

Pegasus



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It's Opening Night

It's opening night,
Yet no stage fright.
How odd it seems.
Yet my knees
Won't keep still.
They hop up and down
Along with my body twitching.
There's nothing to fear
But fear itself
So I hear.
But I'm not afraid.
Yet my teeth chatter
And my cigarette
Keeps shaking
Between my steady fingers.
The audience are people too.
I tell that to the hair on my arms
Reaching outward.
Not too fast.
Soft, Soft.
As Shakespeare said.
I told that to the butterflies
Which dance
Inside my stomach.
They did not hear
Or listen.
Meditation
Soothes the nerves,
But my mind won't
Settle down
To do it
For a while.
Smile and keep cool,
I tell the wrinkled frown
Upon my face.
The edges won't go up.
The curtain surely will.

veronica sarian

Picking Pockets

Picking pockets
People passing
Grass is growing
In the mud.
Plastic plants
Perching puppies
Leaking trees
Disperse more blood.
Fires flaring
Fickle pharaohs
Stabs and knifing
In the street.
Fencing feelings
Flying feathers
Aborting babies
Kick their feet.
Sinking ships
Shabby sandals
Leaves are born
And then they die.
Simple salesman
Sandy seagulls
Fungus crawls
Out of the sky.
Crying cradles
Cracking cankers
Rocks roll by
And into slush.
Clapping cobblers
Cloudy crimson
Flabby bodies
Turn to mush.
Music making
Mantle mending
Hanging from
A loved one's bind.
"Massive Money"
Man-made mothers
Out of the dirt
The flowers climb.

veronica sarian



Janet Hopkins

The Box

The phone call was sudden and frantic. She talked about the idea and she needed my help. "Jean, I've made all the arrangements to get rid of the old box and replace it with a newer one, but I'm scared. I don't want to go over there alone. Would come with me? She doesn't act so bizarre with you."

With a positive note in my voice, I said "I'll be glad to help. Perhaps with two of us the exchange of boxes would be easier. Maybe she won't put up such a fight."

Before I could go on, Carol interrupted with a wavering voice. Suddenly, she stopped in mid-sentence and said "Juliet, go in the other room while I'm on the phone." Some scuffling followed, and then a pause came through to me and then again her voice, but in a lower tone close to a whisper. "What do you think we'll find behind it after all this time? Jean, I can't do this alone, you've got to go with me. I'm just too nervous."

Knowing my sister Carol, I wanted to keep her calm, so definite plans were made for a time to meet, how much cash to get, and how to arrange for a pick-up. We had to think over what contingencies to expect, what kinds of answers we could give to prying questions and how we could get rid of the old box without too many problems.

Our conversation regarding the plans and possible problems seemed to put Carol more at ease and we agreed to meet the next day at noon. Before hanging up, I made an attempt at humor. "Look at it this way. What's the worst thing that could happen?"

Immediately Carol moaned, "What if she had a heart attack!" I gave up trying to dispel Carol's nervousness; she was determined to worry. We both hung up dreading the encounter to come.

Next morning the sunshine outside contrasted with the feeling of apprehension I was having. We met as arranged—Carol with the cash and me with my tools. Carol had worried all night and was looking harried. She went back and forth between car and house looking for her keys, which she eventually found in the ignition. I tried to keep quiet and stay out of her way so we could get this chore over with. And I had noticed the day before on the phone that Carol really doesn't listen when she's nervous. In fact, for some reason my reassurances seemed to make her more determined to be upset.

Finding the keys, she dropped into the driver's seat and handed me a wrinkled brown paper bag with two cold Miller beers in it. "I'm going to need these when we're finished." She put the VW in first gear and we took off with a jounce. Half way down the street she suddenly jerked to a stop. "Check to see if my wallet is in my handbag and count the money. They only take cash and we need enough to pay the pick-up men, too."

"There's two hundred dollars here and I brought some more, just in case." Off we went but a siren a few feet behind us startled Carol and sent her mood jumping again. A shining ambulance passed us and we both let out an audible sigh and then we continued on our way. We were getting close to our first stop. This neighborhood was on a sloping, triangular plot of land between two major thoroughfares. Our approach from the top of the slope made the serpentine lines of row homes appear as a tipsy stack of childrens' blocks.

The crowded arrangement filled the triangle so closely that the buildings seemed to be straining to burst into the roadway. The sudden jerk on hitting a pothole brought my attention back to the reason we were there. "We won't get any thanks for doing this," I said to Carol as we swerved to avoid another pothole and a broken Pepsi bottle. We parked and went into the garishly painted red and yellow building that once had been a grocery store. I had the two crisp one hundred dollar bills in my hand as Carol told the woman clerk that we came to pay for the box. The busy clerk kept looking around nervously as she rang up the \$137.50 on the old cash register and handed me the change. The transaction was completed in five minutes and we were on our way to our final destination.

Driving through Cobbs Creek Park we then crossed the trolley tracks and over the border into South-West Philadelphia. Making a right on Windsor Avenue we began looking for a place to park the green VW bug. Our luck at finding a spot directly across from the house bolstered our mood and we collected the tools.

"Well, here we go again," Carol said as she grabbed for the brown bag with the cold Millers inside.

We entered without knocking. Outside, the sunshine and our apprehensive mood were real, but once across the threshold, reality changed to greyish light and musty odors and then our friendly, cheerful voices calling out, "Anyone home?" Even though our voices were cheerful our eyes traveled in awe over the carefully stacked towers of out-of-print magazines, empty Xmas boxes, flattened brown grocery bags and an eons worth of "Daily Inquirers" and "Evening Bulletins". One tower was topped off with a crated, cellophane-wrapped jar of Hickory Farms guava jelly beside a green and gold, inch high box announcing, "Connemore candies from Ireland to You." Another pile had a large, flat, white envelope with the typed address crossed off and "Important Papers" printed in purple crayon across the middle. A third surface was arranged in a mosaic of opposing rows of opened, edge-stacked third class mail with a smooth edged Hunt's Tomato Paste can spouting eraserless pencils of various colors, ages and lengths, and an artificial plant once a perky pink and spring green now gilded with dust, and completing the mosaic, a small soft package wrapped in an orange-flowered lunch bag and marked in a childish script, "for Grandmom, Love Susan—1967." Even as our voices called "hello!" our eyes continued roving on and on. The towers fully encompassed the edges of each room and left only a barren island in the center. Amazed and incredulous messages rushed to my brain, "this can't be true—I've seen it so often but I still can't believe it!"

Our eyes stopped roving when they found a smallish gnome-like person three rooms away, down the awesome, man-made canyons. Carol and I exchanged a glance and a nod and started on the path from living room island to kitchen island. The dining room had long ago lost its island to the steadily encroaching towers of disordered and outgrown clothes, plastic bags and meticulously arranged debris and now held only a dusty path. We move as if we were going into hostile territory to perform a dangerous and secret mission.

As we entered the kitchen, the little one did not turn to greet us

but continued biting into a crust of brown bread. This person, about 5'2", was dressed in a hodge-podge of patterns; two faded and worn flannel shirts (one blue and white tartan plaid, one red and grey window-pane check), tan and brown striped double-knit slacks, folded up at the bottom; rolled down men's black socks with soiled baby blue fur slippers. The mane of snow white hair newly set in soft weaves is startling above the outfit of castoffs. The chewing continued as if our presence was unnoticed. Reaching out, I touched her and said, "Hi, Mom. How are you?"

