told my mother.

"Oh, my lord, I better go down to the bus stop with you, baby," she said.

"Mother, he doesn't get on 'til we cross Wilmette Avenue." That

was a bunch of streets away from our stop and the dividing line between downtown and South Evanston where Central School was. I and Oliver were going to Central School. We had been going for a year, or, actually, I'd been there a year, and Oliver was just starting. I was a first grader. He was in kindergarten.

"You going to go there to learn the truth, not some Negro education," my mother had told me when I cried upon learning the year before that my first day in school would not be with my friends Madelyn and Roland who lived behind us. My first day was going to be what mother called "an adventure," and that meant I was going to take a bus, she said, "all by your big self," across town for one hour, "just like a big person," to Central School.

"What's an adventure?" I said.

"It's finding something new. And learning how to be bigger than what you find," she said.

"Like Cinderella found the pumpkin and it was big and she touched it with the giant Indian wand and it turned into an Indian pony?"

"Cinderella doesn't go like that," my mother said. "Where did you get that story, baby?"

"Mamma." Mamma was my grandmother. She corrected the stories my mother read me at night at bedtime. "No need to learn all the white man's lies. Cinderella was an Indian, and you are some of that, too. And the prince was an African. Can you see that?" Grandmother would rock in her chair on her porch overlooking Dodge Avenue, a main street in

Negro Evanston. "Africans had plenty of power in the old days before slavery."

I listened to the stories of my mother and grandmother and liked them both. But I didn't want any "adventure" if it meant going to Central School.

"We come all the way up here from Mississippi, we did, baby, so we could find a better life before we had you. Your daddy and me—

**"The other
white people
glanced at us
and shook their
heads."**

we want you to have a better schooling than we had. We don't want you going to Foster School."

Foster was around the corner. All my friends were going there.

At night I heard my parents argue. I stuck my ear to the wall of our adjoining bedrooms and listened to their whispers.

"We didn't come all the way up north to give Peggy Anne anything but the best," my mother told my father.

"The child is too little to be traveling on a public bus across Evanston to some peck-o-woods' school," my father said.

"It's a better school than Foster and she can eat at Nora's for lunch." Nora was my mother's sister—my aunt.

"But Alice, the child will have

to lie about her address to the teachers and lie about living in the district. We just can't send her there and tell the child to lie."

"Why not? I didn't ride a Jim-Crow train to Evanston from Greenwood, Mississippi, and work in white folks kitchens 'til I learned my arithmetic well enough to get myself a job at the counter of Centralia's grocery to have my child go to some old country Negro school where she's going to be taught as bad as we were before we come up here."

"It's against the law to send your child out of the district."

"Pshaw! Spitting on the sidewalk is against the law, too."

"It's not right for the child. She'll be all alone on the bus and with adults traveling an hour each day, every day, each way, to go down there. She's too little."

"She's smart as a whip. We'll just tell her that to get a good schooling she has to keep a secret—her address where she really lives. And pretend she lives with Aunt Nora. She can do it. The child has imagination."

So I had learned the lie of my address and had gone to Central School. For the first three months in kindergarten I was fine.

But the truth leaked out. First, I mixed up my real phone number with my Aunt Nora's. I also got friendly with the white kids in my class. They watched how I took the bus every afternoon after school. Instead of walking back to Aunt Nora's. Then, one day, David Ogleby—who lived a block from Aunt Nora's in this token-integrated, four block piece of South Evanston—David just upped

and said, "Peggy Anne doesn't live here. I see her take the bus every morning. She comes from some other colored place, my mother said, because nobody colored lives near here where you take a bus."

The whole class had stared at me. Miss Shanklenberg, the pretty blonde teacher, had frowned wrinkles into her long, straight nose 'til it looked like baby Reno's. Baby Reno lived downstairs in the two family apartment house where I lived and he had the most wrinkled face my grandmother said she ever saw in all her 70 years. "He's a raisin—a baby that's a raisin." She'd chuckled and told a story about a grape arbor drying up to become raisin jam in a drought in Mississippi.

But anyhow, the white kids found me out a liar. My mother went down to the school and talked to the principal. Mother told me and my dad everything afterwards. Mother had started a big discussion about the right of colored to a good education, and said Foster School wasn't any good. The principal had frowned then too, like a raisin, Mother said. Then the principal told Mother that no matter about good schools or bad, I was illegal. The only reason Central School might let me stay was grace: I was smart, good and an asset, especially good as a Negro example.

My mother had argued back that the education system in the North was supposed to be better than Mississippi and she and her husband hadn't fought in World War II to get the Japs and the Germans put down to live in any America where black people were

still being put down. And that Foster School wasn't fit to teach dogs and ponies good manners—and my mother knew since she knew better stables in Mississippi. Plus Foster didn't even have a library and Evanston was famous all over the country for its fine schools. Evanston ranked third in the country for school systems in 1950. She wanted me to go to the best schools the town could offer and she would go to court if she had to.

