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Graphic Memoir as a Tool for Imaginative Leaping

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Utah State University

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GRAPHIC MEMOIR AS A TOOL FOR IMAGINATIVE LEAPING

by

Shay Larsen

**Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree**

of

**HONORS IN UNIVERSITY STUDIES
WITH DEPARTMENTAL HONORS**

in

**Creative Writing
in the Department of English**

Approved:

Thesis/Project Advisor
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Director of Honors Program
Kristine Miller

**UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, UT**

Spring 2015



GodBeast

Graphic Memoir as a Tool
For Imaginative Leaping

by Shay Larsen

A massive

THANK YOU

to my Thesis Advisor and Committee
Charles Waugh & Shanan Ballam

and

the USU Honors Department

Graphic Memoir as a Tool For Imaginative Leaping

Undergraduate Honors Thesis
by Shay Larsen

The idea for this capstone was sparked in the last semester of my third year of undergraduate research at Utah State University. I had been researching the ways in which creative nonfiction writers approached the realm of surreality in their work with my honors contract advisor, Dr. Jennifer Sinor. Sinor herself had written a piece ("Holes in the Sky") that dealt heavily in abstractions paralleled with the works of American artist Georgia O'Keeffe. While discussing the difficulties of expressing surreality in writing I made an offhand comment along the lines of "makes you wish you'd been a painter instead of a writer, huh?" to which Sinor replied, "You have no idea!"

The ease in which artists can show their audiences the surreal and abstract spaces in their work distilled an envy in me that gave rise to my interest in the graphic narrative form. Where the writer risks alienating the audience with heavy-handed figurative language prone to misinterpretation, the artist has the advantage of not needing words to express such ideas. Rather, the artist can show the audience these spaces in a concrete, visual form; as the saying goes, "a picture is worth a thousand words."

In no way am I claiming the death of writing. There are those talented enough to express the most abstract ideas such as love, loneliness, and emptiness through words alone (another talent I envy). The graphic narrative simply offers one way of reaching this goal of comprehensible expression to a wide audience. The approachable form of the graphic narrative and the story-telling capabilities of the graphics combine to create a one of a kind experience in creative nonfiction reading and writing that easily account for the snowballing popularity of the graphic form.

SURREALITY AND "SURREAL SEEMINGNESS," OR: THE IMAGINATIVE LEAP

American novelist Tim O'Brien discusses the concept of "surreal seemingness" or "The Real Truth" in his semi-autobiographical collection *The Things They Carried*. I had already been studying the approaches of surreality in creative nonfiction when I stumbled on this collection, but found myself nodding all the while reading O'Brien's chapter on "How to Tell a True War Story." I had found my guide through the muggy waters of surreal truth.

O'Brien makes a distinction between the "happening truth" and the "surreal seemingness" of a situation. While the actual, physical happenings of the event may offer one interpretation, the second layer of narrative residing beneath this interpretation can spin the event in a completely different direction. O'Brien uses the example of a war story that can be read as a love story, and though O'Brien's examples and advice are focused on war and soldier narratives, this same concept can be carried over into the everyday struggles the creative nonfiction writer chooses to tackle.

Adapted from the above mentioned O'Brien terms, I have come to call the bulk of this abstractness in my own research "the imaginative leap." One could say that the story of a girl visiting her mother's grave on a mountaintop is just that, and that is the happening truth. But with the imaginative leap the girl could continue beyond the mountaintop and walk straight into the sky on a staircase of clouds to visit the actual spirit of her mother in the sky. Is this also the truth? Who is to say that the girl did not feel that way? That this staircase of clouds is more true to her than the stone marking her mother's grave? Leaping beyond the realm of "happening" into the realm of the surreal blurs the line between truth and Truth with a capital "T."

Naturally this concept can be intimidating to both readers and writers of creative nonfiction. Accepting a staircase of clouds as nonfiction seems almost contradictory to the definition of the genre itself. The astute reader of nonfiction will have less trouble with figurative language and imaginative leaping conveying surreal

ideas, but inevitably this task will alienate some readers.

In order to better understand how others have rose to the challenge presented by imaginative leaping in graphic narratives, I sought out instances of imaginative leaping in exemplary works of graphic nonfiction. I selected them based on awards they have won, recognition they have received, and my own personal interest. In the span of my contract I was able to closely analyze seven works of graphic nonfiction including Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, and *Persepolis II*; David Small's *Stitches*; Art Spiegelman's *Maus*; Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*; Craig Thompson's *Blankets*; and Joe Sacco's *Palestine*. In each work I gained a better understanding of the various ways in which the graphic form can function as a vehicle for conveying imaginative leaps and surreality. In the following sections I will discuss the most common themes and patterns I discovered while analyzing these works.

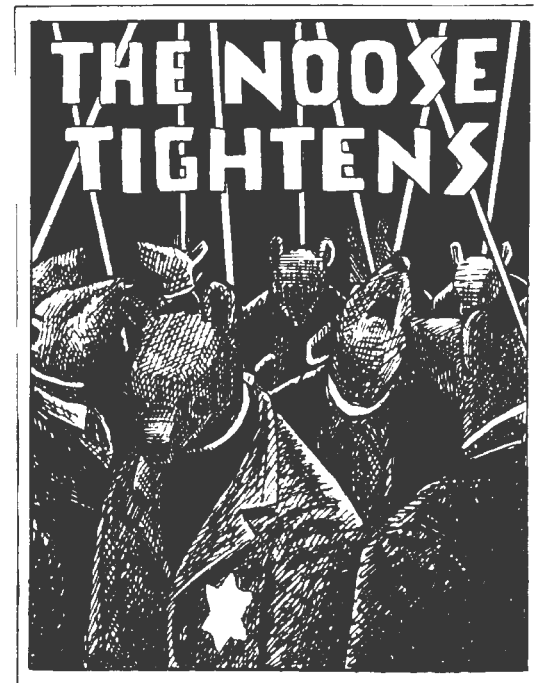
ANTHROPOMORPHIC ANIMAL CHARACTERS

The first reoccurring theme of imaginative leaping I encountered in my readings is also the theme that stands out the most as far as the presentation of nonfiction versus reality. The artist's decision to represent characters in anthropomorphic animal form expresses a desire for the reader to see such characters in a certain way. A way that is reinforced by connotations associated with the chosen animal that has been incorporated into the character design.

The book that utilizes this theme the most is Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. Published in 1991, *Maus* became the first ever graphic work to be awarded a Pulitzer Prize. Though the catalyst for the popularity of graphic nonfiction cannot be attributed to any one person, Spiegelman is undoubtedly the most familiar writer to any who have dabbled in graphic nonfiction. In his narrative recounting of his father's memories of WWII and the holocaust, Spiegelman chooses to portray his characters as anthropomorphic animals based on their nationality.

Portraying the Jewish people as mice and the Germans as

cats carries a second layer of narrative that charges the story. While it may have been just as plausible to write a standard biography in which Spiegelman tells the reader that the Germans were *like* cats and the Jewish were *like* mice, presenting this interpretation graphically and up-front eliminates the need for explanation and transcends the figurative language barrier in the reader's mind.



(Spiegelman 71)

David Small also incorporates character connotations expressed by anthropomorphic animal design in his book *Stitches*. Published in 2009, *Stitches* entails a memoir-like account of Small's diagnosis with a form of throat cancer that left him with half his vocal cords after surgery. The character of Small's therapist in the latter half of the book is portrayed as a white rabbit, invoking impressions of *Alice in Wonderland* as Small confronts the abnormality of his childhood and the contorted truth of his relationship with his parents.

Without breaking from the narrative to explain to the

reader that the whole of Small's visits to his therapist were akin to a "trip down the rabbit hole," Small is still able to implant this same idea through the use of character portrayal. Small also uses this interpretation of his therapist's character to reinforce the reality that his therapist, despite helping him cope with many of his troubling problems, was a paid professional and constantly looking at his clock. This is, again, similar to Alice's white rabbit with his golden pocket watch.



(Small 253)

EMBODIMENTS OF RELATIONSHIPS

The second common theme I came across in my readings involved the author's efforts to portray abstract relationships, such as a relationship with religion and, by extension, God. I also found efforts to portray less abstract relationships between people through a third embodiment "character" that came to physically

represent the relationship itself.

Marjane Satrapi uses imaginative leaping by portraying her abstract relationship with God and her religion in her books *Persepolis* and *Persepolis II*. Published in 2000, *Persepolis* is a graphic biography that recounts Satrapi's childhood in war torn Iran. In 2007 the book was adapted into a movie, furthering the attention graphic nonfiction has gained. Satrapi chooses to embody God as a physical character with whom Satrapi interacts and converses.

One possible function of Satrapi's decision to embody God is to convey the closeness she felt to her religion and her religious identity. While it is possible to convey a sense of closeness with an abstract idea through words alone, the idea becomes more concrete with imagery. By showing a physical closeness between Satrapi and God, descriptions of comfort and safety are unnecessary to the story as such notions are conveyed through the work of the graphics alone.



(Satrapi 53)

Small also employs the embodiment of relationships in *Stitches*. A vital tool in any creative nonfiction writer's toolbox is the use of object correlation. Small converts this tool to graphic form and combines it with the imaginative leap in the manifestation of his relationship with his parents in the form of a jarred baby fetus he happened upon as a child at the hospital in which his father worked. This fetus reappears several times

throughout the narrative, serving as a signal to the reader of Small's complicated feelings toward his parents.



(Small 39)

Upon the first introduction of the fetus, its face is twisted and angry. Small has yet to confront his poisonous relationship with his parents. Throughout the narrative the fetus is seen chasing and grasping at Small with the same contorted expression. Small is now aware of the strangeness of the relationship but has not yet gained the experience or the courage to resolve it. In the last segment of the book, the fetus is seen again with a serene expression, signaling a peace in Small's relationship following the death of his mother.

Another instance of an embodiment of a relationship through a physical object occurs in Craig Thompson's *Blankets*. Published in 2003, *Blankets* is marketed as a semi-autobiographical illustrated novel. *Blankets* is steeped in relationships, including

Thompson's relationship with his family, his first girlfriend, his religion, and his artistic talents. The relationship Thompson holds with his first girlfriend is embodied in the patchwork quilt she makes for him.

The quilt is portrayed richly at the height of Thompson's relationship with this girl, but when found again in a crawlspace years after the end of their relationship, the blanket is seen as just a blanket. This association conveys Thompson's views of the relationship and the subsequent recovery after it ended badly.



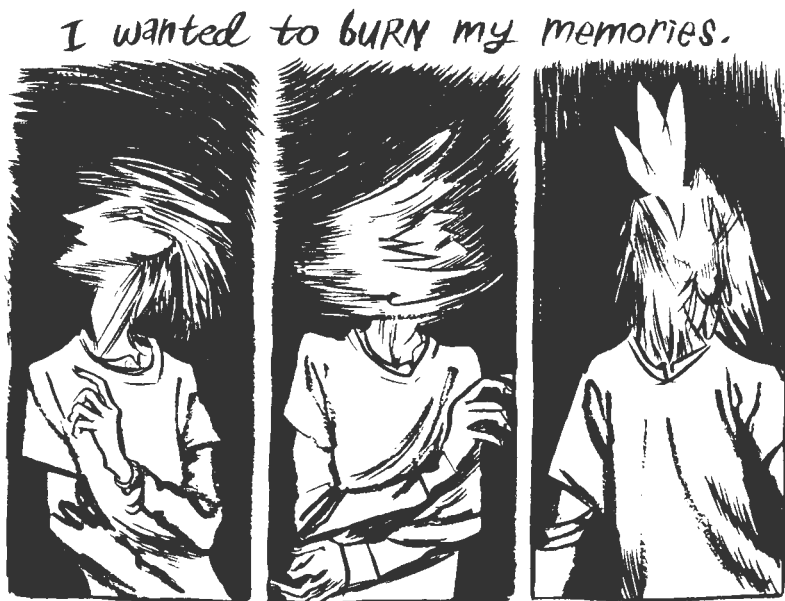
183

(Thompson 183)

ABSTRACT SPACES AND CONCEPTS

Another common instance of imaginative leaping I found included the author's efforts to convey notions of abstract spaces and concepts such as emotion and imagination. Expressing abstract spaces and surreality through lyrical prose is one way in which the creative writer can risk alienating a wide audience. The ability to show such spaces and convey such prose, as mentioned in the introduction, is expressed much easier through graphic representations.

Thompson's *Blankets* is a good example of the artist's advantage of conveying abstract space and poetic forms in storytelling. As seen in the panel below, the complex emotions of Thompson are shown paralleled with text that conveys difficult to grasp abstractions.



(Thompson 58)

The idea of wanting to burn something as intangible as memories is poetic and difficult to discern alone. When paralleled with torturous graphics that convey a sense of torment caused by memories, one can retain the strength of the word "burn" in relation to abstract "memories" while understanding that the author means "forget" or "be rid of." This physical representation of internal purging is one Thompson uses frequently, and is made approachable by the graphic's ability to literally externalize thoughts and emotions.



(Thompson 60)

Satrapı also chooses to portray emotions through physical representation in *Persepolis*. This makes the following move – in which Satrapı loses touch with her religion and “physically” banishes God from her life – a more concrete, understandable feeling for the reader. In the panel below, the surreal realm of religious abandonment is conveyed by young Satrapı floating in a literal void of space. Without words, Satrapı is able to convey a complex crisis integral to the story being told.



