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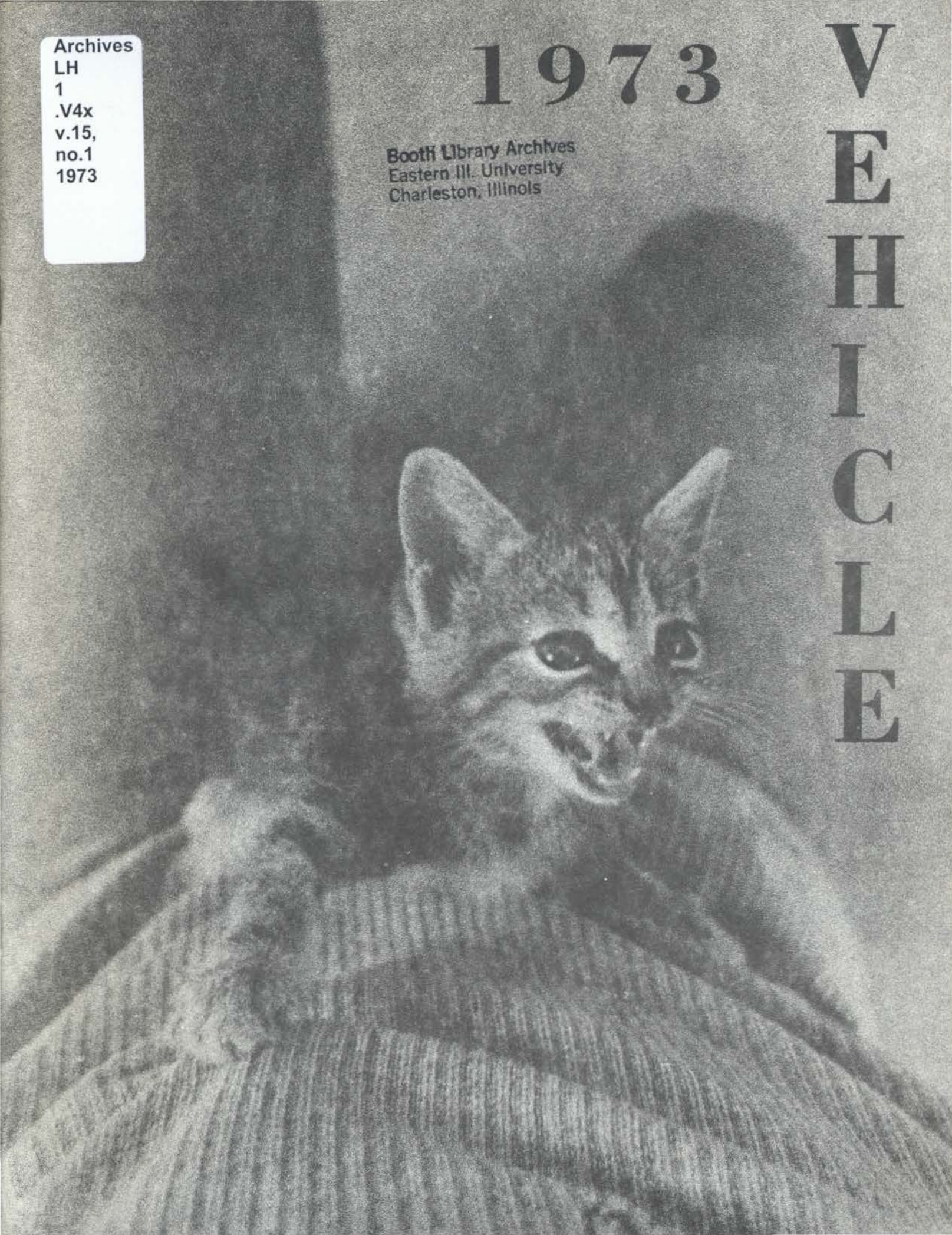
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VEHICLE

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Charleston, Illinois

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Hail to the Cheeks of Men

As he walks, the cheeks of his buttocks bounce up
slapping his lower back, forming a crease and waist in the middle.
Hips so friendly, the creases below the fullness
fill out wrinkles in his pants
turning up in two half moons side by side, and smile
to anyone following behind.
Men have such perfect bottoms, as if
a great sculptor molded each one in perfection.

I've never known of one to spread, grow flabby from just sitting.
A man can prance in such a way to whittle off the bulk.
But each rump holds enough to jiggle to the middle.
When he runs, the muscles in his thighs
etch through the stretching skin – like a horse's legs in stride.
I trace each ligament and tendon with my fingernail.

With both my hands, I like to clasp
and squeeze both cheeks of flesh, like testing heads of lettuce for firmness.
While his hollow pelvis sockets
sunk in each cheek when he is making love,
my fingers stroke the small amount of coarse dark hair
against the grain of how it grows,
then smooth it flat again.
In doing so, I grasp
the rhythm of one man.

Sister Eleanor's Gray Friends

When god and everyone else was asleep, secure,
Eleanor, lighting her candle, dust-smelling of jasmine,
Coaxed the shadows on plaster to follow her
Moving smoothly in time to tallow drops burn.
A classic composer blessed her with music
Seeping into her ear, an electric illusion.
The silk gown dropped on the floor, toes bent and quick,
She spun with the earth in perfect communion.
Orbiting Eleanor, not noticing my quilt-hidden squint,
Balleted on her toes with eloquent poise; then
Snuffing the candle, she breathed back the night,
Crawling in blackness, candle-warm with no noise,
God and everyone else, sun-smashed, awoken;
Eleanor, weary, her gray friends forsaken.



The Typing Teacher

Rahel's '59 Chevy was parked in front of the restaurant. Karen tried to peer through the venetian blinds into Janssen's Cafe, around the neon tubes spelling out "Steaks" and "Chops," to see if Rahel was inside. Ruth continued chatting carelessly. She noticed Karen's search for the blond senior track star, but she chose to ignore it. Later they would have Pepsi's and french fries at Janssen's. Karen could giggle and flutter her eyelashes then.

Mrs. Hutson, business teacher, past matron of Eastern Star, and elder in the Presbyterian church, sighed as she walked along behind the girls, her spike heels clicking with a sharp echo. Their destinations were the same.

A stucco building, long ago a hardware store, condemned for several years, now painted the color of iron rust, housed the community teen center. Karen and Ruth pushed open the heavy doors, fumbling in their plastic shoulder purses for the one dollar admission fee. Mrs. Hutson followed. A hand-painted poster on the glass door announced "Battle of the Bands - Five Bands from Five Cities - Free Cokes - Door Prizes - 7 P.M. to 2 A.M." Similar posters had been on the walls of the high school auditorium and study hall for three weeks, advertised as the event of the century, and student response had justified the claim. The day the president of the student body had put up the first poster, Mrs. Hutson did some figures in her head and discovered exactly what she hoped she would not - that that particular evening she would be responsible for her turn at chaperoning the weekly teen center dance. Knowing none of the other teachers would trade with her for any reason, she resigned herself to the duty. Not that she would ever let anyone on the staff forget how she had martyred herself.

The windowless building was hot, dripping with the humidity and the sweat of hundreds of noisy, excited young people, crushed against tables, walls and each other. Three of the five bands were tuning guitars and organs, testing microphones and amplifiers. Low bass notes from the platform at the back of the narrow, darkened room caused a small thud in the center of Mrs. Hutson's stomach. From nearer the middle of the room came an electronic scream, low pitched, then higher, louder, piercing, stopping. Across the dirty tile floor a young man with hair to his shoulders and a peculiarly handsome, unshaven face blew into a floor mike, creating a rasping thunder. The building grew still hotter, still tighter, still noisier. More guitars were tuned, more amplifiers squealed. The scales of an electric piano mingled with cymbals and experimental drum rolls, and deep voices mumbling "Testing 1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . ." The teenagers continued to arrive, in couples, in crowds, oblivious to the chaos, merely raising their voices in competition with the bands and with one another. They smiled and hugged and moved quickly through the thick mob. Karen and Ruth eyed the band member with the unshaven face and nudged each other.

Mrs. Hutson slipped her sweater from her shoulders and hung it among nylon and denim jackets on the pipe in the corner near the door, and read the No Smoking sign in dismay.

"Hi, Mrs. Hutson!" Still more students arrived, typing students, shorthand students - she knew them only as flying fingers, some quicker than others. She nodded and gave them her tight "Good morning, children" smile. Already they were a

part of the crowd where 75 words a minute didn't matter, and they didn't see her smile.

On a high shelf above the band from Urbana a tiny electric fan waved its head back and forth uselessly like a cretin slave bowing obediently to its unseen master. A red blur in a metal cage, a blue blur, a green blur as it faced the different paper lanterns hung without pattern from pipes and empty ceiling fixtures.

"Wanta chair, Mrs. Hutson?"

"Pardon me?"

"I said, you wanta chair? I think I could getcha chair." Roger Davies. She knew him as big awkward hands, as a constant pile of keys welded together, and as a careful worker.

"Oh, do you think you could, Roger? I'd appreciate that so much."

Roger Davies produced from the din and the heat and the entanglement of blue jeans, a battered wooden chair, painted in blue enamel, upholstered in yellow vinyl. A back slat was missing, and one leg was shorter than the other three. When Mrs. Hutson sat, the chair tipped violently. She flung her arms out to Roger Davies and giggled. He popped his gum between his front teeth.

"I could prob'ly getcha somethin' to stick under it. You know, so it won't teeter." He transferred his hands from his back pockets to the front pockets, swiped the base of his nose with the thick knuckles of his right hand and slipped his thumb into a belt loop before returning both hands to the back pockets. "You know, a book or somethin'."

"No, no, Roger, thank you," Mrs. Hutson was careful to stretch her thin lips over her teeth as she smiled. "This is fine. Thank you very much."

Ruth's disembodied voice filtered through the crowd.

