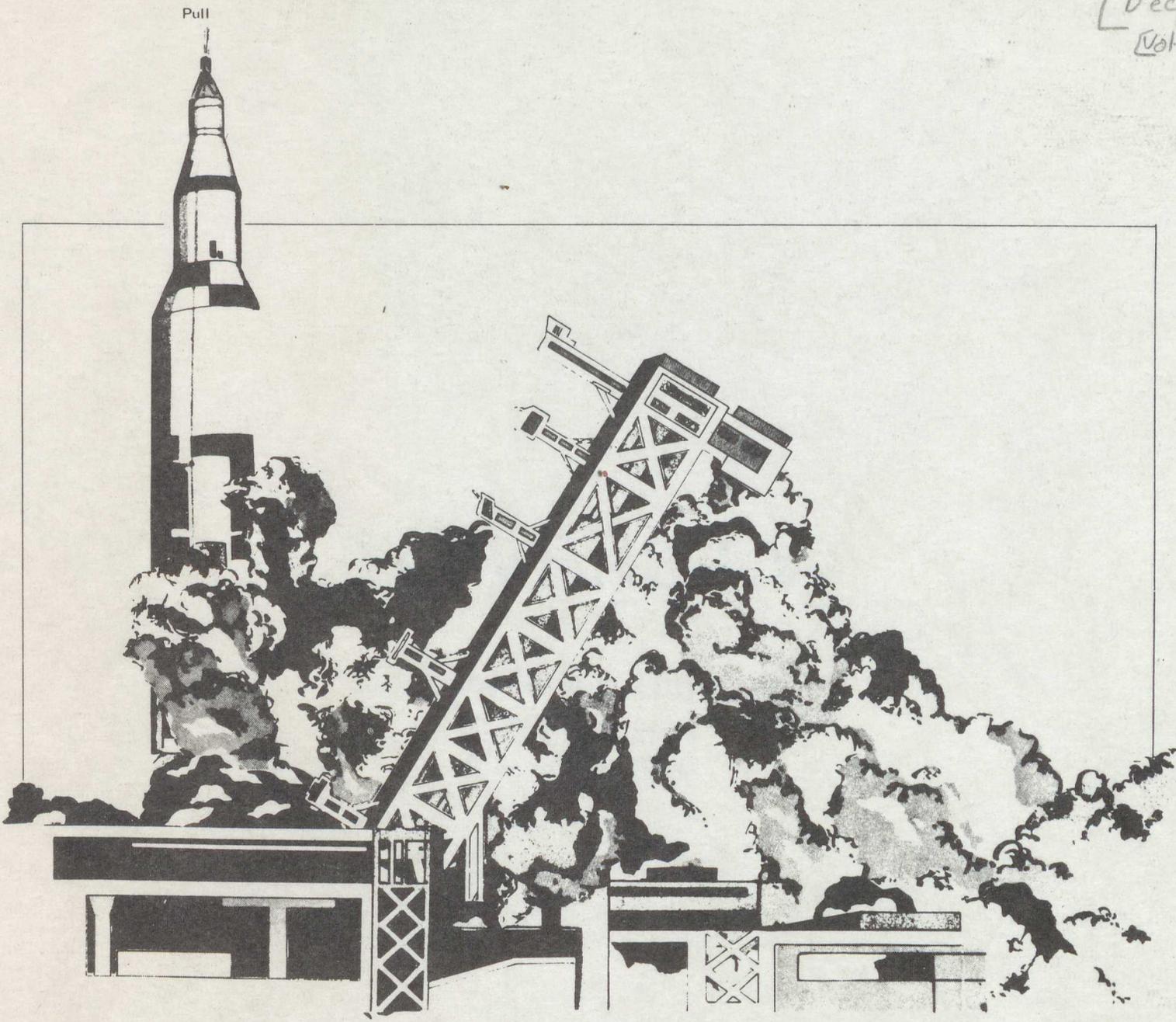


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TOWERS LV

# TOWERS LV

Northern Illinois University

DeKalb, Illinois  
December 1980

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LUCIEN STRYK POETRY AWARD

Winner: "Cancer Flower" by Cathy Allen  
Honorable Mention: "Fall" for my father by John Goss

J. HALL CONNOR FICTION AWARD

Winner: "Faces" by Lorna Collier  
Judge: George Carrington

TOWERS is recognized and funded  
by the Student Association.

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## A Plea

Don't believe my poetry  
its coquetry-  
curls arranged around the ear  
a tasty tear  
or an unsymmetric smile  
to beguile-

It lies from left to right.  
The trite  
in bespangled display-  
buy now, pay

later. It talks,  
walks,  
dresses in style-  
no bile  
no blood, no sweat, no dandruff-  
this stuff

is a rip-off. Pull here  
(behind the ear)  
along the dotted line-  
be mine.

Monica Heilbronn

## For Yeats

August's end we meet  
on road in woods  
berry ripe; so heavy,  
trees threaten  
to skin themselves.

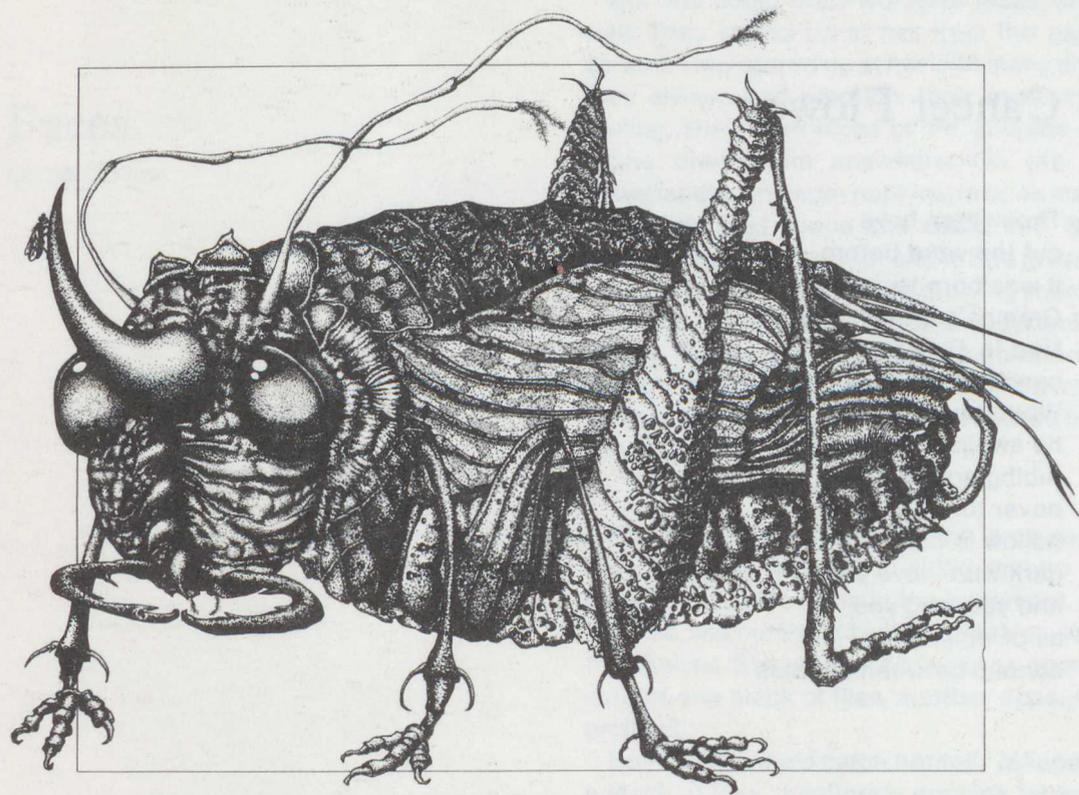
Air sweats, sky drags  
around our heads.  
Lives shift, turning over  
on full stomachs.