(Satrapı 71)

Small also incorporates imaginative leaps similar to Satrapı and Thompson’s representation of abstract emotional spaces. The section following Small’s surgery in which he loses his vocal cord places emphasis on the mouth, accenting its importance in the story, as well as its importance as the catalyst of the tensions surrounding Small and his parents.



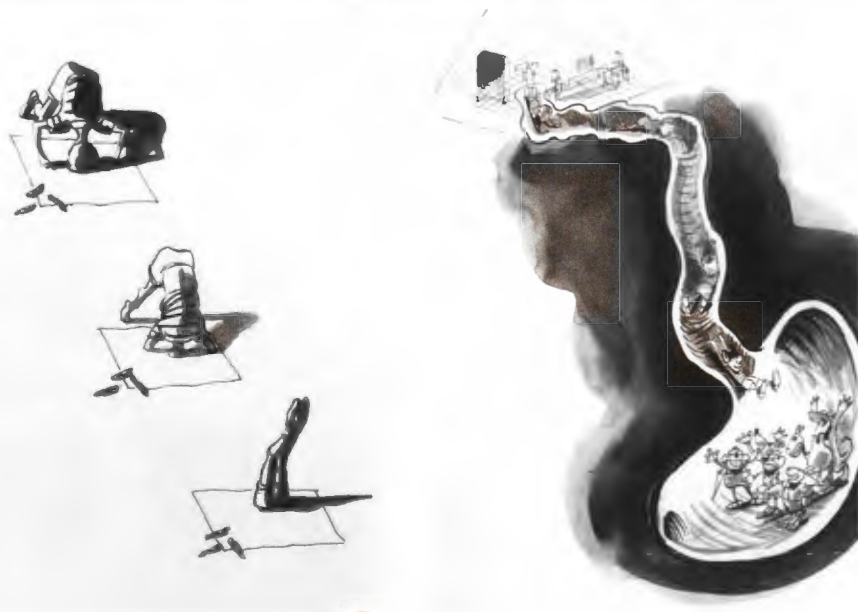
(Small 234)

In addition to conveying emotion, this same form of imaginative leaping in which the abstract is rendered physical was commonly used to express the surreal space of the imagination. The imagination is an integral realm to both the writer and the artist, and even more so in those who consider themselves both. Thompson shows readers the reality of the time playing with his younger brother as well as the imagination-scape that was simultaneously a sort of reality in the imagination of a child.



(Thompson 46)

Similarly, Small shows the space of imagination in relation to the drawings he created as a child. Not only does this image make physical the realm of the imagined, it also invokes a sense of escapism experienced by Small in the time he spent drawing.



(Small 62-3)

UNEXPECTED FINDINGS

With no already established list of graphic nonfiction that utilized imaginative leaps to choose from, I couldn't know for sure whether the readings I selected would contain imaginative leaps. Of the seven graphic works I had time to read in preparation for my own plunge into the world of the graphic form, two came up dry in their imaginative leaping.

I had suspicions when I picked Joe Sacco's *Palestine*, a graphic journalism account of the political turmoil in the Gaza Strip in the early 1990's, that the book would not contain devices as borderline fictional as imaginative leaps. The book had been praised, however, by many online review venues as a major contributor to the success of the graphic field, and while I was looking specifically for imaginative leaps in narratives, I could

not turn my nose up at the opportunity to delve into aspects of structure, craft, and style. The book proved valuable to my struggles with art style as it has outstanding examples of cross-hatch shading.

Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* was the one unexpected let down (as far as imaginative leaping is concerned). The autobiographical work details Bechdel's childhood relationship with her bisexual father as well as coming to terms with her own sexual preferences. A theme I had quickly discovered in my search for imaginative leaping was how closely tied the imaginative leap was to traumatic, life-altering, and emotional experiences. Those stranger moments of surreality in life that become next to impossible to explain via the "happening truth" alone. That being said, I figured *Fun Home* would be a perfect candidate for imaginative leaping considering the nature of the narrative.

While *Palestine* and *Fun Home* turned out to be straightforward, factually driven narratives without acknowledgment of surreality or abstractness, my reading of them did help solidify one aspect of my research. The imaginative leap is a tool. One of many the creative nonfiction writer (or any writer, for that matter) has at his or her disposal and can *choose* to use, or not. Similarly, the graphic form is only one way in which a writer can express the imaginative leap.

This realization became invaluable to the next step of my research. Having familiarized myself with the realm of the graphic form and the advantages, disadvantages, techniques, styles, structures, and choices writers of graphic works struggle with, I was ready to begin my own work. My goal to create a graphic narrative that relied heavily on imaginative leaping became the cumulative apex of my research over the past few months. However, an infinite amount of time could not have prepared me for the challenges this project presented.

GODBEAST: A GRAPHIC NOVEL

The story I wanted to tell was one steeped in imaginative

leaping. The narrative of my first mule deer hunt and subsequent disrupted relationship with my rural childhood was one that I had drafted as a braided essay previously. I found the form lacking, however, as I lacked the craft necessary to express the surreality surrounding the circumstances and the emotions I felt. I knew I needed a tool that could tap into the internal confusion and isolation caused by my actions without alienating readers. I had proposed a narrative that removed the “beast” inside me and gave it a looming, ever-present physical form. And what better way to represent a physical form than a concrete image?

Going into this project armed only with the knowledge I had gathered from my research of exemplary graphic works, my number of concerns far outweighed the aspects of which I was sure. I knew the story I wanted to tell and I knew the tools I needed to use, but the barrage of technical requirements demanded by the graphic form were staggering.

The process began with storyboarding and a struggle to merge text and image to create a complete and compelling narrative. I found myself writing three stories at once. One with words, one with graphics, and one with the relationship between the two. Having firmly rooted myself in writing from a young age and being fairly comfortable with my handle on language, I was startled by the realization of how little actual text was present as the story came together. The graphic component so eclipsed the textual component in ability to relate a feeling, a moment, or a passing in time that I found myself turned completely around and ended up resorting to text only in situations where graphics were at a disadvantage, such as commentary.

With a loose storyboard in hand I began drafting pages. Immediately I ran into the massive roadblock of my own artistic ability. I previously spoke of the ease of images in relating abstract surreality, but then found I had completely underestimated the craft of the artist and his or her part in creating this ease. There is an iceberg of hidden work behind every easy image, just as there is a basement of hidden work beneath every well-written sentence or well-crafted paragraph. The similarities of drawing narrative and writing narrative had never been so clear to me and my respect for

both grew exponentially as I struggled onward in my work.

I became confident in my endeavors to prove the graphic narrative as an effective form for conveying the certain style of imaginative leaping I sought in my research. The ease in which I was able to convey complex emotions through physical embodiment in graphic form created a truly unique result from anything I had experienced before. The figurative language barrier became small as the margin of misinterpretation of concrete graphics also shrunk considerably. It is difficult to doubt what is *seen* even if the imaginative leap is far and wild.

As my project drew to a close my respect and understanding for the graphic narrative form grew twofold. This form is no more limited to action comics and children’s books than written word is to technical documents and instruction manuals. The possibilities presented by the graphic form, not just as a tool for imaginative leaping as I set out to synthesize, but as a complex narrative tool accessible and popular to a wide audience confirms to me that it is one tool I will not discard from my toolbox.

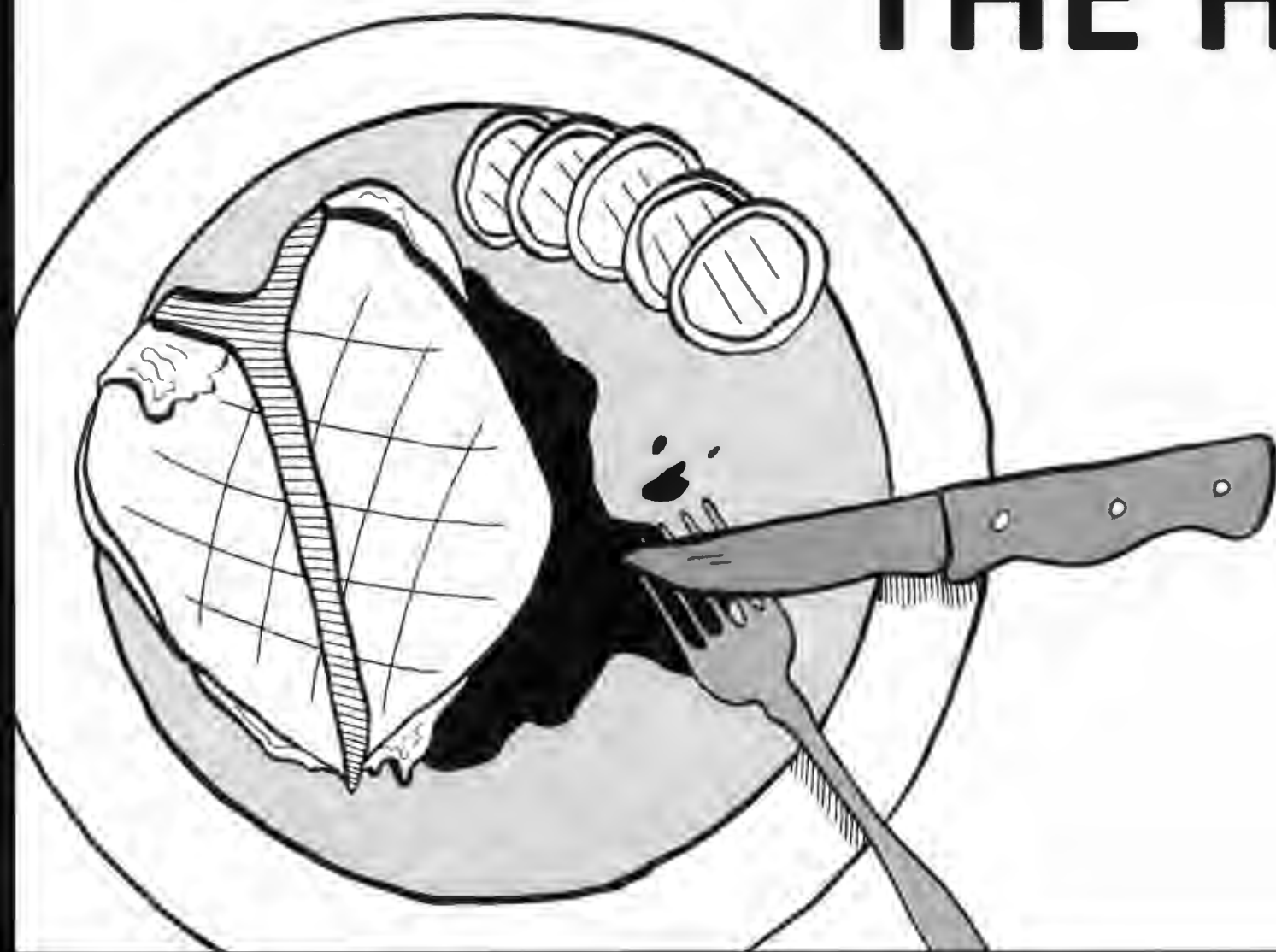
In my findings of common themes related to imaginative leaps I was able to reveal the various ways these six different authors approached the realm of surreal truth. Through anthropomorphic animal character rendering, the embodiment of abstract relationships and object correlation, and the representation of abstract spaces and emotions these authors were able to relate complex, surreal stories in an accessible way easily accepted by a wide audience. I am certain that the scope of graphic nonfiction’s ability to relate imaginative leaps is not confined to these three themes. Just as I am certain that graphic nonfiction is not the only way to convey surreality in writing, nor is focusing on the surreality of a narrative the only way to tell a great story. I am certain that I told the story I set out to tell and that the graphic form was the best way to tell that story. The possibilities offered by graphic nonfiction offer a truly singular experience for any who seek to read or create this narrative form.



GodBeast



P a r t O n e
THE HUNT





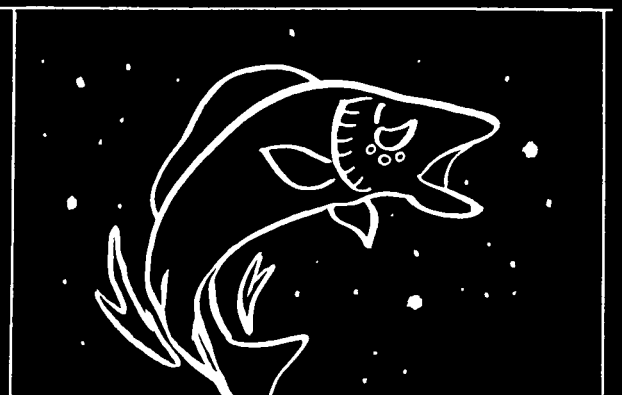
I was born to
the land,

on a farm,
far from town
(like all farms should be).

In the heat of
summer
I ran the creeks



with the cattails and penny skippers.



And at night the
stars shone
like God's dice on
black velvet.





