

2000 Brookie & D. K. Brown Fiction Contest Starstone Winner

SKETCHING THE FIFTEENTH WARD

By Dawn Jeppesen Anderson

JANE DREW WHEN SHE WAS BORED. AND TODAY she was just about as bored as anyone could get, sitting in the third row from the back of the Fifteenth Ward chapel. Some members escaped the monotony of another church meeting by dozing in fits and starts. Even from her position in the back, she recognized when they had gone to sleep. The slumped posture, the nodding head, the slight tipping which was corrected with a sudden jerk. Others were erect with the kind of rapt attention possible only in the very pious. Were they really listening to the speaker? Were they really connecting with some higher plane? When she was in a position to see them, Jane could tell by their eyes. If the eyes were on fire, then so was the spirit. If the eyes were fixed, then so was the spirit.

She watched the young mothers wrestling children on and off the bench seats, dragging noisy toddlers in and out of the chapel until the doors were swinging like the kitchen entry of a truck-stop diner. Casting around for a suitable subject, Jane decided on the Claytons, two rows ahead.

They were easy enough to sketch. She drew a block above a suit to represent Brother Clayton's flat-top. Sister Clayton's hair was preposterously huge compared to her husband's. Jane penciled a big, shaggy mass, a towering combustible haystack of yellow tresses. Then she started on Tiffany.

Tiffany was a sturdy girl, and a perfect likeness of her mother: lipsticked *ad nauseum*, sweeping blonde hair shoved up in a sort of inverted waterfall, moussed spikes and tendrils exploding all over her scalp. In an unkind moment, Jane drew the girl with menacing eyes staring out of the back of her head. But that was not very professional, so she erased them.

There was a younger sister, yet another copy of the mother, only her hair was darker. Not smaller, just darker. And the youngest child, a boy of about eleven, completed the set. He

DAWN JEPPESEN ANDERSON has a bachelor's and a master's degree in English education and has taught writing and children's literature at BYU Idaho (formerly Ricks College), in Rexburg, Idaho, for the past eighteen years. She is passionate about Tolkien, John Irving, and Wendell Berry. She and her husband, Dave, have three boys.

and his father looked like small blocky bookends situated on either end of the family, propping up the hair queens.

Jane sketched away. The choir sang. A frazzled parent chased a small boy up behind the podium, which provided a moment of comic relief. The speaker made a joke about it, and the audience laughed tepidly. Jane leaned back, admiring her work. She did not show it to her parents—they would not approve. As long as they merely suspected doodling, they would leave her alone to draw.

Later, she showed the picture to her closest friends.

"The Claytons?" said one of them.

"And that one is Tiffany, right?" asked another.

Jane smiled, pleased that even the rear-view sketches were instantly recognizable.

Her brother was also able to identify the Claytons. Pretty soon, the sketch had circulated among many teenagers. Yet somehow, it remained outside the range of Tiffany Clayton's radar. But Tiffany got more compliments on her hair that week than she had ever had before. At first, she gushed. Then she became suspicious. She wasn't doing anything with her hair she didn't do every single day of every other week. She still washed it daily and applied several layers of mousse and superhold sculpting sprays. Even Tiffany knew that if her hair had not garnered praise in the past, then it should not be the subject of everyone's attention for this one particular week. Besides, the compliments had a slight edge of disingenuousness to them.

"What's wrong with my hair?" she demanded of her boyfriend one day.

"Nothing, why?" he asked.

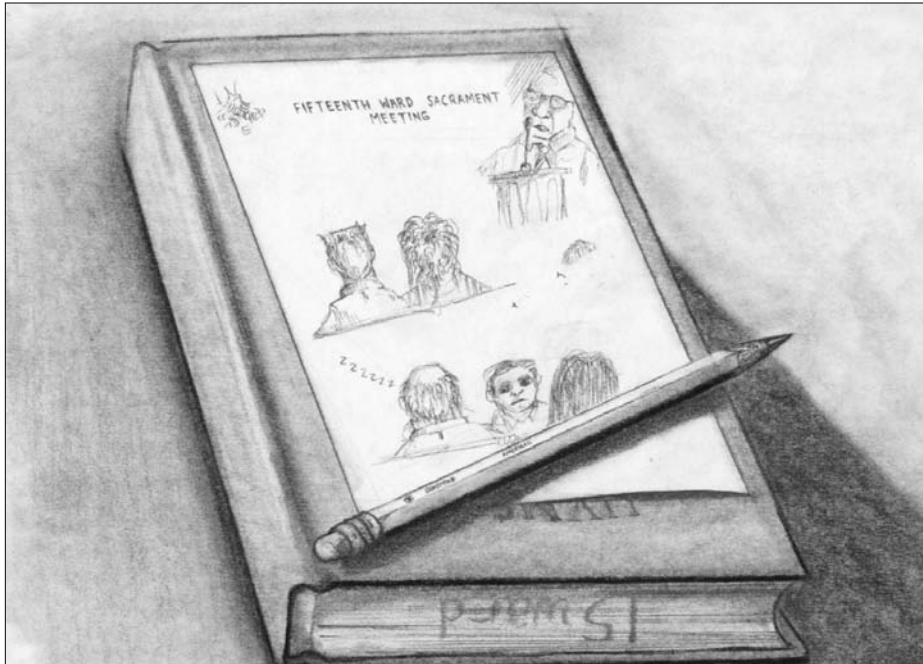
His friend sniggered, "It's so . . . so . . . large."