"Come on, Roger," an insistent, whiny voice. In the heat, along with the deep thuds of base drums being dragged onto platforms, it grated against Mrs. Hutson's skin like nails on a chalkboard. Without another word, Roger Davies pivoted and wound his way into the crowd. Mrs. Hutson continued to smile stiffly, watching the children, the fan, the whirling lights, the busy bands. She was startled when she noticed the unshaven microphone-blower staring at her. She looked away quickly, studied her carefully manicured cuticles, the brown spots on the web of skin between her thumb and forefinger. She hated those brown spots; she turned her palms upward or her lap and allowed her eyes to wander back to the young man. Still he stared. Such long hair; no wonder he leaves the stubble on his face - it keeps him from looking like a girl. The thought amused her, but she had lost her smile. He stepped down from the platform, slender in tattered jeans, and wandered among the people steadily toward her. She felt heat in her earlobes, perspiration along her hairline. Her hands began to shake slightly, like the first day of school, and she rolled her fingers down, covering them protectively with her thumbs.

"Teacher?" he shouted before he was quite through the crowd. "Hey, teacher. Do you know where an extension cord is?"

She looked up at him. He was not tall, but somehow he towered, seeming to dwarf everyone else in the room. His eyes were dark, bright beneath slightly lowered eyelids, not darting

nervously like those of Roger Davies, but coolly set on Mrs. Hutson's face.

"My name is not 'teacher,' young man."

"How the hell do I know what your name is? You're a teacher, aren't you? All I want to know is . . ."

"Until you can speak to me civilly, young man, I have no intention of answering your questions."

"I only have one question, ma'am." it hurt him to say it: it also amused him.

"Yes, young man." It was Monday morning and the class hadn't settled down yet, but he had finally raised his hand, and she did him the favor of recognizing him.

"I want to know, do you know where an extension cord is around here? A long one with three prongs."

"Young man, I am not staff and maintenance, I am merely the chaperone."

"Then you don't know whether they've got an extension cord or not."

"No, young man, I do not."

"Well, thank you, teacher, for answering my question. You've been a great help." He turned to go back the way he had come. His black hair shone red and green as the lights spun. She didn't want him to leave. He frightened her, he insulted her, he revolted her; but he had occupied her for a moment, and now that he was again one body in a forest of bodies, she realized how totally alone she felt. She stood abruptly, the three-legged chair almost unbalancing her.

"Young man!" she doubted the ability of her thin voice to battle the guitars and organs. She called again and started to follow him. As though it were a power in and of itself, the crowd drove her back toward her feeble blue chair.

"You call me?"

She jumped noticeably. The chair balanced on two legs momentarily.

"Did you call me, teacher?"

She winced at the title he had bestowed upon her.

"I didn't think you had heard me," she pulled her lips between her teeth before smiling. "You startled me."

"Sorry. What did you call me back about?"

"Oh, I just thought. That fan up there," she pointed until he saw it. "It probably has an extension cord. I mean, it would just about have to have one, being way up there the way it is. I don't know if it's the kind you want, but I'm sure you may have it if it is. The fan certainly isn't doing this room any good." Her laugh was lost in a sudden amplified squeal. He studied the fan until the squeal ended. His nose was thin, but not pointed like hers, and his eyebrows, she noticed, did not stop at his nose, but formed a steady black line below his forehead, a high smooth forehead devoid of blemish or scar.

"Yeah, well, it's probably only double-pronged, but I'll take a look," he grinned with crooked teeth. "See? You're okay, teacher. You really are. Thanks."

Across the dance floor his hair reflected blue light, shimmering like the aquarium in the teacher's lounge when all the lights were out and only the fluorescent lamp glowed below the bubbling surface of the water. He gently worked the plug from the baseboard outlet. Gradually the whirring began to slow, the senseless kow-towing of the wire cage faltered and then ceased altogether. The blades, now distinct and

individual, faced only the blue paper lanterns, gave out only blue light. He lithely climbed onto a table and removed the still fan from its perch.

For several moments he was gone: he, the fan and the extension cord inhaled into the crowd. When he did emerge, onto his band's platform, Mrs. Hutson noticed that the cord and he had survived the trip unscathed, but that the fan had somewhere along the way fallen victim to the mob. He spoke with the other members of the band, his smile bright. He pointed to the perch with a slender arm, then shrugged, tossing his lead guitarist the coiled cord and leaping once again from the platform.

"Hi, Mrs. Hutson. I didn't know you were chaperoning tonight." Janie Madison, a promising shorthand student, already consistently accurate at eighty words a minute, greeted her teacher with a grinful of braces.

"Good evening, Janie," Mrs. Hutson turned slightly, the chair rocked backward. Smiling rigidly, they observed each other wordlessly. Finally Janie made a move toward the crowd.

"See you later maybe, Mrs. Hutson."

"I hope so, Janie."

"So, it's Miss Hudson, is it, teacher?" again she was startled by the bass tones. "Listen, I just wanted to thank you for showing me the cord. It's just what we needed."

"Mrs. Hutson," she corrected in careful phonetics, "I'm glad you could use the cord."

"I just have one other question," he squatted before her, balancing on toes in oil-stained tennis shoes, nibbling on a thumbnail. She tugged her skirt over her knees abruptly, shifting her uncrossed legs away from him. "Is there a place in this town where you can get a cup of coffee and have a cigarette? We don't play til midnight and I'm about to die."

"Janssen's Cafe is just down the street. It's open until 10:30. There, on the east side of the square," she pointed a thin finger, its nail long and tapered and purplish red.

"Terrific," he helped himself with a hand on her knee. Her throat closed and her stomach became queasy. Inside her patent-leather shoes her toes had curled. "I'm going there right now and leave those dudes to set up for themselves."

"I envy you that cigarette," Mrs. Hutson ventured, after a deep breath.

"Yeah? Come over with me."

"Don't be ridiculous, young man," she giggled. "I am chaperoning this dance. I can't leave."

"Are you getting paid?"

"Well, of course not, but . . ."

"Then leave. Surely they don't expect you to stay put in that half-assed excuse for a chair until 2 A.M."

"No, no, I'm allowed two breaks," her words meandered, almost lost in the din. "But as long as the children are still arriving . . ."

"As long as the children are still arriving, teacher, the money-takers can look after them."

The money-takers - mere children themselves. The bank president's son whose college semester would not begin for another week, and the new student teacher in the history department so laden with eye-make-up she always appeared to be asleep.

"Come on, teacher," he urged, "before the real noise starts."

"It gets worse?"

"It gets worse," he smiled and offered his hand. She refused his aid, but studied his large, rough hand with the creases and lines of a hand well beyond his years, stained knuckles and short dirty fingernails. A strong hand, useless at a typewriter. Considering the odds of ever finding another hanger, she reluctantly left her sweater.

"Daniel," she said to the bank president's son, "I'm going to Janssen's for a few minutes. Do you think you can handle things until I get back?"

The bank president's son nodded and waved her on. Four years ago she had awarded his short, thick fingers an "A" and now he was on the Dean's list at the University.

The glass doors swung shut behind them, isolating them in the autumn night breeze and comparative quiet. Shielding himself from the wind, he huddled in the doorway and lit a cigarette with several matches. They crossed VanBuren Street against the light, and walked the half block to Janssen's Cafe wordlessly, watching their footsteps. Within her ears was a disturbing humming, like that of the television after midnight. She shook her head, but the sound persisted.

"Ears ringing?" he asked, holding open the cafe door as she passed before him. She nodded.

"Amos'll do that," he said. He followed her to a dark booth of cracked red plastic near the kitchen. "It'll go away in a while."

Only the fourth grade and science teachers from the grade school, the county clerk, and Dr. LaMonica's gossipy wife patronized Janssen's at the late hour, but Vic Janssen was fully staffed in anticipation of those under sixteen without cars who would flood the cafe during the band break. Vic, his grandson Rahel, and his nephew's sister Joyce would be waiting tables and drawing cokes. His son's wife Rowena and his grand-daughter would cook. For now the idle staff, along with its four bored customers seated below paint-by-number portraits of horses, worried quietly over Mrs. Hutson and her long-haired companion.

Rahel, tall with short blond curls and thick glasses, approached the back booth.

"Evening," he said, his hands inside his long white, grease-stained apron, his weight first upon one foot, then upon the other.

"Good evening, Rahel. I'll just have coffee." Mrs. Hutson lifted the heavy clasp of her black handbag, and, without opening it completely, she slipped her hand into it and found her Irish linen cigarette case.

"The same," nodded the young man. He lit a match and held it to the end of her long, thin cigarette. Rahel Janssen asked "Cream?" and, receiving no response, disappeared into the kitchen.

"You say the ringing will go away?" she flicked tiny ashes into a plastic tray advertising the local bowling alley.

"I bet I can guess what you teach," he reached to stab the butt of his cigarette into her ashes. "I bet you're a widowed English teacher — the kind hung up on sentence diagrams."

She scratched the bridge of her nose with her thumbnail.

"What makes you say that?"

Rahel set two heavy earthenware mugs before them, on

saucers chipped and discolored.

"Thank you," Mrs. Hutson stared down into the black coffee, blowing softly, watching white curls of steam slide across the surface of the liquid. Rahel rejoined his grandfather behind the counter.

"Just a guess," the young man said. "Am I right?"

"A divorced typing teacher," she said to the cup. "I suppose you were close."

"Divorced?" he tested the coffee against his lips and, returning the mug to its saucer, spilled a little over the edge.

"After a four-month marriage longer ago than I like to think about." She brought her head up and spoke harshly. "As though it were any business of yours."

"How long have you been teaching typing here?"

"Thirty years," she said proudly, adjusting her posture. "And shorthand for twenty-four."

"Shorthand. Jesus." He sipped at the coffee carefully.

The door squeaked open and three sloppily-dressed teenagers rushed in, noisy and panting.

"The back booth!" signaled Ruth, stopping to toss her nylon parka onto the wooden coatrack by the door.

"Somebody's already in the back booth," replied Roger Davies, snapping his chewing gum.

"Well, poop!" said Ruth, and Karen giggled. "We'll sit at the counter then. Hi, Mrs. Robinson. Hi, Mr. Lee!"

The grade school teachers gestured their reply greeting.

"Hi, Mr. Lee!" called Roger Davies, mounting a red vinyl stool and spinning himself around twice before ordering a coke from Rahel.

"Hi, Rahel," Karen said quietly with a secretive smile.

Rahel leaned down with his elbows on the counter.

"Old Lady Hutson's got her a boyfriend in the back booth," whispered the track star. "At least I guess it's a boy."

The young man spelled out "Tom" in the spilled coffee on the black table.

"I think they're staring at us, teacher," he said quietly.

No one had ever stared at her after 3:30. She made some unnecessary adjustments in her skirt, tugged at her sleeves, and rolled her cigarette out beside his.