Her once deep-set blue eyes, now looking like miniature sunken pools, acknowledge us but show no surprise. Carol and I decide to sit and make small talk in the kitchen which causes Mom to react with consternation because we need another chair. As she unburdens the third chair she mutters, under her breath. "Where will I put this stuff? Why did you come? I'm not ready for anyone to see this place." Her worried phrases leave no space for us to answer. We wait for her to finish. We act as if we did not hear or as if hearing we remember her words starting the too familiar "Ritual of Visiting Mom."

The three of us eventually get involved in placing the needed chair, as if the activity is important. Then we sit and chat, bringing up another familiar step in our visiting ritual. Carol asks, "How have you been eating, Mom?" Mom is vague as if to protect some awful secret. We all talk about the lovely springlike weather and Carol and I propose the idea to sit outside in the sun, right now. Mom refuses. "It's too much trouble. Isn't it too cold?" So we sit marooned on the kitchen island surrounded by kitchenesque towers. While Carol talks to Mom, the stacked empties with their label peer at me. My mind dredges up old TV and radio ads praising Jello and Kleenex, Duncan Hines and Cool Whip, Joy and Tide, Franco American and Campbells, Pine Sol and Lysol, Hunts and Guldens, Gallo and Ruinite until I tear my eyes away and concentrate on my mother and sister. I join in and try to lead up to why we are here. Carol adds a little more. Mom acts as if she is not interested as she rearranges a vast collection of empty pill bottles beside her.

Time is getting short. The men will be here soon and I'm getting nervous. I can't hold back anymore and I blurt out, "Mom, we came to remove your old box—your broken Frigidaire. A couple of men will be here any minute to deliver a new refrigerator." As I am speaking, her eyes open larger and larger in horror. Her right hand covers her mouth that is forming an "O" and a moan of outrage escapes. She starts to rock and shiver and chants "Oh my God, no! How could you do this to me, you could have waited until I died." She repeats the horrified and wounded words over and over.

Now it is our turn to take control. As we reply to her we begin removing the contents of refrigerator and freezer. There is a conglomeration—one egg, three rolls of Scotch tape, one Ever-ready "D" cell battery, two half cans frozen carrots, one jar of white and pink icing bits from some long forgotten birthday cake, six onions, one stick of Parkay margarine and twenty five ketchup envelopes from McDonalds. And Mom's chant continues with "How will I put it all away? Oh my God! What am I going to do? The refrigerator hasn't been moved for 35 years—Oh my God!" Her hosannas accompany our vacuuming, around, on top and under the icebox and continue through the men's arrival to pick up the old box and deliver the new box.

The real action of preparing, removing and replacing the refrigerator is over so quickly that we decide to celebrate. I mark the breakthrough into new changes for Mom by vacuuming my way from kitchen through to the front door. Carol opens a cold beer and orders a pizza for our lunch. Meanwhile, Mom is directing my cleaning and complaining about the new box. "The old one was alright. You wasted all that money . . . I'm just going to die anyway . . . Why did you put me through this horrible ordeal?"

I don't need to listen to Mom's words. They are as familiar as "Mary had a little lamb." She has used these phrases before, during and after every purchase. I've heard them while urging upon her a pair of well-fitting and comfortable shoes for her aching feet. And I've heard them while we "enjoyed" a simple hamburger platter at Barson's. The refrain never varies its emphasis, whether the item is enormous or picayune. And so her woeful dirge is in counterpoint to my positive cleaning activity.

When Carol returns with our "Family Style Pizza" she announces with a fanfare, "Delicious fresh-baked pizza with a layer of extra cheese for one and all." We parade Indian file to the kitchen island, and place our chairs around the far end of the table. It too is an island, an islet, only one-third of it is untowered and available for use. We serve out crispy slices and Sunkist orange soda. A small silence rises, mixing with the cheesy aroma. Snatches of praise for a terrific pizza are heard between bites. Then Mom breaks the spell. Holding her third slice of the hot pie, she asserts her right to be negative. "How much did this pizza cost? We didn't need the extra cheese. It's too much cheese!"

Carol opens the second beer to punctuate the completion of our mission. We two sister simultaneously raise our glasses and salute our bond. "To a job well-done, for valor under fire, Salute!"

gloria beam

Deceptions of Life

Babies cry
and no one comes.
Appliances fall apart
the day after the warranty expires.
Parents say, "We'll see,"
and nothing happens.
Cars we thought were safe
are recalled years later.
Experimenting boys tell girls
what they want to believe
What the politicians say
changes after the election day.
Lovers cheat;
Honesty seems a thing of the past.
But we are most deceived
when we deceive ourselves.

dawn harro

Thoughts

You guide me through the
sea of contentment
Sun-speckled sea
So calm and so warm.

You lead me to the
heights of fulfillment
Star-sparkled sky
So private and pure

Paint me a story
Of impossible dreams
Fulfilled.

Sunshine fingers dance
Lightly across the waters
Spreading warmth within

I felt I touched you last night
Inside, the part of you
that cries out for
love, understanding, comfort
reached inside for that part of me
Through my own loneliness and pain
I saw you, touched you.

lisa williams

Cries That Echo

Cries that echo
Cut my veins.
I'm lost through running rivers drained.
And through a tunnel
Shrieks get louder.
Oh, the pounding in my head is heavy
As I look in my fish chowder.
Fishes, dead,
Float to my spoon.
A bark at day,
A howl at noon,
By kittens swimming by the bay.
Or am I wrong?
Their struggle is hard.
Trying to save themselves
They grow tired,
And slowly sink
To the bottom of the bowl.
And I lift it up
And know that it was once fresh,
And now the celery
Is a piece of mesh.
And the faces of
The little men
March up my spoon
And speak to me
In tiny voices.
Oh, I see!
They're singing songs.
It's Jingle Bells.
As I fall
Through rushing wells
Again,
My veins are sealed.

veronica sarian

The Voice in Deep Right Field

It was the ninth inning and the sun was going down fast; Mickey was hoping they'd call it on account of darkness. Mired in the worst slump of his Babe Ruth League career, the boy had committed two errors and had only gone one-for-five. There had been better games.

The scent of a light August shower hung in the air as the wind began to kick up. Mickey loved the outfield, especially on nights like this. His shirt began to flap around his wire hanger frame like a flag, and if he held out both arms, palms cupped to catch the wind, he felt a great gust could cradle him in its arms and take him away like some runaway kite. So deeply was the boy buried in his fantasy that he failed to hear the crack of the bat.

"Mick!", screamed Tom Floyd, his best friend and the steady second baseman in the league.

Shaken from his dream, Mickey saw the ball screaming toward his right side. Morris wasn't supposed to hit to right, he thought. Mickey had played against Steve Morris for the past three seasons and the kid had never been able to get it out of the infield. Mickey could only watch now as the ball landed a good ten feet to his right.

"Don't let it get past you!" someone screamed.

The ball bounced safely into his glove but on the way to his left hand he bobbled it. There was a groan from the infield as Morris saw what was happening, rounded first and broke for second.

Things were happening so fast for Mickey now. He booted the ball once and could not get control of it. It seemed greased. Keep in mind, Mickey was not usually this bad in the field. He was a reliable man with a glove, could usually position himself well for each hitter and rarely missed a cut-off man. Mickey's biggest defensive problem was his arm; it had been likened to a Girl-scout's. From the very beginning he had been dubbed "Spaghetti Arm" and it stuck.

"NO! . . . He has to THROW it!", he heard Tommy McLaughlin say.