Even the road moves-  
on fat worms,  
one layer on all the others,  
moving.

We are thick with silence.  
Summer tongues  
ready to fall,  
words purpled for picking.

A chainsaw wails across miles.  
Whatever limb severed,  
crashes hard on all the years  
and makes no noise.

John Goss



## Cancer Flower

Those men have  
cut the word before  
it was born to  
Grampa's breath.  
Had to, they say  
cancer flowers.  
White on white  
he swells with  
tubing and stories  
never told. The  
hollow in his throat  
dark with i love you,  
and you, and you....  
all of which  
echoes between his ears.

Cathy Allen

## Faces

Lorna Collier

She drew faces. Not portraits: if she tried to copy someone else's face, it didn't work. Sometimes when she was drawing one of her faces, it would end up looking like someone else's face, but that was strictly by accident.

She drew only the faces. She couldn't draw the necks or the shoulders or the rest of their bodies. She couldn't draw backgrounds or landscapes or still-lives. She couldn't draw flowers or horses or the sea. She couldn't even draw men's faces: if she did, they came out looking like cartoons.

But she could draw women's faces, and she drew them well. They stared up at her from the paper: sensual, sad, defiant. They stared up at her with many different moods, but they always had emotion, their eyes were always full of feeling. They were faces of life, and she drew them.

She drew them anywhere. On the blank spaces in newspapers, on paper napkins, in book margins. On any free and unclaimed space she could find. She drew them in pencil or pen or crayon or chalk. She drew them in all colors.

And when she was done drawing them, she threw them away. They embarrassed her. She scribbled over the faces, closed the eyes, blackened the contours so carefully and lovingly outlined a moment before. She tore them up and hid them in the bottom of the wastebasket, hoping that no one would ever see them.

\*\*\*\*\*

She worked as a file clerk for a large company. Every day, from eight to five with a thirty minute lunch break, she worked in the file room in the basement. She alphabetized the files, she put the files on the shelves, she took the files off the shelves. She worked hard, but as soon as she had taken care of one stack of files, another appeared. The work was endless.

Sometimes she'd catch herself, stopped in the middle of a stack of files, mindlessly drawing faces on the table top. Full of shame and embarrassment, she would wash off the table, erasing the faces. Then she'd work even harder, to catch up. To punish herself.

It was usually dark when she left for work in the morning, and nearing dark when she got home. The basement was windowless and airless. The walls were crumbling cement bricks, infested with spiders and wasps. The company had mouse traps in every corner; sometimes she'd get to work in the morning before they'd removed the dead victims. Those were the days she seemed to catch herself drawing most often.

Sometimes she'd go outside for lunch. The company's office was in the heart of the city, among rows of other crumbling buildings. The bus stop was right in front of the office, so there was usually a big crowd of people, most of whom were women, going to and from their endless jobs. She didn't like to look at the women, to see their empty eyes. So she usually stayed inside the file room, eating a sandwich at the battered table she called her desk.

She worked with two other women. One was a black woman who was from Jamaica. She never spoke unless spoken to. When she did speak, though, her voice was like gentle music. She always carried a black leatherbound Bible. Everyday at lunchtime she would sit on a bench in the hall and read her Bible. She never brought anything to eat or drink, just her Bible.

The other woman was Phyllis, the head clerk. Phyllis was a 45-year-old divorcee with two children. Small and bony, Phyllis wore a red wig and red lipstick. She had one front tooth that was gold. Phyllis always wore high-heeled white patent leather boots and orange dresses. She brought her transistor radio to work; all day long the file room throbbed with the coarse jangle of country music.

The executives of the company had their offices on the main floor. The main floor was high-ceilinged and painted white and full of windows. Most of the executives were old men with white hair and red faces. A few were young, with three-piece suits and fresh cologne. The executives never spoke to anybody from the basement. The clerks learned to slip in and out of their offices as if they were invisible. The executives wanted it that way.

\*\*\*\*\*

She lived with her husband in a small apartment in a large complex. She had no children. She also had no friends: she and her husband had moved to the city several years ago, knowing nobody. She still knew nobody.

She married her husband when she was sixteen. She never got beyond her sophomore year in high school. He finished school and got a job in the city. So they moved.

She had never had many friends before she met her husband. Even then she drew faces. She had always drawn faces. Sometimes she drew them more than other times. Lately she drew them a lot.

She loved her husband. He called her pet names and sometimes helped with the housework. He didn't even mind her faces: if he found a face she'd only incompletely erased

in the blank pages of the checkbook, or if he came upon her absently drawing angry eyes over the sports sections, he'd smile tolerantly. He put up with her.

She loved him.

\*\*\*\*\*

One day Phyllis didn't come to work.

It was unlike Phyllis. Though sometimes she stumbled in hungover, and spent the morning in the bathroom, she always came to work. Every day for eleven years she had come to work.

No one told them where Phyllis was. Rumors floated down to the basement: hospital. Alcohol. Drug overdose. Remarriage. No one could say for sure.

She and Jamaica did Phyllis' job plus their own that day. Someone had used an insecticide in the basement the night before. The repellent hung thick and heavy in the close-in air of the file room. One of the overhead lights went out, leaving her and Jamaica in shadows, filing furiously and struggling to breathe.

She found out what had happened to Phyllis from the man who came to fix the light. He hung out at the same bar Phyllis did. The night before Phyllis had collapsed at the bar and been taken to the hospital. The doctors said she had bleeding ulcers.

Phyllis didn't come back the rest of that week. None of the executives came down to notify her or Jamaica, or to give them instructions or assistance. So they kept on with their work, doing the job of three.

The silence was startling. She had never known such silence before. Always there had been Phyllis' music. She had always hated and locked it out, or at least she'd thought she had. It seemed now that the music had been the foundation on which she set the blocks; without the foundation, she couldn't escape.

The silence was worse than the music. Now she heard herself walking back and forth across the room, climbing the ladders to the upper shelves, crawling on the floor to reach the bottom shelves. Now she could see nothing but the files, herself and the files.

Jamaica didn't like the silence either, although she didn't say anything. She worked more slowly, getting less done than she had when Phyllis was there. She began to make a lot of mistakes, as if she were filing in a trance.

One day after lunch it started. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death," said Jamaica in her

sweet, sad, island-music voice, "I shall fear no evil."

\*\*\*\*\*

"I think you need a hobby. Something to get your mind off your job, something to keep you busy while I'm gone," her husband said, holding her as she tried to stop crying.

"But I can't do anything," she said.

Her husband stopped to think. He was packing for a business trip to another city. He would be gone for a week.

"I know what you can do," he said suddenly. "You know how you're always doodling over everything? You know, buy some paints and an easel. You could use the spare room."

"No, I couldn't."

"Why not? Come on, babe, you'd love it. My wife the Artist." Her husband started to laugh.

"I couldn't. I'm no good, We can't afford paints and all that stuff. Besides, I'm no artist."

"I was just kidding about being an artist. You don't have to be good to have fun. As for money, sugar, don't worry, I can afford it. Come on."

"Well. I guess I could try."

"Good!" Her husband gave her a hug. And a kiss. And another kiss. "You know, babe, I'm going to be gone for a whole week. That's a long time, you know."

He smiled at her as she turned out the light.

\*\*\*\*\*

Jamaica's Bible recitations became more frequent. In a way, they became another kind of background music. Jamaica wasn't preaching, or reciting the verses to anyone but herself. At first she said them softly. Then she began yelling them. The verses came in no particular order or sequence. At least none that could be recognized.

\*\*\*\*\*

She bought the paints and the easel and some canvases. She cleaned out the spare room; it became her studio. She didn't, at first, know where to begin. The first night in her studio, she didn't paint any faces. She just sat in the middle of the room, staring at the welcoming, beautiful blankness of the canvas.