"Well, I'm hardly surprised," she said. "I'm supposed to be chaperoning the dance — not sitting in Janssen's drinking coffee. Tom. Is that your name?"

He nodded. "Teacher, I don't like being stared at. And I really think I ought to get back to the guys."

"Wait," she said urgently, briefly touching two fingertips to his wrist. "I mean, I'm not done with my coffee yet. You wouldn't make me walk back all by myself, would you?"

"Teacher, you break my heart. Okay, but hurry it up if you can."

"It's so hot," she sipped delicately. After a pause, she asked, "Where are you from?"

"Indianapolis."

"Big city boy," she wrinkled her nose. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-two. How old are you?"

She pressed her lips together, glaring at him. He laughed and spun the ashtray with both hands.

"You don't have to answer that if you don't want to, teacher."

"You enjoy making fun of me, don't you, young man?"

"Oh, come on. You dig being made fun of or you wouldn't be a shorthand teacher. It's obviously your life goal to be made fun of."

"What do you mean by that?" she moved closer to the edge of the seat, grasping the side of the table with white, trembling fingers:

"You probably should lower your voice."

Conversation among the other patrons of the cafe had ceased. Ruth and Karen giggled quietly, the counter stools beneath them rattling.

"You know, of course, that I don't have to sit here listening to you insult me," Mrs. Hutson hissed, tapping a fingernail on the rim of her cup.

"Then why do you?" he asked. Beneath the veil of black lashes, his eyes were steady. She picked up the mug with both hands, the handle pointing toward him, and swallowed twice. Slowly she returned the cup to the cream-colored saucer, picked a napkin daintily between her thumb and forefinger from the black metal holder, and dabbed it at her crimson mouth. Tucking the cigarette case back into her handbag, snapping the clasp, she scooted to the edge of the booth.

"I think I'd better get back to the dance. Thank you for the coffee." She stood, smoothing her skirt, smiling with tight lips at Karen, Ruth, Rahel Janssen and Roger Davies. The young man stared at her, his lips parted slightly. He laughed and shook his head and stood up, forcing his way into his pocket. From a handful of change, he selected two dimes. One slid flat onto the table top, the other rolled until it bounced off the napkin dispenser and fell. He joined Mrs. Hutson at the door.

"You are a very rude young man," she whispered, as he held open the door for her.

"You conned me into paying for your coffee and I'm a very rude young man?" He hooked his thumbs into his back pockets and took long strides in order to keep up with her

short, quick steps.

"You invited me for coffee," she watched a car as it slowed at the corner, full of young people from out of town.

He started to reply as the car squealed onto VanBuren, but he remained silent. Outside the laundromat next door to the teen center, he stopped to light another cigarette. She waited, shivering in the wind. Over the match flame he studied her expensively made-up face, her tight red curls.

"What makes you want to teach, teacher? What are you offering those kids in there?" his voice was quiet.

She rubbed her arms briskly.

"Business is the fastest growing occupation in the United States today," her professionally practised first-day-of-school speech. "Typing and shorthand in high school can lead a young woman to a high-paying secretarial job; it can set a young man toward an executive position. The college-bound will use shorthand in lecture notes and typing for their term papers."

He leaned up against the wall of the laundry, a hand in his front pocket.

"What I mean, teacher, is what can you give these children of yours that you love so much that they couldn't get from any other typing teacher?" he aimed his half-smoked cigarette for the gutter; it rolled to the edge of the curb, glowing orange. "Tell me that, will you, teacher?" He walked past her and into the teen center without looking back.

The heat and the crowd were as she'd left them, even her broken blue chair remained undisturbed. A single band was present now, the band from Urbana under the blue light, its noise, if not music, at least forming a pattern. Carefully she lowered herself into the chair, smiling with perfectly straight, white teeth at the bank president's son, and began to mentally design Monday's lesson plan, wondering, only briefly, what had become of the fan.

Pensive Again

Unsure of why I have been known to cry in desperation from some strange inclination that has attempted to consume the very life from my being, i have groped through this maze of mysterious meaning, searching, seeking, my weary soul reaping, my mind unkeeping of peaceful thoughts.

Overshadowed by time, i have failed to find anyone truly kind to understand my restless, upheaving mind.

Yes, i repeat myself thus defeat myself over and over again.
The seeming futility of my existence resulting in subsistence to a lonely life has left me tired, weak, aloof from the phillistines.

Deceiving myself, leaving myself to the whims of mindless beings, i had been practically stripped of all the gifts that nature has seen fit for me.

In the last attempt to avoid contempt of the lift that swirled about me, i created a world of rock and stone, all my own, that few could see.

i existed there for quite some time dying everyday from a decaying mind. i wandered alone until i could see from the light of a star what had become of me: Instead of flesh, body and soul, i had become a continent of rock and stone.

During the day i was scorched by the sun, at night i froze unprotected, unable to run from my own nightmares.

The land was void of any life at all, there were no seasons, no spring, no fall.

But something happened that night as i huddled in fright as the sky rumbled above me. i was touched by something sharp yet soothing, almost unnerving: my deep seated yearning to be alone, a world apart from others.

As the morning dawned, i heard a soft euphonious song that existed where only silence once reigned. i listened intently to this beautiful song until i gathered courage to observe what stirred me. As i opened my eyes, i saw before me a soft glimmering peaceful entity; it was you, my love in the form of the sea.

i had no time to ask how or why or from where or whom you had come for you flowed around me, under me, through me, above me until i was submerged by your existence.

i realize now that you also created a world, but not alone for you were in need of stone to form you, support you,

for you were in need of stone to form you, support you, stone
to hold on to, to need you, attract you, repel you, praise
you, amaze you, worship you.

Of course, we created the same world, i the land, you
the sea. You gave me life and fertility, i gave you
substance and fertility, it is truly wonderful.

Our world is at peace, we are separate yet together, hard
yet soft, sturdy yet flowing, questioning yet understanding,
Companions and friends, potential lovers.



The Defense Man

No. 41's a defense man –
 For half the game
 He sits on
 green peeling benches
 touching
 half-frozen ears
 with
 gauze-wrapped hands
 And yells:
 GO DINO!

He wipes his face –
 The sandpaper towel
 drops
 A splash of grime that
 tints
 The blood
 oozing above
 His
 bruised left eye.
 He puts on a Curad
 And rubs
 His
 noble crooked nose,
 souvenir of
 63 of Iowa

Dino doesn't go
 but falls
 41 rings his hands
 hurting the
 blue-jammed finger
 on his
 spike-scarred hand.
 He yells:
 GO JIMMY!

Jimmy doesn't go
 41 paces
 He feels
 The strain
 on his
 over-battered leg
 The pull
 on his
 once-sprained ankle.

FOURTH DOWN:

His
 pigskin brain
 stirs his
 astro-turf heart
 as he
 Shakes his
 well-worn knees

Bites his
twice-swollen lip
Rubs his
once-stitched chin
And runs
To take his half.

Wedding Preparation

Sitting on the edge of the couch, she twirled a pen, occasionally drawing doodles on the notebook which lay in her lap. Michael, sprawled out on the couch, was engrossed in a football game.

"Hon, will you get me another coke?" He held the glass in her direction, keeping his eyes on the television.

"Sure. It's a good thing that I'm not an advocator of women's lib." Jennifer jumped up and headed for the refrigerator with the notebook still in her hand.

She pattered around the compact kitchen. She put the notebook on the counter as she opened the refrigerator. Taking out the ice tray, she began to crunch the ice just the way Mike liked it. As she waited for the hiss of the coke to go down, Jennifer thought aloud, "I wonder how long I'll enjoy these wifely duties? Planning a wedding is such a hassle. I'll be glad when it's over and done with." She refilled the ice tray and put it back into the freezer. As she turned to pick up the drink, she remembered the notebook and the need to get Mike's wedding list completed. The wedding was only three months away, and the invitations had to be sent out a month before. She hoped she could persuade Mike to see things her way. "Be tactful, Jenny, be tactful." She lifted the glass by its stem. With the other hand Jennifer turned the pages of the notebook until she found the wedding list. Placing her thumb as a marker, she picked up the notebook and sent back to the living room.

"Here, my love." She got no response. Still standing, she spoke again. "Mike, here's your drink. Michael!"

"Thanks, Hon. You ought to watch this game, it's a close one. Come on, sit down and watch it with me."

Jennifer sat down on the couch, as Michael moved his legs to make room for her. She stared at the television, trying to understand the game, but thinking of the wedding. Jennifer thought of the approach she would take with Mike. Finally she blurted out, "Mike, don't you think it's about time to make out your wedding list? I can't wait until the football game is over since my train leaves in a few hours. Mike, are you listening to me? Michael!"

"I'm sorry, Hon, what did you say?"

She repeated herself, speaking slowly, enunciating each word, until her voice trailed off at the last words. She wasn't saying it right.

"I suppose," he answered as he flicked off the television, catching one last glance at the game. "Let's have it."

"I'm sure you want to invite Ron, Bill, Steve, and Dwight." She began to fumble with the pages of the notebook, then taking a deep breath, she added, "And, of course, your dad."

"You're right about the guys, but a definite no on Dad."

"But, Hon."

"If you're planning on arguing about this, forget it. I've told you my answer. That's that." Mike reached out and

turned the television back on.

Jennifer, keeping her eyes down, stretched to reach a kleenex on the nearby table.

"Oh, for God sake, don't start crying. I shouldn't have snapped at you. I'm sorry."

"I don't want to argue about this, Mike. I just wanted to discuss it."

"All right." Mike got up and went into the kitchen and brought back a chair, placing it directly in front of Jennifer. He leaned back and turned off the television for the second time. "Let's discuss."

"I don't understand how you can deliberately hurt someone, your dad, I mean."

"That's a joke. Don't you think my dad has deliberately hurt me. I can remember dreading Sunday mornings. Every Sunday we would have eggs for breakfast. I had a strong imagination when I was a kid, and I could imagine those eggs as young chickens. Do you think Dad cared about how I felt, or do you think he even asked why I couldn't eat my breakfast? No. He would just knock me out of my chair. I was stubborn, and the old man was stubborn, so we'd repeat this scene every Sunday. How I hated those damn Sundays."

Jenny watched Mike as he took a cigarette out of his shirt pocket, striking a match to light it, then taking a deep, long drag. The smoke streamed out of his nose. Speaking softly she said, "But he's your dad."

