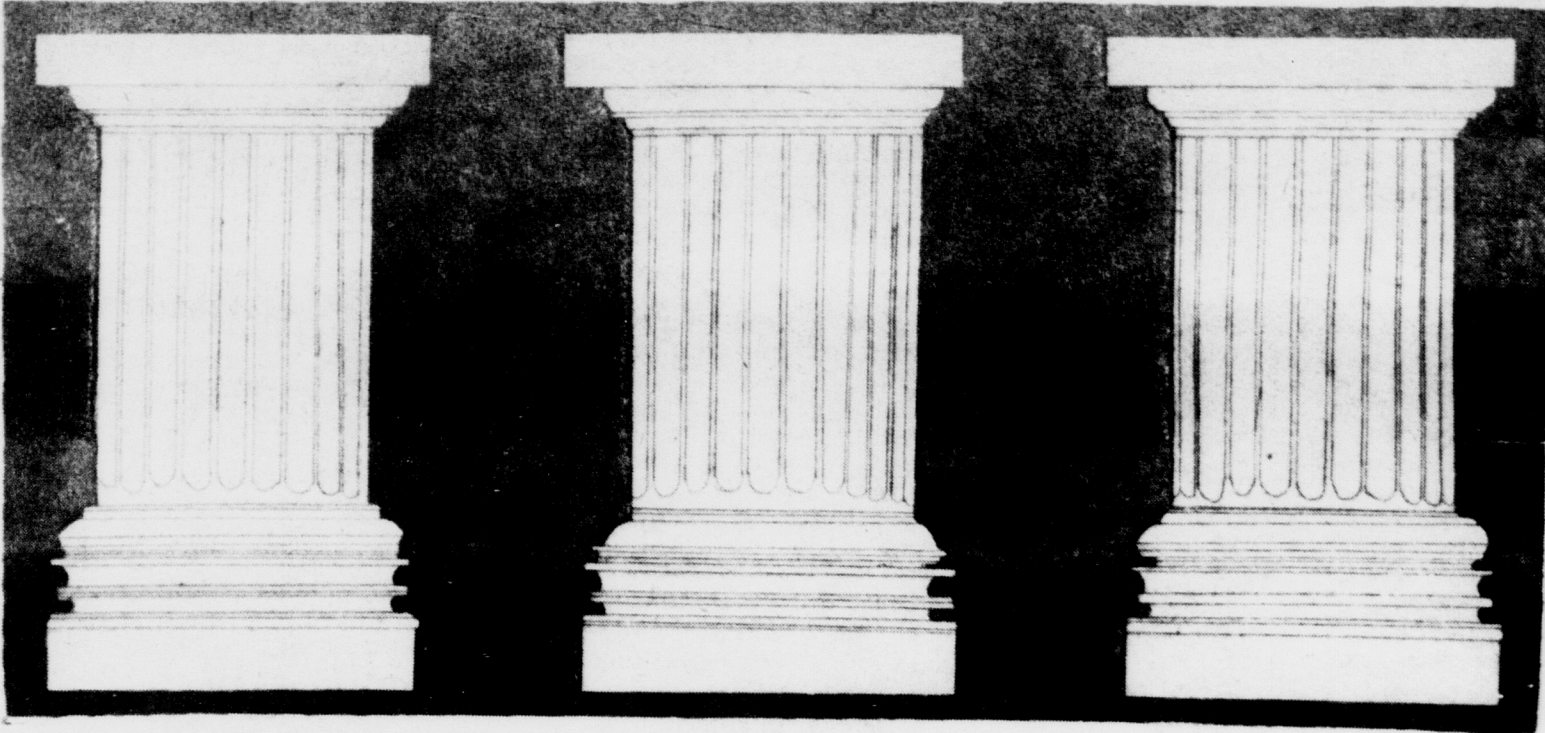
