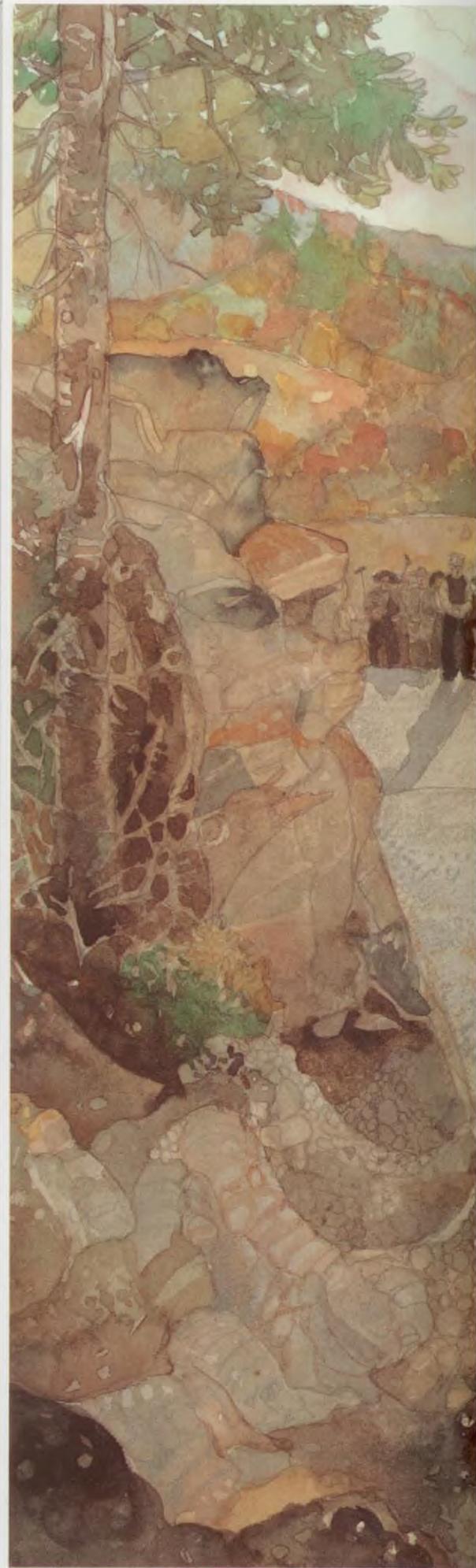
