

A Famine Throughout the Land

Six Palatal Parables

by Mark Mathew Braunstein

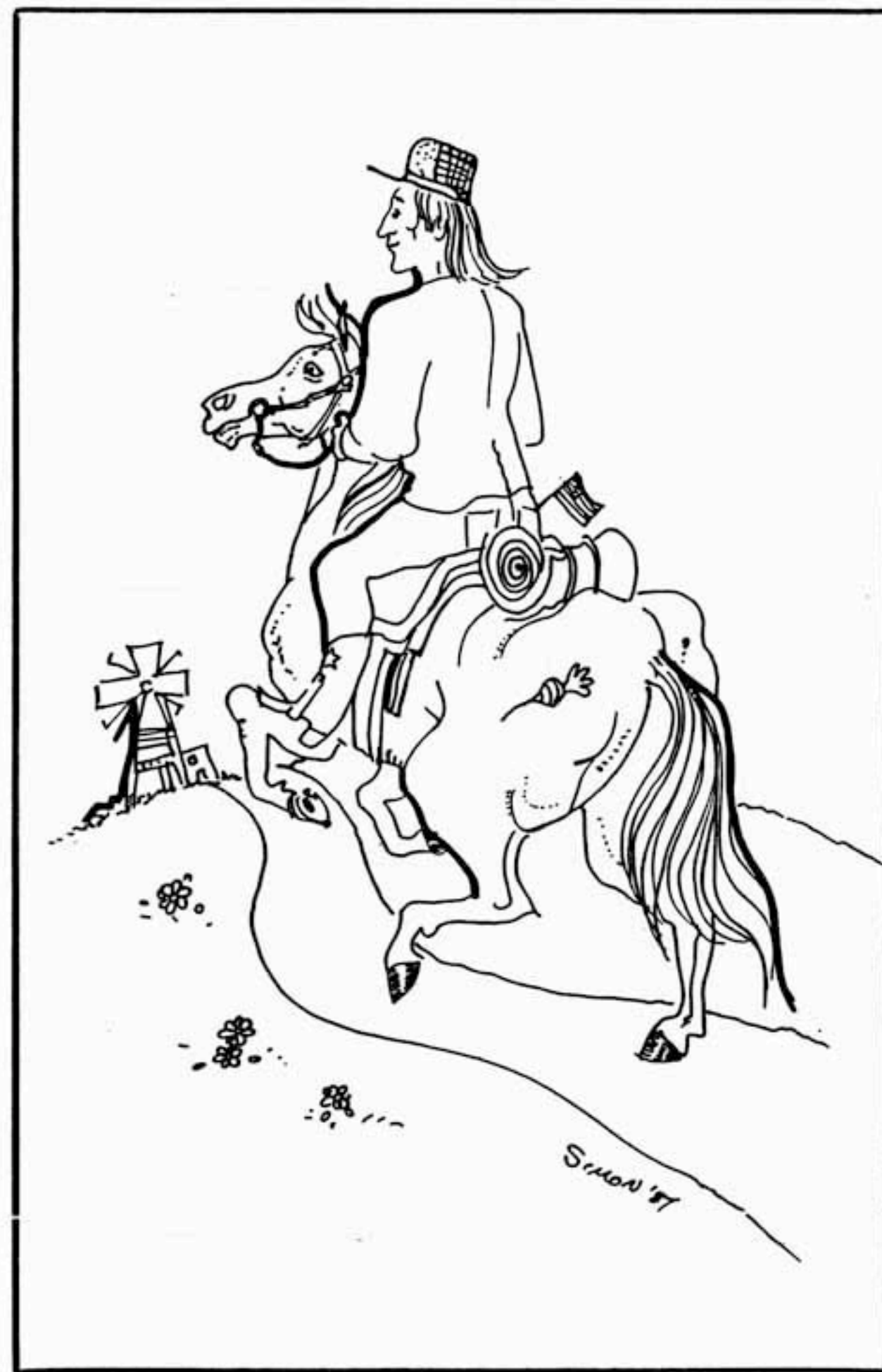


Once upon a time Chuck Steak mounted his cherished horse Radish and wandered into the forest in search of food. Not just any food, mind you. He'd had it up to here with the bit of bread his parents had been feeding him, what with a famine throughout the land.