"Court" set the principal sitting up ramrod straight, the way Mother told it. Mother came back to our side of town and got on the phone with my other aunt, Pinky, who had two children plus Aunt Izzie who had Oliver. Word spread that the three sisters were stirring up legal trouble for the white folks and Negro church services rocked with congregations singing "Amazing Grace!" and "Precious Lord, Take My Hand!" The principal and the sisters met some more. The following September Central School opened up to Oliver and agreed that when Aunt Pinky's girls and my two cousins, Mildred and Jean, got to be old enough to—in two years—they could come, plus more black kids who were not relatives were being interviewed when their parents called the school.

So me and Oliver were riding to school on all that history this morning. I'd finished out kindergarten and begun first grade and Oliver had then joined me. Oliver was little, a runt. If I was three and a half feet tall, he was three feet tall, and he was as black as tar. "A disgrace to the family,

the little darkie," said Uncle Larry, the whitest member of the family and what my grandmother called a "no-color skunk." Uncle Larry drank Gordon's Gin from the bottle and smelt of Juniper berries. "Juniper is what they flavor the devil's brew with, child," my grandmother said. "But it don't fool me none. Liquor turns you rotten inside and your soul stinks. Poor skunk Larry." She shook her head. "He talks stupidity out of that bottle."

Oliver was smart and knew his adding and subtracting before he even went to kindergarten. He could add all the way up to 10 and he could draw too. I liked him going with me on the bus. I felt safer.

But we still rode mainly in silence after we left the Negro side of town and hit downtown and the white people got on and watched us and didn't say anything. Evanston white people in 1950 were not wearing sheets or burning crosses, but they sure could stare hard at you if you rode the bus and were alone, and we were in a Chicago suburb, which, after all, meant we were in the most segregated city in North America.

Still, nobody really bothered us, until the wolf got on.

Did I say wolf? I started out by saying "dog," didn't I? By the time I told you all the background, though, the "dog" had turned more howling and wild-eyed like pictures I saw in school of wolves in Alaska. That white man calling us 'nigger,' and baring his purple lips on the front of the bus, well, he was turning fidgety in the bus

and squinting at us by that fourth day. Like a wolf.

The second day my mother had rode with us. As soon as I told her about the man she came down to the stop and grabbed Tom Brown the driver. He was white but everybody knew everybody in town. She said, "Tom! who is that white man making comments at Peggy Anne? We can't have this."

"Mrs. Dye, I'm sorry. He is a stranger in town. Nobody knows him. May be a Jew." Brown hissed this under his breath and raised an eyebrow. "Speaks with an accent."

"So does everybody here. Even the English who started this country." She huffed up. My father had a grandpa who was English trash, so to hear my mother and father laugh about him. He drank as much as Uncle Larry and made moonshine in Georgia and he was mean. But "the English are cold like that, sure are," my grandmother said. "They the meanest people face of the earth. They killed our Indian relatives off, yes they did, and they don't have no soul about nothing. They sell their mother for a piece of land, they would. Don't never trust no English. They DO make good tea, though." She sipped her Earl Grey tea.

My mother's talk with the bus driver had made me remember all this. I shivered at the thought of the English as my mother and the driver spoke. But then the driver Brown started me shaking even worse by what he told my mother. "Mrs. Dye, we can't tell the man to not say ugly words too much. He has free speech."

"Free speech?"

"Yes. I checked with the

company and there's no law against using the word 'nigger'."

"Humph." My mother tossed her head like she was shaking off Jumbo's stray fleas. "You white people with your words. You keep us out of jobs because we don't speak the right English and then you use those words that I wouldn't call to the devil himself and humiliate my own tongue with. Those words told people to burn up black folks and cut off their tongues and all kinds of terrible things. And you let that cracker speak that violence to my daughter!"

She had trembled and clenched her fist while me and Oliver watched, holding our breaths. My mother had a powerful little fist. She was five-feet-five and her fist was from a little-boned hand. She wasn't a big strapping woman but rather thin and narrow hiped, not at all what you'd expect from a Mississippi woman raised on a farm and meeting Klux Klux Klans in town and carrying her pappa's rifle on the wagon for him when they went in to buy seed and thread and cloth plus sometimes peanut brittle or a piece of cheddar cheese for a treat. My mother had learned to shoot a rifle early because her father told his three daughters and the baby son, "We are in war. We will die before we let the white people take anything from us anytime." He had land and cows and chickens and geese and three tenant farmers. He was a big, tall man, and he liked to tell big stories and play the family's prize treasure—the gramophone.

My mother took after him, except she wasn't big and couldn't carry a blues tune.

"I'll ride the bus with the baby, then," she told my father.

"I'll get my pistol."

"No! You don't come along."

"I'm sick of these people, I'm sick."