"So what? Jenny sometimes your logic is hopeless. Just because my father made love to my mother, and the result was me, does that mean I must love and respect him? People must earn my respect." He seemed to be spitting out his words.

Jennifer pressed against the back of the couch, trying to avoid the force of Mike's words. "But, but —."

"No buts. Do you want to hear another great example of fatherly love? I've told you that I made poor grades until I got to college. I mean really poor grades. I should count up all the C's and D's and F's I made — WOW. Anyway, whenever I'd bring home a report card, Dad would call me stupid, worthless. He would really degrade me, usually ending his long speeches with a few belts across the mouth. Nice, huh?"

"Are you sure you aren't exaggerating — a little?"

Mike began to fiddle with his beard, tugging at his moustache, then stroking his chin whiskers.

"Now, I suppose you're going to get mad. Stop fussing with your beard! You are not exaggerating. Okay. It's just that I've only met your dad once so I haven't made any value judgement about him."

"Oh, that's great. You love me, you are going to marry me, but you side with my old man."

Jennifer flipped back her hair and turned her face away from Mike's accusing glare. "Come on, Mike, don't be childish. I believe you. Forget I said anything, forget the whole mess."

"Jenny, my dad made my childhood miserable. He talked with his hands. If I did anything wrong, POW. No questions.

never any concern. I spent most of my life picking myself up off the floor. That's why I never go visit him. If I were around the bastard for more than five minutes, I would probably explode. The best thing to do is just stay away from him." Mike nearly shouted this as he jammed his cigarette into the ashtray, smashing the Winston until only the filter remained.

"Well, my father's not perfect, and our relationship hasn't exactly been fantastic, but I am still going to ask him to give me away."

"Don't expect me to praise you on that point."

"What do you expect of me? To exclude him from the wedding altogether, I just couldn't do that. I know he loves me in his own way, besides, I don't expect perfection."

"If he loves you, he should show it in a way you could understand. According to you, since he's your father, you owe him the honor, regardless of whether he deserves it. Great logic, Jenny."

"Logic or no, it's my decision."

Mike threw up his arms. He barely missed hitting Jennifer in the face, causing the girl's eyes to widen in surprise. "I rest my case."

"What do you mean by that Mike?"

"It's really quite simple. If it's your decision to have your dad at the wedding, then it's my decision whether I invite my dad. Agree?"

Jennifer did not know what to say. She just sat on the couch, slowly tearing into shreds the kleenex which was in her hand.

"Come on, Jenny. Do you agree or disagree? Answer me, damnit."

The girl flinched, but looked Mike straight in the eyes. "I can't answer you. It's not the same situation."

"Oh, but it is. If I can't influence your decision, then you shouldn't try to influence mine."

"There is one difference, Michael."

"What?"

"I'm right, you're wrong."

"Damn you, Jenny."

Jennifer stood up. She placed her hand on her hip and began to tap her foot. She started to pace, placing her finger to her chin. "Visualize this. We are at the wedding ceremony. Pamper me, will you? Think ahead to the big day. My mother introduces her family to your mother. Later, my relatives question my parents. 'Where is Mike's father? Is he alive? Is he sick? It's too bad he couldn't attend. I'm so sorry to hear that Mike and his father don't get along. Why don't they?' Jenny asked these questions extending one arm then the other, making a variety of facial expressions. "Now, just what should my parents reply? That you're too bullheaded to invite him — it's the truth. I think it would be rather embarrassing. No comment, Michael?"

"Excuse me, I wasn't sure the play had ended. I should applaud, I guess." Michael applauded, waving his arms, and he even whistled. "Personally I think it would be slightly more embarrassing if my old man and I got into a big argument and spoiled the whole wedding."

"That's not likely to happen."

"Oh, it isn't. I find it more believable than your quaint performance. Besides, I think I know the relationship between

my old man and myself just a little better than you. Miss Know-It-All."

Still pacing the floor, Jennifer tried to defend herself. "I'm not trying to be Miss Know-It-All. I'm just trying to show you how ridiculous you're behaving. I am looking at this problem logically, with some sense."

"To hell with your logic. I want to know one thing. Do you want me at the wedding, or do you want my dad?"

"I see, you're giving me an ultimatum. You needn't shake your finger at me, Michael."

"Stop being so damn dramatic, this isn't a theater class. I just want to know where your priorities are — with me or Dad?"

Jennifer sat back down on the couch and placed her hand on Mike's leg. "Hon, you know where my so-called priorities are. With you."

"Well, then start showing it. Are you going to start ordering me around even before we're married? Next thing I know you'll be chosing my clothes, my friends, making all my decisions. I won't have it, Jenny. Don't be a domineering bitch."

Jenny removed her hand from his leg with a quick jerk. "Wake up, Mike. The world doesn't revolve around only you. Consider me for a change."

"You wake up. Maybe we should cancel the whole mess."

"Maybe we should."

Jennifer sat quietly, the tears beginning to flow down her face. She leaned forward, letting Mike see that she was crying. The man opposite her scanned the couch, seeming to gaze right through her. She straightened up, stood, and walked in the direction of the kitchen. She stopped a few feet behind his chair. He made no move to turn and see where she was going. "You heartless bastard." Jenny's words faded as she ran to the kitchen. She placed her hands on the sink, sobbing loud enough so that Mike could hear her. He still didn't come. She went on toward the bedroom, occasionally pausing to lay her head against a wall. She glanced back and saw that Mike had not changed his position; he was ignoring her. Once she entered the bedroom, she searched for her suitcase. She began to grab her clothes, throwing them on the bed. She hurled a hanger across the room, watching the hanger as it struck the wall, leaving its mark. Finally she was defeated and lay down on the bed, her legs dangling over the edge. Now she was really crying. "Why doesn't he follow me?"

Jennifer's fingers traced the pattern of the bedspread. Tucking her hands under her chin, enclosing her breasts with her arms, she began to picture the wedding day. She visualized walking proudly down the aisle, her arm entwined in her father's. She saw her mother wipe away a tear. Turning, she glanced at Mike's parents and smiled. Jenny's thoughts returned to the present. She stopped smiling, her dreams about the wedding beginning to fade.

Jennifer's legs began to ache. She sat up on the bed. She pulled a kleenex out of the box that was on the nightstand. She patted her nose and wiped the mascara from under her eyes. She began moving around the room, finishing her packing. With suitcase in hand, she headed back to the living room. Her illusions of an ideal wedding were gone.

"Mike, I'm s---. Oh, I didn't know anyone was here."

Excuse me, I'll just go back to the uh study. I didn't mean to interrupt your conversation. I'll leave."

"Wait a minute, Jenny. Karen, this is my fiancée. Karen is a student of mine. She has missed some classes and came to get the assignments."

"I was ill. Mike, Mr. Rogers, is a wonderful teacher."

"Oh."

"I must be going. Thank you, Mr. Rogers, for all your help. I really appreciate it."

"Are you sure you have all the assignments? Don't just stand there, Jenny, come sit down."

Jennifer scanned the room, trying to find a place to put her suitcase so that it wouldn't be too conspicuous. She took a seat in the kitchen chair that had been Mike's during their quarrel, shoving the suitcase behind it with her foot.

"Jenny, why don't you fix Karen a drink?"

"I should be going, but a drink would taste good."

Jenny went into the kitchen. She got some ice. While she poured the coke over the large ice cubes, she muttered to herself, "Sit down, get up, fix a drink. Does that girl have to sit on the couch — and so close to him?"

"Do you have the drink fixed yet?"

Jenny slammed the ice tray back into the freezer and shouted, "Coming."

"Here. I'm sorry what is your name again?"

"My name is Karen, Jenny."

"You didn't fix me a drink?"

"I didn't know you wanted one. I'll go get you a coke."

"No, that's all right. Here sit down on the couch."

"It looks rather crowded. I'll just sit here in this chair. Are you a freshman, Karen?"

"No, I'm a senior."

"What's your major?"

"Really, I must go. I have detained Mr. Rogers long enough. You were planning on going somewhere, at least I gathered from your suitcase."

"Well." Jennifer was speechless. She crossed her legs, hanging her arm across the back of the chair, and managed to give a slight smile. Mike was looking at her legs. The seducer did have to wear a short skirt. Jenny felt shabby in her faded jeans and T-shirt.

"I must go."

"You can't be in that big of a hurry. Finish your drink first."

Mike was being so thoughtful.

"I do have a few more questions to ask you. Could you give me some hints on how to study for your tests? I did pretty poor on the last one. Do you think I should see a tutor?"

"Did you thoroughly read all the assigned chapters?"

"I skimmed most of them."

"Well, you can't expect to get A's on my tests unless you take the time to read the text. Missing classes doesn't help. You need better study habits. A tutor won't help if you haven't done the required work, or if you don't have the class notes to study. I advise you to get the notes from someone. Read the chapters — thoroughly — and study the notes, then you should do fine."

"Yes, Mr. Rogers. Now, I must go."

"Let me walk you to the door."

"Thank you for the drink, Jenny."

"It was nice meeting you, Karen. Maybe I'll see you again."

As Michael showed Karen to the door, Jenny proceeded to empty the ashtrays and to pick up old newspapers. When Mike returned, Jenny was fluffing a pillow with all her might.

"Those type students really amaze me. They don't do any work, yet they expect A's. Hey, don't destroy the pillow."

Jenny picked up the kitchen chair and tried to bypass Mike. "Pardon me, the train will be leaving soon, and I must straighten up this apartment. Should I fix you a coke now?" Her last words came from the kitchen.

Suddenly Jenny felt a hand on her shoulder. She attempted to duck out from under it. She busied herself, wiping off the counter, then drying dishes.

"Slow down. You were rather rude to Karen."

"Rude!" Jenny made an about-face and glared at him.

"I can see that you're still upset."

"No, not me."

Michael took Jenny by the shoulders. "I should shake the hell out of you, maybe that way I could put some sense into that little head of yours."

"You wouldn't dare." Jenny made no attempt to release herself from his grasp.

"I'd rather hold you."

Jenny searched Mike's face, his mouth curled slightly at the corners. She put her head against his chest and began to cry. "You could have followed me into the bedroom." Jenny nearly choked on her own words, her body trembling with each sob.