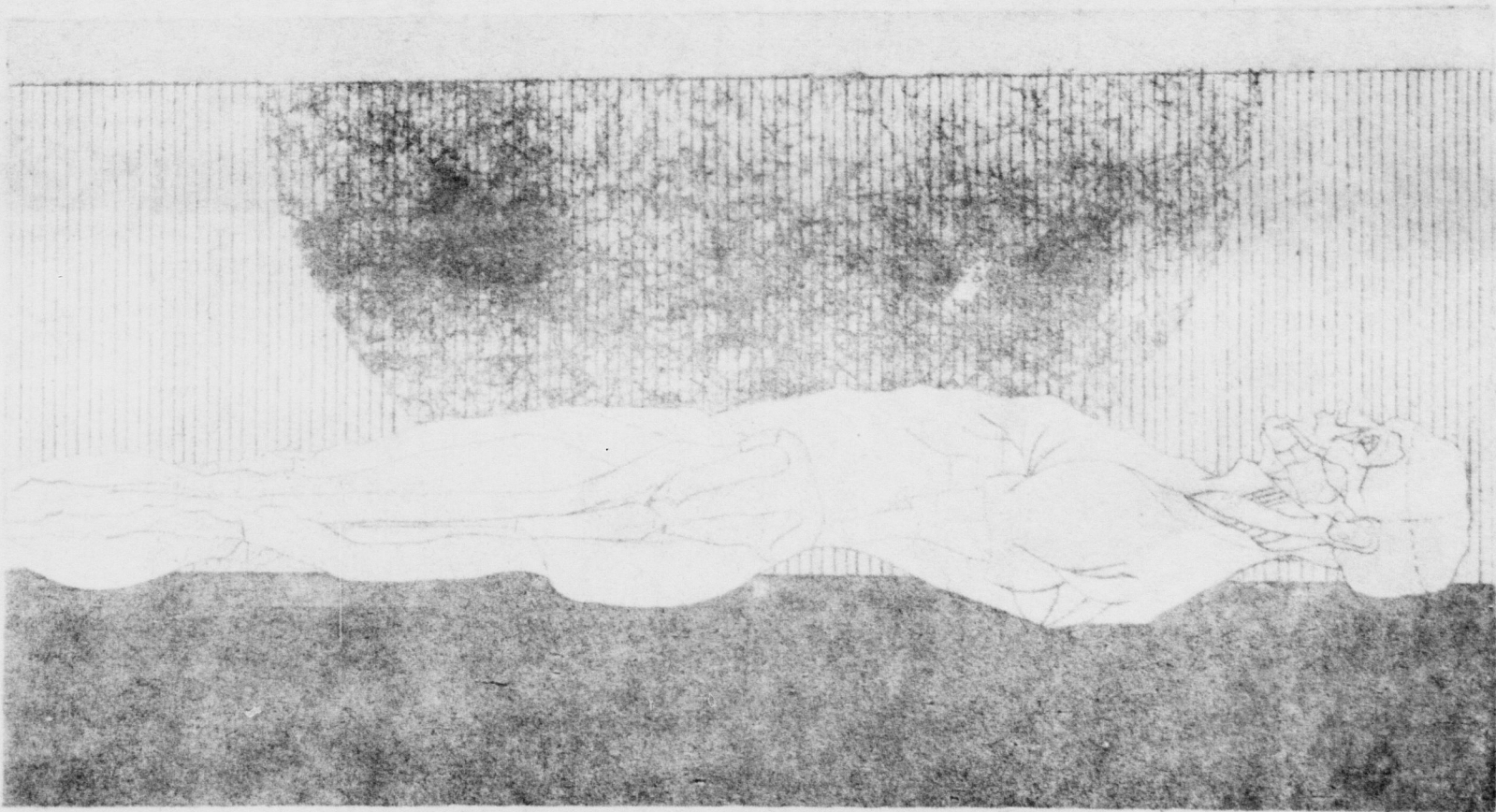