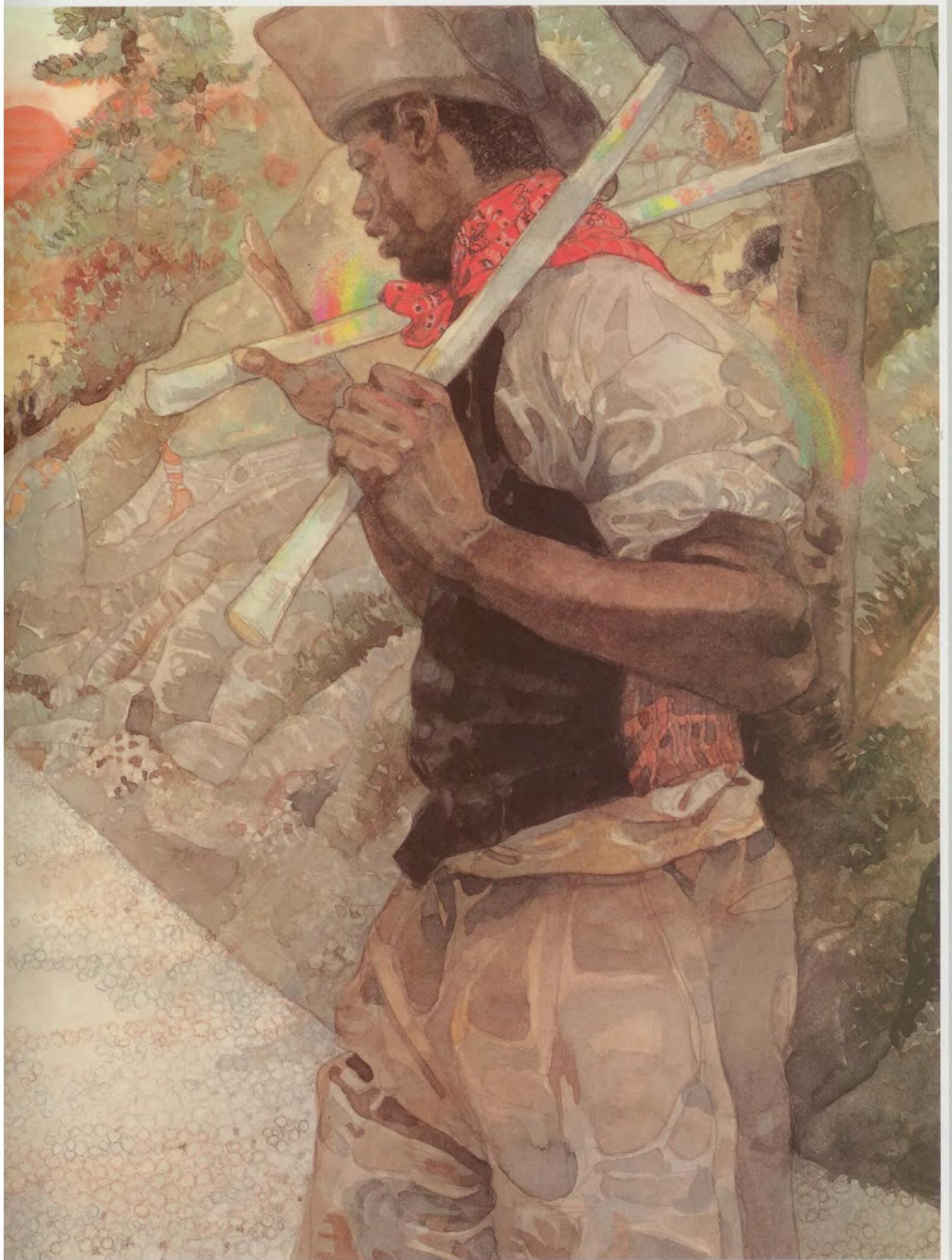