She slammed her locker and would not ride home with her boyfriend and his creep friend.

"What's wrong with my hair?" she whined to her mother.

Sister Clayton smiled and laughed, assuming a joke. When she saw her daughter's twisted expression, she said, "Oh, sweetheart. Your hair is beautiful." Of course, the mother's hair was exactly like the daughter's, like two mirrors faithfully reflecting each other.

Then Sister Clayton reached up to touch her daughter's



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stiffened tendrils and said, “Do we need to schedule you for some more highlighting? I’ll call Misty and see if we can get you in tomorrow.” Tiffany had her hair highlighted to the tune of \$40 worth of strong-smelling chemicals, and for a while, she felt better.

Jane, meanwhile, decided to do another sketch. It was a wonderful way to pass the time in church. She became quite good at hair textures, as most of her work portrayed the backs of people’s heads. She tried drawing Sister Limpel’s face in Young Women’s, and the likeness was remarkable, but it wasn’t as easy or compelling as sketching the back of her short, dark hair. So she drew another rearview of Sister Limpel’s family during sacrament meeting. Brother Limpel was almost bald, and Jane struggled at first to depict the amazing reflection off his scalp. The Limpel children were all over the place during the meeting, and so she sketched them as shifting, dark-headed blobs.

Her collection of sketches grew. The Andersons and their three boys were famous for sleeping through the meetings, and Jane piled them into a lumpy pyramid of tilting heads. All six of the tall, wealthy Petersons she drew with swan-like necks and graceful, angular shoulders. The Borahs, on the other hand, made an interesting study in shape and proportion. Sister Borah was small as a mouse, with fly-away hair that looked, from the back, remarkably like whiskers. Brother Borah was a massive man and perfectly symmetrical. His shoulders had no definition—they were simply large, sloping arcs that started at his wide, wide neck and curved in a perfect hemisphere down to the bench seat. Their one child was not quite symmetrical but broad as a melon in her purple print dress. All of the figures Jane drew ended abruptly where the back of the benches began, like portraits limited by the size of the picture frame, like puppets cut off at the shoulder blades. Jane liked realism.

Her *rear-view portraits*, as she liked to call them, garnered quite a bit of attention from a few confidantes. Every Sunday, they would linger after the meeting and play a game of guess-the-back-of-the-head.

“The Hansens.”

“No, it’s the Christensens. Sister Hansen has lighter hair, doesn’t she?”

“Well, this is Brenda Davis. I saw you staring at her the whole meeting.”

Jane enjoyed the attention. Short, bespectacled girls with short, water-thin hair take it when they can get it.

Once, Jane’s father noticed her sketching away and, more out of stiffness than curiosity, craned his neck back and looked long and languidly at her rendition of Brother Bartle. He noted for just a moment how Jane looked up, looked down, looked up, looked down, applying detail and dimension to the portrait. When her father made the connection between the unwitting model and the sneaky teenager recording the image, he smiled to himself, admiring her resourcefulness, but didn’t give it another thought until they passed the sacrament and Jane was still sketching. He put a hand on her shoulder and gave her the look which meant cease and desist.

Her parents mentioned this obsession with art once or twice, and she assured them she did it to pass the time. Doodling, she told them. Helped her think about what the speaker was saying. And this was true. Words and ideas and platitudes drifted in and out of her head until it was difficult for her to distinguish between her own ruminations and the speaker’s.

“The scriptures tell us that John the Baptist lived in the wilderness among the beasts. . . .”