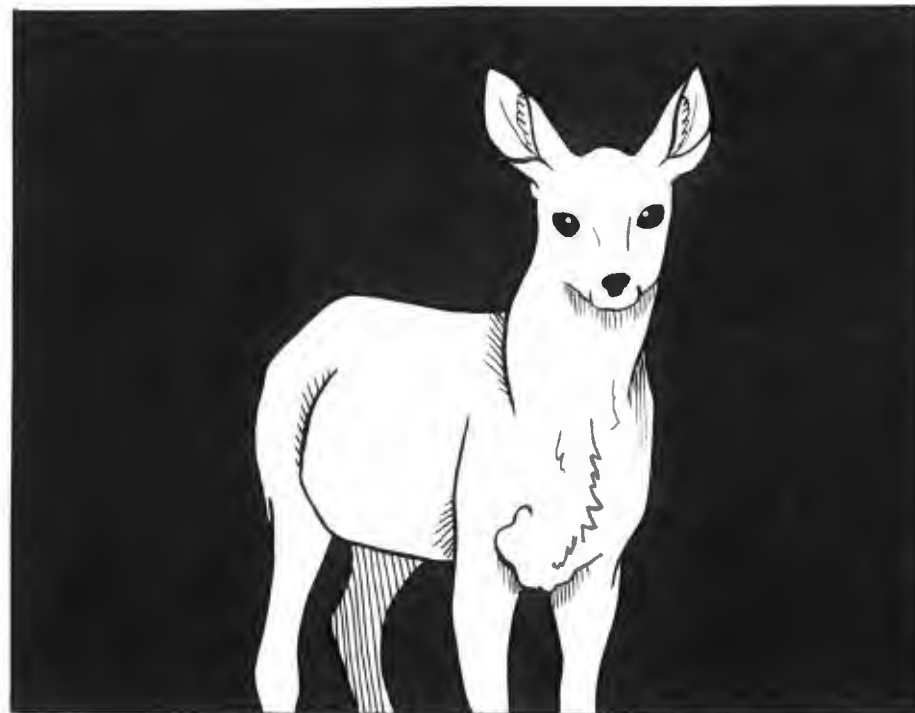
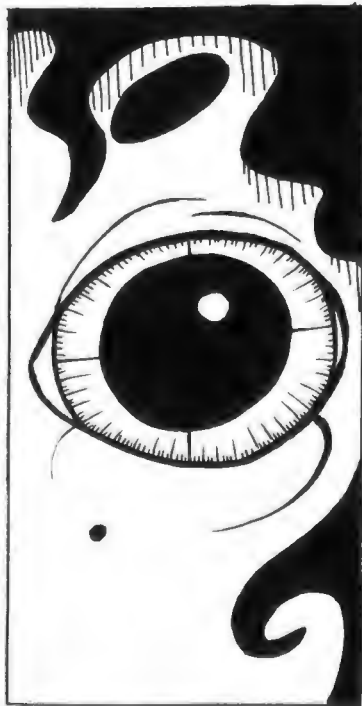
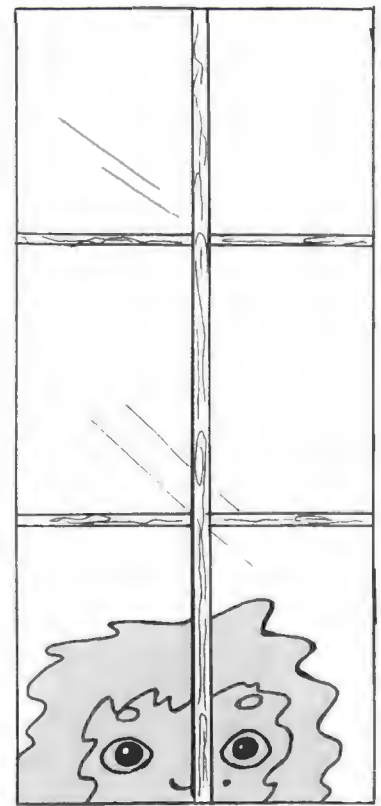
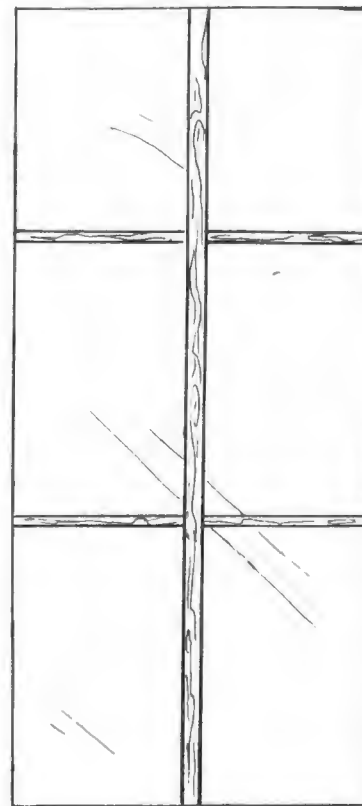
If ever an Eden existed on Earth it was there.
In the barn. In the corn. In the sage.

In the flared ears,
barred pupils, and
wide
antlers of the deer



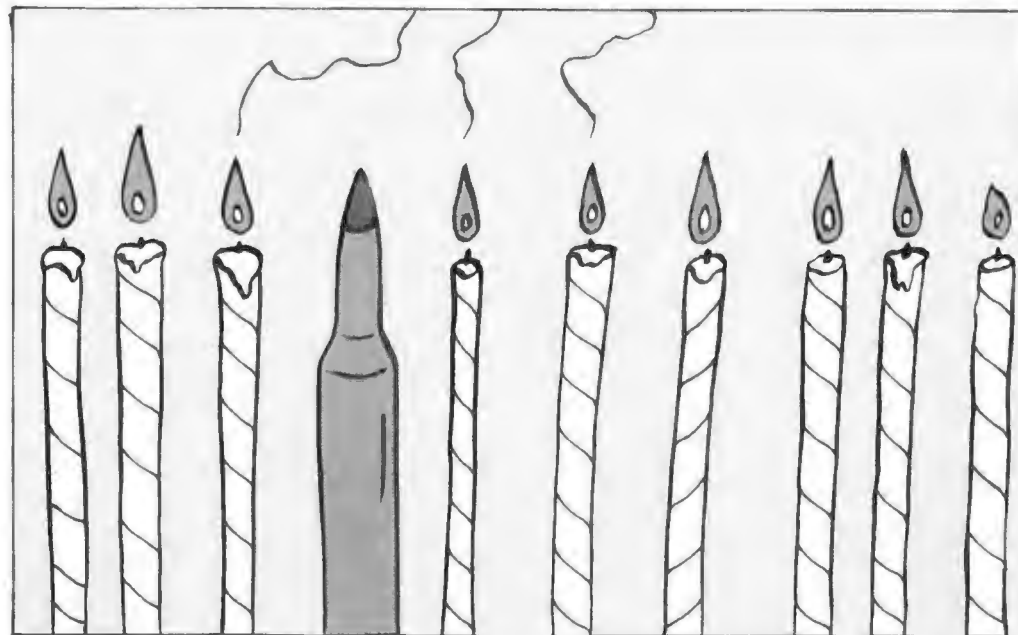
roving the fields, the hollows, and the orchards.





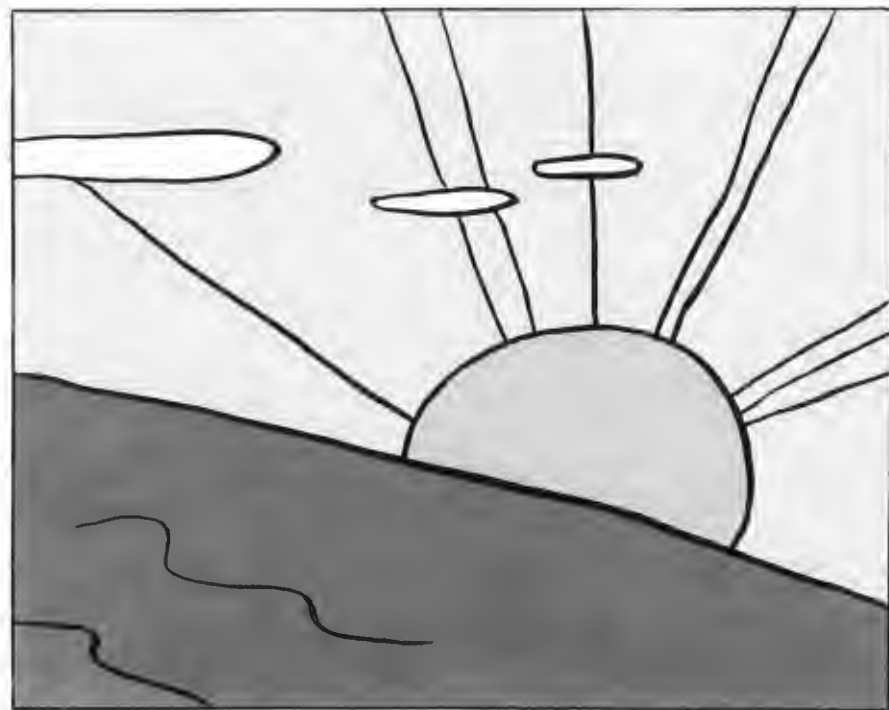
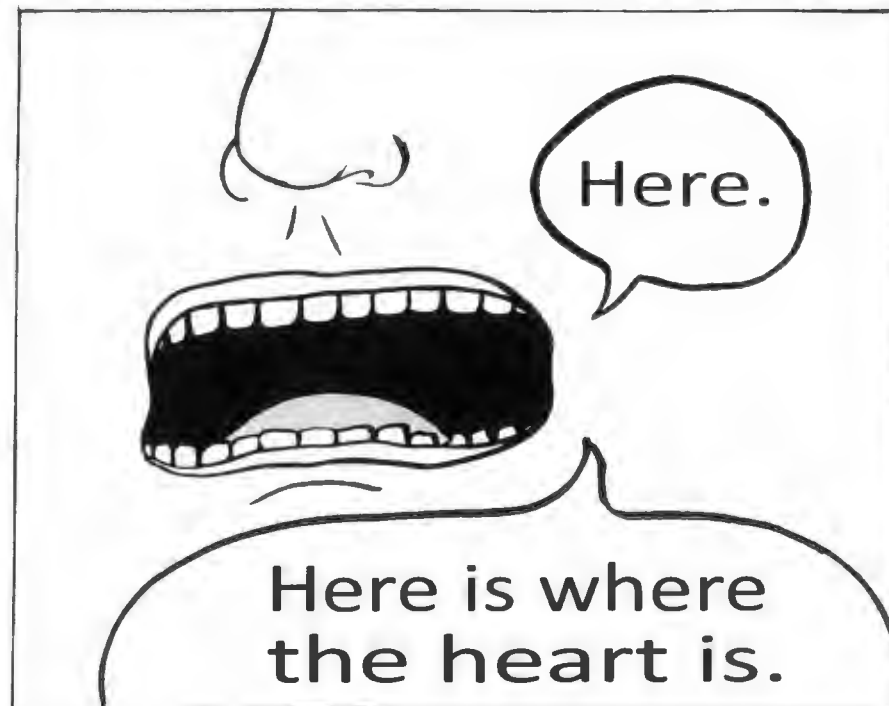
I used to watch
them from the
kitchen windows
at night as they
picked their way
through
the fallen plums
and crab apples.

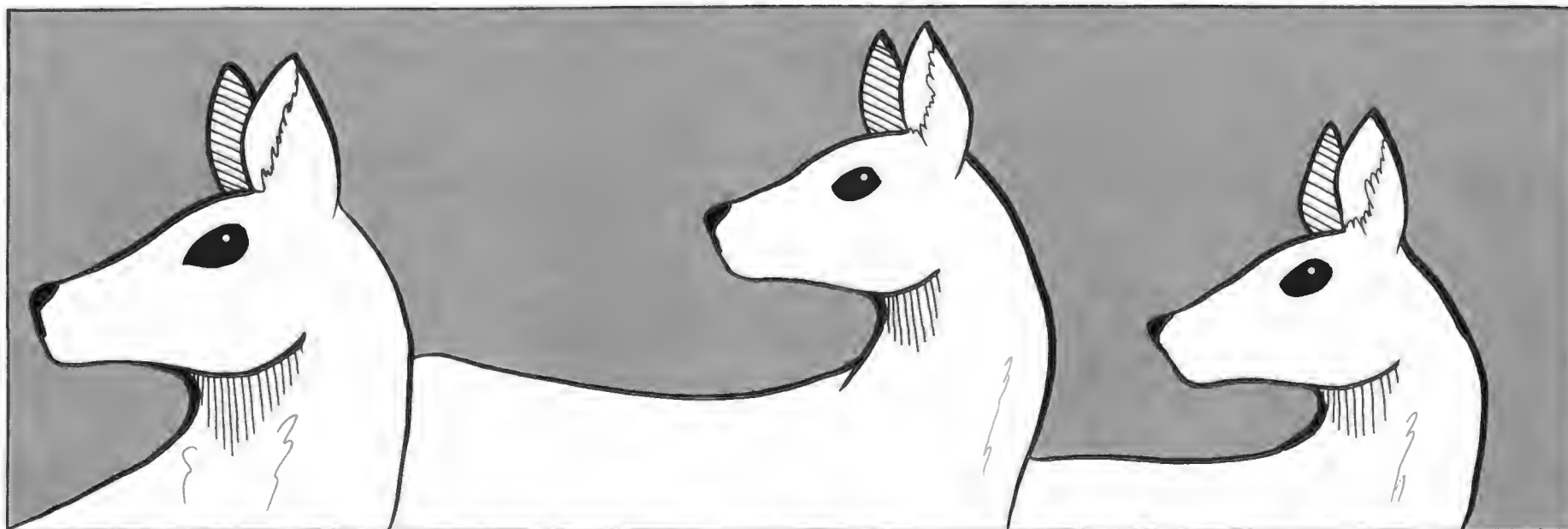
Soft.
Slow.
Ethereal.