"Hush, don't cry. I was on my way in when Karen came. Really I was. Let's not argue about the wedding anymore. I simply can't invite Dad. I hope you understand."

"I'm trying. It's just that I've dreamed about my wedding since I was a little girl. But I'm being selfish. It's your wedding, too. I caused the argument. I'm sorry." Jenny was still crying.

"I shouldn't have been so touchy about it. I'm as much to blame as you are. Let's forget it. Why don't we go into the other room?"

Michael placed his arm around her shoulder and guided Jenny toward the living room. She molded herself against his body and willingly walked with him. They sat down on the couch.

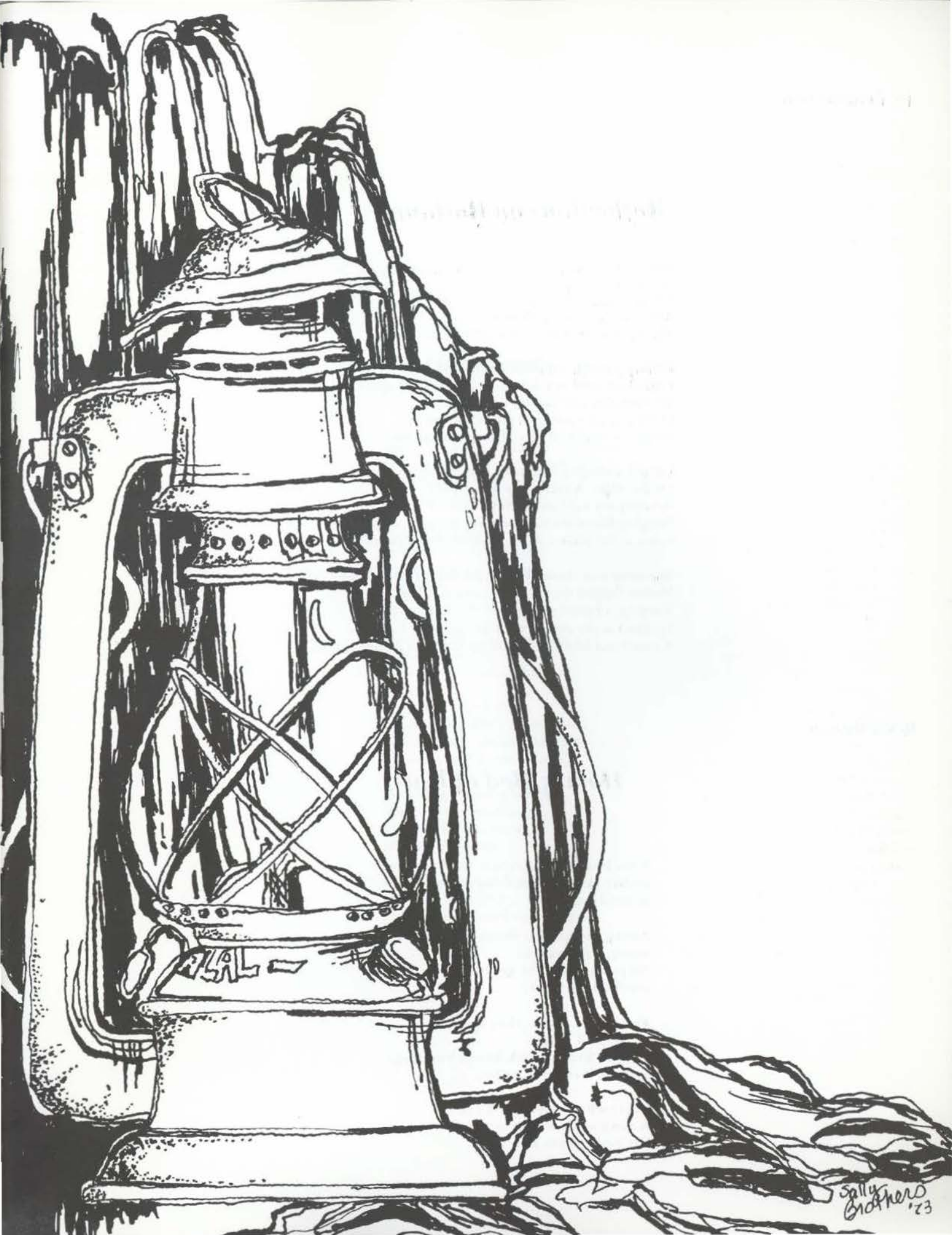
"Would you like me to cut my hair short like Karen's? Do I wear jeans too often? Do I need to lose weight?" Jennifer examined her hands.

Mike lifted those hands, enveloping hers with his. "Don't be silly, little jerk. You're perfect."

"Oh, Hon, I'm not perfect. No one is, not even you. Accept me for what I am. I have flaws and irritating habits just like everyone else, including yourself. Don't expect perfection from anyone."

"All right, Jenny, but let's discuss it later. No more crying. Let me fix you a drink, then you'll feel better."

Jennifer watched every movement of Mike's body as he walked to the kitchen. She leaned her head back against the couch, closed her eyes, and smiled.



Reflections on Bathing

Nose and cheeks bloated in reflections of chrome,
Swollen lips pressed to the faucet and legs crimped,
I pushed away, like a balloon deflating
And skimming in a gush to the back of the tub.
The water rocked forward to touch the tile.

Peering through luminous ripples I strained to see
Crystals of sand and detergent that grained against
My buttocks only to find scratches
In the enamel moving. I pinscerced two
Fingers, snapping at bits of grass eluding me.

I wiped a clinging hair, wriggling behind my thumb,
On the edge. A spurt of water slapped.
Relaxing my hold on the tube I stared at it swaying and
Dangling like shriveled skin from the rack, dripping.
I shot at the plaster above, plunked down the tube.

Spreading and closing legs curled water round them.
Mother flipped the catch releasing gurgling and
Slurping, a funnel spun round the drain puckering.
I rubbed at the dirt on the sides, grabbed for
A towel and stood as cold drops fell from plaster above.

Helen Mattern

Home: Bed of Dust

Ants bearing fragments to their home
gather themselves, friends and kin
in procession.

Along the gravel, shoes of mourners
move, halt, move.
Steps slide on the gravel
muffled by grief.

Beside the ditch, they bank
petals and grass,
rods of brown with heads bursting,
cattails lean over water.

Everywhere seeping. Even me.
A long walk home to the dust:
His bed, yours and mine.

One Time

Jamie and I played doctor
In the black of Coles' garage,
Crouching between fenders,
Oil hanging in the air.

A pebble clicked
Behind the teeth of a car.
Its heat made us sticky,
Grit clung.

Shoes crushing gravel,
Marched. The door clattered up.
Jamie dropped his stick.
My eyes wrinkled at the sun.

A hand clenched mine,
Dragging me, like I did my doll.
"Mortal sins," shouted Mother,
"Must be told in confession."

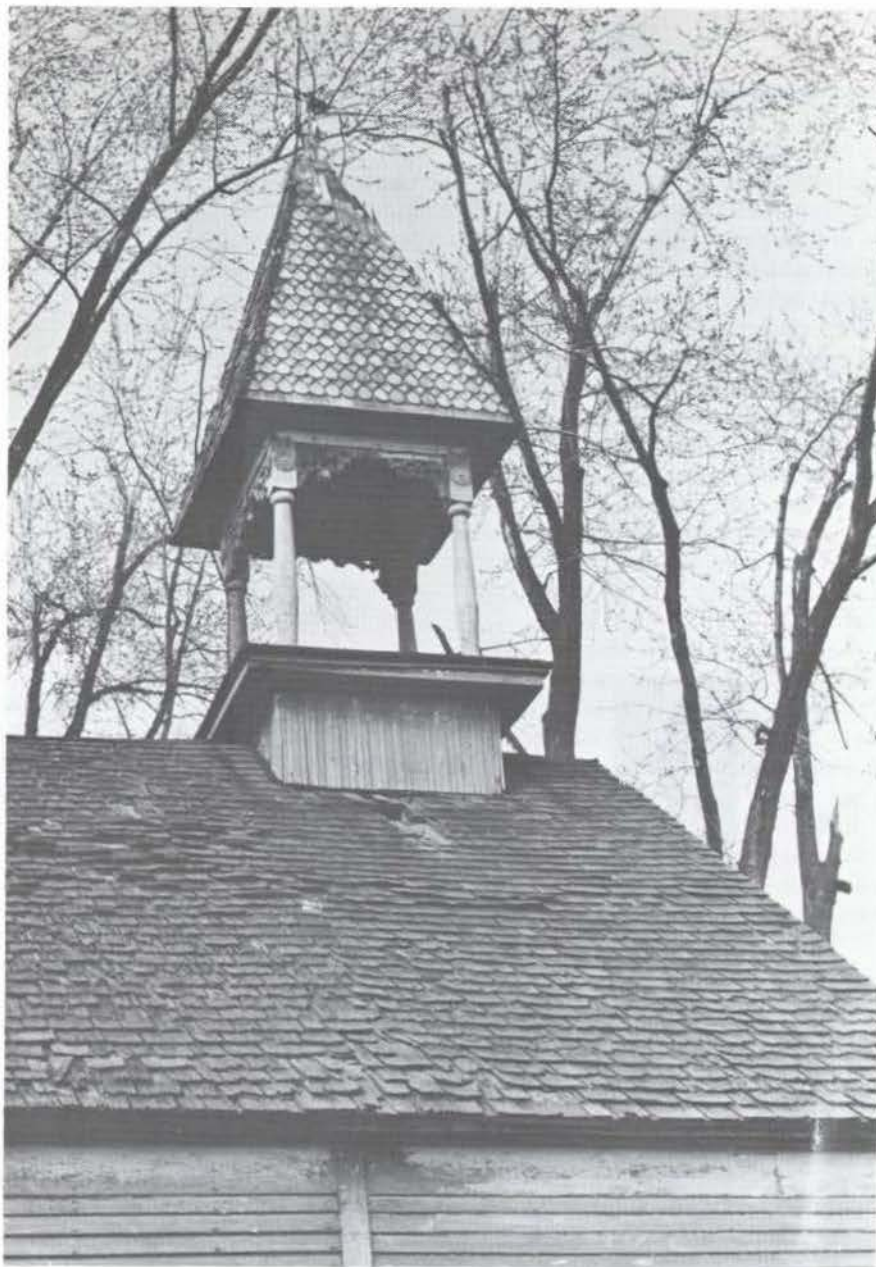
Unfolding sweating hands,
I parted the curtain.
The kneeler was warm,
Muscles tightened.