The ball left his hand in its usual high arc and landed harmlessly a good ten feet in front of Tom Floyd and bounced into the second baseman's glove. Steve Morris had gone in standing.

Mickey didn't look up as he trotted back to position; not wanting to see the stares of his teammates. He was praying for rain now.

Two outs, a man on second and the tying run came to the plate. They needed to win these last two games to qualify for the playoffs. As Mickey was rerunning the series of previous plays over and over in his head, he heard a voice that sounded as if it was standing directly behind him, whisper into his ear, "Plant your foot next time boy . . . Plant it."

Mickey turned but found no one there . . . just the soft kiss of that August breeze.

"What the f . . .", he said turning with hands on hips. Someone from the infield screamed for him to wake up out there.

Mickey had recognized the voice. Something about it rang true to him but he couldn't place it. He wondered aloud if the game was driving him to the edge. Then, like a Fourth of July firework he saw a line shot come off the bat of the next man up and heard its crack moments later. That delay of sight from sound always

disturbed him as he swallowed hard and charged.

It was going to fall somewhere between himself and the first baseman. Steve Morris had taken off before the pitch and it would take a throw to home to save this one. Some of his teammates had already thrown down their gloves in frustration.

Mickey took the ball on one bounce, about waist high. This time it came cleanly into his throwing hand and as he loaded up he heard that voice again . . . this time it was screaming.

"Plant the foot son. PLANT IT!"

Mickey threw his leg out and drove his right foot into the turf like a tent stake. The ball fired out of his hand and headed arrow straight for home plate. Tom Floyd was smiling.

The throw was a little to Ken Naughton's right but as anyone in Babe Ruth knew, if Ken had a chance at the play, you usually didn't. Morris tried to knock the ball out of the burly catcher's glove but only succeeded in hurting himself. The game was over, Mickey's team had won and his teammates swarmed him.

While Steve Morris lay on the ground, holding his collarbone and whimpering that it must have been the wind, Mickey, like a gameshow contestant, had the voices name on the tip of his tongue.

Sleep did not come easily to the boy that evening. The events of the day kept screaming down the highway of his mind. Who was it? Who was the voice in deep right field? He felt that the game he loved so much might be slowly driving him mad. The steady 'flap-flap' of the window shade finally put him to sleep as the breeze kicked up again.

He was dreaming now, or at least he thought he was. Wearing the same clothes that his mother had laid out for the next day, Mickey found himself back at the field, behind the batters' cage. He was waiting for someone. A shadowy figure suddenly appeared in right field, stalking back and forth like a starved hyena. The boy's throat became so dry that he made clicking sounds with each swallow. Then It spoke.

"You have got to be a limber," it said, "can't have no scare-crows out here."

I should have known, Mickey thought to himself. It was the same voice as that afternoon. It had materialized and had grown two arms, two legs, and what Mickey imagined several rows of very sharp teeth.

"You've got to be as loose out here as a sheet on your mother's clothesline. Unnerstan'?"

The frightened boy nodded in agreement.

"Now pick up that bat and hit a few. I'll show you some real outfieldin'," the thing commanded.

Dumbly the boy moved around the cage and into the batter's box. He was numb. Sheer, unadulterated fright had turned him into a mindless lemming, marching unquestioningly toward his death. He knew the color of his face must be as pale as a new looseleaf page.

In the cage he found a bat and ball. He hefted the bat; it was the perfect weight for him and as smooth and unmarked as any he had ever seen. For no reason whatsoever he felt a surge of warm powers spread through his shoulders and down into his wrist and fingers. He felt good.

THWACK! In one easy motion he tossed the ball in the air and

drove it into deep right field. The ball fell through the night sky like a shooting star. It was at this time that Mickey realized it was still dark out; he guessed it to be sometime after midnight. With a slap the ball landed cleanly into the glove of the figure in the outfield, and with a slight grunt It heaved a perfect one bouncer back to the plate.

Another and then another shot left the boy's bat. He had never hit it so well. Line drives, flyballs, in-the-gap shots rang off his bat, and the figure in right field played them all cleanly. Flying around in long, graceful strides, not a blade of grass was safe from Its spiked feet. The boy had never seen anything like it; or had he?

"Alright," said the voice, "we know you can hit. Now you shag a few." In the blink of an eye Mickey was transported to the outfield, glove in hand. The shadow was now at home plate.

CRACKKKKK. The sound of wood against leather pierced the night sky. The ball, glowing in its oblong magnificence came down to earth and landed in Mickey's glove. He felt like he had caught an untracked comet. But when he looked inside to make the throw back home it was empty. Mickey looked back at the diamond helplessly.

"We'll get to that. You just shag a few mo' for now."

So one after another each ball that dropped into his glove magically disappeared, until finally the voice said, "Let me have this one back."

The next one was a moon shot. Mickey didn't even bother to look back he just turned and ran in the direction he knew it would be landing. But it hung for awhile and he was able to glove it in what must have been the next township. He was still facing in the wrong direction, cranking the old arm up, when he felt two very strong hands grab him by the shoulders. At the same moment he felt a warm liquid begin to trickle down his thighs.

"Stop," said the voice. It was directly behind him. "Don't move. Just look at me."

This is it. I knew it was a nightmare, the boy thought to himself. I'm going to turn around and whoever this person is is going to have maggots crawling all over its face and I'm going to scream and no sound is going to come out and I'll die of fright right here. If I'm lucky.

"I'm talkin' to you boy," said the voice sternly.

Mickey turned, eyes screwed shut, face contorted like a firing squad victims. He could put it off no longer and slowly opened one eye. NO! It couldn't be.

"Ain't you gonna say hello Mickey?"

"NO NNOO NOBBB NOBLE?" the boy blubbered.

"In the flesh," said the figure, smiling, "well almost."

"Noble Parrish?"

Images flashed through Mickey's mind with incredible speed. Noble Parrish had been perhaps the greatest centerfielder to have

ever stepped on the green grass of this field. The townies called him the Department of Defense, and for good reason. He was the fastest, smartest and strongest player the Beerhall leagues had ever produced. He was also a native of Ashboro, North Carolina and quite coincidentally a black man. This last factor was the only reason there was ever any argument as to who was the best to ever play in Millville. But Mickey knew. He could still remember the first day he had seen Noble play, seven or eight years before. It was a thrill that would stay with him like a birthmark; and the Noble that stood before him now was the same Noble he had seen go five-for-five that day. He hadn't aged one bit. Not bad for a guy that had been killed in a factory accident no less than three years before.

"I . . . I'm dreaming," Mickey said aloud.

"Sure you are," said the man who was as dark as the night sky that surrounded them, "So why not learn somethin' while your at it."

"But why Noble? Why me?"

Noble smiled. A warm ear-to-ear grin that put Mickey to ease before it had finished spreading across the dead man's face.

"Two reasons really. The first is even as young snotnose kid, I could tell that you loved the game as much as me. I could see it in your eyes son. The way you used to sit through one weeknight game after another while you could be out chasin' girls or somethin'. I didn't want to see the game break your heart like it did mine."

Mickey stared at the ghost, astonished.

"But you . . . you were the best," the boy said, choking on his words.

"The best huh?," Noble asked, "the best in this little phone booth of a town. The world's a big place Mick. And it's growin' all the time. If you want to do anything with yourself, and I mean really do something, than you had better get ready to grow right along with it. Whether you play this silly game for the rest of your life or go sell insurance like your Pop, you've got to look beyond the lines of this field. You've got to be ready to play in the really big parks. That's why you can't be defeatin' yourself like you been doin'. Now pick up your glove. The first lesson starts right here, on this field."