I was twelve when that Eden
vanished.
That year I shot my first deer.



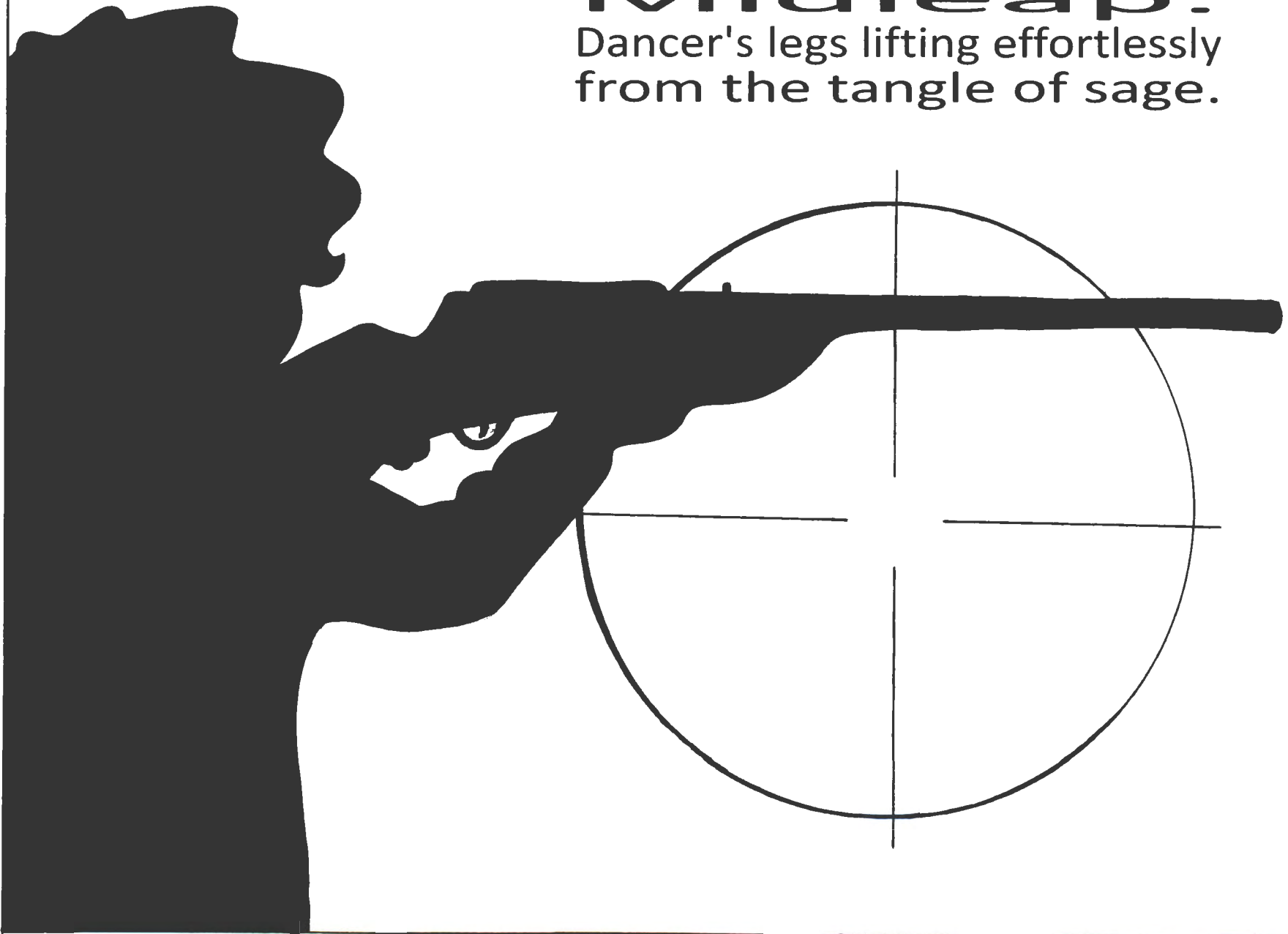




The deer is still there in my mind.

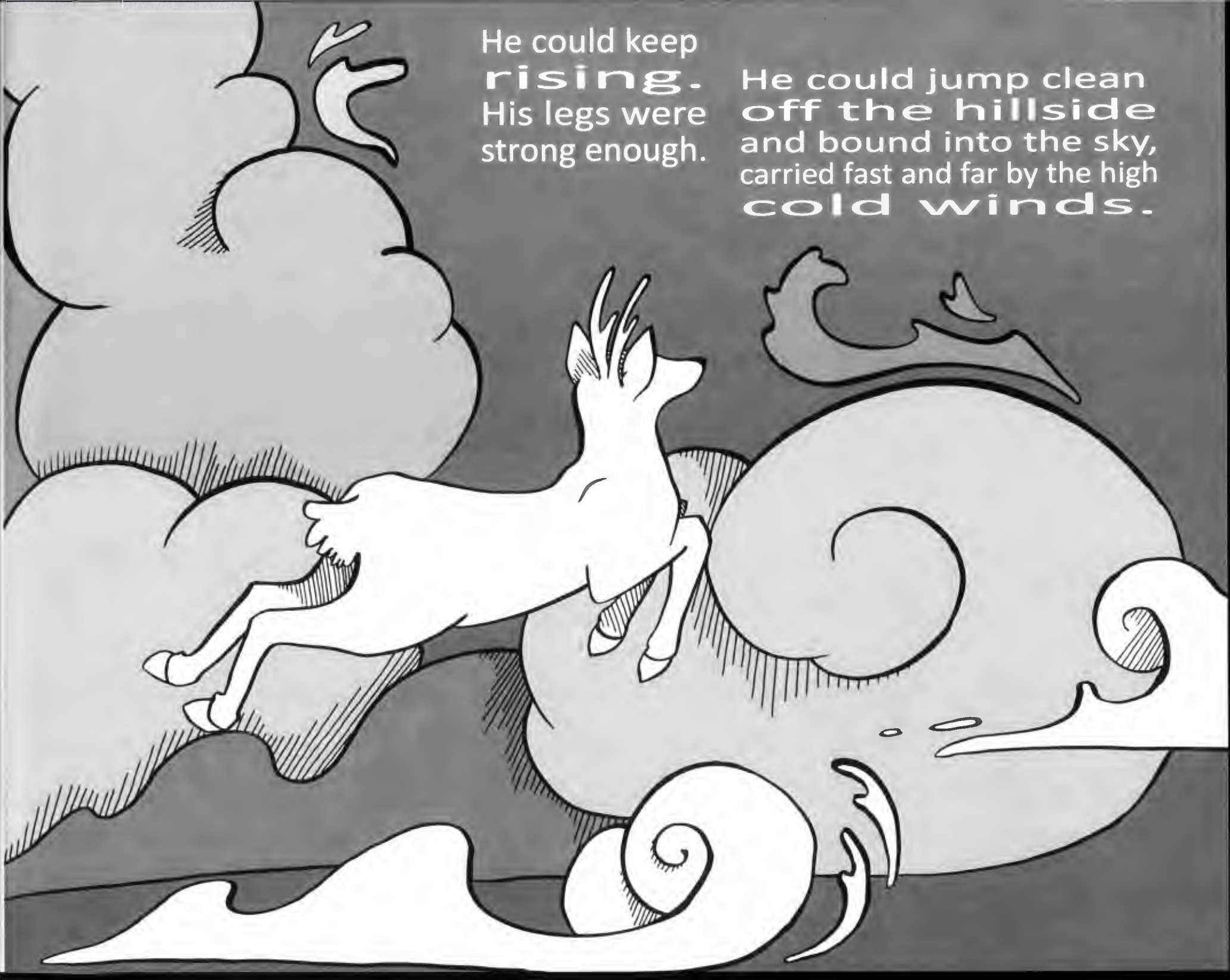
Midleap.

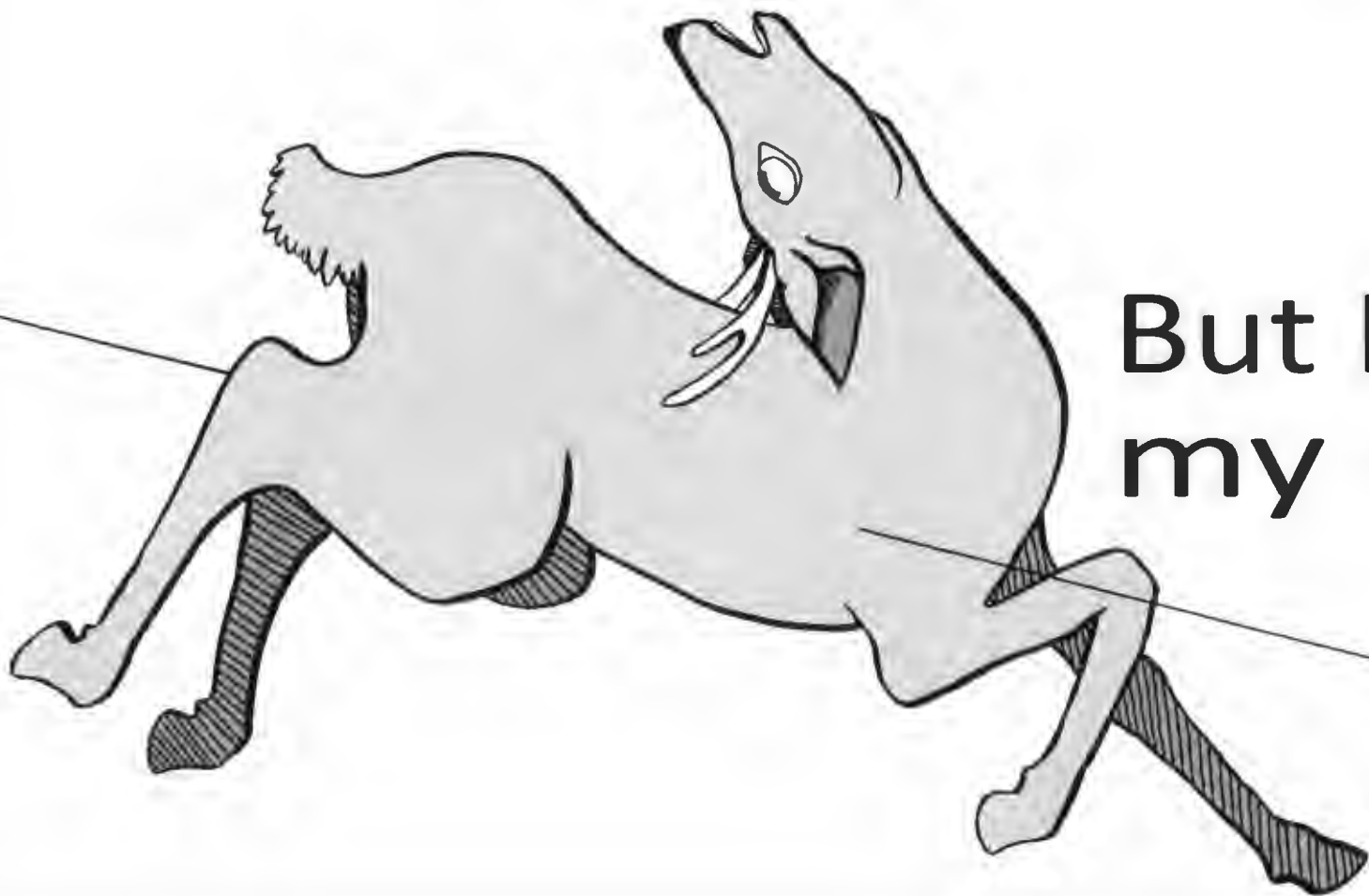
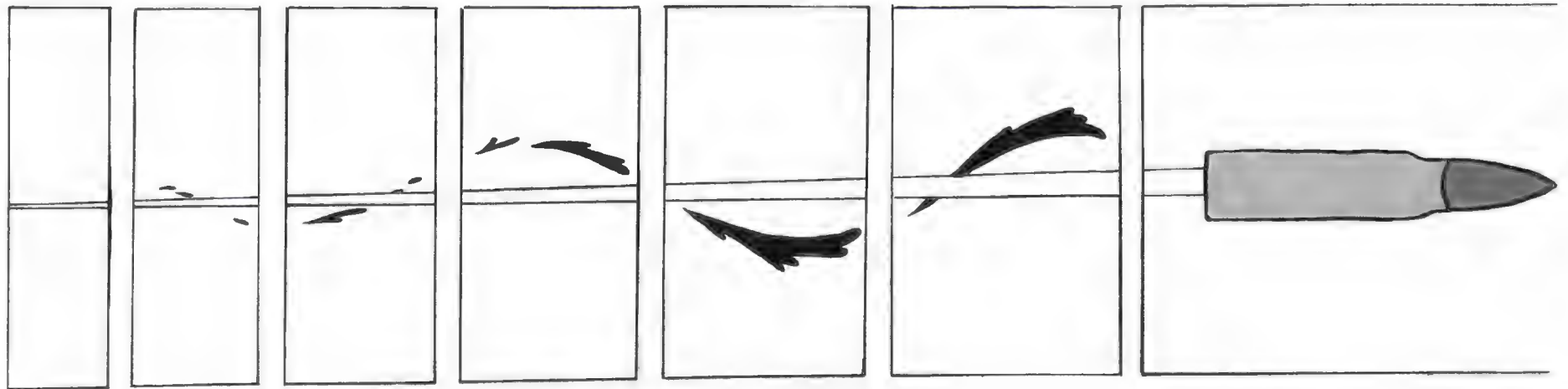
Dancer's legs lifting effortlessly
from the tangle of sage.