I crouched in the black,
My voice scratched—
"Jamie and I pulled down pants,
One time."

Combine

You can feel the machine approach in the vibrating ground.
You wait to see it appear, slowly rolling over the top of the
Ridge, creaking, and hear the deep chugging of the metal
Walled stomach's contractions as it digests the beans.
You catch first sight of its ferris-wheeling reel,
With ten rows of long cream-colored boards, hanging with
Strong wire teeth spaced eight inches apart, that pull through
The tangled mass of beans, shaking the beans inside the paper-
Shelled pods, combing the plants into the ever-waiting cutter bar.
At ground level, the ten-foot row of sickle blades
Move side to side between the stationary guards.
Like steel-tipped shafts, held straight in the front,
They push and divide the grouping stalks combed in by the
Turning reel. While the sickle blades, who rest between
Each front-line shaft, click their sabers in monotonous rhythm,
Cutting the tough, ripe stalks.
The moving reel still holds the sickled stalks, carrying
Them into the auger, this two-headed screw that catches them,
Turning them in and in closer to the central mouth where
Steel fingers claw in the bitten stalks.
This faded, red Chinese dragon sucks them deep inside,
The canvas tongue swallows, where the grating bars,
Like a floursifter bruise the pods to split them,
Popping the beans from the three-celled pods through a sieve
To drop into a waiting bin.
The stalks, empty pods, and airy chaff, still move on
Back towards a daylight space where they fall like
Brown-paper confetti in an aura of itchy, shimmering fuzz.

The combine lumbers to the end of the field, where the
Patiently sitting trucks are waiting for it to return.
Now a phantom auger, in a metal tube, draws them up
To fall from the spouted mouth. The beans flow into the
Hardwood bed. They thunder with their hailing, ricocheting
Off the empty floor, quickly buried by the bushels of others.
They fall, slowly peaking, self-leveling and shifting
Into a mound. The beans slide down the gently sloping sides
To reach the corners of the truck bed, roundly spreading
To cover the floor in a yellow-beaded mosaic.
The rattle of the last few stragglers, hurrying up,
Announce the end of the spill,
Falling, few and fewer, until the last one or two just dent
The peak and rest on top.
All noise stops.
Save the whispering slide of a few restless ones,
Searching for a more comfortable seat.



Park Sitter

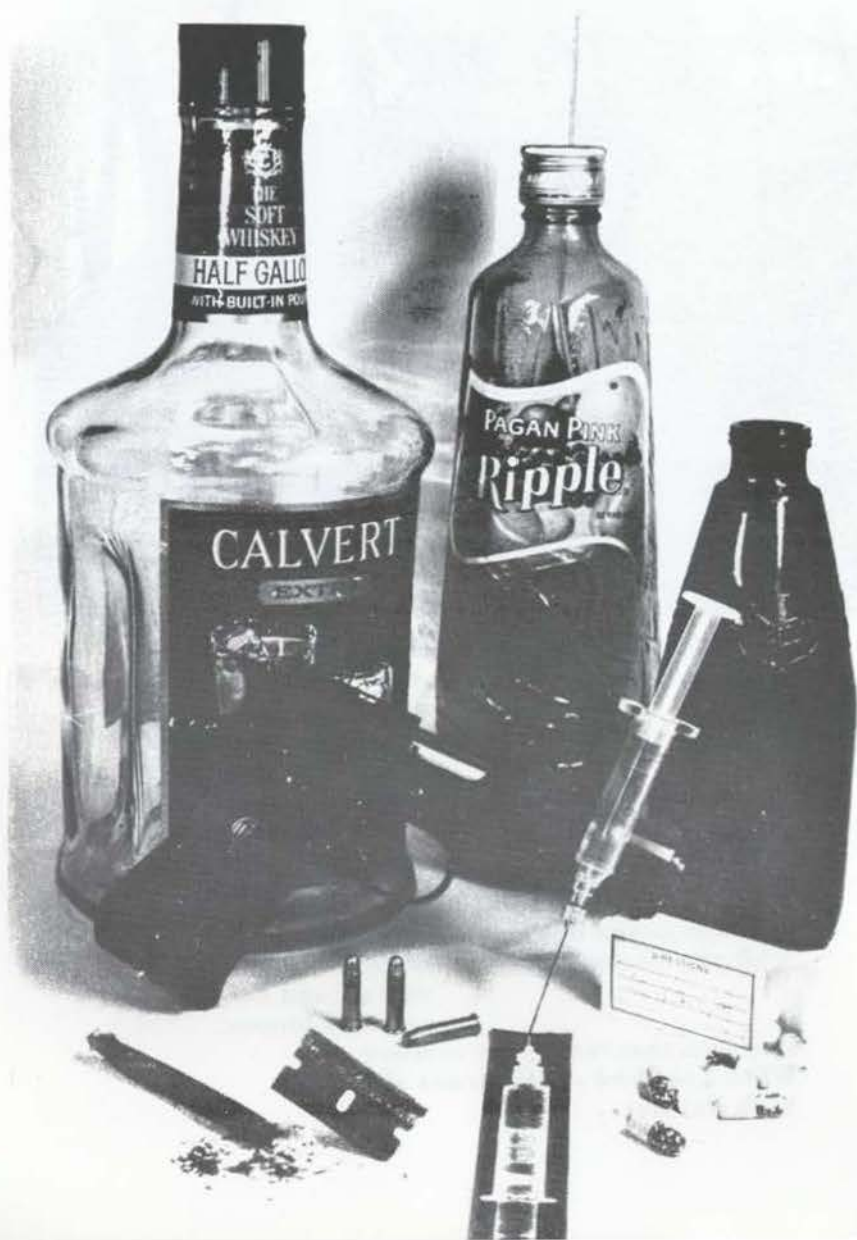
Stone-faced and paper-masked,
Just muted mumbling queries passed
Through carven lips, numbed and alone;
With pigeon-cloak and rain stains

on hair, and neck, back,
and eyes forever.

Cup eyes that run over in summer,
When a red bird scratches one shoulder,
With wet feet.

The Sole Tortoise

Under the wheel, glued to the road,
a flattened Braque-faceted shell,
Leg reaching like points of a star,
I do not see any part of your head.
What flexed your toothless mouth inside?
No thought to look at a blade of grass,
a fly, or a place to hide your shell,
shutting out all but your toes and marrow.
Perhaps you were not hiding, but blind
to the tread imprinted like your back, busy
inside touching your head to tail.
Maybe your head was sideways,
one eye looking in, the other out your camp's door.



Blind Society

Mike Cordts 19

I never was much of a bourbon drinker or even a drinker for that matter—except when I was with Moe. Good ole Moe had that certain something about him that made the horrible stuff worth drinking. Me and Moe are the best of friends. We've got a lot in common I guess. You know, we share a lot of the same problems and experiences and stuff like that. Anyway, me and Moe like to tip a bottle at least once a week and try to appreciate what we have. Moe's a great guy.

Our relationship had its roots in Viet Nam. I didn't meet him there but that is where it all got started. Moe has to be the only good thing to come out of that place.

I was stationed at Pleiku which is about a hundred miles north and west of Saigon in a section of the country known as Area D. Nobody really knew what the D stood for but as the time passed it was amazing to see all the filthy words that could start with a D. Pleiku was located in a small valley sandwiched between a line of hills that extended a couple of miles in either direction. I guess you could call it the no-man's land of Nam cause nobody but Charlie lived or roamed up there.

The army's alphabet soup had me labeled as a FAO, or a forward air observer, a job that I soon came to find was about as bad as wading through the slime and stink of the rice patties. I flew a Cessna-180 with the only armament being a stack of flak jackets I sat on and a rack of smoke canisters mounted on each wing. No rockets, no napalm, and most of all no speed. Charlie found this out quickly as he did all things that went on. I guess this is the main reason that I came to know Moe. Charlie was always on his toes.

I really didn't mind having only smoke racks at first. In fact I enjoyed it cause I didn't have to kill anything I spotted. All I had to do was get on the radio and report it. I just flew around all day hunting for Charlie, marked him with smoke when I did, and got the hell out of there so the Hueys and Phantoms could do their dirty work.

I guess I was too good at my job for my own good. It seemed as if I could always find Charlie. That's all I did—eight hours a day, seven days a week, week in and week out—find Charlie. I couldn't believe the army actually keep track of such details as finding Charlie until the CO posted the FAO standings one morning. It was like an honor roll and my name had a star next to it. It seemed that I had found more Charlies than anybody else. I was the feelers for the octopus army and they were showing their appreciation.

I was killing in an indirect way, which bothered me more than killing Charlie face to face in the mud and the slime, face to face, yellow to white. But Charlie knew my value. A guy who lived in the small houch with me brought in a propaganda notice found in one of the near by hamlets one afternoon that said Charlie had a reward on my head. I guess I was too good at my job.

The day after that happened I got up real early 'cause I had been heaving my guts out all night after dreams of my head on a pole. The stink of rotting canvas, mold, and the wet steaming vegetation didn't help me any. My plane was being readied for another hunting mission and I wandered down to the small grass strip surrounded by concintine and spider holes to have a look.

I could hardly hold my body still as the Sarge and I

checked the bullet hole patches in the tail section that covered the three rounds of .50 caliber fire I had taken yesterday. Sarge was giving me some hints on quicker exits after dropping the smoke canisters when the whole world was turned upside down in a swirl of red and orange confusion. The next thing I remember was the strong smell of clean linen and the stiffness of the starched sheets and I figured I was either in a hospital or heaven 'cause those things just don't exist at Pleiku.

I wasn't sure if all of me was there or not and as I ran a bandaged hand across my body to make sure, I heard old Moe's voice for the first time.

"Hey, the mummy lives."

Soon there was a couple of nurses around me 'cause I could hear their voices and the strange smell of makeup. Then it dawned on me that my face was bandaged. It really bothered me 'cause I figured my nose was gone or something really bad. But one of the nurses said everything was in the right place but that some of it wasn't working too good.

Great. Now I began to wonder what "some of it" meant. Then in came the doctor and he told me the war was over as far as I was concerned. Great. That had to be a classic line. Then he told me that I was blind. Great.