John Henry sang and he hammered  
and the air danced and the rainbow  
shimmered and the earth shook and  
rolled from the blows of the hammer.  
Finally it was quiet. Slowly the dust  
cleared.

Folks could not believe their eyes.  
The boulder was gone. In its place was  
the prettiest and straightest road they  
had ever seen. Not only had John Henry  
pulverized the boulder into pebbles, he  
had finished building the road.

In the distance where the new road  
connected to the main one, the road crew  
saw John Henry waving good-bye, a  
hammer on each shoulder, the rainbow  
draped around him like love.





John Henry went on his way. He had heard that any man good with a hammer could find work building the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad through West Virginia. That was where he had been going when he stopped to build the road.

The next day John Henry arrived at the railroad. However, work had stopped. The railroad tracks had to go through a mountain, and such a mountain. Next to it even John Henry felt small.

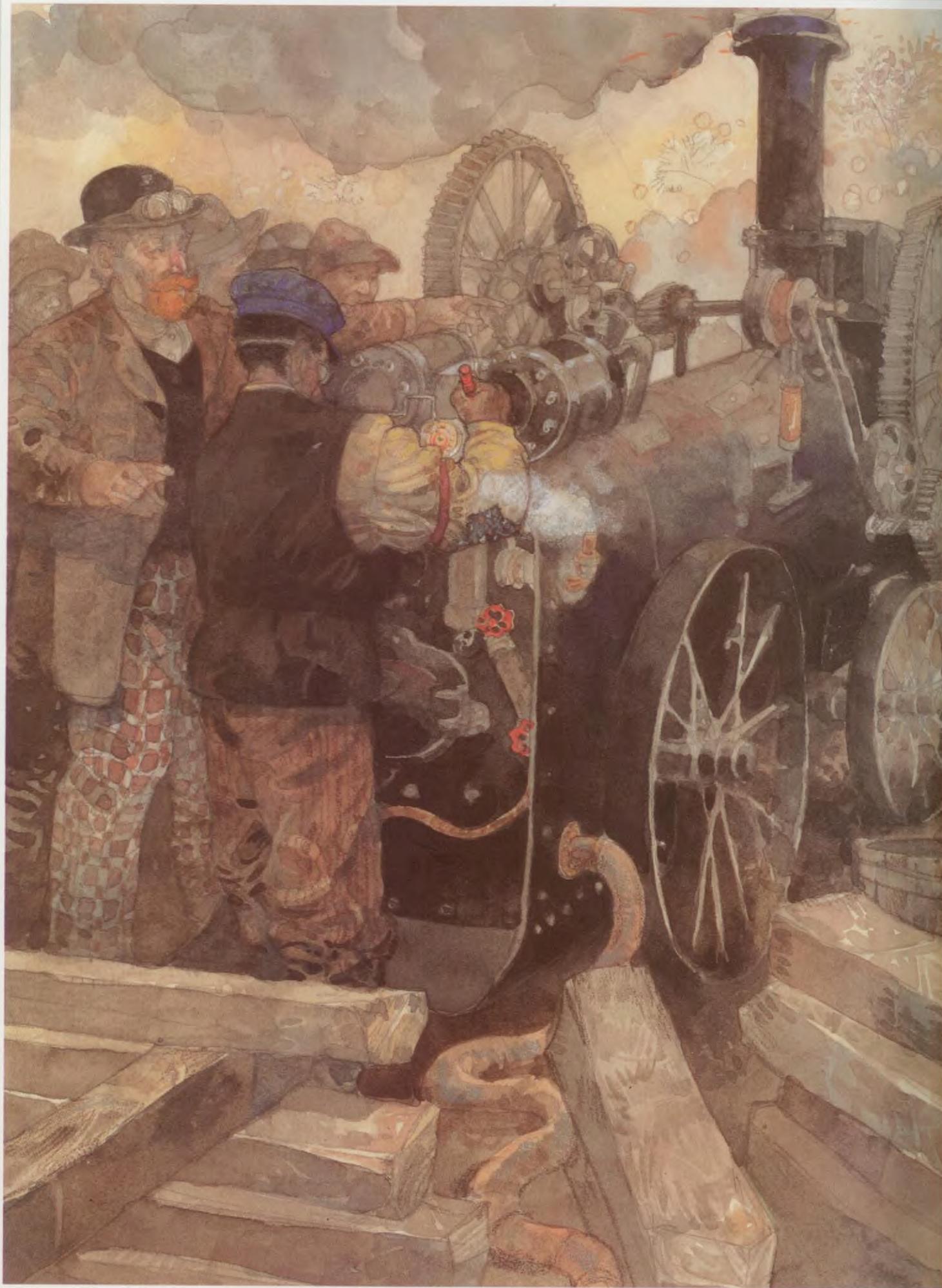
But a worker told John Henry about a new machine they were going to use to tunnel through the mountain. It was called a steam drill. "It can hammer faster and harder than ten men and it never has to stop and rest."

The next day the boss arrived with the steam drill. John Henry said to him, "Let's have a contest. Your steam drill against me and my hammers."

The man laughed. "I've heard you're the best there ever was, John Henry. But even you can't outhammer a machine."

"Let's find out," John Henry answered.

Boss shrugged. "Don't make me no never mind. You start on the other side of the mountain. I'll start the steam drill over here. Whoever gets to the middle first is the winner."





The next morning all was still. The birds weren't singing and the roosters weren't crowing. When the sun didn't hear the rooster, he wondered if something was wrong. So he rose a couple of minutes early to see.