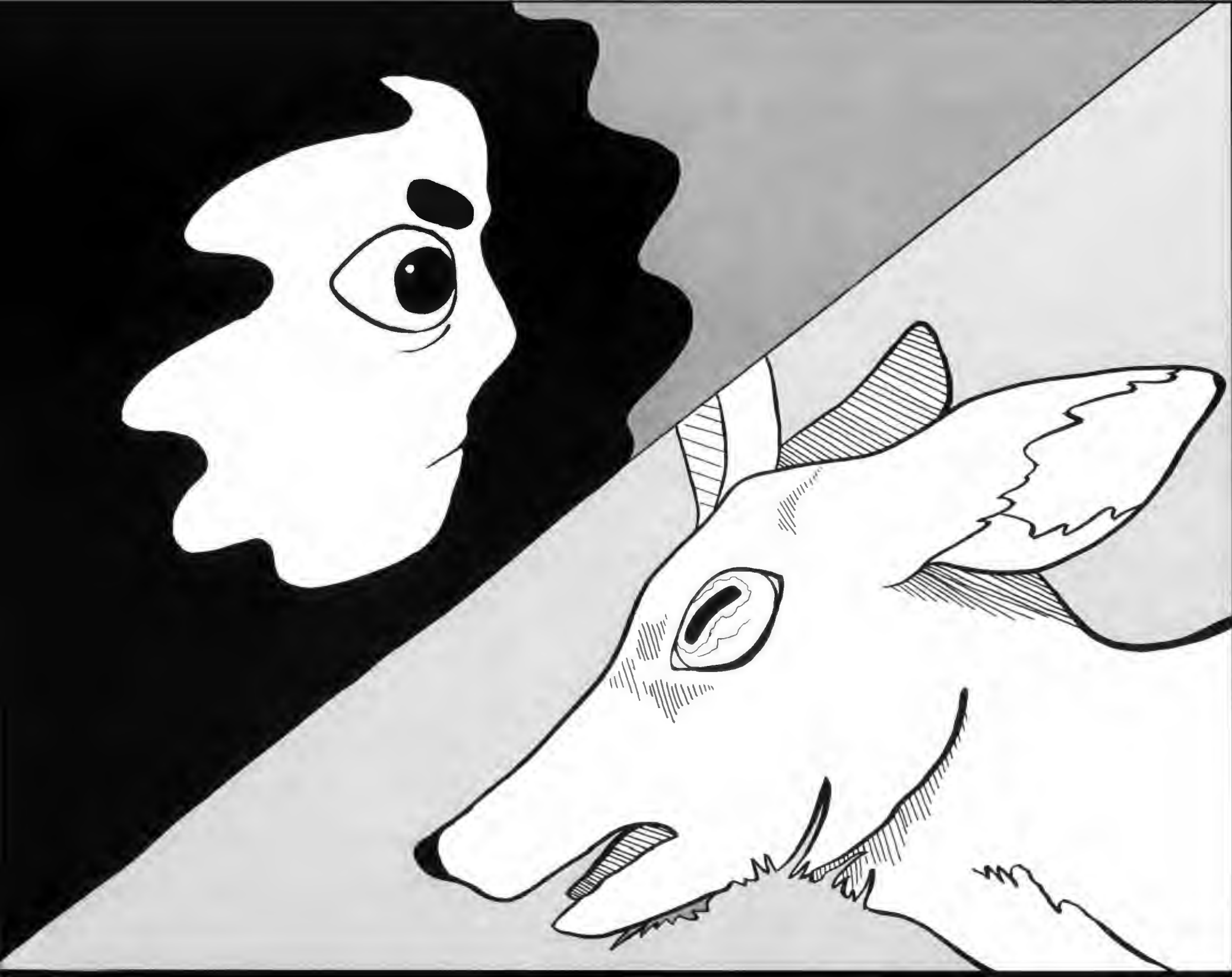
He could keep
rising.
His legs were
strong enough.

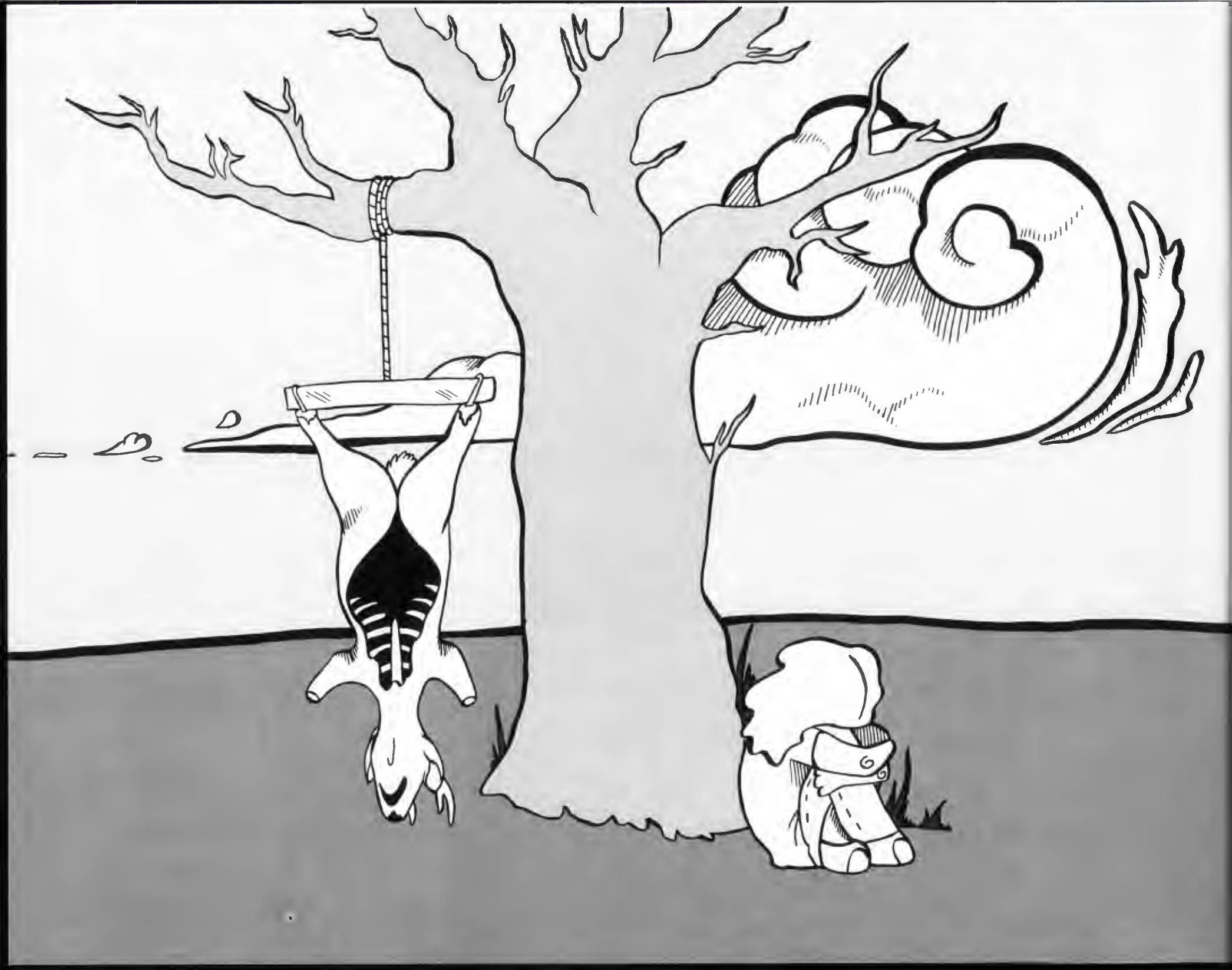
He could jump clean
off the hillside
and bound into the sky,
carried fast and far by the high
cold winds.



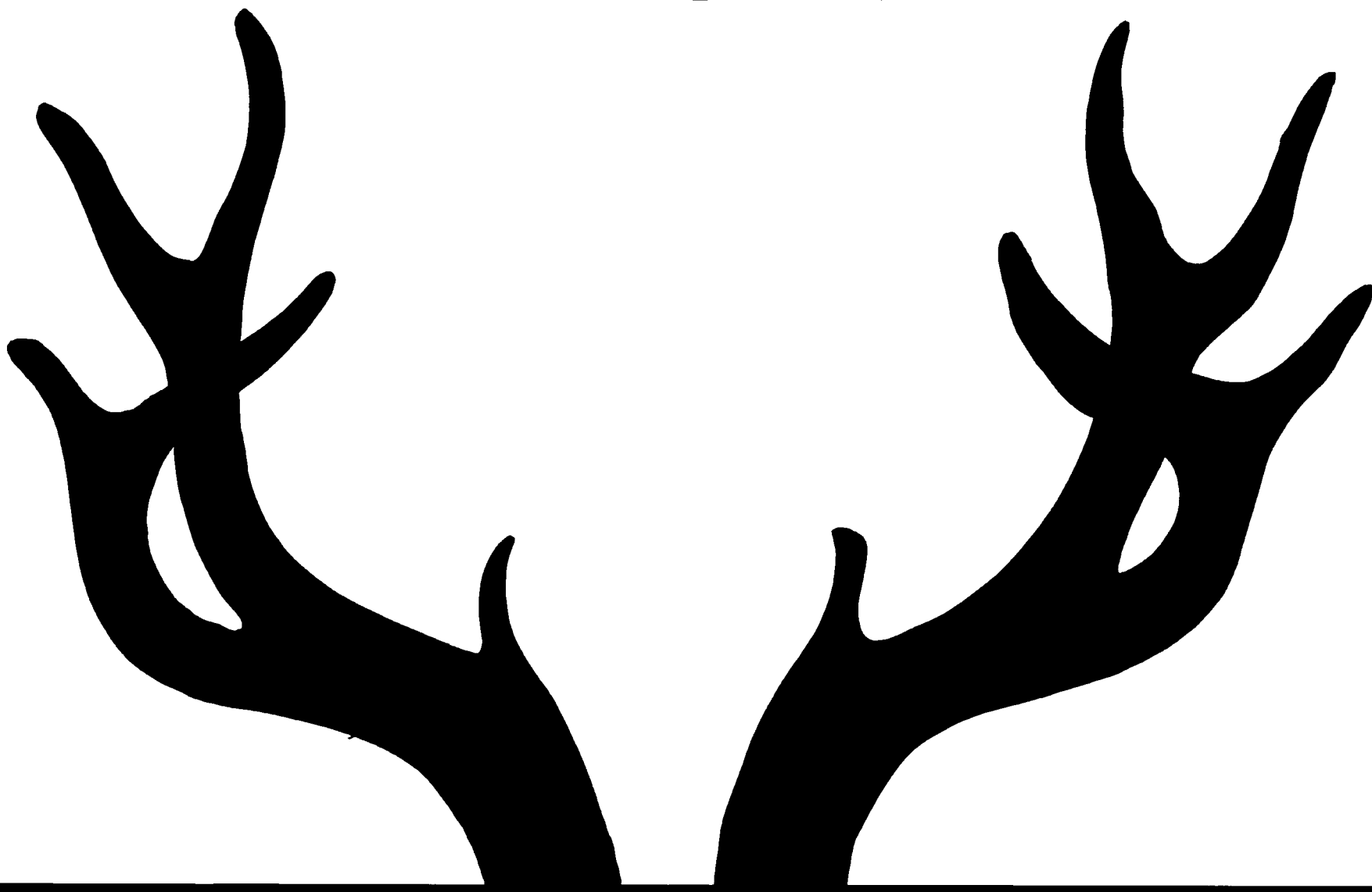


But I found
my mark.