I don't really remember what happened but I guess I yelled a lot and cussed even more and told them all to get the hell out of there and leave me alone. I felt really bad. Christ—no eyes. What in the hell can anybody do without eyes? And then I guess I started to laugh. Not just a little bit but until my insides were tied into a tight knot. It was too much. The best eyes in the army they had once said.

"Hey man, what's so funny?"

"I can't see, man. But I still got my nose."

"Congratulations. Ya been out every since they hauled you in here. What the hell happened?"

"Red and orange man, red and orange."

I guess I was out for another day or so and when I came around again I felt a lot better except that I was still blind. The nurse told me that a mortar shell from Charlie had hit near the plane and exploded the fuel tank.

She said I had a couple of burns on my arms 'cause I must have thrown them up in front of my face. My face wasn't burned but my sideburns, eyelashes, and eyebrows had been scorched off. She said that Sarge had probably saved me cause he was standing between me and the plane. Sarge had died right on the field.

The doctor said the explosion and heat had damaged some part of my eyes that I didn't even know I had. He looked at them every morning and said they were doing nicely and that it was very possible that my eyesight could be restored. At first I believed them but after awhile I thought they were just trying to build my spirits up 'cause they told the guy on my left side that they could save his leg and two days later it was gone.

The bathroom brought the strange voice and me together. I couldn't stand that damn bed pan and I always used to hear that same old laugh and "Hey man, what ya doing over there," every time I used to try to use it. So one day I decided the hell with it and I got up and started running into all kinds of stuff.

"Hey man, you're going the wrong way."

"Get lost big mouth."

All of a sudden a huge pair of hands were on my shoulders and that same voice told me to quit feeling sorry for myself and to get my head together 'cause he didn't want to hit a poor helpless blind man. Well, I took a swing at the voice but all I hit was somebody's funny bone 'cause a whole bunch of people started laughing. Everyone except that voice.

"Hey, I'll be your eyes for awhile if you want to loan me your armpit 'cause I lost mine somewhere. Dig?"

I knew I was being dumb so I said sure, what the hell? An armpit for a pair of eyes wasn't a bad trade at all.

Well, we both found the john and I discovered something else. Moe. That's what he said people called him. So me and Moe went to the john together all the time and sometimes he took me for walks outside so I could get some fresh air and sunlight. I was always scared of running into stuff but Moe made me feel good and confident 'cause he didn't baby me like I figured a blind man should be treated. Maybe that's why we got along so good.

We talked a lot about the war and stuff. He said he had part of his shoulder blown away when a buddy set off a claymore at Fou Loi. He'd been at the hospital about two months. We talked about everything. Mostly women though. He didn't talk about himself too much at all and about all I could get out of him was that he was from Chicago. He used to tease me about being from a farm and that I didn't know what the big bad world was all about. But I knew he was just kidding.

The other guys in our ward were pretty nice but I didn't get to know too many of them and none of them as good as Moe. We used to sit around and make fun of each other. They used to ask me what time it was and then laugh their butts off.

I couldn't see what was wrong with them so Moe would handle my comments. One guy, I think his name was Jonsey, used to ride me a lot about being with Moe so much. You know, the queer bit. He was getting on me pretty bad one day and Moe challenged him to arm wrestle. The guy had lost an arm from falling on a water buffalo-dipped pungi stick and gangreen was on him before they could get back to base-I found out later. Anyway there was some kind of fight and that guy told Moe to go back to the jungle where he belonged. Moe was kinda quiet after that and the kidding slacked off.

I used to get letters from home all the time and Moe would read them for me. The ones from my wife really hurt Moe. He said it was a damn shame that I couldn't have lost just an armpit like him instead of my eyes. I guess she sent a picture of the family 'cause Moe said she was really pretty. I got down in the dumps real easy when I thought about her and Moe knew it. I always wondered if she would still love somebody that couldn't even go to the john by himself. Moe always told me I worried too much and threatened to write her that I had lost my nose if I didn't shut up. Good ole Moe.

One night the doctor came in and said they were going to take me into surgery the next day to see what they could do. I was pretty worried and couldn't sleep and me and Moe talked about half the night when all of a sudden he said he would be right back. I could hear him walking all over the place and he finally came back with a bottle of bourbon. Well, that was the first time I had ever drunk bourbon seriously and that's why

we still drink the same old stuff. For old times sake, I guess. We sang about the other half of the night until the guys started bitching. They just couldn't understand me and Moe. Especially Jonsey.

The next morning there was some big conference going on around by bed when I woke up. I heard Moe say something about a sign and that he was going to kill Jonsey. When they found out I was awake some guy tore down a piece of paper above my bunk and they all left. Moe didn't say much except that he'd see me the first thing after the doctor was done.

They came and got me a couple of minutes later and scrubbed a long time on my face with alcohol to get the tape off. Then they wheeled my bed to where the doctor was waiting. The ride seemed to last forever and I was scared 'cause I kept thinking they were going to run into something. Finally somebody put a mask on me and said to count backwards from one hundred. I was so tired I didn't even count and I remember somebody calling me a stubborn bastard as I slowly relaxed and went under.

The nurse told me later that the operation had taken about six hours and that I was lucky. They had replaced that unknown part of my eyes and she said the procedure was fairly new and becoming widely known. I really didn't care about the procedure. I just wanted to get rid of the darkness.

Moe was there when I woke up too, and he told me they couldn't take the bandages off for a week or so cause the sudden light after so much darkness might spoil the operation. So every day they took off another layer of gauze and I could finally start seeing a little daylight.

The pain was terrible and I guess I had a fever, too, cause I went out of my head a few times. Everytime I did I would wake up and find those huge hands on my shoulders and that same voice telling me everything was going to be all right.

Finally they said they were going to have to take me back to surgery to take off the remaining bandages and take one final look at my eyes.

So off I went the next morning with Moe's promise that he would be there. I knew it would be but a matter of hours before I would know for sure if I wanted to live or not. But I kept thinking of Moe and my wife. I don't even remember the mask.

The next thing I knew Moe was telling me to take it easy and the nurse said not to rush anything. My face felt cool and I knew the bandages were gone. My head was hurting like hell and even the dim lighting of the recovery room was like looking at the sun.

Moe encouraged me to take my time again. So I relaxed a little and tried to open my eyes slowly but Moe bitched 'cause I was still going too fast.

I knew my eyes were open 'cause the light was unbearable and I put my hands over my face and felt better. It was a long time before I slowly removed them and squinted around the room. It was a small white place with a big medicine cabinet and oxygen equipment next to the bed. There on a chair by a pair of swinging doors sat a big man. I knew it had to be Moe but I couldn't see him too good.

"Moe?"

"Yeah? Hey, welcome back to the bright, sunny world."

I saw him stand up and move quickly to a small stool by

the bed and I thought for sure the doctors had messed up my eyes. It was the same voice and laugh but Moe was black. Black as hell.

"You're a nigger!"

The huge smile slowly faded and Moe's brow creased with the weight of a statement that he must have heard many, many times. I couldn't believe I had said it, it was more like a voice from far away. He had been too nice to me, too considerate. He couldn't be black.

Once again I had to shake my head to actually believe that I was saying and thinking these things about a person who had shown me more interest and attention than anyone else ever had. Moe had gotten up and was heading toward the door. He stopped and turned as if to say something but decided against it and left. I was still trying to sort out my thoughts when he came back in.

"Yeah man, I'm a nigger. But just to people who have eyes."

Well, I felt like hell for awhile and then got mad. I had never been around a black before and I used this as an excuse for my actions. But I knew deep down that I was just kidding myself. Moe had been more than a friend and I was more than a bigot. Without knowing it I was the one thing I hated—a born bigot. Just like most everyone.

Moe stayed away for awhile and I finally found him in the coffee shop one day. He didn't say much as I sat down and just kept messing with his coffee. I tried to apologize but it just wouldn't come out so I got up and left.

I was leaving in an hour so I went back to pack and check out. Everyone yelled good-bye and congratulations as I headed for the door. I heard Jonsey tell the guy next to him that he was glad the nigger-lover was leaving.

I don't remember what happened but for a short time I was blind again as I tried to shove his face through the back of his head. There was blood all over the place and all of a sudden a huge pair of hands were on my shoulders again. Moe lifted me off Jonsey and carried me outside while the rest of the guys just watched.

Well, that was three years ago and me and Moe got back to the States a couple of weeks after that. We took our back pay and set up a gas station in L. A. And every once in awhile we get out the bourbon and talk about all sorts of things. There's a lot of Jonseys around but we both know how to handle things. Moe really understands me and he's a great guy.

Black Dream

I do not think that Black History Week will ever become a hum-drum period of reflection and celebration in Blackness unless black people the world over become hum-drum homicidal beings, squandering in ultimate mediocrity. This particular Black History Week will have a special meaning for me because of a strange and wonderful thing that happened to me over Christmas vacation.

I was driving down Chicago's east seventy-first street near Jeffery Boulevard on a very wintry evening, listening to my radio and feeling very young and alive when I began to feel something quite unusual. I was looking at all the black people around doing their thing: standing in front of lounges and grocery stores and buying those last-minute holiday items. I thought how the neighborhood had changed in the past few years. I remembered people discussing how the neighborhood had "gone down" and become rough since most of the white people moved out and many, many black people moved in. I tried to feel sympathetic about the sudden change, but I could not bring myself to do it. Everything seemed so alive! Anyway, I stated thinking about what I would get my lady for Christmas when that "something" struck me again.

As if in another perceptual dimension, I began to perceive a peculiar sort of vibration from the people and the whole area. This undefinable sensation remained with me as I entered the African shop next door to Hamilton theater. The whole time that I was in the place I was showered with kindness and warmth from the ladies who worked there. I believe they were from Haiti but they talked of northern Africa and the artists who sold their wares at the shop. I really wanted to grab one lady and say, baby, you are so, so black, beautiful and feminine. I did not though but, as I walked out of the shop, I realized what it was.

The feeling was isolated. It was rather nebulous but definable, metaphysical but real. The feeling was like the moving of a fetus, growing and becoming human. It grew and grew until the entire area was trembling with the anticipation of a new black child that would come from all of us, maybe through our children or theirs. Our efforts have conceived a child, a form of our ancestors and ourselves, both wise and strong, a child never to be aborted by the racism we bear. A child who would come as a transcendental mood that would permeate the entire world. A mood, a drive, that would prevail through all ages, creating the world all of us have so desired.