\*\*\*\*\*

"God said, 'let there be light', and there was light!" screamed Jamaica. "The meek shall inherit the earth!" Without Phyllis, the workload, previously impossible, was

now inhuman. Boxes of things to be filed were stacked on cartons of files which were stacked on more boxes of things that had to be filed. The door to the file room was almost blocked with the mountains of endless work.

There was still something wrong with the light; no one seemed able to fix it. If it worked at all, it flickered steadily. Most of the time, it was out, leaving them in semi-darkness.

Jamaica began speaking in her native tongue. Her words formed chants, desolate songs. She quit filing, and instead sat curled up in a corner, chanting and staring at something beyond the crumbling brick wall of the basement. The half light flickered like firelight across her expressionless black features.

Still no one spoke to them of Phyllis. It was as if she had vanished, as if she had never existed, as if she had been erased.

\*\*\*\*\*

The angry eyes glared at her from the canvas, glistening brown. The red lips pouted defiantly. The cheekbones were high and haughty; the golden hair streamed wild and free.

She stared at the face. The painting was finished and she didn't want it to be. She loved it. She loved the creating, she loved splashing the bright colors on the white space, she loved losing herself in it.

"I'm good," she whispered to herself. It was true. She knew it, she felt it inside, in the quickening of her heart, in her joy.

"I'm good. I'm good. I'm good." She kept repeating it to herself, and each time the words filled her with a happiness she had not known was possible.

She painted every night that week. Her husband was gone, so she was free with her art. She painted all the faces she had always drawn on napkins or book margins, but with two differences. The faces were now as large as life, and she did not destroy them.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Girls," said the executive. "Girls, meet your new head clerk."

He stood at the door to the file room, blinking at the darkness. He had his arm around a middle-aged woman with bleached blond hair and a slit skirt.

"Meet Doris," the executive said, giving Doris a squeeze.

Doris smiled. "Hi." She nodded in their direction. Jamaica sat against the wall, staring blankly. "Are we going to lunch now or what?" she demanded of the executive.

The two left for lunch, still arm-in-arm. Jamaica started chanting. There had been no mention of Phyllis.

\*\*\*\*\*

"The doctors say a week and I'll be ready to go back to work," said Phyllis. "I'm so glad you came. I can't wait to hear how everything is at work."

Phyllis was unrecognizable. The wig was gone; her hair was gray and so thin that the bones of her skull shone through. Her skin was pale and stretched tightly across the jutting bones of her face. White sheets were pulled up to her chin. Dark pockets nestled under her eyes, eyes which looked strangely gray.

"You know, even though I hate the company, I've kind of missed it," Phyllis continued. "And I can't stand this damn hospital much longer. Besides, I got two kids still in school, and payments to make, and—well, I can't make it without that job. Bad as it is, what the hell else am I good for?"

Phyllis laughed. Her gold tooth gleamed, the only color in her face.

The radio beside the bed was silent.

\*\*\*\*\*

It was her last chance to paint. Her husband was due home the next night. She came straight from the hospital, from Phyllis. She hadn't been able to tell her.

The only color she could use was black. She slapped it on the white, feeling its power. Slowly the face took shape.

When it was finished, she stood back to look at what she had created. And then she knew she could never draw another face.

She had drawn Phyllis' face and she had drawn Jamaica's face. She had drawn the faces of the women at the bus stop. She had drawn herself.

Slowly, methodically, she painted black bars across the face. She took one last look at the eyes of death, then filled in all the white spaces, until the face was finally and irrevocably covered.

\*\*\*\*\*

"By the way, babe, how'd your painting go?" her husband asked, holding her against him in the bed. He lit a cigarette, the flame of the match flickering across his expressionless face.

"It didn't work out. I told you I'm no good," she said lightly, her head on his chest.

"That's too bad. Listen, I had an idea while I was away, thinking of you here all alone. I was thinking it was time for us to have a baby."

"Baby?"

"Well, you're always talking about how you hate your job. This is a way out. We can use the spare room for a nursery. And I saved the best news for last: I got a promotion."

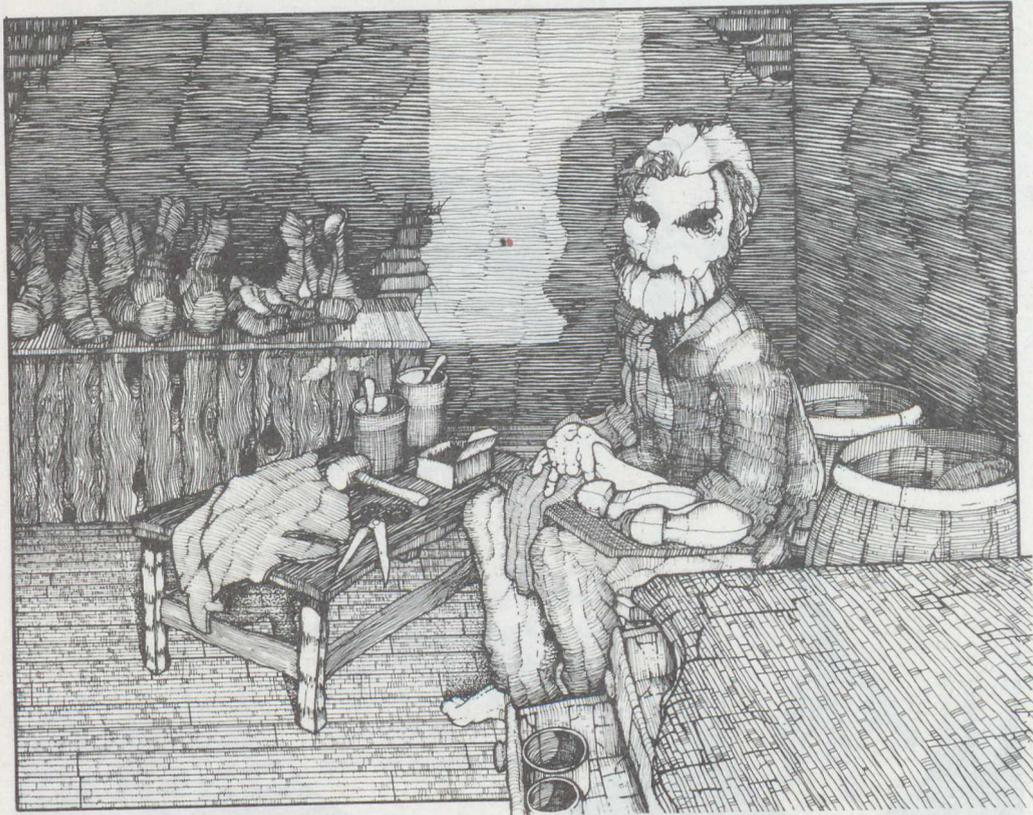
"Promotion?"