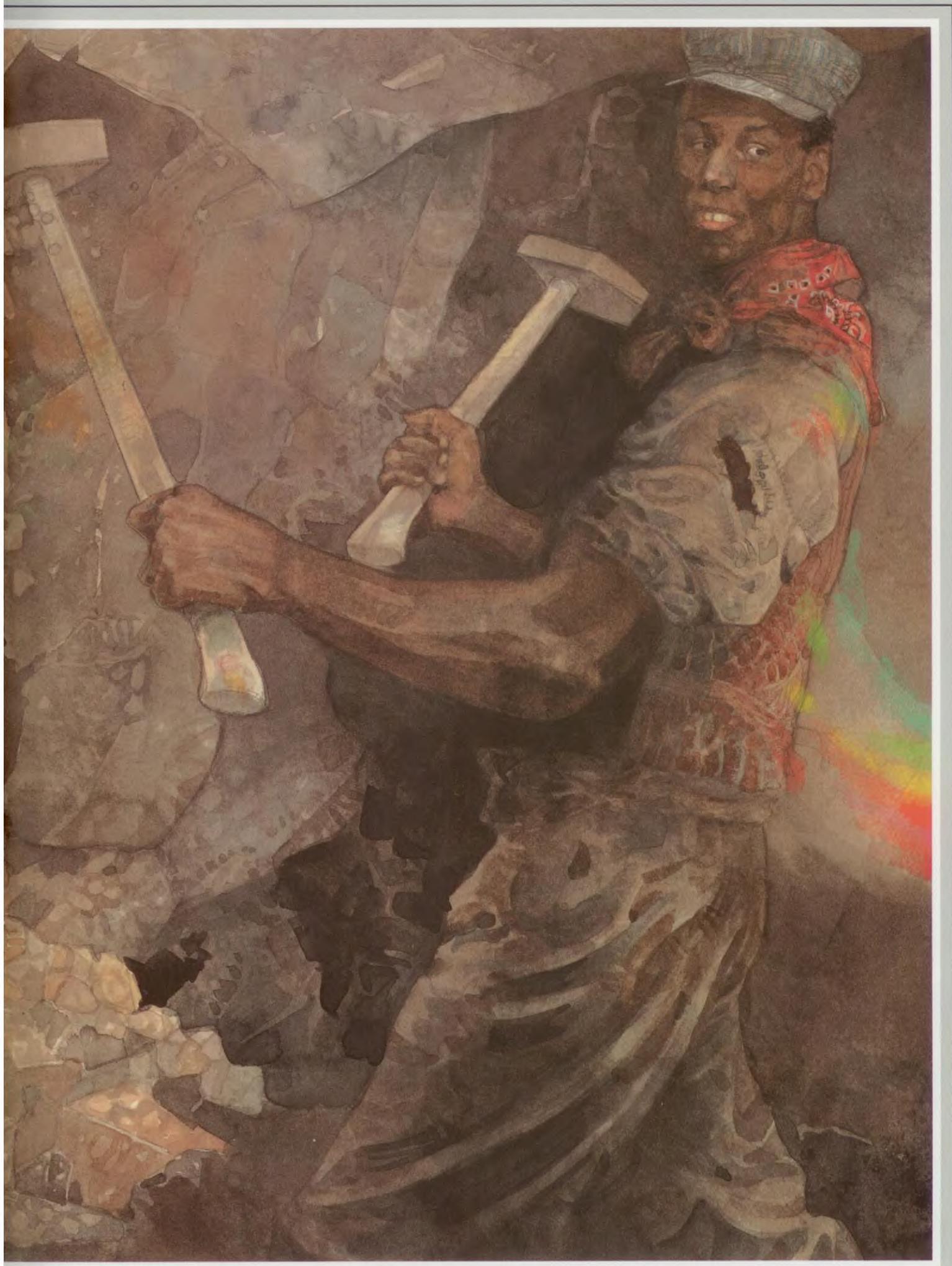
What he saw was a mountain as big as hurt feelings. On one side was a big machine hooked up to hoses. It was belching smoke and steam. As the machine attacked the mountain, rocks and dirt and underbrush flew into the air. On the other side was John Henry. Next to the mountain he didn't look much bigger than a wish that wasn't going to come true.

He had a twenty-pound hammer in each hand and muscles hard as wisdom in each arm. As he swung them through the air, they shone like silver, and when the hammers hit the rock, they rang like gold. Before long, tongues of fire leaped out with each blow.

On the other side the boss of the steam drill felt the mountain shudder. He got scared and hollered, "I believe this mountain is caving in!"

From the darkness inside the mountain came a deep voice: "It's just my hammers sucking wind. Just my hammers sucking wind." There wasn't enough room inside the tunnel for the rainbow, so it wrapped itself around the mountain on the side where John Henry was.