The child has not yet been born, but it is being kindled by the entire black community. We should never despair. As long as we remain true to ourselves, the baby will come. And whether we see it or not, we will all be responsible for its existence.

The feeling is a good one. I still have it and I will keep its hope with me as long as I live. And I will teach it to my children and to my brothers and sisters everywhere I go. Nothing will change my mind. If it is an illusion, then I will deceive myself and look forward to every day and every Black History Week. And I will look forward to it as I look into all of you, my people.

The Poetry Reading

It is a good anthology, the reader thought.
He read the poets' credentials
in the back of the book,
with their smiling or frowning photographs.
One didn't have a photograph,
but that was fine – the reader
liked his poems anyway.

The reader closed the book
and glanced outside.
A cyclist, down on the bars, was speeding,
pedaling fast along the path,
gliding in and out of the pedestrians.
Like a pen tracing script,
he leaned through the turns.
Pumping in rhythm: fluid on wheels
moving past and out of sight.

The reader put aside his book.
All the poets lay face upon face,
their poems, like spokes, brace the binding's rim.
But one artist is not represented.
His verse is motion and
after existing for only a moment, he is gone,
vanished like a spoken poem in the air.

The Funeral

You lay in the box
Filled and cushioned with silk,
All around gleaming.
Eyes closed,
Face toned with make-up,
You are the mannequin in the show case
Accented with flowers.

I bring you horses,
Japanese lanterns,
Poetry, and
Gypsies dancing in the streets.

She and Her

She was prim and neat, like a black arrow,
She always folded those hands of hers to answer snideness.
Those hands, bewitched as Christmas cookies, flew in the air,
Splattering my papers with red-icinged comments. They etched
A line on my forehead, burning their way to my skull.
Smiling, she handed out the folded gifts to each.
Frowning, her glittered words chastised the flourescent bulbs,
That burned out like Christmas lights before holdaiy's end.
As she bent over our work, her holly scent crisply delighted us.
She drank from a shining coffee cup, like the Communion Chalice
At Church—not like the ones at home.

But then I'd walk down sandy, bubble-gummed sidewalks toward her.
My toes would sink into the cracks that cramped my feet,
Because I couldn't look at her, Before her, stood
A wool-suited man buying assorted wares from her,
A breast here and there, a leg to maul.
The gutter was green with vomit. I tried not to look.
I fell in and lost the words of "she",
And grabbed the hand of the whore. of her.



The Cane Pole Lungfish

At sunset,
 The hills wear the new mask of Spring.
 Waterfilled, the plants rise covering
 The bones of the earth, ballooning.
 Stretching like neoprene clowns
 Blown up from the base. A wet mouth
 Forces air through a tight nipple.
 The tongue clamps it shut until the plug
 Is snugged into place. The plants stand,
 Forced taut and straight by the water.

The lake is shrinking, pulling into itself.
 The grass crawls in on the water
 Like paint sliding down the curve of a bowl.
 Its progress is marked in green circles
 Of evolution, preserved in colored rings
 Like a stump. The grass is wading
 Through the swamp left by the lake
 That is fleeing down the man-hole,
 Moving by sheer weight to the lake
 That is growing downstream.

I cross through the sleepless pines,
 Planted in alleys by the WCPA.
 The conifers, the perfect union
 Of the triangle and the circle
 That passes snowflake branch to branch
 To the earth. Passive, unbent, stronger
 Than oak. Rocked by thick mounds
 Of dried needles that could be woven
 In a mat, I reach the shore.

Free from the pines, the grass rushes
 Toward the lake, consuming the bare mud
 Left naked in the sun. And the plants
 Of the inner circle are a virgin stand,
 Pale delicate. They spring back underfoot,
 Not stiffened by the water that is confined
 In the ribbed veins of the sophisticated
 Plants that will replace them, that I
 Left by the pines, that are moving in
 Just over my shoulder.

These are like moss and scatter over the ground,
 Matted, twisted, not lifting their
 Stalks against the wind, but creeping
 Lizard-like over hardened earth
 Towards the lake. And so I creep on knees
 And elbows through the foliage, the caking
 Mud rough on my skin. Chin on the ground
 I look through the thin spiderweb stalks
 At the pines on the bluff, and they are masked
 By a green fog, a thin scrim of vegetation.

The lake bed below me is fissured, broken
 By deep cracks into odd-shaped bricks,
 Unmortared, each falling away from the next
 Like a jig-saw puzzle shrinking piece by
 Jagged piece. It's as if the earth were molten
 And cooling through the weeds, lazy, slowly blink

Lidded eyes, and rest my neck on a scaly hand.
The blood rushes cold through my veins
As a cloud covers the sun, and I move forward,
Parting the leaves behind me with my tail.

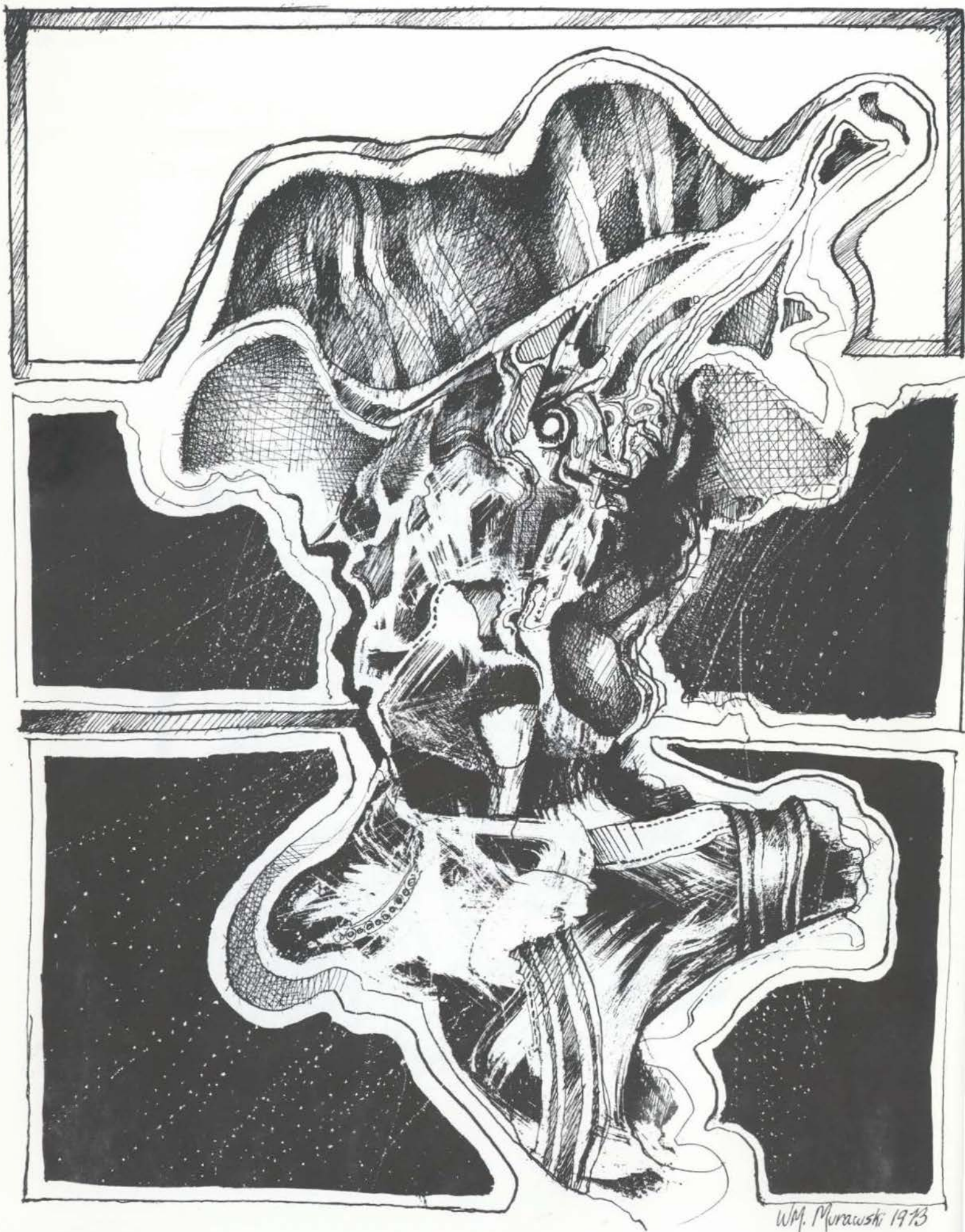
Mary Bassett 27

Over the cold mud to the water, past the
Coon prints, past the clam shells bleaching
In the sun, I meet the lake. It denies the warmth,
Sending the rays back as if mercury were
Cresting the waves. I could slide
In the water, lie still on the bottom,
Waiting to fin to the top and gulp hungry
At the air, and then sink again to the
Watery plants, softer than the virgin grass.

But my image cracks into waves. The lake
Is drawing into itself. The earth bed is
Drawing into itself, harder, and harder.
I roll my eyes back in my skull to touch
My wrinkled brain, draw up my knees
Until I'm a knot of denim and flannel
Left to dry beside the lake that is disappearing,
Stretched drop by drop in a quick stream
That stops and flattens to cover the cornfields
And fence posts planted beyond the pines.

Du, stille Welt

Ich stehe hier mit dir
Und kann nichts Neues darbringen.
Ich komm' direkt daraus
Wo man immer lebte, liebte,
Schweizte, schwieg.
Wo man nur das rauschende Wind
Und schreinde Kind
Zuhörte,
Nur Blätter der schönen Linden
Oder Schnee des hohen Bergs
Vor dem Auge hatte.
Ich bin gar nichts
Außer Prometheus und Pandora:
Meine Feuer brennen,
Meine bösen Geister fliegen immer aus.
Immer stärker, immer schwächer
Wuchs und werd' ich wachsen,
Nur zum Tod und wieder zur Geburt.
Ich bin wie du –
Doch bin ich du;
Wir stehen hier zusammen,
Unsere Äpfel fallen gar nicht weit
Von unserem gleichen Stamm.
Warum denn können wir
Als Zwillinge im gleichen Schoß
Nie einander
Ansehen,
Anhören,
Anfühlen?



W.M. Murawski 1973

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