"You got to rest, Will. You can't be out in the morning and make the 4 o'clock shift." My father worked in the post office—a "good job" for a black man in 1950. He got it because he had worked hard for the Democrats before the war and in Evanston, to be a Democrat was to be nearly a communist and worth a good job. Evanston was a Republican town. Even the dogs came over on the Mayflower. Evanston was national founding town of the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Women's Temperance League, and the City of (White) Churches. Rich, Roosevelt Democrats who snuck from Mayor 'Boss' Daley's Chicago machine to live in the town's big houses on Lake Michigan had patronage jobs they couldn't even give away in Evanston. So Democrats took in colored people. My father was a patronage Democrat. He accepted his post at the post office and thanked the Democrats but he watched them. "They're Dixiecrat crackers too, and Democrats lynch you down in the South, so I watch my back." He'd chew his pipe when he said that. He was also angry about the war. "We didn't win nothing. We still got poor people—some of them those white hillbillies still stinking from the West Virginia outhouses. They are lined up with plenty of 'just-up' Southern colored for food at St. Andrews." St. Andrews was the Episcopal Church my father joined

from love of the rituals and incense which he said calmed his nerves.

He veered between wanting to shoot up the town and "all the crackers" and injustice in it and wanting to go back down South to the woods, because "coming up North got us here in time for the war and not much else and I don't want to really be a part of this place but what can I do?" He had nightmares at night and screamed through the walls where I could hear him. He was running from a creek rat, stuck under 20 pounds of water with the Japs coming after him in the jungles of Ichy Bora, some island off the Japanese coast. He would holler and cry and the next day my mother would tease him at breakfast, trying to cheer him up. She called him the 'Black Frog' and told me, "Your daddy turns into a frog at night and hollers bad dreams, and then he wakes up stronger."

My dad would have rode the bus with me and shot up the town. So mother rode instead to stop the mayhem, and when the dog got on, she told him, "You leave my children alone, or you'll deal with me. I'm a Mississippi Negro who the white people down there didn't kill. I'll do to you exactly what you want to do to me, only I'll do it first, and coming from Mississippi, I know how to do it!"

He had just looked at her, not saying a word. And then got off the bus at the next stop. Me and Oliver were happy the rest of the day.

But then, the following morning, he appeared again, and I was so scared. I told the bus driver Tom Brown, "I'm scared," but Brown said, "Sticks and stones can

break your bones but names can never hurt you." He wasn't going to do anything.

I sat down, and me and Oliver looked at each other, then looked at the dog, and tried to stuff our ears with our fingers, and then to sit up straighter. We moved to the rear of the bus, and then the wolf followed us. That was worse. No Tom Brown near by.

We came back up front.

Now, on the third day, with Oliver crying and me feeling shakier by the minute, I tried to think up something. At first, I thought I'm never going to a white folks' school again. But I liked the kids at Central School, so I discarded the thought and felt the fear some more.

Then I saw in my mind's eye my father's face the morning after a nightmare. He had run from killers. Finally, I saw my father's face all screwed up in anger the day before. My folks had fought wars to get to Evanston, to get me to school.

I wasn't going to quit.

But how to stop this wolf? He loomed over us, snarling and spitting. "Nigger, nigger, nigger!" The other white people on the bus didn't say a word. They acted like they didn't hear.

"You're going to school to get an education, the best," said Mother. I heard her voice now.

"What good's an education if the child don't know who she is?" My grandmother's voice shot into my head. I closed my eyes and saw my mother and grandmother on grandmother's porch while I sat there, trying not to be noticed and chased off to play, while I listened

hard like to the radio. "These white people will teach her to hate herself," said my grandmother.

"Well, she has to have learning

"Then the principal told mother that no matter about good schools or bad, I was illegal."

as good as theirs. She has to have the stories and the words and the world they have," said Mother "No—Alice! She has to have our stories and see the world our way and not theirs but ours—where we are somebody." My grandmother raised her voice.

Now, desperate, in this desperate moment with Oliver crying and me feeling the pain of his fear, and with the wolf barking his low, dirty words at us, and seeing no help to cut off the animal's mouth, I suddenly heard my grandmother's voice: "Once upon time there was a big ugly white man who looked like a wolf but was a mangy, old, hound dog under his wolf clothes." The words came out of my mouth, "and he used to eat rats and flies off the garbage cans in the alley and pick his snotty nose. One day he saw Cinderella and Oliver, and they

were carrying a magic wand but it was a tomahawk," the voice continued. Only it was my voice now and the story was coming out grandmother's way—spilling out. Oliver looked up at me, at first in disbelief. Then he quieted down and I watched his face and his big eyes inspired the words to keep flowing, and I continued the story of Cinderella told new. Cinderella slayed the hounddog with the tomahawk and took over the castle which was a stone tee-pee colored all the colors of the rainbow. The prince sailed in there on the Mississippi River which ran under the drawbridge from all the way around the world to Africa and back through France and England and everywhere people from Africa had sent folks to start the human race. Cinderella was African-American and Indian and my grandmother's story and my father's and ours. When I was telling the story, time fell away, the bus fell away, and the world we were in fell away. Oliver and I were transported. The wolf turned red and green and purple. He barked while we watched him from our seats. The white people who were passengers watched. And Tom Brown the bus driver watched through his rear-view mirror. We were all still on the bus and nothing had changed but the way I was seeing had changed, and I saw the possibility to change everything if I could see even more. I roared the words out into the dark violence, words and story to change our journey under siege. □