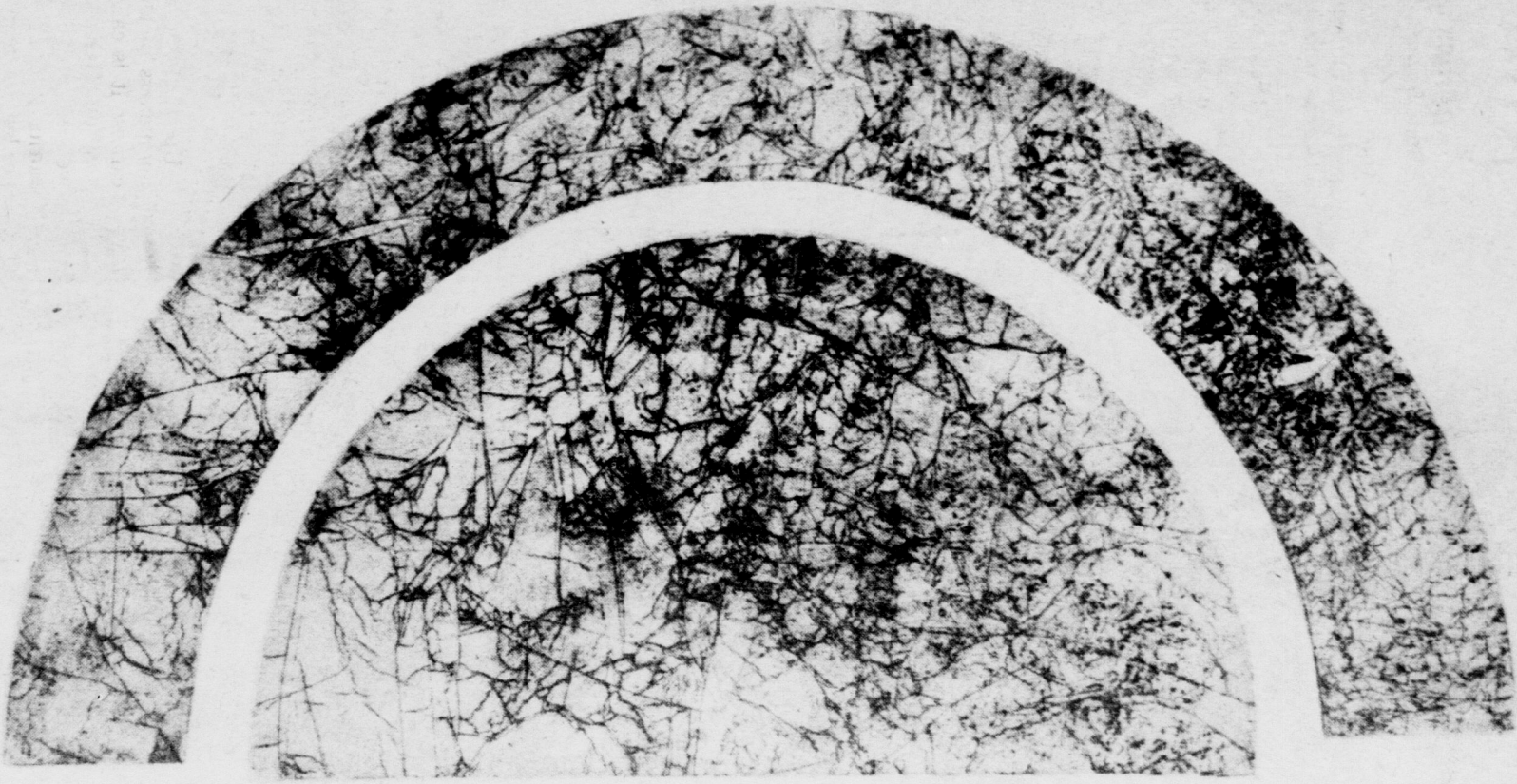