Mickey watched as this spectre started to walk back to the batter's cage.

"Noble," the boy called out, "what's the other reason?"

"The what," Noble turned, annoyed.

"You said there were two reasons for all of this. What's the second one?"

"Oh . . . yeah, well I need to get in shape for the new season. You should see the guys I play with now."

They both smiled and Mickey learned more that night than in a lifetime of extra innings.

john farrell



Janet Hopkins

The Shadow of Your Mile

By the time he reached the top of the hill the first drop of sweat had begun its descent and his legs began to sizzle with that familiar numbness. The moon jerked in his vision, bobbing in vanilla whiteness as the hideous puffs of gray clouds circled the sky.

Autumn, with the dead leaves twirling their ritual dance of death through the streets. The night air was dense and suffocating, and yet the trees he passed seemed to be caught up in some wild conspiracy of breezes, the skeleton-knuckled branches beckoning to him in the glow of the streetlights.

Four miles to go, he thought, and then the comfort would be rushing over him, basking him in its glow of sweat and the feeling of hovering, hovering like some out-of-body spirit above the trees, the town, the drugstore, above Charlie Myers' Horror Movie Arcade (where, as a child he had his first running experience bolting from a midnight showing of "The Thing"), above the Cheshire Valley Cemetery, above the park and the high school, and finally down to earth again, his sneakers flopping gently on the soft grass. . .

"Do you think I don't know where you run off to night after night? You think I don't know?"

Valerie.

After only two miles her image still persisted, her enormous figure lounging in front of the television, the flickering rays dancing across her grotesque face. An apple seed was journeying piteously down the triple set of chins, the flesh jiggling like a bowl of peach jello every time she laughed.

"Do you think I like being left here all alone every night while you're running through the streets like a little baby? Do you call this a marriage?"

He called it worse than that. A living hell was a more suitable word for it. A marriage consecrated and burned in hell.

"Stay with me tonight, huh, sweetie? Just for one night, please, honey? You know how I worry about you all alone in the dark out there. Please? I promise I won't read any more of those voodoo books."

He sucked in his breath and pumped his legs madly over the top of the incline, the only sound in the world was his breath drawing thunderously to his ears.

"If you knew voodoo like I know voodoo. . ."

Those damn books, he thought. He had lost count of how many he had burned in the past year. Valerie had suddenly buried herself in them shortly after he had bought his first pair of jogging shoes. Somehow the books kept turning up, breeding themselves like flies; the old, dusty pages of mythical monsters and long-fanged devils staring up at him every time he took a bath, or sat down to dinner or breakfast.

"... the average person, with the right amount of skill, foresight and intelligence, can acquire the ability to summon or conjure up any number of mythical beings to serve at his every command. All it takes is a few simple ingredients. . ."

Damn her, he thought, damn her and damn her voodoo; and suddenly he was whirling down the hill, the low screeching of an ambulance siren drifting in the distance. One of the kids stayed too late at Charlie Myers' Horror Movie Arcade, he thought, chuckling.

Far off to the north where the Cheshire Valley spreads into acres of black swamps and dark, sloping ravines, he heard the low rumbling of thunder. Two miles to go, he breathed, his veins stretching taut against his thighs.

The night was his and the Cheshire Valley seemed to hover around him in its ignorant, sleeping slumber; as he ran down the quiet midnight street, the images of abandonment seemed to flicker past him like some still-life photographs from a dusty, yellowed album—the tricycle overturned in the grass, the sneakers of some humiliated fat child dangling from a telephone wire, the dark, picket-fenced houses where the glow of a cigar hung in the black window. Far off he could hear the sounds of screen doors slamming, the flashes of shadows drawing the shades of lonely, darkened attic rooms.

Only two miles to go, he thought, and then the floating, the feeling of ecstasy and, (it was the image he loved best about running) the momentary image of Valerie caught in a whirling undertow of sweat, a giant, helpless hippo thrashing crazily as waves and waves of his sweat carried her out further and further. . .

Soon, he thought. Only a few more miles.

Then he saw it.

It seemed to be nearly a half mile away, moving rapidly down the center of the silent street.

Moving towards him.

Even at that distance he knew it was large, nearly seven or eight feet in height, a featureless shadow. It was too dark to even tell if it was human.

Nothing, he thought; a man on a bike. A large man on a bike. I'll let him pass.

Something flashed, and for a moment he couldn't decide whether or not it was an eye, a red eye momentarily illuminated by a streetlight, or a reflector on a bicycle.

He decided he didn't want to stay around to find out.

But suddenly it seemed to be moving faster, as if it had spotted him, moving dizzily in a darkened blur of the night.

A rush of nausea swept over him and suddenly he was leaping for the sidewalk, the sledgehammer hurling against his stomach.

Damn it, pass! Pass!

Oh shit!

He saw that whatever shape or thing it was had leaped onto the sidewalk and was coming towards him.

He was leaping across the street now, hurling down Straub Avenue, the muscles and tendons resisting in his legs as he galloped and pumped, blinking against the sweat, and his breath choking like a helpless dog tugging at the leash.

He knew that it was behind him, even closer than before, and he stifled a scream when he turned for a moment and saw the sizzle of lightning crackle across a flash of something white, bone or teeth, he couldn't make it out. He didn't want to make out. . .

The stench was worse. It permeated his nostrils like the time he was running down King street and tripped over the Myers' dead cat and ended up vomiting over the stench and the stiff curled tongue crawling with flies and the jelly-brown eyeball that had attached itself to his T-shirt.

He picked up his speed, choking, his legs numbing, and behind he could hear it gasping like an asthmatic child in a fit, and he knew that if he slowed for an instant the damned thing would be reaching out for him...

Jesus God, no! he cried, and suddenly he was racing down Bradbury Street, straining, heaving, pulling desperately at the leash, summoning every ounce of strength left in his legs, his arms, his body.

He could hear it's feet slapping, no, cracking at the pavement and the stench was hitting his nostrils and making him dizzy.

He had just turned down Poe Street, his shoulders numbing with pain, when it touched him on the shoulder.

No! Goddamnit!

It was resting there, caressing the shoulder blades, and he realized for a horrified moment that there was no flesh, only knuckle and bone, and he screamed so loud that the hideous thing jumped from his shoulder and murmured a short chuckle.

Leave me alone! And suddenly he could see the house, the lights and Valerie's shadow hovering beneath the satin curtains.

Oh God, please let me get home, please! Let me get home, even to Valerie, yes, to Valerie and home behind the locked doors forever and ever...

He was plunging across the grass, across the driveway, his eyes riveted to the brass knob glaring in the glow of the outside lamp, and he could hear it behind, slowing, wheezing for breath as he scrambled for the brass, turning and turning it in his sweaty palms.

Nothing, goddamnit!

"Valerie," he pounded, crying and screaming and sliding his moistened fists down the door.

"Valerie, the door, the door! Please!"

He could hear it crawling across the grass, the horrible crackle of leaves and sickened breath hissing as it moved closer and closer...

"Valerie! Oh God! Please, Valerie!"

Her slippers, her slippers shuffling miserably across the linoleum. "Those goddamn slippers," he cried!

It clicked it's tongue and he could hear, as he squeezed himself against the door, the saliva hissing hungrily and the huge shadow descending across the house...

And suddenly the brass was turning and turning, and the latch

thudding sickeningly in his ear. He plunged in past her and slammed and bolted the door behind.