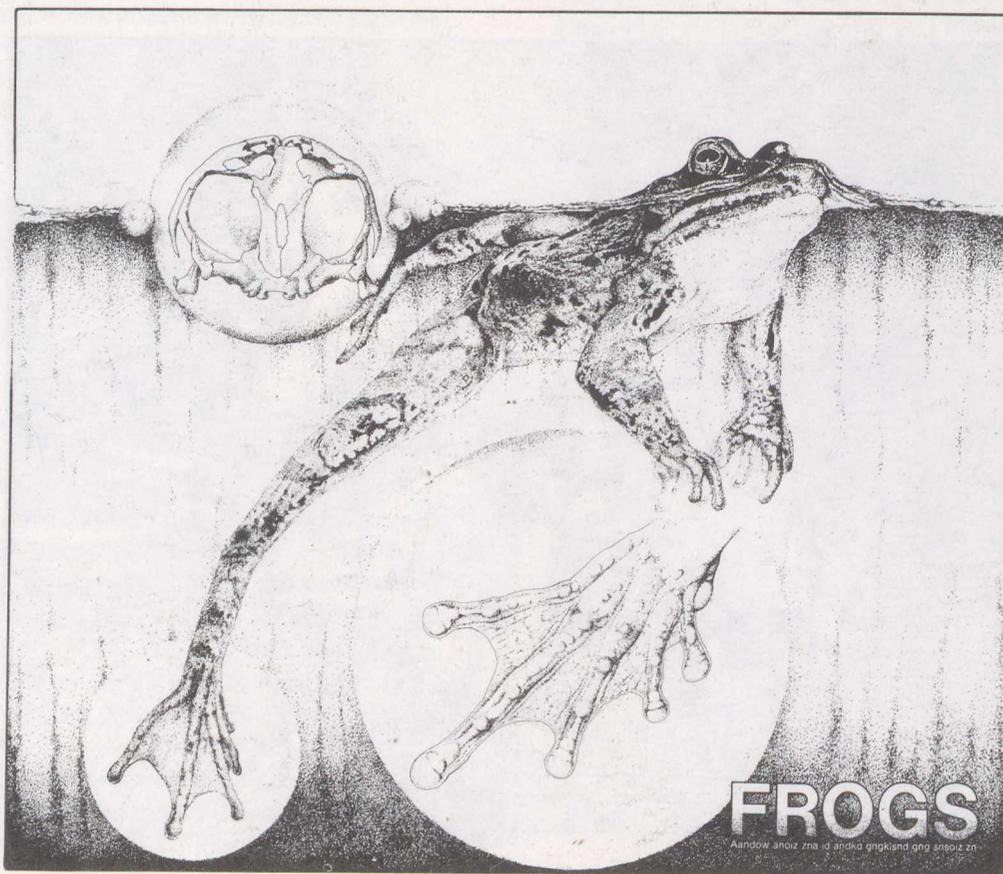
"They said I did so well on this assignment that I should be route manager. Route manager! Only problem is that means travelling, so I'll be leaving you alone a lot. That's another reason a baby would be good, to keep you company when I'm gone. What do you think, babe?"

The darkness surrounded her, swallowed her. She was hollow. Empty.

"A baby sounds fine."

She turned her back to her husband so that the tears wouldn't fall on his chest.





## Spring 79

Now it's the rain falling;  
puddles along streets  
and in my mind  
puddles  
the snow melted  
last glimpse  
breath on a window

smear'd clean  
but I miss  
crumbled flakes  
waylaid by my eyelashes  
draped cars boxed in each space  
christmas cookies  
sent when I thought I knew you.

House crowned velvet  
icy gutters dripping water  
down the wall each drop  
in the bucket a  
firecracker  
as I waited for Spring.

Rosemary Stapey

## Season

This is the time  
when I spin on fast heels  
and catch red.  
Each breath drawn  
thickens blood to sap,  
damp leaves mixing  
with cool air.  
My hair flashes  
orange at the roots.

This is when I walk  
the river's curves;  
water combing banks  
for bird skulls  
and old shells lodged  
in sparkling loam.  
I hear stones, worn round,  
tumble south;  
eyes to match  
the racing carp's.

I am gravel piled at the edge  
of field by this flood;  
a kite of maple  
strung along by the duck's flight.  
My voice sinks heavy  
back to earth,  
to be turned under,  
when winter's melt  
fills my hands.

John Goss

# The Hunter-Tourist from the Fields

Bill Sughrua

Nick was thinking about his friend Joe. Looking out of a hotel window in a small Venezuelan town, Nick was thinking about his friend Joe. He wondered whether he was dead, and then felt ashamed: he thought about the firmness of Joe's limbs, the short quick sway of his body in motion.

From the window Nick could see small houses at the end of the street. They were made of wood and painted a dirty white. He could see mestizos lounging peacefully in the shadows the poorly constructed wooden awnings threw on the front steps of the houses, others sitting on the boiling metal of cars parked in front of the porch-steps, their faces empty, bored. Behind the houses were vast fields of tall tan silky weeds, and, behind the fields, the dried meshed green of the jungle trees with burnt tangled leaves. Nick watched birds flutter wildly over those trees, the blistering sun on fire behind their small brown heads, their smooth feathered backs.

It was hot in the hotel room. From the floor looking almost flesh-colored from sunlight streaming through the open window without a screen, Nick grabbed a discarded paper bag ruffled so that it had a funnel on top. He wiped his sweaty face with its curled edge. He heard a jeep race by in the street, the Negro voices of its passengers reverberating in the stiff air thick with insect noises. He thought about his friend Joe again: his friend he had been working with during the past four years at *The Des Moines Weekly*. He slid his hand along the window's wooden trim until a sliver pricked a blister. It bled so he pressed it against his pants.

Nick had just checked into the hotel. The hotel manager, Thomas, walked into the room and placed a small pile of neatly folded towels on a cot-size bed pushed against a wall covered with gray bumpy plaster and outdated "Travel the Tropics" posters. His face was light brown, his hair black, his eyes blue and wide. His heavy stomach bulged over his belt. He had an apple core inside the cage his fingers formed. He brushed his lips with it. Behind him a light bulb hanging from the ceiling by a cord rocked slowly. "I'll be back to give you the room key I forgot to give you before." Thomas left.

*Nick stood there thinking about the afternoon at THE DES MOINES WEEKLY when he had told Joe he would go on the trip. He remembered sitting at his desk watching Joe pound IBM keys at a desk across the aisle. Joe looked up and said, "Vacation in our department starts in a week. Going on the trip with me?" Nick told Joe that he would go because he*

wanted to do something different. Joe told him that he had hunted in Venezuela before and that it wasn't as easy as it seemed and that he'd heard of hunters getting lost, or getting killed by an animal they thought was dead but when walking up to it found out their shot wasn't good enough. Joe told him that he felt he should know that it would be nothing like duck shooting in an Iowa swamp. Nick smiled and said that he couldn't hunt as good as Joe could but that he could kill a damn duck and that if he could kill a damn duck he could kill anything.

Nick stood there thinking about Joe poking the fire bed with the tip of a double-barrelled shot gun at the campsite he had just left, and Joe say, "I'm just going out for a short while before breakfast. Maybe I'll catch something feeding off the dead kudu we saw yesterday." Sitting by the hot coals of the fire smelling hot coffee and stroking a blister in the inside of his right hand, that was the last thing Nick heard Joe say. Hours passed and Joe never came back and then night came and then morning came and he still wasn't back, Nick sitting there by the tent in the open field bordering the jungle remembering how Joe had insisted on hunting only in the fields and keeping a safe distance from the jungle, Nick refusing to believe Joe might have accidentally stumbled into the jungle by walking through those weeds that go over your head and obscure your view. Then Nick threw some clothes in a pack and picked up his shot gun but remembering Joe had all the shells with him he buried the gun in his down sleeping bag in the tent. He couldn't get any food since it was all locked up in the truck and Joe had the key. He headed for the dusty road they drove in on remembering he had seen a sign saying that ahead ten miles on the road was the town El Pas. He thought that Joe had been lost but had found the town and was there alive. Very alive.

Thomas strolled into the room, dropped a key in Nick's palm, sat on the bed and took a pint bottle wrapped in yellow paper from his pocket and slurped. Nick could smell the liquor on his breath. Making the stench more noticeable Thomas coughed and pointed a leathered finger. "You're a hunter, huh? I could tell by your boots. We rarely see American hunters around here."

"I'm looking for one. Have you seen any recently?" Nick asked.

Thomas only slurped, silently.

Nick automatically repeated himself: "Have you seen any recently?"