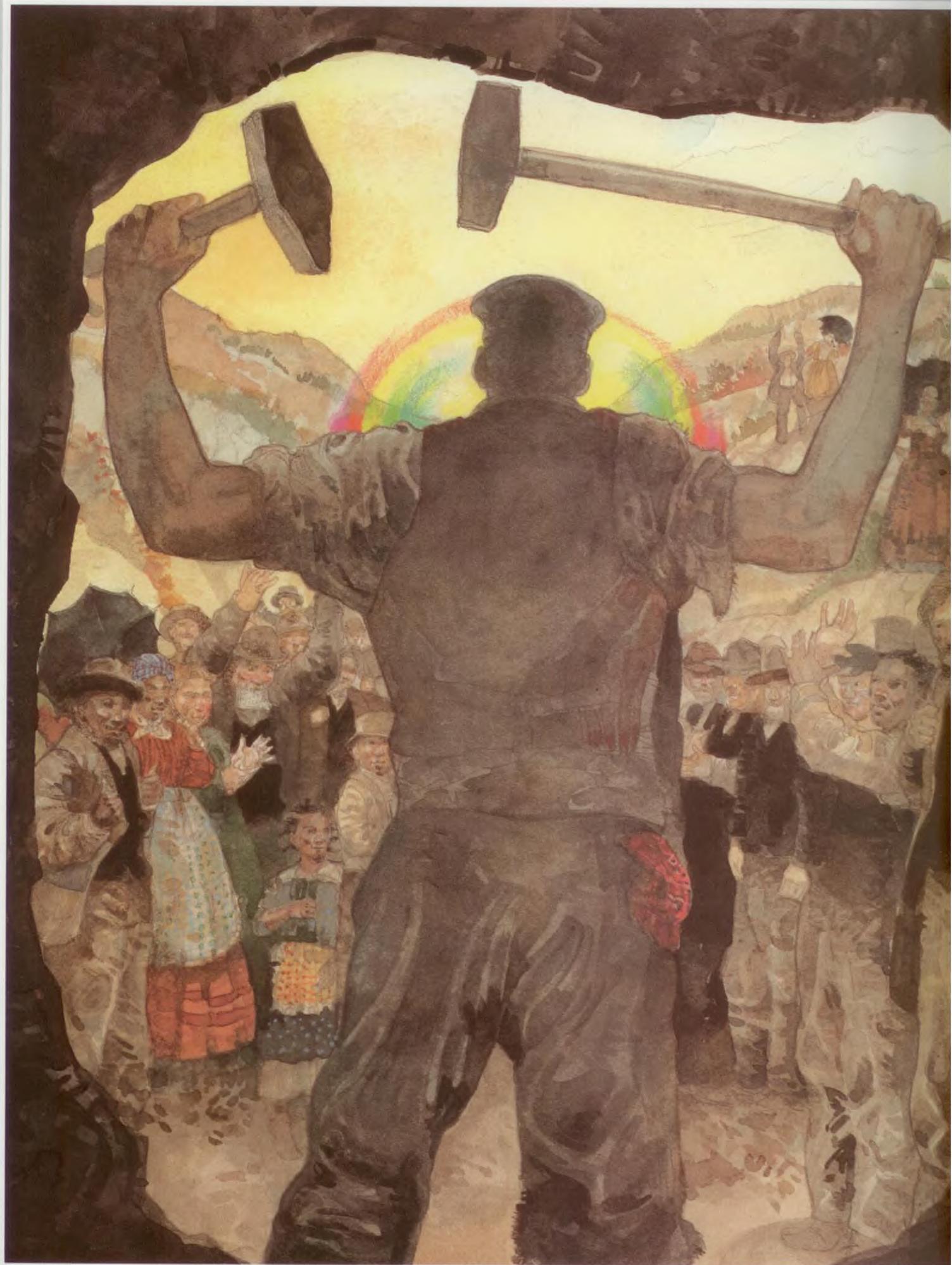


All through the night John Henry and the steam drill went at it. In the light from the tongues of fire shooting out of the tunnel from John Henry's hammer blows, folks could see the rainbow wrapped around the mountain like a shawl.

The sun came up extra early the next morning to see who



was winning. Just as it did, John Henry broke through and met the steam drill. The boss of the steam drill was flabbergasted. John Henry had come a mile and a quarter. The steam drill had only come a quarter.