He listened.

Something resembling the sound of a claw scraping its way down the door.

Silence.

Almost deafening in its silence and he pressed his spine hard against the door when she spoke.

"Stop acting like an idiot! What's the matter with you?"

"Something out there," he blubbered.

He tried to hold her back, but she was stronger than him, pulling him away like a little child and the door swinging free before he could even cry out.

She stood in the moonlight, all three hundred pounds of her, swaying cautiously as she looked up and down the street, the porch, the silent darkness.

"Jesus," he muttered, and she swept her gargantuan arms about him as he wept. For the first time in years he fell into the heaving breasts and the smell of apples.

"Something out there!"

"Shhh! There's nothing out there, baby. Not anymore."

I hate you, he was thinking. What am I doing?

He tried to pull away, but she locked him close, pressing his spine tighter and tighter.

"There, baby. You're going to give up this silly running, aren't you? From now on you're going to stay home and take care of your old lady, aren't you?"

"Yes, yes," he heard himself saying and before he knew it, she was leading him up the stairs, holding his hand like a scolded child being put to bed.

She made him shower the sweat and tears off his body. When he had finished toweling himself he discovered her lounging beneath the blue sheets, grinning in a hideous curvaceous pose like an elephantine Cleopatra.

Afterwards, he awoke in a trembling sweat and noticed her huge shadow perched by the open window, the breezes shifting through her auburn hair. He knew she was staring at something.

Sleep beckoned and the last thing he remembered before drifting off was the image of Valerie waving at something in the darkness.

philip yates

Portrait

It wasn't long
Before the swollen wind
Unlatched the gate
To where I'd been,
Undressing me
Before my eyes
Allowing me
To realize
My nakedness,
My feebleness,
Susceptible to death.
Upon the upbeat
Of my step
Shakily I fell
And wept
Onto my soiled foot.

The darkness became
My enemy
And slew my sole security,
Falling heavily too thick
Its time not yet arisen.
Within the openness
I shut my mind.
I hid
Without facade
Unrealized.
Beneath my very self
I did deny
The portrait
Of the sinner
After life.

veronica sarian



Everlasting Love

If there is such a thing
As an everlasting kiss,
I would like to share one with you.
And if anyone could ever
Hug all of their love into another,
I'd love to hug mine into you.
But you'll have to promise
To return some back to me,
So that we may exchange it
Eternally.
I have such a longing
To be with you always,
To hold your hand in mine
Until the end of time,
To walk forever in love with you,
To kiss an everlasting kiss with you,
To hug a neverending hug with you.
To love an unending love with you,
But that's too much for me to handle.
So forget it.

veronica sarian



To a Calendar Kitty from Her Admirer

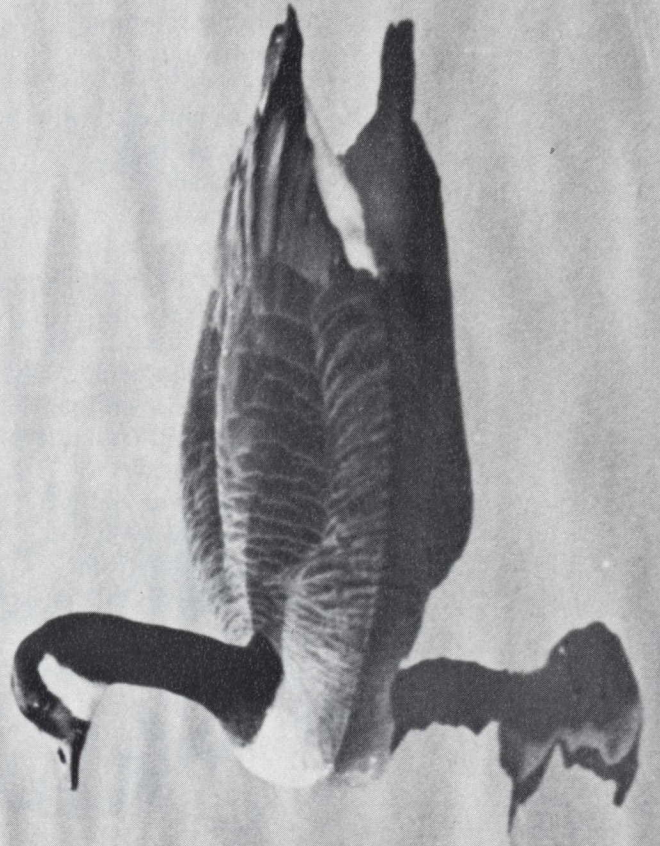
Chick,
You are my beautiful girl,
My wild baby,
My catty pet.
Chick
You are my joy,
My pussycat of love,
And my soft-footed
Friend
With ears
Larger than your hands
So you may listen
And understand
The stories
That I come home
And tell you.
Your eyes
Round and green
Glow at night
And wait and watch for me
"Til I come home.
And in the morning
You softly purr
"I love you."
From the bottom of your heart
And kiss my face
And knead me.
At night again
You lie on the bed
And await my return home,
Your soft body shedding the blanket.
You cry at night
When I'm not home,
And sit by the window
When you can't fall asleep.
Looking outside
You may see an old mate.
But he passes.
Mating season's over
And you hardly talk to each other
Anymore.

veronica sarian

The Goose

She floated by
As if the conscience of one's mind,
Gliding along the waters of emotion,
Freely,
And letting
 Feeling all of nature's deepest meanings
 them,
 to her
Act as a guide.
Silently,
 understanding why.

veronica sarian



Hepzibah

Hepzibah was her name. It was pinned to her shawl like the price tag on an empty sack of potatoes.

Ignoring the old woman's startled glance, the doctor in charge of new admits instructed his nurse to help her undress. Hepzibah's first reaction was to clutch her worn black shawl more tightly around her and did her best to disappear into the folds of it. But the determination of Nurse Binder won out: closing her eyes against the personal sacrilege, Hepzibah surrendered herself to Dr. Brown's stethoscope.

The thin substance of her withered flesh clung to her frame like crinkled paper on a hand made kite, and with her eyes closed—she looked like a propped up corpse. After a cursory examination, the doctor wrote down his findings and turned the patient over again to Miss Binder. Meanwhile, the nurse had discarded the corpse's black shroud and dingy undergarments for fresh shirt and drawers and a plain yellow housedress.

Proceeding to help her dress, Binder murmured all the while; "the poor soul must eat like a robin," and "I will certainly take it upon myself to see that she gets some meat on those bones!" Unfortunately, yellow was a poor choice for Hepzibah's sallow complexion—but clucking her tongue, Binder explained it would have to do for the present, for after all, "there were others to be considered!" Finally, discarding several pairs of shoes because of size, the nurse came up with a pair of shocking pink fluffy house slippers. These, she slipped onto the long suffering woman with a flourish.

"There now, at least your tootsies will look alive!"

The elderly new admit had endured it all in silence and with closed eyes. However, as the nurse turned to gather up the shoes, a hoarded cud of tobacco hit Binder's starched white posterior, drooled its brown stain down to the hem of her uniform; then plopped to the floor. None the wiser, she turned and wheeled her docile patient to her assigned room.

Hepzibah's roommate was an ancient Indian squaw who, because of her impassive manner, Binder had labeled "Squaw Sitting Bull."

Oblivious to everything and everybody at End Have, Hepzibah and Squaw S.B. seemed a well matched pair and soon became the 'pets' of the nursing home, brightening up the otherwise dull routine of the place.