Thomas nodded, his head fixing itself in the position of prayer. "They were a group of five, but they were blacks from another town." He urgently raised his head, as if someone had called out his name. "Ask the police. They should know. They know everything about El Pas." He finished most of the bottle and palmed it and walked to the door.

When he had left, Nick sat down, first wiping dry the liquor he had spilled on the mattress. The mattress smelled musty. Over its edge he could see dead insects wedged in the floor's cracks, their bodies warped.

After a short while he left, too.

It was still hot. Nick's shirt hung close to his chest, wet, as he walked down the street from the hotel to the police station. He had stopped once to ask a mestizo where the police station was.

Made of faded red brick and light yellow mortar, flat metal signs covered with Spanish words dangling over doorways, tiny grocery stores, hardware stores, Laundromats, restaurants and taverns stood baking in the heat. They were open for business, battered green awnings rolled down, glass doors with taped-up cracks held open by wooden shavings, mestizos shuffling in and out. Through the doorway of one grocery store Nick could see a white-aproned worker sitting on an upturned bucket, drunkenly trimming celery stalks from a wooden crate on the floor.

Nick came to the police station. It was made of gray brick and didn't have any windows, just a dark wooden door with the sign: EL PAS POLICE. A mass-produced, 2-foot high, burnt-pink clay pot stood on the cement walk to the right of the door. People had thrown cigarette butts and paper wrappers into it. Nick went inside.

In a chair in a corner sat a policeman mopping his wet face, adjusting the position of an electric fan blowing papers off his desk. He saw Nick but didn't speak. Rigid, quiet, Nick stared at the electric fan.

Another policeman poked the door open with the end of his revolver and swaggered in. He sat down, grinning. His face was tanned. His short hair was thick and black. His eyes were brown and sharp. "Vicente, what the tourist want?"

"I don't know. He hasn't asks me yet," Vicente said with both arms on the desk to keep the papers from being blow off.

"I'm looking for a hunter. Has one been here during the last two days?" Nick asked.

"I haven't seen or heard of any. How ba' you, Pedro?"

Vicente asked the other policeman.

"Not a WHITE one, like the AMERICAN."

Nick walked to the door. "I'll be back to check again," he firmly said.

Vicente didn't wave to Nick, but a piece of paper got loose anyway. He grabbed it, holding it close to the fan which sucked it in. Pedro turned his back to Nick and watched the paper shred inside the fan. Nick left and walked into the street, enveloping his hands with loose, torn pockets.

He concluded that Vicente and Pedro were harmless, that they were only stupid bastard mestizo policemen. They reminded him of the editor-in-chief of *The Des Moines Weekly*.

*He remembered walking out of his office a few weeks ago. "How'd he like the article?" Joe asked. Nick told Joe that he didn't but had to print in in the paper to fill up space and Joe said quickly, his face red with embarrassment, "Nick, he may be a bastard, but your article did have faults. The writing was a little dead, and you missed some of the movie critic's main points. A lot of us think your writing lately has been a little—" Nick interrupted, protesting, "Come on. That editor's nothing but a harmless idiot. Don't pay any attention to him, or to anyone else. The article's fine. All my articles are fine, fine, fine, fine, fine."*

At the end of the street Nick could see that place where the street forked to the left and joined the unpaved road he had walked into town on. He knew the orange, nylon, two-man tent was still pitched next to Joe's International Harvester Scout, its fly-lines firmly tied around the truck's door handles. He knew the ashes in the fire bed had burnt out a while ago, now cool, dark-gray, brittle and coughed into the air by the footsteps of small animals stalking past the campsite. He knew that he would find Joe and that they would be back at their campsite soon, packing up.

Nick passed a diner and feeling hungry stepped in and sat at a table. Mestizo men were sitting at most of the other tables, drinking liquor from thick porcelain coffee cups, their wet faces brown and shiny. The waitress walked over to Nick, her hand overturning oily hair fastening to a cheek, her heavy eyelids sprinkled with tiny beads of sweat. Nick gave her his order. She walked off to scream it at the cook hunched over behind the counter at the far end of the room, only his shoulders, tired eyes and bald brawny head visible over the formica top. She reminded Nick of a whore he was with once, while he was living in Chicago, months before *The*

*Des Moines Weekly* hired him. She was no different from the whore. It was this sharp contrast that was so jarring.

*He remembered sitting in his car parked in the lot of a north-side beach, hearing Lake Michigan waves crash against a cement walk only yards away, watching a thin-hipped blonde artistically drag a tube of lipstick across pink lips with lipstick already on them. It was over: the blonde had Nick's forty dollars and she left the car without saying a word and Nick watched her walk up the embankment of Lincoln Park and out onto Clark street. Sitting there he concluded her blue eyes encased in pink-powdered flesh were sincere. The way she looked at him, during it. . . Warm. Giving. Ripe.*

The waitress finally gave Nick his food, letting the plate drop with a heavy thud. He began to eat, the blister stinging as the fork brushed it. Nick periodically wiped it until he had finished his meat, paid and left.

He went back to the hotel.

"No luck, no news?" the manager, Thomas, asked Nick walking through the doorway of the room. He was sitting on Nick's bed, cleaning the barrel of a shotgun.

"No. . ."

He wiped the outside of the barrel clean and looked inside it.

"Do you hunt?"

"No, it's too dangerous. The gun is to protect the place." Thomas reloaded the gun and placed it under his feet which began to rock it back and forth. "This hunter you're looking for. Did you lose him, or did he lose you?"

"He lost me," Nick replied, his eardrums beginning to swell from the sound of the rocking rifle.

Thomas leaned back. "I don't want to scare you," he said. "But if this town hasn't heard anything of your friend yet, he has probably died or is dying somewhere. El Pas is the only town around for miles."

"No, he's still alive. He's only been lost for a few days."

"A few days is a long, long, long time, around the jungle, especially for a lost tourist."

"We weren't even near the jungle. We were in the fields."

"Doesn't matter. The fields are close enough."

Nick's face, chest and arms were wet with sweat. He was panting in short choppy breaths. He'll be around. He'll be around.

Perhaps not wanting to provoke anxiety in Nick, Thomas changed the subject: "What do you do in America?"

"Write for a newspaper."

"Is what you write good?"

"Some people don't think so."

"They don't?"

"No, but I do."

"I've always wanted to do something like that, you know, something creative."

"Doesn't take much."

"For me it does, without a complete education. The only real education I got was from my mother who taught me to speak fluent English. She's dead now." Thomas gazed at the small hole-punched cardboard disk hanging on the card used to pull down the window shade. "So I just manage some damn hotel for some South American business man, signing in an occasional guest and cleaning his room towards the end of the day, sometimes taking a break when I'm finished, like now." He landed his hand on Nick's wet shoulder and tightened his grip. "Its not that bad though. After a while you get used to it too. Sometimes you even meet an interesting guest."

Nick didn't understand what Thomas was getting at.

Thomas began to rock the rifle with his feet again. "We should eat together. But not here. How 'bout today."

"I would, but I just ate." Nick lifted the rifle from the floor and gently tossed it on the bed. "That noise, that noise bothers me."

Thomas picked up the rifle from where it bounced lightly on the mattress. "Well, then maybe tomorrow," he said. He left the room, dragging his weapon.

Nick didn't know why Thomas had asked him to a meal. But he decided he would go: he thought he might run into someone having news of Joe. He heard Thomas' heavy footsteps echoing in the stairwell, and the BANG, BANG, BANG of the butt of his rifle bouncing along the wood behind him.

## II

The next afternoon Nick and Thomas left for the diner Nick had previously been to. They drove down the street in Thomas' old Buick. The sun stabbed through a broken sharp-jagged car window and into Nick's eyes, leaving small white dots in everything he could see. Through the windshield Nick saw the fields lying in front of the flaming green tree line. The fields. Nick looked at the fields. He looked at the tall, slender, green, grassy, blades.