TUESDAY

April 7, 1971



etching/Georgia Forster

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GOOD NEWS
SHEET PABA JAMES - JAMES TAYLOR
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After I gave Jerome Greenland and Iceland and both North Poles, and him complaining there was nothing but penguins hanging around there, I had to give him part of Spain on Tuesdays to keep him quiet. It was either that or listen to his stories. And that was generous, since it was him who had dropped the key down the sewer and we were locked out. And all the bathroom lights on the block were out. So we were stuck sitting on our steps until Pa's shift got off at five a.m. It wasn't so bad, though, Jerome said, since we could wait for the cats, but I wished he wouldn't have dropped it. It must have been at least twelve o'clock (midnight).

There was half a moon left, and shadows were jungling down the sidewalks. The leaves were mostly gone, and the trees were ready to reach down and pinch your head off. I was considering crying.

So I kept talking. To shut him up. He seemed mildly interested in dividing up the world fair and square, but I knew he was half listening for the bushes to heave and Dracula to jump out whipping his black and red cape and flashing his gums. I could just see Jerome hoping. Jerome liked to scare himself to trembling.

I know he does because I have to sleep in the bottom bunk and I hear him trembling with Dracula through the boxspring and mattress. He woke me up screaming once, hanging by his toes, staring into my mouth upsidedown, claiming Dracula had bit him and changed him into a bat.

I wouldn't help him get back up until he promised not to bite me. He promised, but I wish when he scares himself he'd leave me out of it.

A spider tiptoed across the next step down, and the neighborhood was so quiet I could hear him. Well, I could; and the streetlight made him eight inches tall.

"A man was rotting away from the insides out, and his voice was so rotten it sounded like sandpaper . . ." Jerome's whisper rasped low. I jumped.

"Cut it out!"

" . . . and he gurgled blood when he laughed — like this." Jerome chortled the Rotting Man's laughter, and it echoed down the silver-gray street.

"You're scarin' me, Jerome."

And he prayed to the Devil, 'Devil, I want to live forever. Here I is rotting away slow by slow, and sounding like a meat grinder; but I want to live forever,' and the Devil appeared to him in his bathroom mirror, humming soft, and granted his wish. Said, 'You can live forever and ever.' Jerome's voice trailed off. A wind came up and blew the leaves around.

"But," his voice throbbled. "But, he didn't stop rotting. He just went on rotting and stinking forever. And now, when the wind whistles, that's him laughing like sandpaper on the roof." The leaves raced frantically.

"I'm taking Spain back!" It wasn't fair.

"I want Africa, then."

"Why?" I hadn't had my heart set on Africa, but I was thinking about the blood gurgling, and I didn't feel all that generous.

"In Africa, they got pythons," said Jerome, coming close. I could see his eyelashes. "Once, a guy went on a wild safari into the deepest jungle and one by one all his natives got captured by cannibal gorillas and sunk in quicksand and finally he was all alone."

"You watch too much television." My undershirt itched; I wondered where that spider got to.

"No, listen. He was all alone, and when he was camped by the quicksand, eating his regular pork 'n beans, this python snuck up on him and eats him. All in one piece. And he got out his switchblade, and cut himself right out . . ."

"What's a python?"

He stopped. "Pythons? They're like tigers, only bigger; and they got elastic stomachs and teeth long as roofing nails."

Well, that was news to me. "Yeh? Cut hisself out of his elastic stomach. Then what?"

"Nothin'. Put the python in a burlap bag and went home. Only thing, his face was part digested from the python's stomach juice, but he got his pitcher in the newspaper in Africa, and the Salvation Army sends him shoes now."

I was really impressed. I figured that made up for the Dracula bat, anyway.

"Like big tigers?" I shifted my weight back, and hugged my knees. It was cold. The street was pretty empty, and the light buzzed blue. "Anything like cats? Do they got a tail and whiskers?"



PYTHONS

a short story by Lauri Comito

"Claws," he breathed, awesome. "Claws like you wouldn't believe. Like a rake, red and curved and long." He stretched each word like a rubberband. "They use them to stuff people into their stomachs with."

"You're crazy. Jerome, you're an awful liar. The cats'll get you for sure." I'd forgotten about the cats.

"Yeh? That guy got in the newspaper, didn't he?"

The moon was low in the sky, and big. The night was clear and sharp as window glass. It broke. A soft high cry rose higher and higher down the block, across the street. Our ears shot up, and we looked down to Veruzo's, wide-eyed. We'd forgotten about the cats; we were going to wait for the cats.

"What time is it," I wheezed.