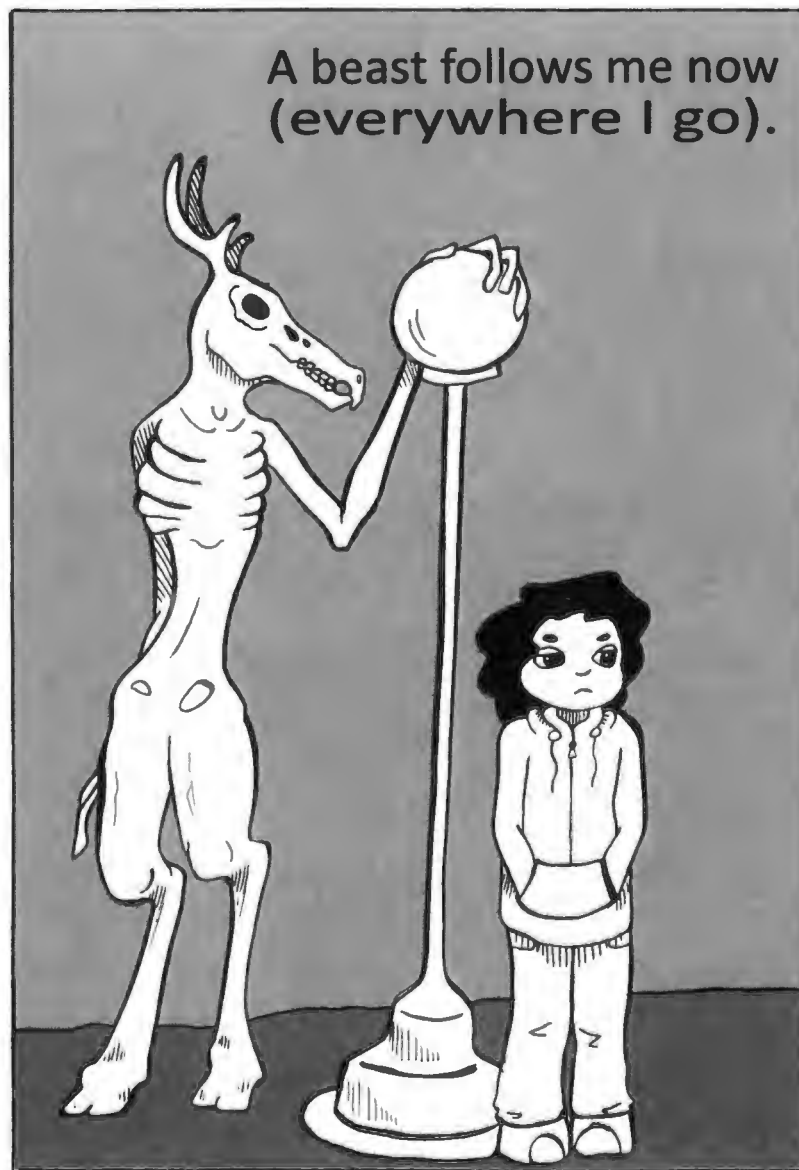
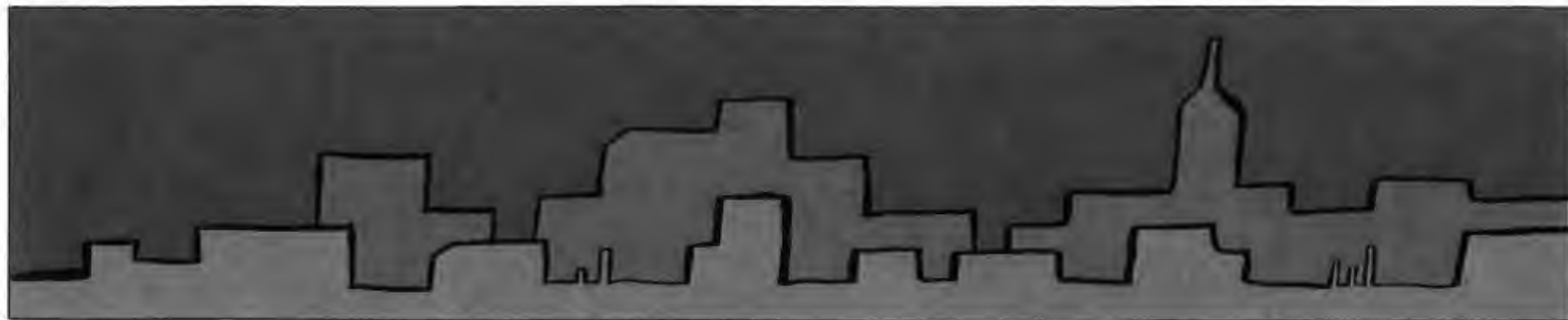


P a r t T w o
THE HUNGER



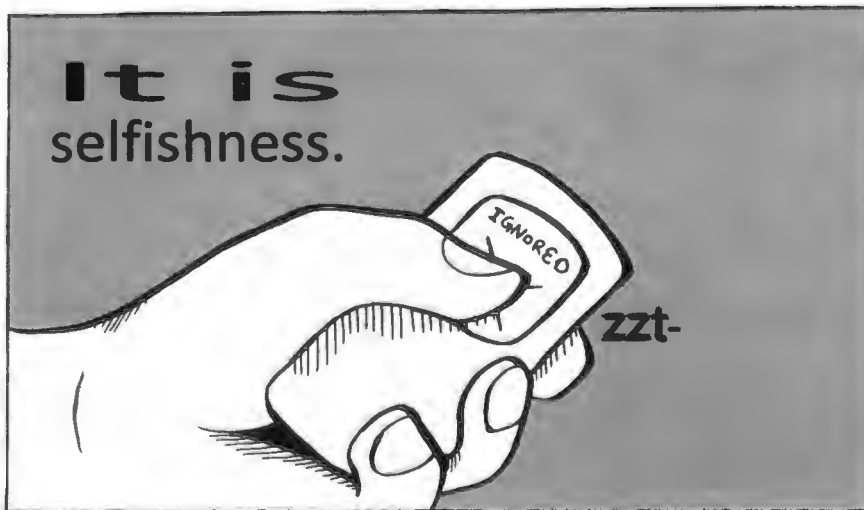




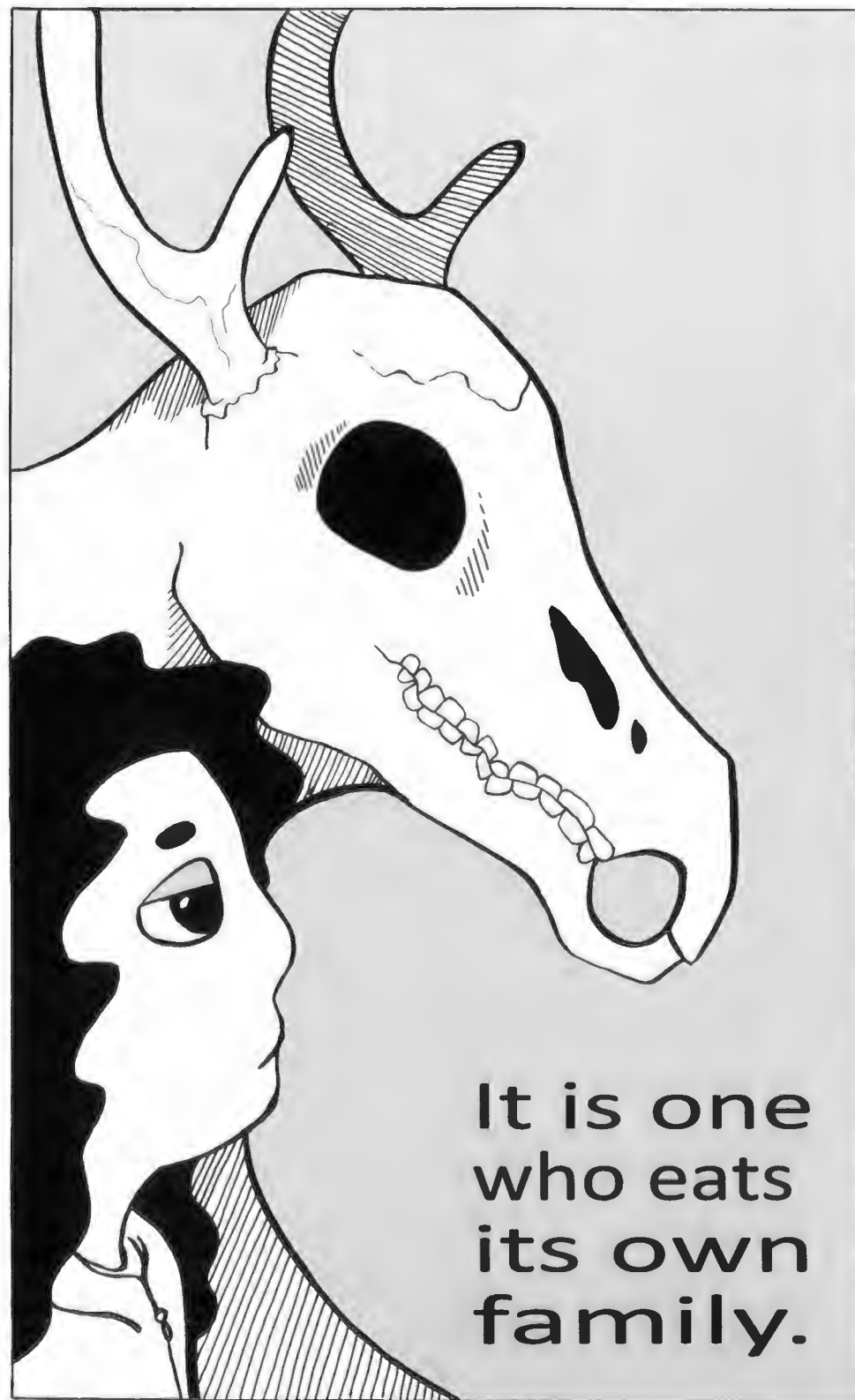




**It is
isolation.**



**It is
selfishness.**



**It is one
who eats
its own
family.**

I am sick
with it.



It
keeps
me
from
my
home.

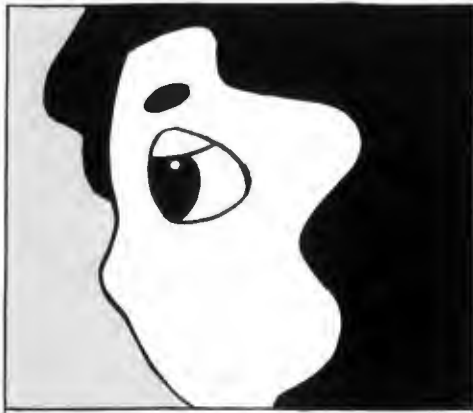


Reminding
me of what
I did.



What I
took.





When I stand still, I can hear it coming back to me. With a ringing in my ears I watch him fall, front legs extending to meet the earth but already dead by the time he touches ground. His legs crumple beneath him and his chest crashes into the brush. A thrill mainlines up my arms and my steady hands shake. Where I stand on that hill, shoulders bathed in the red wash of a September morning, I can reach back in time and touch fingertips with my great grandfather. For a hundred years this land has been my family's home. A hundred years of the smell of sage and the call of owls and the perfect silence of falling snow. Wasn't it enough? I didn't have to take more. I didn't have to take any at all, but I did. With a cough of sparks and a plume of powder and a metallic bark and a bruising punch I reached out with copper fingers and fixed my fist around the heart of my brother and gripped it so hard it stopped beating.

Oh, you stupid thing you.

What did you think

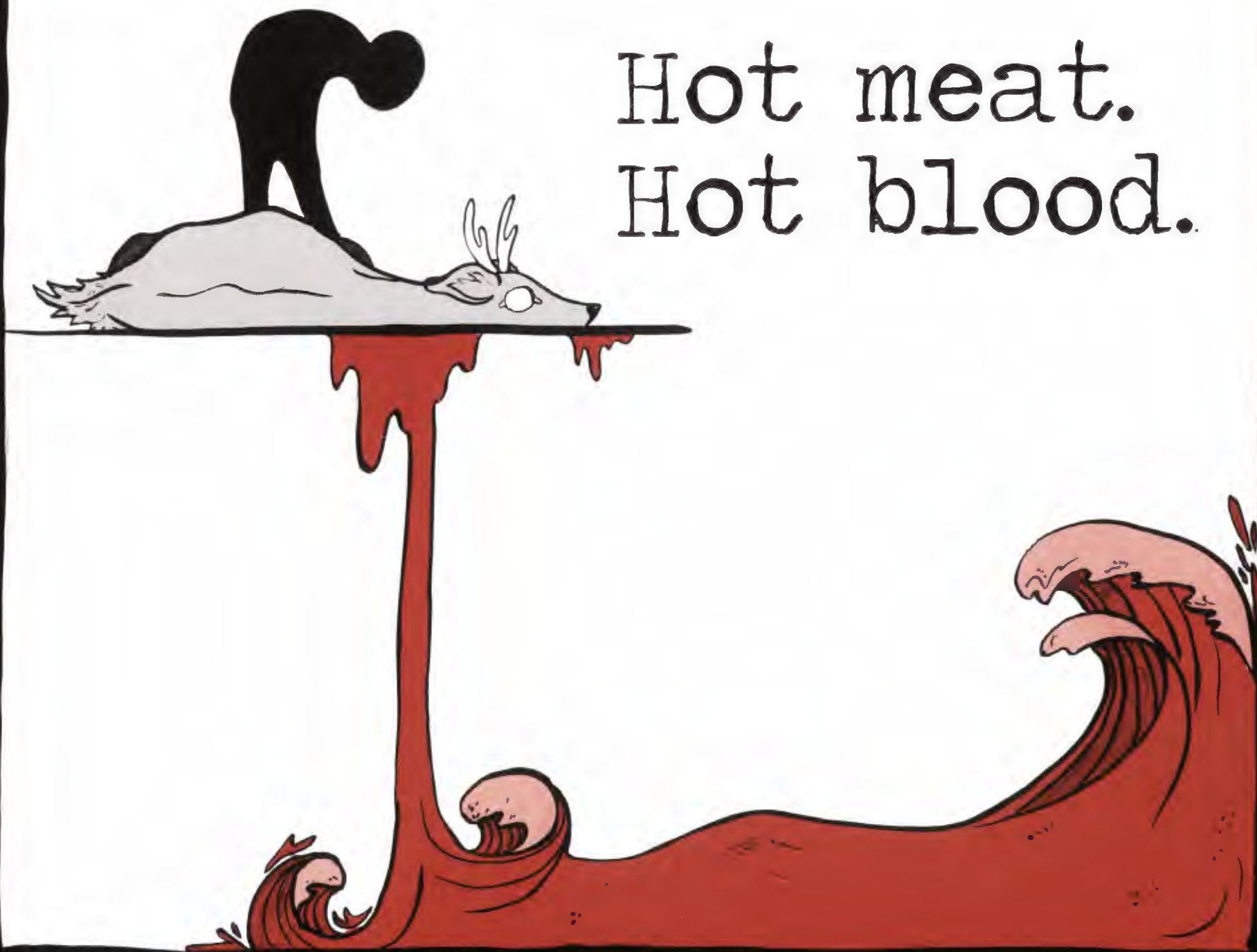
was going to happen

when you pulled

the trigger?