A few mestizo women scattered in the street, each

carrying two or three bags of groceries, raw, now sunburnt meat resting on top, drying lettuce leaves hanging over the stiff brown paper edges. Thomas drove slowly, weaving like a fish to avoid hitting the women. Then he pulled to the curb and got out. Nick opened his door, while turning around and looking at the mestizas still lingering down the street in the winding tracks the car wheels left in the crumbling asphalt.

The two men went into the diner. The room looked the same to Nick as it had the day before: drunk mestizos huddled around tables, a waitress tugging dirty hair as she walked, a cook's massive head and shoulders bobbing steadily over the top of the counter as he worked.

Vicente and Pedro happened to be at a table in a corner, waiting for their order. Thomas led Nick to their table. "There's the police. You can ask them again," he said.

But before Nick made it to the table, Pedro called out: "Hey, American. Got news of dead hunter, a mestizo muchacho."

Vicente eyed Nick as the waitress brought soup over, spilling it.

Nick stood in front of the table. He peered down at the two men. He was unemotional. He spoke mechanically: "The hunter I'm looking for is American."

"Oh, sighed Pedro, "A Amer-i-can, none of those yet."

Nick and Thomas finally sat down at the table and gave their orders to the waitress as Vicente asked Nick, "How long you going to stay looking for lost Amigo?"

"A little longer. Then I'll walk back to our camp and see if he made it back there."

An insect drowned in Pedro's soup. He hunted it with a fork. He placed it on the table. He flattened it. He swept it off the wood. He looked at Nick, hard.

The mestizos at the other tables were getting drunker. The waitress was pouring more liquor in the coffee cups they held out like hungry children, the shadows from cars parked in the street coming through a window and darkening their sleepish faces. With a blank expression the cook watched. Behind him hung knives of all sizes on rusty nails pounded into a wall sprayed with grease from the grill in front of it. He selected a knife and went back to work.

Pedro looked at Nick again. "Forgot to mention. There a rumor of the peasants in town taking part in the Agrarian Revolution. If I was you I go home. Some people won't be nice to you. They blame revolution on American—you know, Western—influence."

Unable to see how a person like Pedro could understand anything political, Nick didn't believe any of it. He quietly stood up, leaving half of his meal, and walked out. Mumbling parting words to the two mestizo policemen, Thomas followed Nick.

The two men sat in the Buick. Thomas looked over at Nick. "I've seen Pedro and Vicente act that way before. They're all right. But sometimes they're unpredictable about tourists. They can cause trouble."

"They can go to hell."

"Listen. I know those two men. I could tell you things that would—"

"Just forget it."

The car pushed off into the street, a dark cloud of tiny asphalt chunks following it. Minutes later Thomas wheeled the car in front of the hotel, almost catching the leg of a mestizo child. Nick left the car and went to his room. Thomas followed, saying he wanted to replace some cracked tiles in Nick's room with new ones.

Nick rolled onto the bed.

Thomas knelt on the floor, his fingernails tugging at a broken piece of tile, his heavy brown face tightening, the raised veins in his forearms green and thick. "Imagine, doing shit like this for a living."

"Don't. No one's forcing you," Nick muttered.

"That's not the way things are," Thomas lectured, ripping a second piece of tile from the floor.

Sweat trickled down Nick's cheek and into his mouth. He spat it out, and thought about the newsroom at *The Des Moines Weekly*. He knew the writers were probably finishing their articles for the next day's printing about now. He couldn't wait to get back at the office, with Joe, to resume writing his articles. His articles. The articles the editor-in-chief and others had continually told him were ineffective. He remembered that a few years ago everyone at the office had liked his writing. And now all this criticism and ridicule. But Nick ignored all the comments.

Thomas stood up and walking by the window he suddenly stopped short, pulling Nick over with an outstretched arm. The jeep Nick had heard drive by the day before had parked in the middle of the street, disrupting the play of little mestizos. They crowded around it. Behind them the black of the asphalt street loomed like a stagnant river. Mestizos standing in front of shops and parked cars looked on.

Vicente and Pedro, led by the passengers of the jeep, the

Negroes, came out of the diner and walked towards the jeep, slapping the ground with black-booted feet. When they arrived at the jeep, Pedro bent his body at the waist and stuck his arms into the back seat, balancing his weight by pressing his stomach against the metal and kicking his feet off the ground. When Pedro swung back on his feet, his hand produced an ankle, limp. The children excitedly pushed in. "Go on na' . . . git o'ta here," shouted a Negro with a waving hand. The children formed a cluster, playfully fleeing down the muggy street, past the onlookers and shopkeepers rolling up their awnings.

Vicente and Pedro pulled a body wrapped in a thick green canvas tent from the jeep and began to carry it to the small hospital at the end of the street. Nick watched the hot sun flicker off the brass rings sewn to the tent to pound stakes through, when using it. He knew it really wasn't a tent now, but something practical to wrap a corpse in. But as he watched it move up the street, in the arms of the policemen, he imagined it expertly pitched in the shade of the shallow hills of a grassy plain. "That's probably not Joe," he said to Thomas.

"Just wait. Pedro and Vicente will be back. They probably found identification on the body."

A little while later the two policemen walked back to the hotel. Pedro looked through the open door and up the stairwell. He began to climb with Vicente. Thomas was now standing on the top stair. The two policemen stopped halfway up the stairs. "Tell American," Pedro said, "niggers happened to find body right inside the jungle. No identification on it. All that was on it was torn shirt, red." Pedro tossed the shirt up to Thomas. He continued: "Rest of his clothes probably looted by some niggers or torn off by animals. Hunting gun probably looted too. He was probably lost and died from thirst before animals came. Animals chewed off his feet to the ankles, chewed most of his face, and took couple good chunks out of his side. The skin left on body is definitely American, and there is a few patches of brown hair still on head. So it must be friend of American. Friend of sonsabitch American." Pedro began to walk down the stairs. Vicente wagged behind. Thomas went back to the room.

"Listen—" he began.

"I heard it, I heard it all," Nick broke in. He looked at Thomas, his brown eyes reaming, like a child at a circus. "It's not Joe."

"It is him. It must be. The body is American, and there are not many Americans around here."

"It's not Joe."

"What color is his hair?"

"Brown."

"So is the hair of the corpse."

"I know, I know, I heard, I heard."

"This isn't an American national park, you know. This is a goddamn jungle. Jungles kill, and they do it over and over again."

"He was in the fields. He always hunted in the fields. He wouldn't go near the jungle, where that body was found."

"It is your friend. Your friend was in the jungle, Jesus, I don't even know why you came here to hunt."

"It's not Joe."

"The body had a red shirt."

"So? Many people wear red shirts."

Thomas stepped forward. He held out the shirt. It had been hidden from view at his side. Perhaps he only wanted Nick to see it as a last resort.

Nick saw it. He saw it. He had seen it before. He had seen the thin flannel threads sticking out of it quiver in a breeze.

### III

The morning sun beat through the hotel window. The sheets felt hot against Nick's naked legs. He got out of bed and began to dress, slowly, dazedly picking at a heap of clothes on the floor. He was finished by the time Thomas came into the room and began to collect the broken tiles he had already pulled from the floor. "Forget to throw these away yesterday," he said.

Thomas was sipping a bottle wrapped in yellow paper again. He sat down on the bed, placing the pieces of tile next to him on the mattress. "Been thinking about your friend?"

"Yes. I was up all night."

"You see, he was dead, dead all along, probably all during the time you've been here thinking he was alive."