First, came the incident of the Squaw's chair, described by old Mrs. Harvey as "running a close second to her weekly bingo bash!" (Mrs. Harvey, one of the livelier residents, was in-house Bingo Queen).

The chair, (a large over-stuffed one in front of the home's only color TV), had become known as 'the Squaw's' because, being a large determined woman, she had claimed it. Hepzibah beat her to it that day by the strategy of skipping dessert at lunch, thereby being the first one in the sitting room. When old Sitting Bull saw her roommate occupying her throne, she moved in close and faced the intruder, arms folded, a human rock of Gibraltar. Her eyes, bright chips of coal imbedded deep within the wrinkles, denied her dead pan expression.

The tension mounted; the residents stood in a group, forgetting pills, aches and pains and all, while the two formidable old women sparred for position. And Joe Grundy, the janitor, took bets.

Mistress of the dirty look, Hepzibah zapped the Squaw with one of the most withering she could muster. The rock stood her ground. Changing tactics, the skinny challenger concentrated on her own right leg. (A former resident of Crete, the decades of walking and climbing had strengthened her limbs). Doubling that leg to her body, the old Greek delivered a karate-like kick at the hulk in her way—and received the shock of her life! The Squaw, a Blackfoot Indian, used to the rough terrain of the Dakotas, was deceptively agile—and before the foot could touch her, intercepted with a strong grasp on Hepzibah's ankle. At the same time, the force of her grasp shook loose a fluffy pink slipper and sailed it out an open window. Dropping the ankle, the Squaw again resumed her pose.

Hepzibah gasped; then the closest thing to a smile her dour mouth could manage, flitted across her face. In view of all, she relinquished the coveted seat, limped to the window, and tossed out the other slipper. By now, members of the staff had joined the crowd in the sitting room, and young and old alike broke into applause that ended quickly when Joe called a tie and offered to hold the money until the next match.

According to Mrs. Harvey, in the weeks that passed after the chair incident it became evident to the 'family' at the home that by some miracle a new bond of tolerance existed between Hepzibah and the Squaw and then, as if things were too peaceful, the two ladies again became the chief players in another drama that put End Haven on the map.

It was a night in early November, and most everyone had retired to their rooms. The Squaw was sleeping soundly and Hepzibah had just dropped off. Between the beds in their room there was a large brightly colored woven basket with attached lid, (nearer to the Squaw's bed than Hepzibah's). The basket

belonged to the Squaw. When the Indian was admitted to the home Miss Binder had assumed that it contained the makings of a rug, and hadn't questioned it. Rumor indicated that it contained the ashes of S.B.'s husband, the way the Squaw guarded the thing. Hepzibah hadn't concerned herself about it at all.

Until the first wisps of smoke filtered into their room that evening, the basket had remained stationary, but then it began to take on a life of its own—slowly rocking back and forth. Presently, the lid arose and from it appeared the struggling head of the basket's occupant. Sensitive to the smoke, the creature struggled to free itself and the basket overturned with a bump. A light sleeper, Hepzibah lay quietly and listened. The rustling in the big basket made her flesh creep! She had a few fears, but the biggest was of rodents—and this one must be huge! Cautiously, she raised up on an elbow and flicked on the light over the night table. (By this time the Squaw's pet had freed itself and was under S.B.'s bed).

In her concentration on the unwelcome guest, Hepzibah had not noticed the smoke—now the thickening haze in the room brought her to her feet. The rodent forgotten, she hurried to the door; arriving at the same time as the creature. Its body caused her to trip, and in the dim light she kicked at the annoying hose-like object. With a loud hiss, it attacked. She screamed then, a loud raucous croak, that was repeated as she jumped aside and threw open the door against it.

Badly frightened, the wiry old woman started down the hallway for assistance; then stopped short when she saw the flames at the other end of the corridor! Fire to Hepzibah was no new experience. It awakened dormant feelings of sorrow. Two of her children had died when fire ravaged their home.

Tearing at the buttons on her pajama top, Hepzibah ripped it off and into two pieces on her way into the bathroom adjoining her room. Hurrying to the sink, she soaked the flimsy material under the cold water spigot, and tied one half over her nose and mouth; then entered the smoke-filled bedroom. The old Indian still slept, but her breathing was irregular. Hepzibah tugged and pushed at the large body, trying to waken her. This failing, she squeezed the other half of the wet rag into the woman's face. The Squaw trembled. Encouraged, Hepzibah summoned her remaining strength—and at the top of her old lungs, exploded with Aaaaaaaaah! Aaaaaaaaah! The noise penetrated the Indian's smoke-drugged senses like a laser. She rolled towards Hepzibah, choking and trying to rise, while the aged Greek, trembling with exertion, frantically pulled at her arms; for unconsciousness could claim both at any moment!

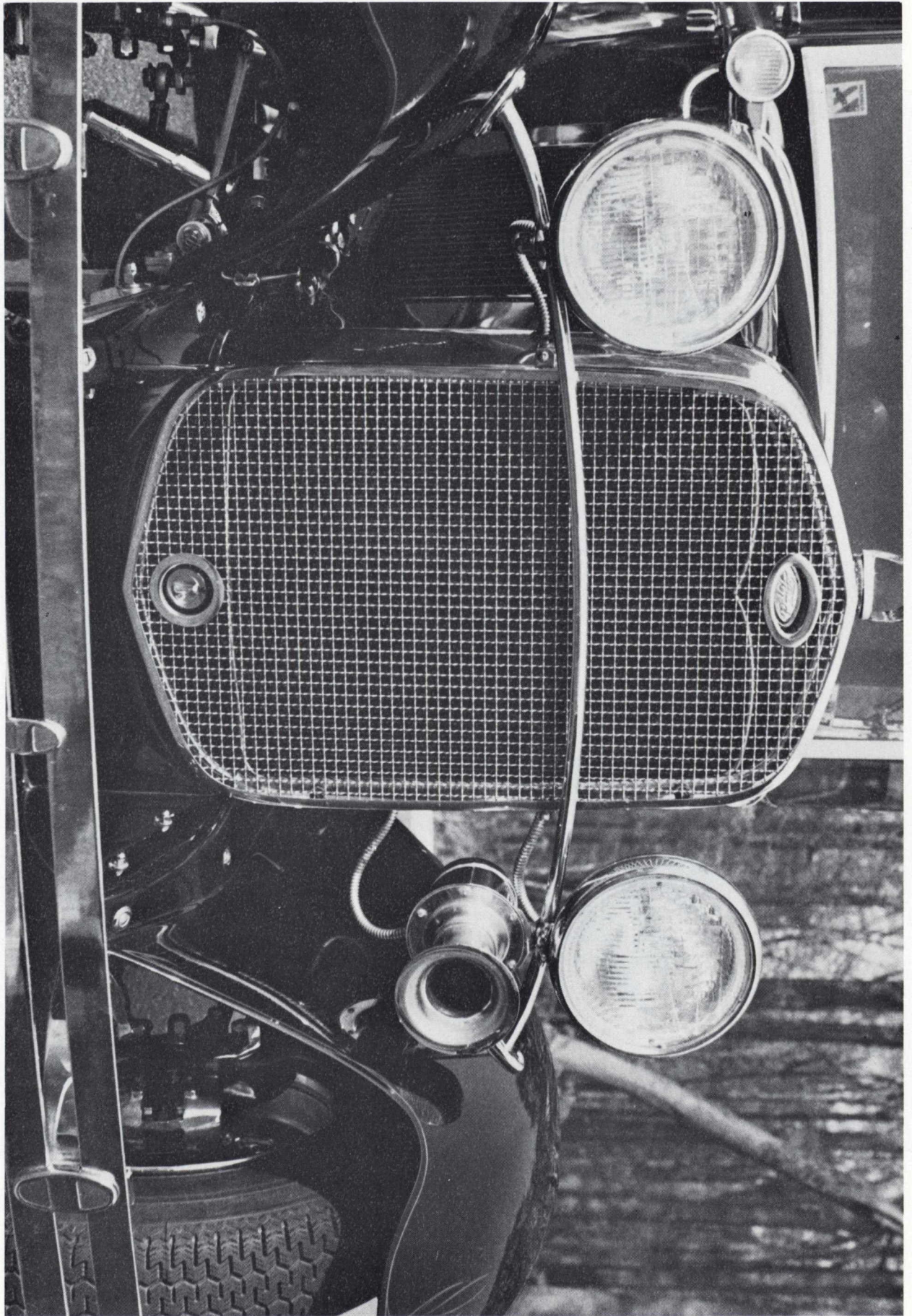
Supporting one another, the old women stumbled out into the hall, just in time to receive help from two husky attendants; who, unable to separate them, threw a blanket over both, and steered the unsteady bundle down the stairs.