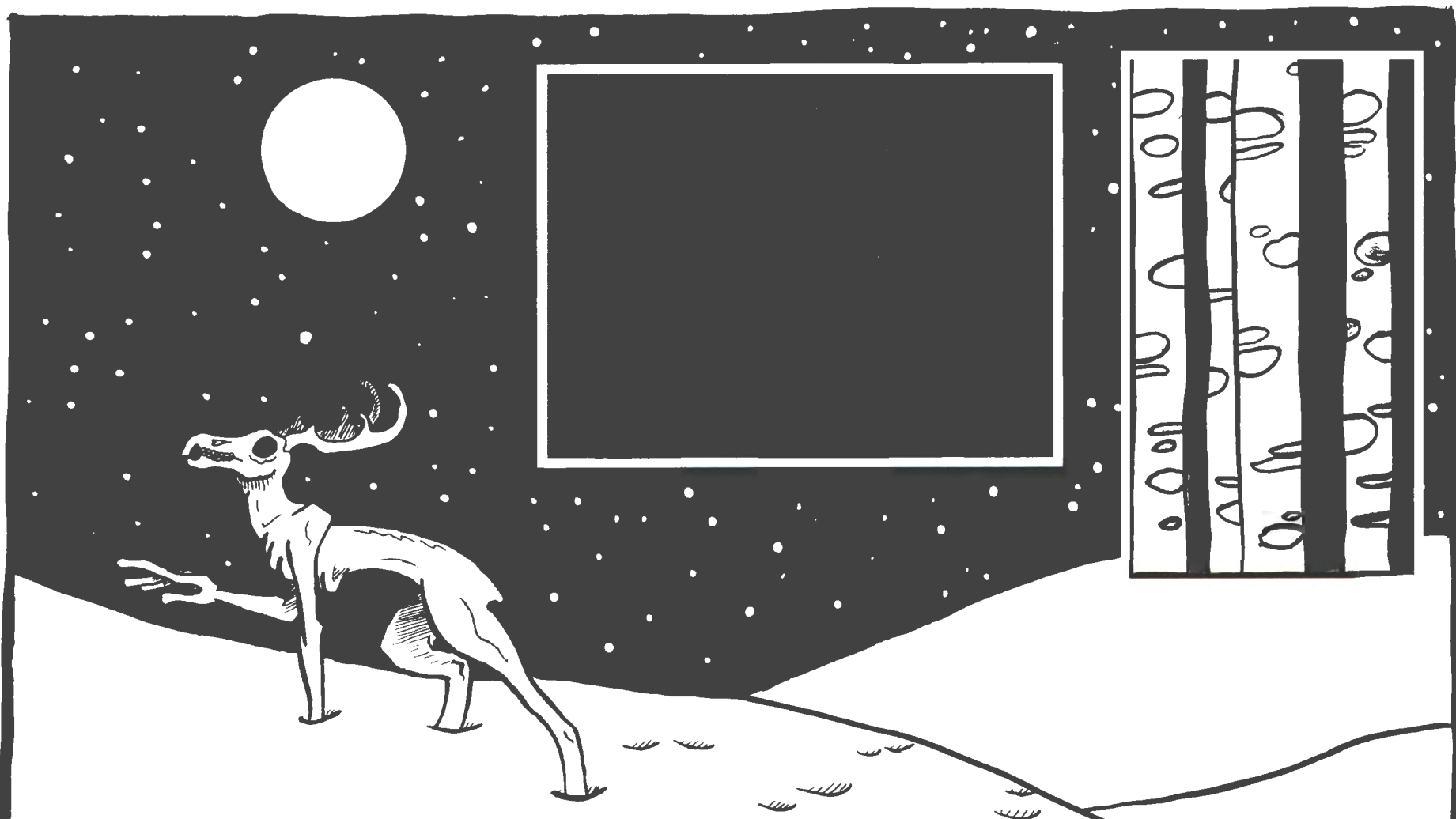


Hot meat.
Hot blood.



From the moment it comes into this world, buzzing with the shock of birth, it gapes at the skin stretched over its ribs and knows from the aching in its chest and the stillness of its heart that it is alone.





The open arms of the cold, empty wilderness beckon to it in shades of white and blue and it knows with its chest thrust forward and its arms thrown wide that it holds the power of a predator and that the coldness is not to be feared and that the emptiness is not to be feared and it howls its law to the dead moon sliding across the pitch of the sky with a thrill on its teeth and a moan in its throat.



It
becomes
God.



HUNGE
R THE
NGER

But
then
the
hunger.

Though it has eaten its mother, its sister,
its grandmother, its father, though it has
unhinged its jaw and swallowed the whole
of the world it is still

still

still

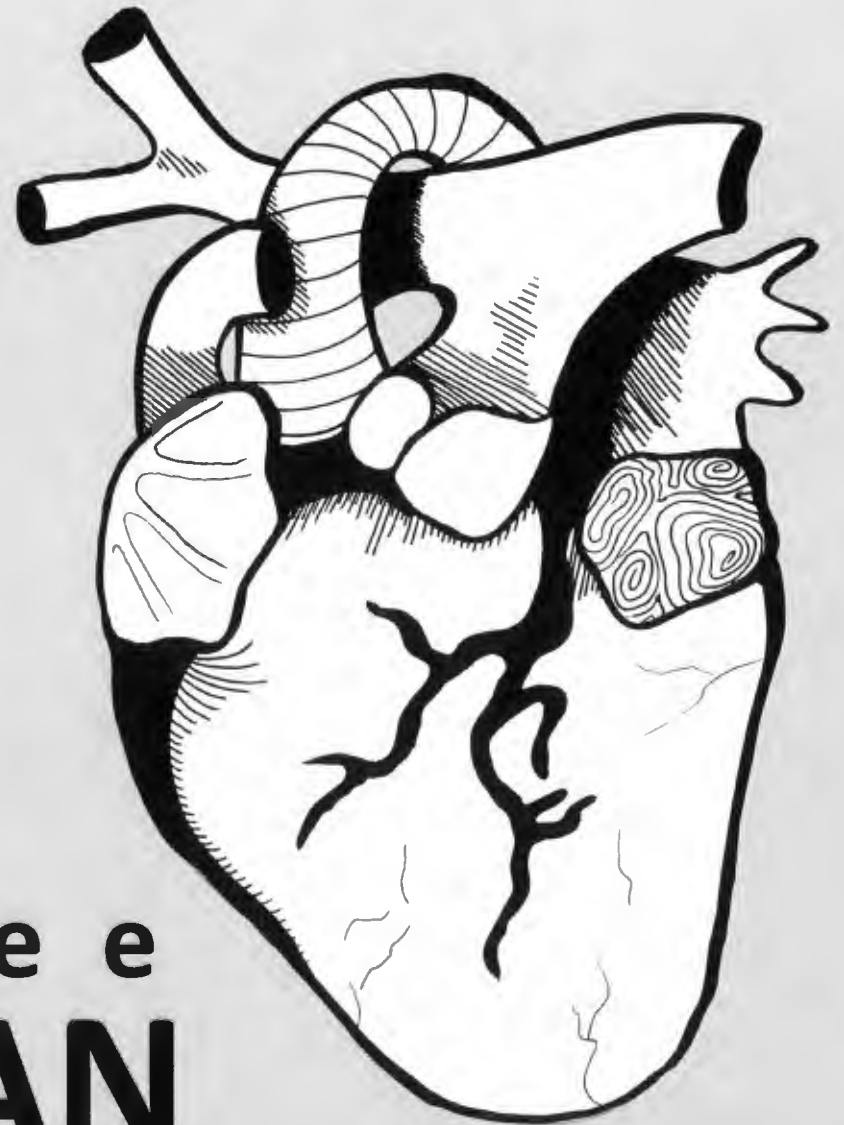
HUNGRY.

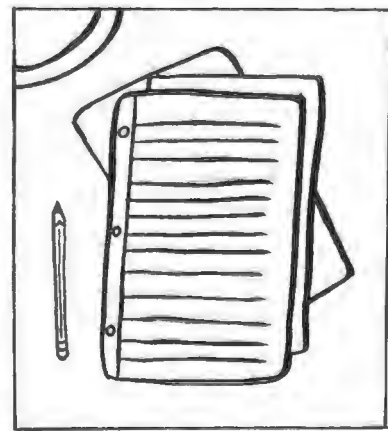




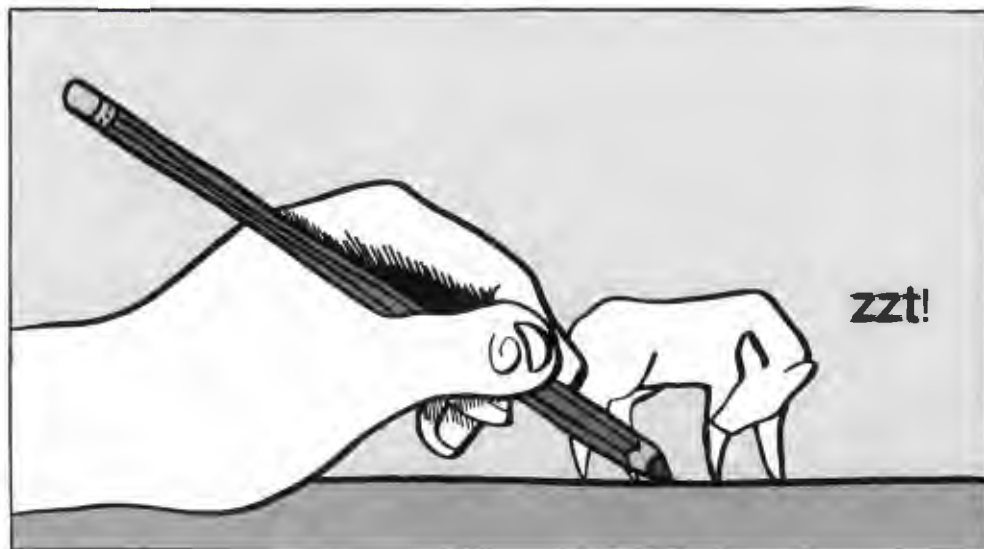
It aches.