Jane drew Brother John Webster with a shaggy mane and replaced his white shirt with a hairy animal skin. Realism gave way to primitive interpretation.

"I knew the Lord guided my companion and me to that couple. . . ."

Jane sketched the sister missionaries on the second row with divining rods protruding from their skulls.

"I want all the little ones in my Primary class to know how much I love each and every one of them. . . ."

She penciled the six Sunbeams as insects, arranging them on a bench seat like an entomologist. One was a butterfly; one, a ladybug; one, a bumblebee; a grasshopper; a caterpillar; and the last one she sketched as a spider with horrible spindly legs and twelve eyes on top of his head. That would be Taylor McBride. Jane thought he was a brat.

The sketching of the Fifteenth Ward continued for some time, maybe two months. Even the Young Women's program, rehearsed for several weeks with much anguish and gnashing of teeth among the leaders, did not deter Jane.

By the time everything was rehearsed to death and the program ready for launch, Grace Peterson knew, second-hand, about Jane's drawings. Even at fifteen, Grace already had her father's height and her mother's looks.

"Like she's got nothing better to do, drawing her stupid little pictures. What's she got against me? Like *grow up* already." She rolled her eyes at her sister. The two girls slid from the back seat of the Petersons's Lexus, and the sister made a joke about Jane. Giggling behind their hands, they leaned on each other all the way into the church. Later, on the stand where the Young Women would stage their program, Grace stooped from her elegant six-foot altitude and adjusted her stocking, casting a sidelong glance at Jane.

Jane sat with one leg crossed over her knee, chewing on her pencil eraser and slumped so far into the folding chair it practically engulfed her. One sandaled foot pumped up and down like a piston. People filed into the chapel, milled about like so many restless mall shoppers, and finally settled into their seats. Jane fidgeted during the sacrament, using a tiny pink sharpener to shave little curls from her pencil.

At a signal from Sister Limpel, the Young Women stood and piped a raspy version of "Beautiful Savior." The song was followed by a series of thumps and squeaks as the girls dropped into their hinged chairs. Grace Peterson glided forward. Jane could see the girl's effect by a sudden restlessness among every teenage boy in the congregation. Grace reached for the microphone with a slender hand, adjusting it to her remarkable height. In a delicate gesture, she swept back her long, amber hair. She opened her scriptures. She adjusted the microphone again. The suspense was palpable, even painful. Murmuring bashfully, she said "Our theme for this Young Women's program is 'The Lord Looketh upon the Heart.'" Grace's talk was spare. Jane had a hard time attending to the few details, as did everyone else. "We should accept people for who they are—for the Lord looketh not on outward appearances," Grace breathed quietly into the microphone. Jane noted the many eyes that followed as she returned to her seat.

Tiffany Clayton practically skipped to the podium and chirped her way through a story from the *New Era*. Her blonde locks were taller and stiffer than usual—extra plumage for the

occasion. She giggled often and, nervous as a pigeon, shifted her weight from foot to foot, her shoulders bobbing. Her hair was the only part of her which remained immobile through the entire talk.

Jane's pencil flew: the Young Women's Program 2000 captured in interpretive pencil art for future generations. *Better than photographs, ladies and gentlemen, this is real art, the real thing, baby. A keepsake you will always treasure.* But there was one speaker whom Jane did not sketch, mainly because she was the speaker. Still clutching the pencil and notebook, she unfolded herself and shuffled to the podium.

"My talk today is consistent with the theme of love and acceptance," she stammered. Her voice came back to her a thousand ways in a thousand fragments of echo and distortion. Jane could hardly bear the sea of faces—there were so many faces—dizzying, leering. She much preferred her place in the back of the chapel with rows upon rows of heads turned forward and away. While she spoke, Jane looked up and looked down at her notes, looked up and looked down, but she did not focus on the words she had written. She sketched instead, swiftly, nervously—not anything in particular, just circles and squares and triangles and sloppy bugs and fountains. It was hard to do anything, standing in front of all those faces, all those judges.

When the speech ended, Jane was spent, her hand cramping. She could not remember what she had said, only the relief at being able to collapse into her seat. But after a few minutes, she revived, shook out her wrist. Two leaders spoke at the microphone, giving short testimonials of service in the Young Women's program and the gratitude they felt for working with such beautiful girls filled with the light of Christ. A member of the bishopric followed, reiterating all that had been said already: such beautiful girls, such beautiful spirits.