Miraculously, there was no fatalities.

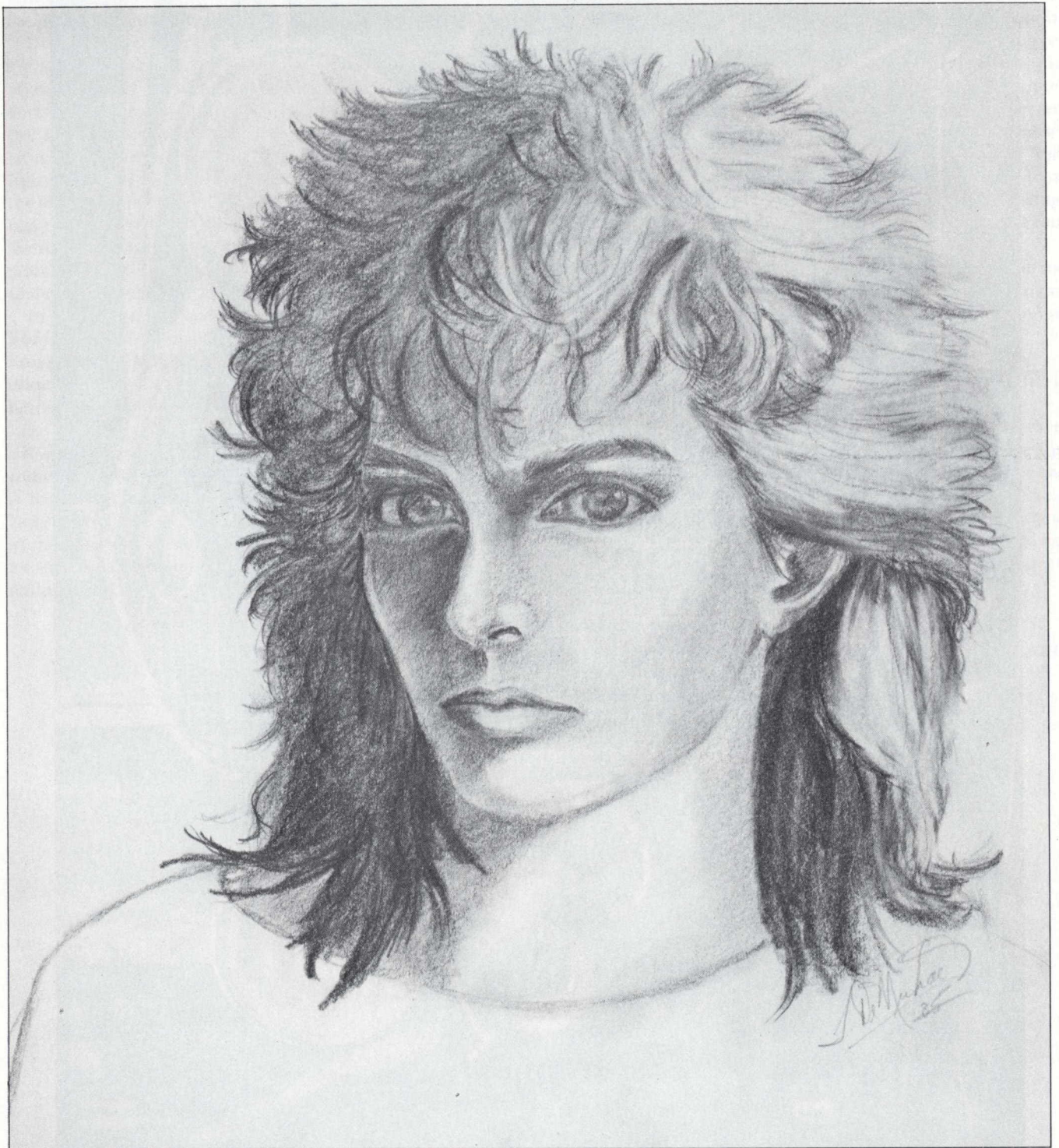
Hepzibah's cries had alerted Miss Binder who called in the alarm.

When the building was being evacuated that night, there had been another distraction out on the lawn. There were squeals, someone fainted, and another ran off screaming. In the chill air the creature was quite docile, and one of the onlookers carried the large limp burden to his car. It made the first page of the *Register* along with the fire. But it seemed no one could explain what an ancient fangless rattlesnake was doing at the scene on that cold November night.

dot ammon



Wayne Journey



You Are in My Thoughts Today

You are in my thoughts today
My thoughts drifting like clouds
It reaches across miles to you
Above your head they puff the skies
Smiling down upon as you rest.