"I know. I was thinking about that too." Despite Nick's grief, all through the night he couldn't shake his mind of his useless hunt for Joe. He had failed. He had failed Joe. The jungle got to Joe before he could, before he could find him and bring him back to their tent lying in the endless, ageless fields. Looking outside at the distant leaves of the jungle bending from the heat. Nick thought about the whore the

waitress had reminded him of, the blonde with deep glowing eyes. He now knew her eyes were nothing special: only the eyes of a whore, a piece of trash selling the trash between her legs. Looking at his hand he could see that a tiny patch of bright pink flesh had begun to web itself over his blister.

Thomas took a long sip from his bottle, watching Nick. He caressed his liquor-dripping lips with a forefinger, drank again and tossed the bottle.

Nick caught the bottle, slowly drank from it and wiped the sweat off his face with the yellow paper. "So what's all this about Vicente and Pedro that you wanted to tell me yesterday?"

Thomas looked at Nick. He looked at Nick. His look was warm, blanket-like. "I'll tell you later," he said.

That was all Nick wanted to know for now. He looked at Thomas fumbling a shattered tile. "You don't like this work."

"No, I don't."

"But you do it because you have to."

"Yes, I do it because I have to."

"I think I understand now."

The light bulb dangling from the ceiling was still.

"You'll be home soon," Thomas said to Nick.

Nick leaned into the plaster, sweating, not looking out of the window now. "Yeah, I know."

"You'll be writing good newspaper stories again."

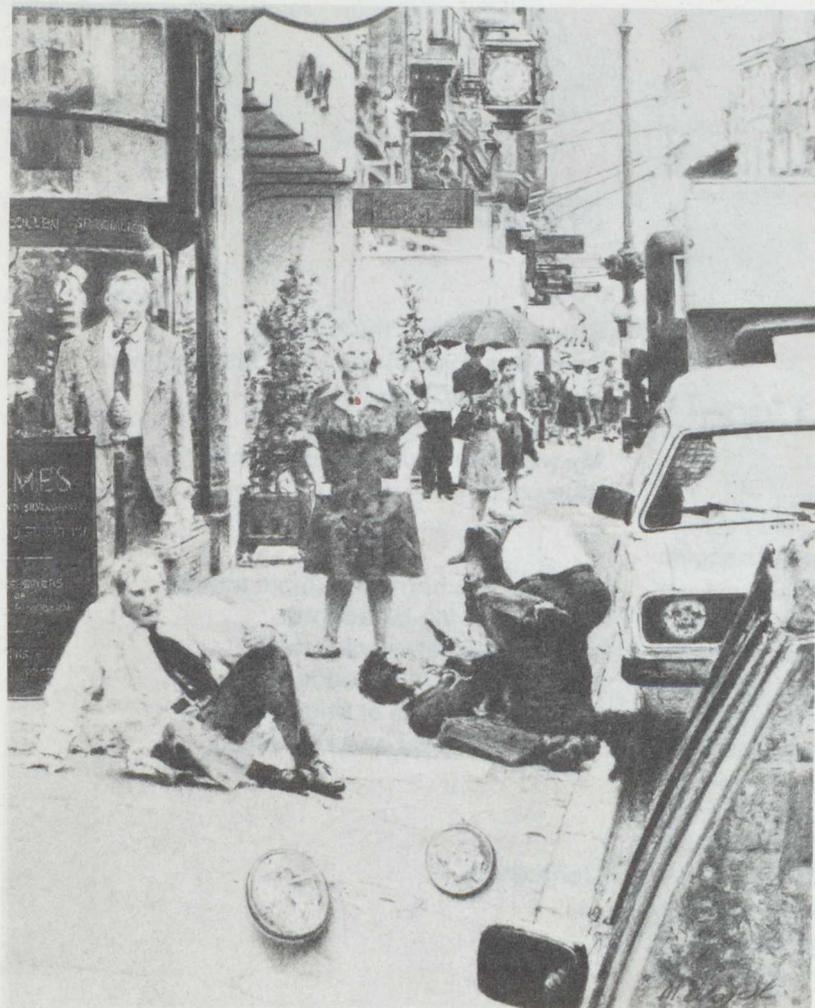
"No, I'm losing the ability."

"I see."

"Pretty soon I won't be able to write at all."

Outside in the street the mestizo children were playing, the air hanging lifelessly above. Nick could hear them.

Divias Sowa



## Nidus

Straw and thistle thick fields.  
Sun warm road where I first tasted clover-  
purple honey. Sweet breeze  
rode up and over the rise.  
My world fenced in a muslin mile,  
attic cool.

Summer of cherry and apple shade,  
creaking swing of laughter,  
and canvas hammock smells.  
Captain's wheel nailed to a tree  
to navigate acres of bright yellow.  
Windmills repeat away for miles.

John Goss

## Diving Song

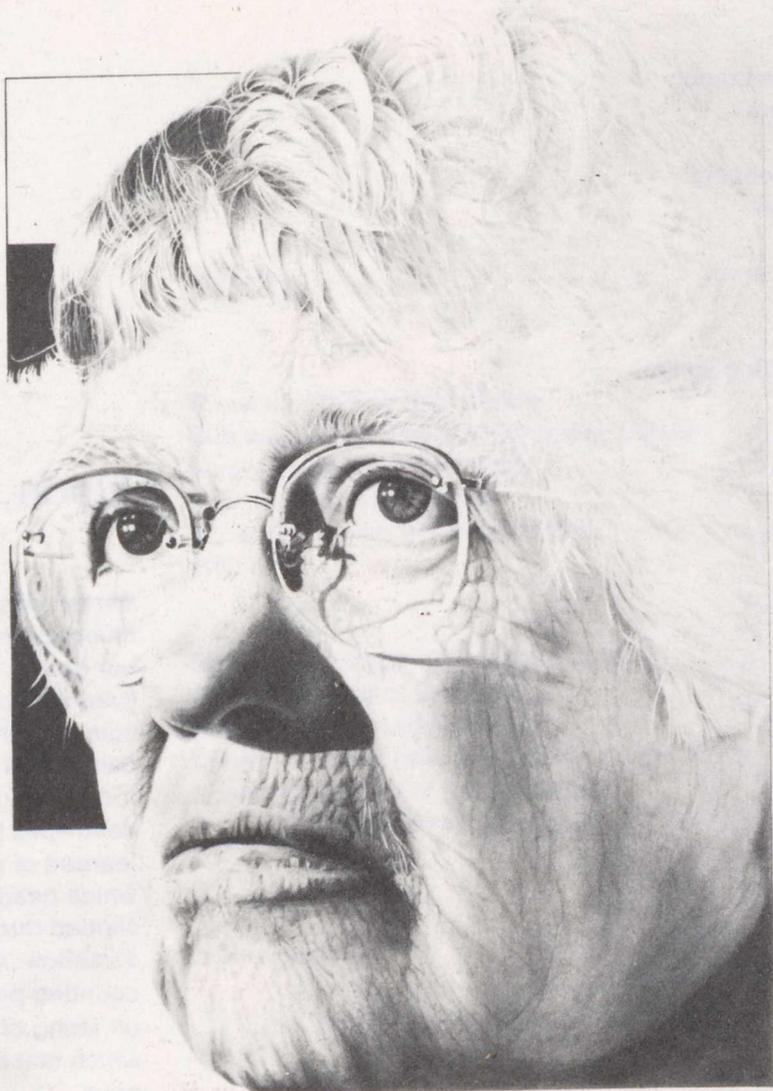
My smallest sister  
can leap from a low branch  
and in wet leaves wait  
for my deep boots,  
and bright rake swooping.  
Then shriek through  
the tallest oaks;  
a brown shower of arms.  
She laughs  
scuffing roots,  
and teaches me diving songs.

Ward Smith

## Upon Leaving

Winter falls  
chipped white from  
our house. I've  
lived fireworked  
summers there and  
dampwood days where  
the sweet made my  
head spin. I've  
learned of rosaries  
which beads have  
slipped through  
somehow. And of  
counting prayers  
on string of light  
which makes things  
grow.