Part Three
THE HUMAN

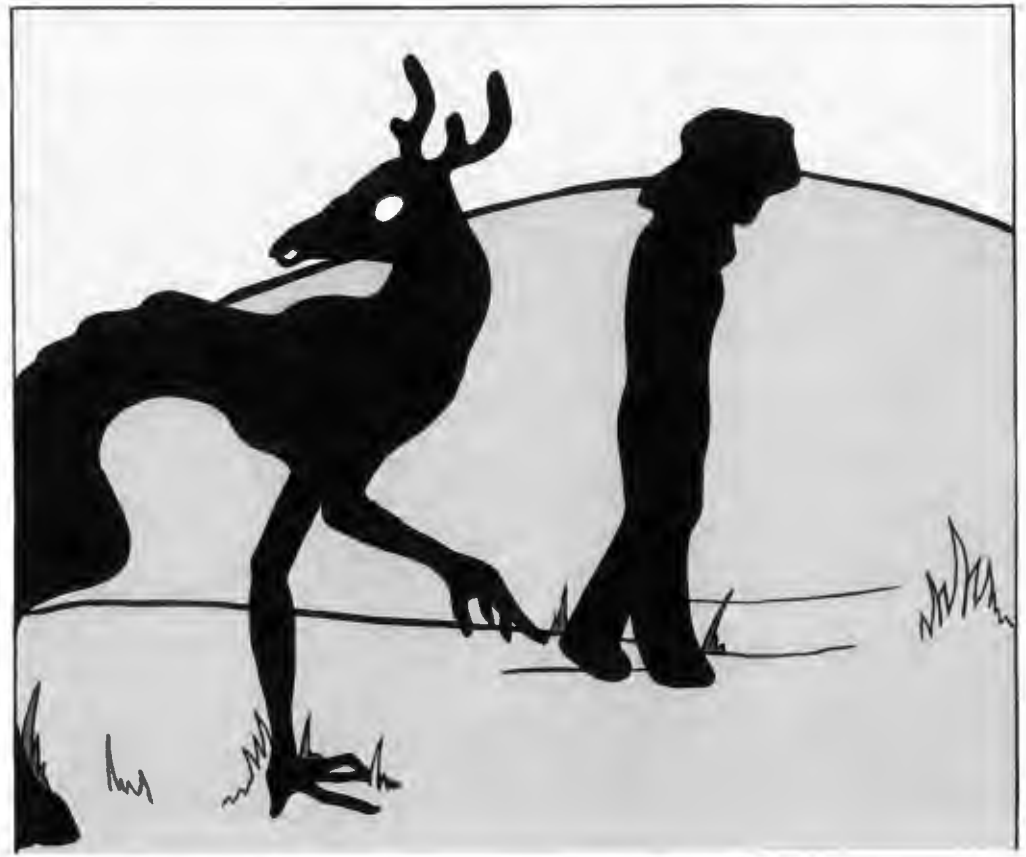




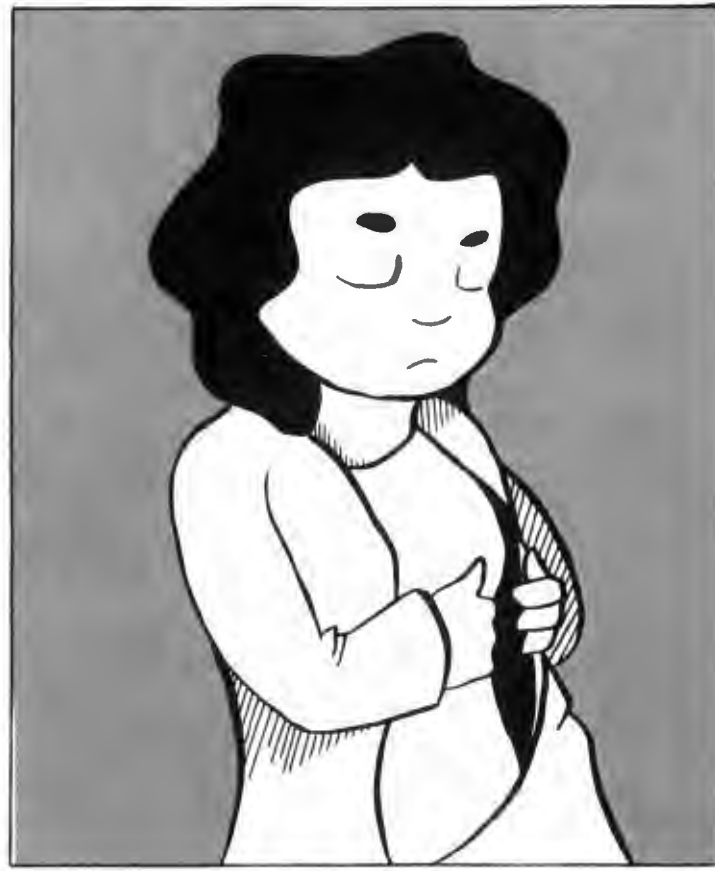
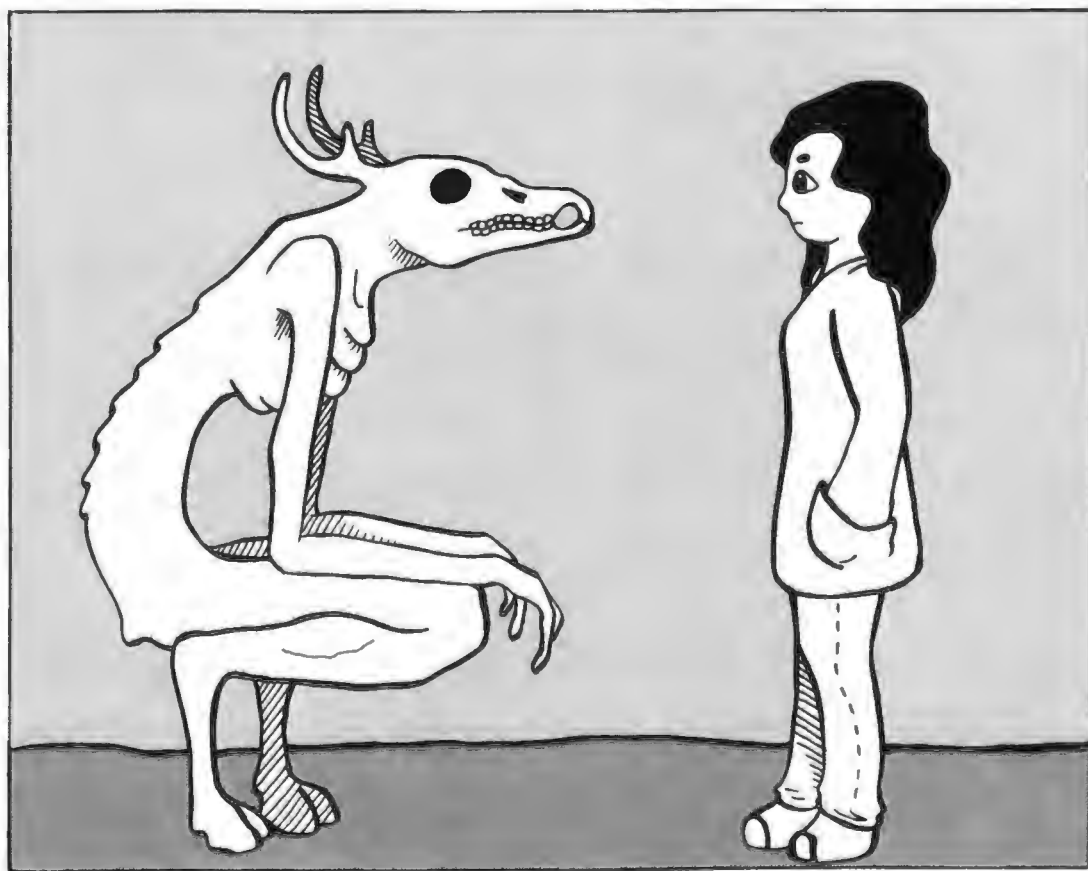
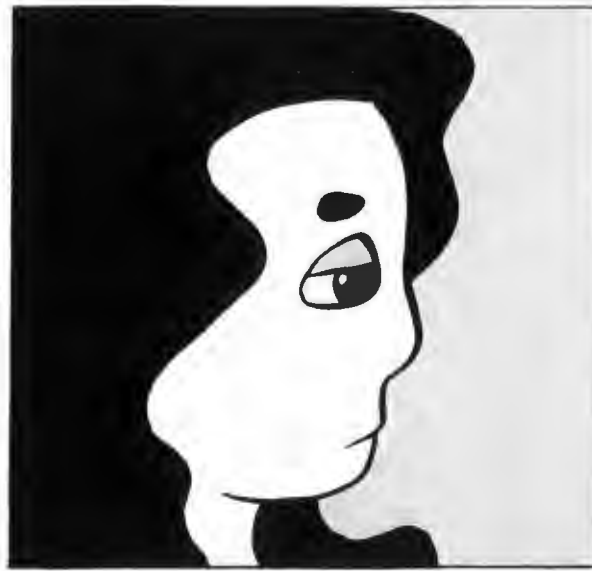


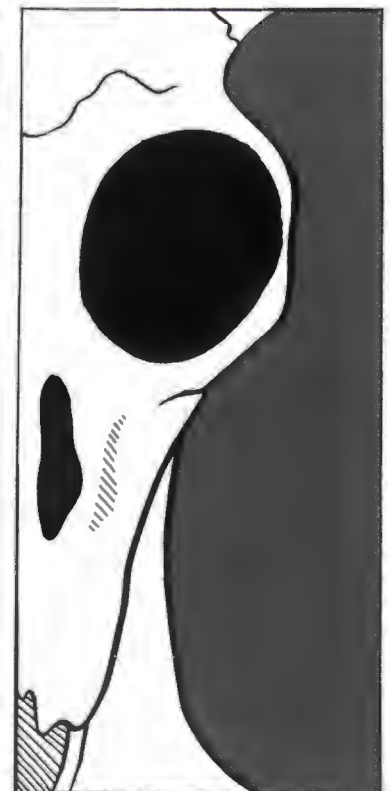
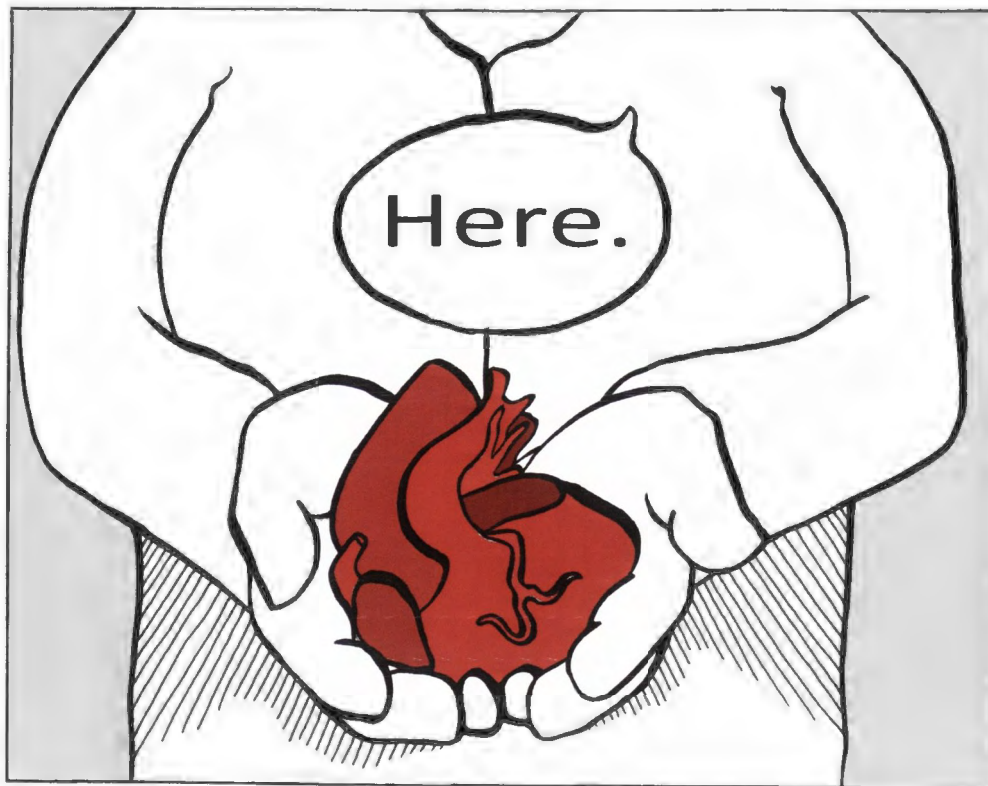


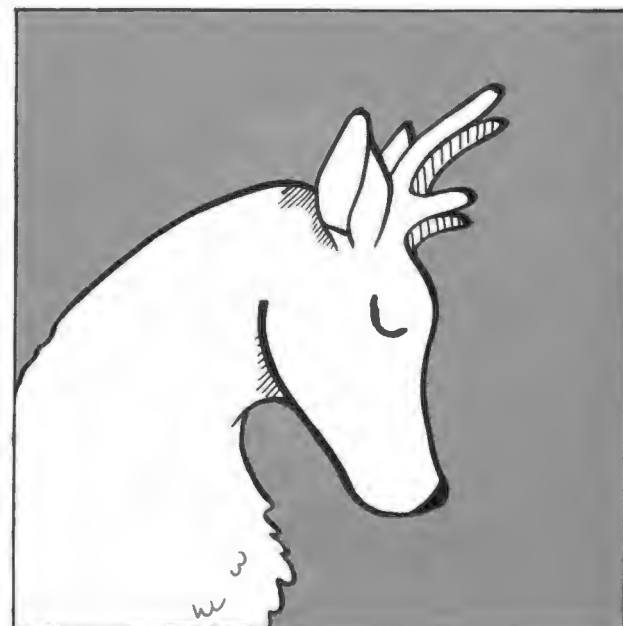












Let's go
back
now.

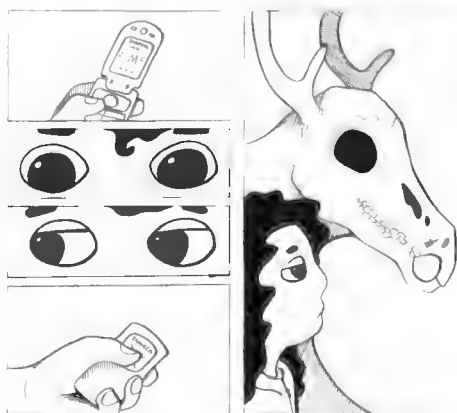








Concept Art





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About the Author

~~Artist?~~

Person Who Did A Thing

Shay Larsen had no idea how much time this would take. She had no idea how hard this would be.

If you need to find her, she's probably staring blankly at a wall somewhere on campus. Go poke her or something to make sure she isn't dead.

K, thanks.



I just
wanted to
read comics...