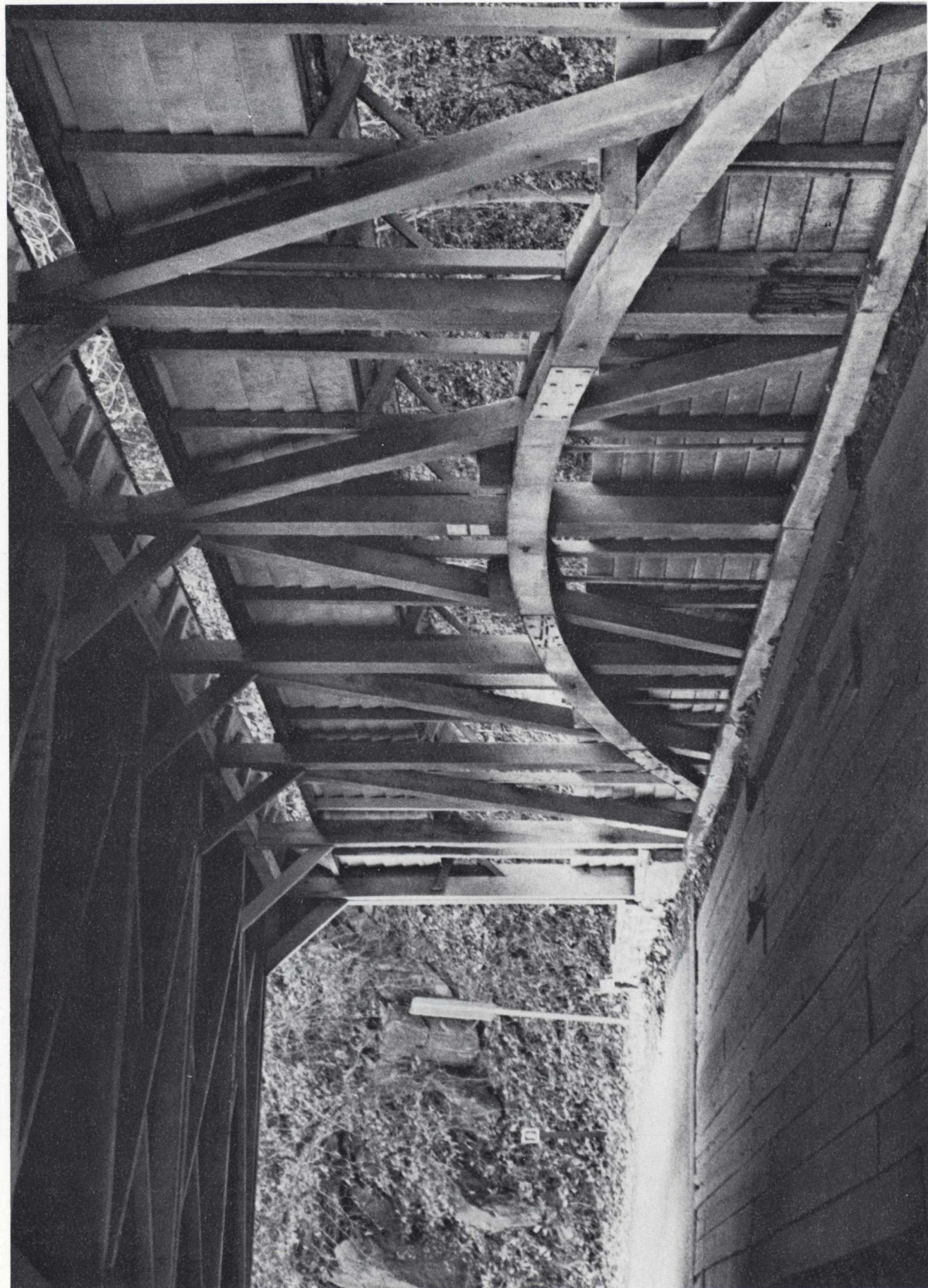
You are in my thoughts today
My voice carried on the wind
It rushes to speak to you
Humming around your home
Touches the corners of your mind.

You are in my thoughts today
My warmth transforming like the sun
It shines sweet heat
Wanting to warm your wetness
It caresses your everlasting feeling.

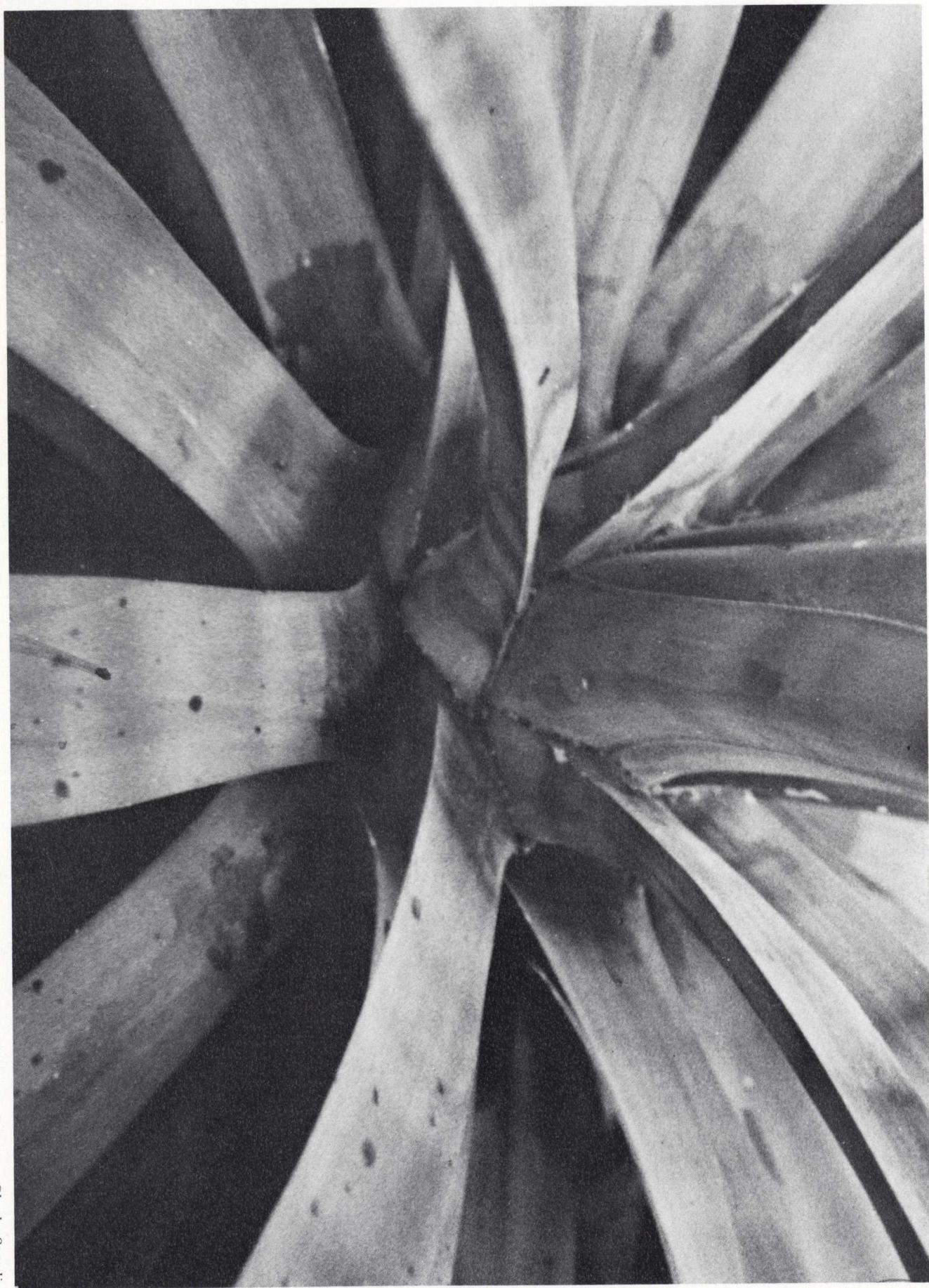
You are in my thoughts today
My body lays as an ocean
It rolls on waves of waterbeds
Making contact as it peaks
Upon ecstasy in a sea of liquid love.

You are in my thoughts today
My soul rides on reality's dreams
It soars to the sound of your heartbeat
Joyfully living, loving, and laughing
For this is joy and joy is you.

angela johanson



Charles Strayline



Charles Strayhorn

“After All”

The hummingbird flirts
Admidst the flowering vine
Climbing the crumbling facade
Of an old, abandoned farmhouse

An elbow in the hand of another
A friendly overture
Look fast!
See through the magnifying lenses
The fluttering wings
They beat so quick
Did you see them?
Look again
There, near the roofline!
Watch as it drinks from
The long forgotten nectar
Satisfied—it's gone.

Retreat to a warm and darklit room
Rocking in a wooden armed chair
Shoulder nestled in and under shoulder
Childhood secrets, treasured, shared
Quiet, close and closer still
The shrill ring of the telephone sounds
Thoughts and feelings suspended
In time
The illusion shatters
Just a fantasy
After all.

lisa williams

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