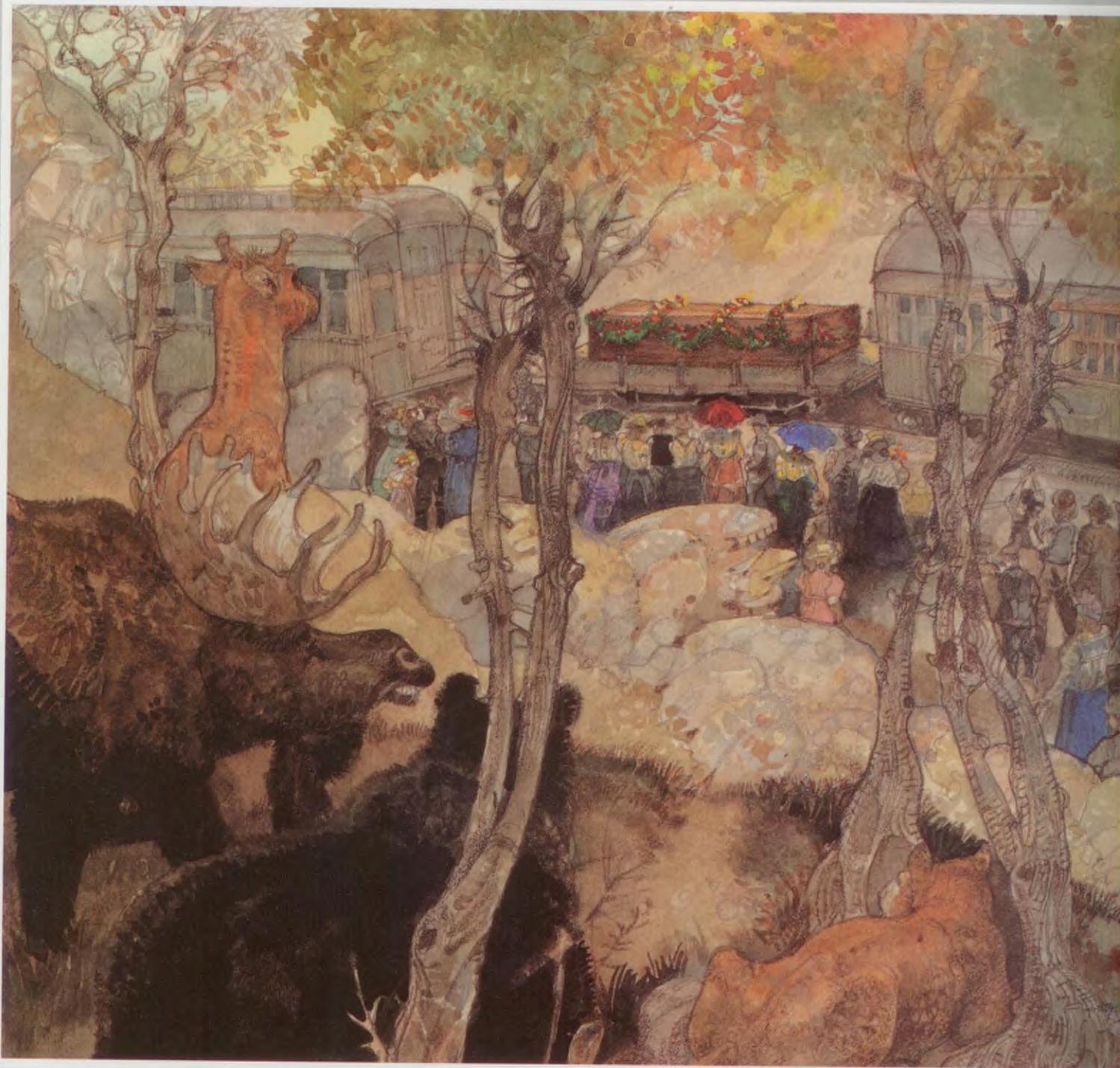


Folks were cheering and yelling, “John Henry! John Henry!”

John Henry walked out of the tunnel into the sunlight, raised his arms over his head, a hammer in each hand. The rainbow slid off the mountain and around his shoulders.

With a smile John Henry’s eyes closed, and slowly he fell to the ground. John Henry was dead. He had hammered so hard and so fast and so long that his big heart had burst.

Everybody was silent for a minute. Then came the sound of soft crying. Some said it came from the moon. Another one said she saw the sun shed a tear.



Then something strange happened. Afterward folks swore the rainbow whispered it. I don't know. But whether it was a whisper or a thought, everyone had the same knowing at the same moment: "Dying ain't important. Everybody does that. What matters is how well you do your living."

First one person started clapping. Then another, and another. Soon everybody was clapping.



The next morning the sun got everybody up early to say good-bye to John Henry. They put him on a flatbed railroad car, and the train made its way slowly out of the mountains. All along the way folks lined both sides of the track, and they were cheering and shouting through their tears:

“John Henry! John Henry!”

John Henry’s body was taken to Washington, D.C.



Some say he was buried on the White House lawn late one night while the President and the Mrs. President was asleep.

I don't know about none of that. What I do know is this: If you walk by the White House late at night, stand real still, and listen real closely, folks say you just might hear a deep voice singing:

I got a rainbow  
RINGGGG!RINGGGG!  
Tied round my shoulder  
RINGGGG!RINGGGG!  
It ain't gon' rain,  
No, it ain't gon' rain.  
RINGGGG!RINGGGG!