"Just about time. Moon's nearly down." Our streetlight buzzed blue. "If we don't hurry, there'll be no light. It's pitch in his alley."

"We'd be the first ones to see them." We didn't look at each other. Nobody had seen the cats that wailed under the old water tank in Veruzo's back alley. Whenever there was a moon, you could hear them, though, crying and screaming and yowling. Fighting each other. Often we'd find blood spattered on the gravel, and all the garbage strewn around. Mrs. Arvey paid us a quarter to clean it up. But we never saw the cats.

They were wild cats. Belonged to old man Veruzo before he died. They moused his basement for years and years. Whole families of cats, cousins of cousins' cousins, until there were thirty or forty. Veruzo was a widower, and he grew peppers and grapes on his fence. His whole yard was a cemetery of tomato stakes that stood straight and sharp in rows. Kids were afraid to tremble of him, and threw eggs at his windows on Devil's night. The kids said the reason the peppers grew so good was Veruzo ate the cats with the tomatoes and buried them in the yard. He made a heavy black wine with the grapes. He had laid a little cement walk from the back steps to the alley for the trash, or to make his grizzly task easier. The rest of the yard was overgrown, so it spilled over into the next door neighbor's. Overflowing. Veruzo bought Chinese wind chimes at the dime store and hung them like spangles in the peppers for scarecrows, until the yard looked like a sequined New Year's Eve costume. Jerome said the cats never came outside, but howled at the moon through the basement window. They were prisoners down there. No one ever saw them. People hardly ever saw the old man, either, except early in the morning. He walked, in a sagging green cardigan, his white hair electrified, to Victor's Market for pasta. Then Veruzo was gone. People said he sagged off somewhere to die. The cats never went away. The kids broke the basement window. There were never any rats in the alley.

The kids in the neighborhood wanted to see them. In winter, we could follow their tracks up and down the alley in the snow, giant tracks that pounded the snow hard in the frenzy of some

terrible combat. Jerome said they fought for domination of the neighborhood, for who would call the shots. He said it was Veruzo's cats that ran everything because they were ghosts, watching. They were the ghosts of bad people. Veruzo must have been a cat then. Jerome said they had been on Palmetto Street before Veruzo, and they were just waiting for the people to go again. They knew everything. He said they watched people live and die in the neighborhood, waiting for the bad ones to die, and sat on rooftops. They walked like sandpaper sliding when someone died. He said they knew who it was, and they smiled cat smiles with their eyes. Jerome's crazy.

But we talked about them in whispers anyway. About what color they were and how their teeth flashed and how they were big as cocker spaniels. We would speculate how the cats would like the cop who walked with his long yellow nightstick from one corner to the other, or about the President of the United States, and if they'd want either of them.

We wanted to see them. We used to pretend we would catch one, a kitten, and tame him, and then we'd take the neighborhood away from Veruzo's cats. One night, we said, we'd wake up and sneak out to the alley and watch them strutting and scrapping in Veruzo's yard, and then catch one.

They hid during the day in the old cars and junk oil drums rusting behind garages, and we were captured for bed before nine o'clock. But we knew, from midnight trips to the bathroom, that the cats lived during the dark wee hours of the morning. We heard them.

"The landing net's on a nail in the garage," Jerome said. "We'll get one and we'll take over the neighborhood."

"Jerome! Do you think we should? They'll know..."

"Don't be a stupidass. You believe everything anybody tells you? There's a flashlight under the workbench, too." He stood up and wiped his palms on his jeans. He still didn't look at me.

My mouth was dry. I licked my lips and walked fast around back for Pa's old fishnet. It had a short handle, so we'd have to move fast. The ragged weave was perfect for trout; we had never tried it on cats. But, for as long as it hung there, we had known that's what it was really meant for. I checked it for holes, holding it up to the pale light. Jerome's face was blue as a clown's mask, and the street light buzzed. I heard the cats again, restless and high-pitched. Nervous. I wasn't very sure.

"They're choosing up sides, and picking victims. They're sick of waiting around for the people to leave. They want all the bad ones at once. Now."

"How'd you know animal language?" Jerome was always surprising me.