Cathy Allen



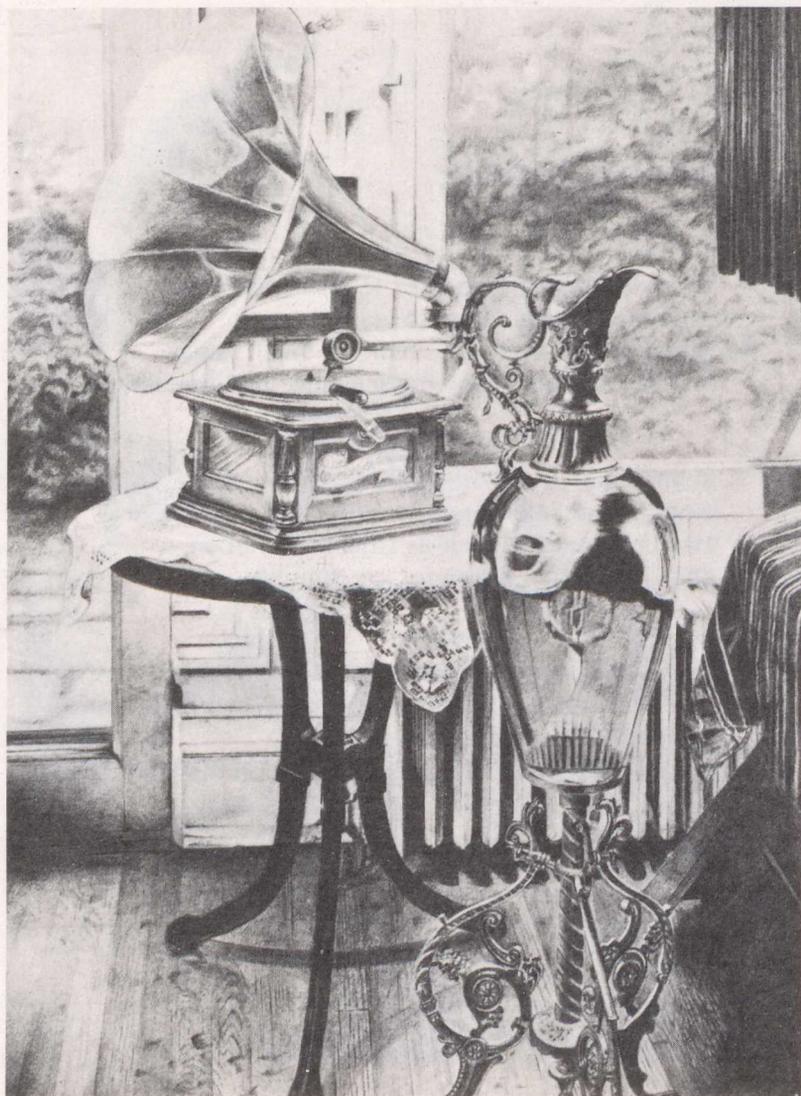
## Red Cabbage

My mother called me back to earth again  
from my endless letter, to learn to cook  
red cabbage. So much onion, so much apple,  
she showed me, much more simply than the book,

some sugar: a shovel of snow in the volcano,  
vinegar and salt—for suffering.  
Having cooked it clear as Christmas ribbon,  
she poured it in a dish for me to bring

to the potluck. When they brought it piping  
like a town of chimneys, and dropped it just before  
the table, they made light of it, but I  
stood staring: something scavenged on the floor.

Monica Heilbronn



## Grandma

You taught me to dance,  
measuring box steps.  
I bent with you  
all winter.

There is a wood  
fence across our  
amethyst morning.  
Staving thin ice  
your arm tugged,  
I held you.

On the bus to work  
you turned with clouds,  
and through the window  
kissed me.

Now I pack  
teaspoons,  
stir the rose  
petals you hid  
in a crystal glass.  
In closet light  
your old coat  
waltzes to the sound of snow.

Ward Smith

## Fall for my father

Three years now.  
Your crate should be  
plumping,  
your jaw cracking  
like a pumpkin,  
your tongue-a root  
worming up to sun.  
This breeze  
is seasoned with you.

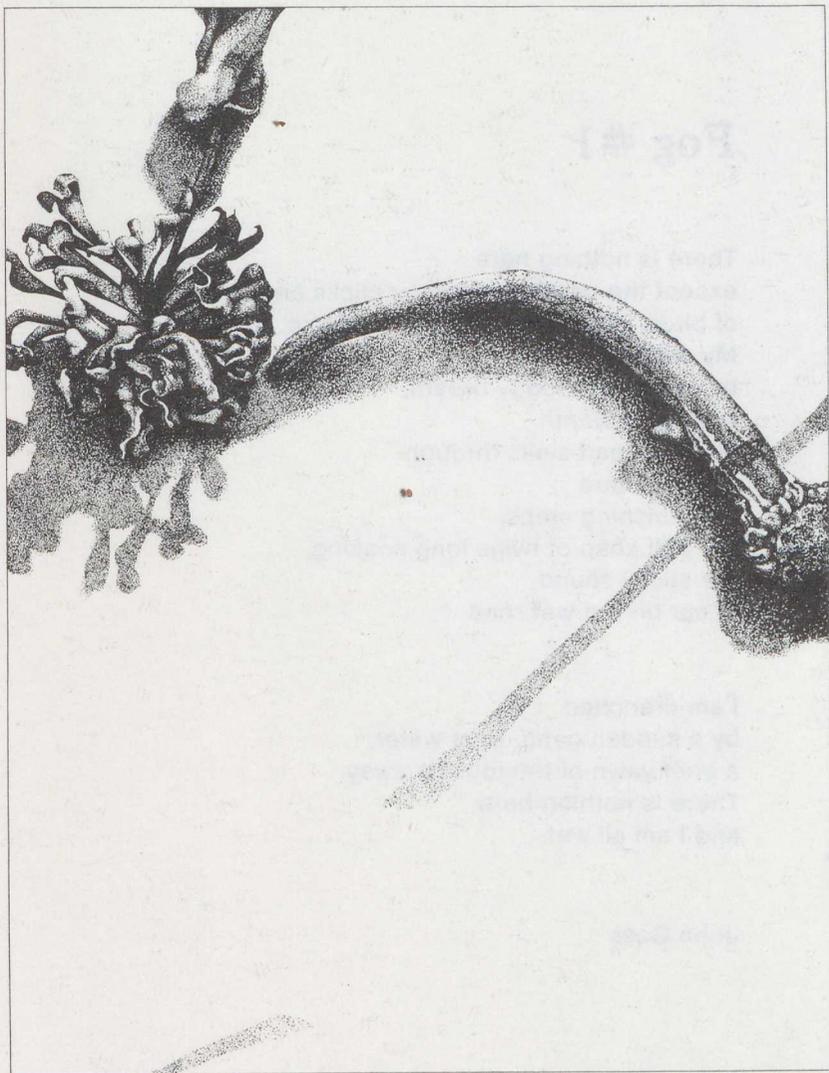
John Goss

## cowboy death, with a chew

clamped jaw  
bones almost  
shoving through his face  
only tarpaulin skin  
holds death in

sometimes he'll spit out  
mucoused past  
and almost smile as  
blurred city shoes  
smear by

John Campbell



Fall for my father

## Fog #1

There is nothing here  
except the constant, looping clicks and caws  
of birds, lost in trees erased by white.  
My sight condensed  
by each fresh foggy breath,  
a hanging depth  
that my head sinks through.  
Nothing here  
but mulching steps,  
the soft snap of twigs long soaking,  
the sticky sound  
of car tire on wet road.

I am drenched  
by a sudden gang-up of water,  
a brief yawn of thunder far away.  
There is nothing here  
and I am all wet.

John Goss