JANE MISSED THE following Sunday. She told her mother she was ill, but the truth was she could not bear to look into people's faces or have them look into hers, telling her what a great talk she had given, what a beautiful spirit she was. While the rest of the family went off to church, she stayed home and evaluated her artwork from all the Sundays before, all the sketches of the Young Women's program. The member of the bishopric she had illustrated with a white string knotted exactly at the back of his head to indicate the mask he presented to the congregation. The first counselor, Sister Nye, spoke with such airy enthusiasm that Jane replaced the woman's head with a large, transparent balloon. As a clever bonus, she had drawn a CTR symbol on the balloon, backwards but plainly visible to the listeners. And while Jane attempted an honest representation of Sister Limpel, she messed up the proportions of the president's head. She gave up and rolled the lead point around and around on the paper until the dark, helmet hair became a bowling ball—glossy, impenetrable, and pocked with three holes.

Jane's sketch of Grace Peterson was pretty generous, considering the others. She faithfully rendered Grace's shining hair, but then sketched the girl with an unbelievably long neck that

craned forward over the microphone. Long enough, surely, to give the boys a real start.

She hadn't needed to think twice about drawing Tiffany Clayton. She laughed aloud when she picked up the sketch. In place of Tiffany's head was a shooting, tumbling fountain springing up from the neck of her fashionably undersized dress. All water and air.

Jane spread the pictures out on her bed and pointed judgmentally at each one of them, proclaiming aloud, "The Lord looketh upon the heart. The Lord looketh upon the heart." Gathering the little papers into a pile, she mused at the sudden strangeness of it all. She knew every one of these people. Every head in the Fifteenth Ward was familiar to her. And yet none of them, not one, not even her parents or her brother or her best friend knew Jane. She made a face and smashed the pile with her fist, scattering the sketches like leaves across her bedspread. Then she stood and walked to the vanity table and dropped heavily into the chair. There was still one more sketch to finish. Jane looked for a long time at her reflection. And for a long time, the girl in the mirror stared back. She lifted some of her thin brown hair, bobbed in a straight line at the chin, and let it fall. Then she removed her glasses and leaned forward, squinting.

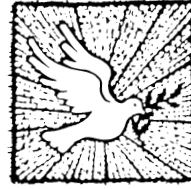
She could fix all this. On paper, she could make everything right. So Jane put her glasses back on and sketched. Her mind swirled with every doctrine, every platitude about self-worth she had ever heard. Words and random thoughts and more words merged into a spiral, like a pencil point, pulling a watery gray line closer and closer to the center of a page. She worked rapidly, feverishly. Finished at last, she taped her art to the mirror and collapsed on the bed.

When Jane's mother came in later and found her asleep and snoring softly, tossed out on the mattress like a garment, she walked over and laid a hand across the girl's neck, checking for fever. Curious, she nudged the wastebasket full of sketches with her foot and peered down at its contents. The depictions were very odd—people with balloons and bowling balls for heads. Jane muttered in her sleep and shifted on the bed. At that moment her mother noticed the picture on the vanity mirror. She reached out and peeled it away.

It was a detailed pencil sketch of Jane—at least it appeared to be Jane. She sank onto the bed by the snoring girl, clutching the paper.

Strange. Why would Jane sketch herself this way? How did she even do it, the mother wondered. And, as if she could find the answer there, she leaned toward the vanity mirror, envisioning how Jane might accomplish this image of herself. Why would anyone want to sketch the *back* of her own head? Absently, she stroked Jane's hair and sat staring at the mirror. She considered the sketches in the trash and almost added Jane's portrait to the rest, but on second thought, rose and pressed the paper back onto the vanity mirror.

Downstairs, someone banged through a couple of kitchen cupboards, looking for food. She tugged the corner of the bedspread over her daughter's shoulders and crept from the room. The roast must be done by now, she decided. ☞



RETURNING TO NORTH BRANCH

There's a low field in North Branch
where the grass, once two feet
with whip sharp tips
too slack for a switch,
has now come to nothing.

I'm facing southwest
where cows lag in cliques
across the summer field:
two beats beyond the electric
fence, cows drift near the road
to one low note of language,

Up deep from black/white
canvas stretched over each notch
of spine, mocking the far off barns
where crushed corn spills on
patches of standing water.

In that house near the edge,
equidistant to road and river,
my brother and I rhymed,
and my mother grew blue lilacs
which nearly beat the smell of field.

And to the cows
tracking through shit now
with ribs showing
like a stack of boomerangs,
turning back, I'll concede:
I am not the farmer. Not the mover.

—CHRISTOPHER SALERNO