"I'm a bat, remember."

"Yeh?" I was still doubtful, but those cats were raising Cain. My eyes hurt. We didn't look at each other.

Veruzo had been dead for a year. But the cemetery of tomato stakes still stood sharp in rows. The grapes had withered in the first frost, and they cracked brittle and dry on the fence. The wind chased a milk carton down the walk to the back door. Jerome and I stayed in the alley, behind Turis' blue Ford. It crouched on its rims a few feet from Veruzo's gate. Jerome said we could see them and not be seen from Turis' Ford, and we were ready. The cats had good eyes.

The moon disappeared. I switched on the flashlight, but it only glowed a beam a few feet ahead, and I swung it into the windows of the old house, from attic to basement, across the yard, slowly. It was very quiet now, except for the wind somewhere.

The eyes. They reflected the light like a thousand tiny mirrors in the dark. They stared out knowingly, white slits, from the windows and the broken back steps. Close, a hard black hiss. I froze. Jerome sunk his nails into my leg.

He glared back at us from the dash of Turis' Ford, arched gold and bristled. I turned the flashlight on him and he was gone.

"On the roof. Under the eaves, there. Along the fence." Jerome pointed. He didn't let go of my leg. All around us we could see them. Cats, in groups of threes and fours and fives, like hidden faces in a puzzle drawing, blending in with the dark. Kittens cried under the water tank a few feet from us. The rest were silent, waiting.

"Come on." I think Jerome said it aloud. Slowly, we crossed the alley, and we could see them, half a dozen, in the light I tried to hold steady. Half a dozen, some black, under the tank, on a bed of a torn green sweater. They stared at us.

Jerome flashed the net. The tiger-striped kitten clawed my hand. I dropped the flashlight, and the beam clattered down the pavement, splashing shadows. Leaves chimed frantically. I sucked the blood.

We ran. Gravel skittered under our tennis shoes as we beat it for the street. A dog barked again and again. Blood pounded in my head, and I heard my breath, hard and hoarse. I ran faster than Jerome; he had the fishnet. The kitten slashed at him through the holes. Thin red claws like rakes; and when I turned I could see long scratches down his cheek the blood pouring down the front of his jacket. His face twisted and he dropped it behind him. The kitten screamed sandpaper.

We ran faster. I could feel cats running silently in the gutters along garage roofs, right and left. Near. The flashlight splashed their shadows everywhere, silently running. The wind whistled through the fences. I ran faster, and I could feel Jerome panting behind me until we were on our porch. We looked back wide-eyed finally.

The wind whipped the leaves up the steps behind us, and the street was empty. Silent, except for the streetlight, buzzing. The crashing in my head slowed, and stopped; and we stood by the door and waited for five o'clock.



and concerning the arts....

...every Wednesday this spring will be poetry, talk, and an informal thing at 4 o'clock centering around a local poet. Today the first of the series will be Doug Lawder, in the Green Room of the Union. Next Wednesday, April 14, Dennis Pace and Daryl Jones will read, talk, or whatever happens same time place.

...and more on the Creative Writing Contest. Fiction & Poetry must be in by May 7, c/o Al Drake, 322 Morrill Hall, or c/o FREEWAY, E201 Holden Hall. Attach a sealed envelope to all manuscripts with name and address info inside—no names on manuscripts! Prizes: 1st of \$75, 2nd of \$50, 3rd of \$25, in each category.

...and then, the INGHAM COUNTY BICENTENNIAL MEDIA FESTIVAL & CREATIVE WRITING AWARDS PRESENTATION NO. II. Far out—eh? May 27th. And you can't wait!

...and for authors, poets, playwrights, photographers, artists, etc., *tuesday* is now conducting its annual spring talent hunt. Address submissions to: *tuesday*, c/o State News, MSU.

...still the best, the cheapest, and in fact the only literary mag. of MSU writers, the spring issue of *Preview* is now available at most bookstores for 10¢. Issue 5 is an all poetry edition featuring the work of Carolyn Forché, George Graeber, Mike McCormick, Dennis Pace, Alan Ver Planc, and others.