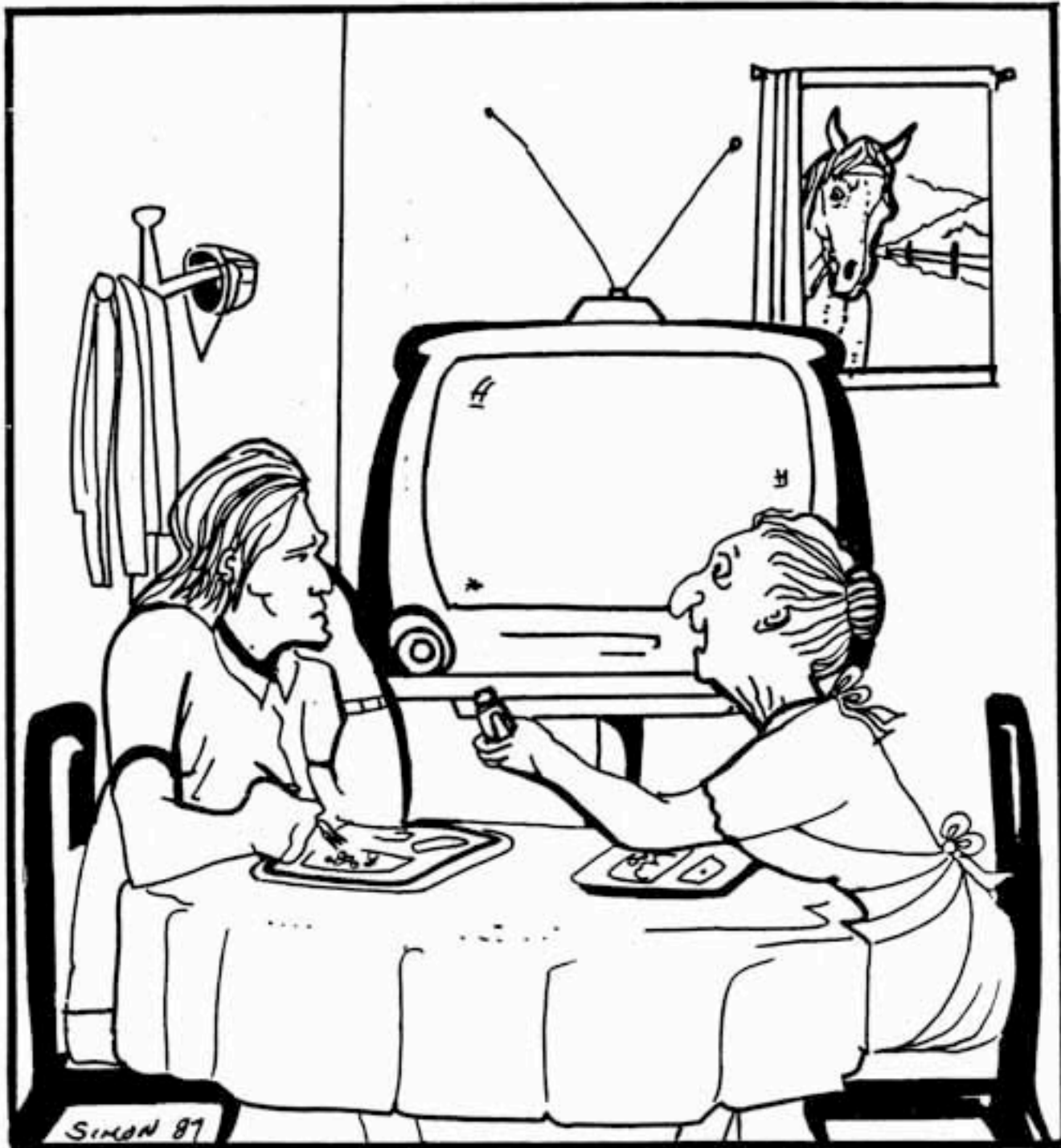
Along his way he soon discovered a cottage made of cheese. Chuck sampled a piece of shingle. "Cottage cheese!" he muttered. The taste he found uninspiring, and because he hardly was on a diet to lose weight, he affixed the shingle back onto the wall and moved on.

Farther down the road he chanced upon a second cottage, this one made of white flour, white sugar, white milk, egg whites, white shortening, white salt, and near-white ginger. Its contents were clearly marked because instead of an address, the house was identified by a list of ingredients. Chuck nibbled upon a piece of roof. Sure enough, gingerbread.

Suddenly the door opened and an old woman, leaning on a crutch, hobbled out. She invited the stranger inside for lunch. Chuck tethered his horse, and stepped inside. The house was as hot as an oven, and little wonder. The bent old lady already had turned on her microwave and opened its door to insert two TV dinners for their meal.



Within two minutes they were seated in front of the TV and had begun the first course, uniformly located in the aluminum tray's upper right corner so that the meal could progress clockwise, and the diners need never take their eyes away from the TV set. That the TV was off seemed not to concern the hostess, who nevertheless stared into its blank screen. Chuck grew quite distressed, and noticeably so.



"Too much salt?" the old lady asked.
 "No," Chuck answered. "Too much electricity. There is more voltage in the TV dinner than in the TV set." She pondered over his complaint for two

seconds, then flicked on the set. Nothing like a balance of powers, thought Chuck.

As though the flick were a rub and the TV screen a lantern, a young maiden with a Jeannie name tag upon her lapel appeared upon the screen. She was beaming from inside a commercial in progress. "Good nutrition does not have to be whole-wheat," cooed the coed. "Blunder Bread builds strong bodies twelve ways."

Now that was the same weightless, colorless, tasteless sludge that Chuck had fled, so he recognized a lie when he heard it. Twelve ways indeed! And twelve ways only! Way 1: the left nostril. Way 2: the right pinky toenail. Way 3: the mucus along the epiglottis. Way 4: the pubic hairs. Way 5: the left kneecap. Way 6: the five lumbar vertebra.

To detect whether the seventh way were his right foot, Chuck rose up and kicked in the TV screen. Outraged, the old lady, swinging her crutch, drove him out of her cottage. Chuck, still hungry, remounted his horse and continued his journey.



oon enough, he met a traveling salesman who introduced himself as Manganese Mark. All in the same potion, he offered a panacea for most ailments and a prevention for all the others. Baldness in men, unsightly hair in women. Athlete's foot and runner's knee. Anesthetic for the arthritic, stimulant for the somnambulant. Aphrodisiac for the debauched, sedative for the celibate. Appetite suppressant for the obese and nutritional supplement for the malnourished. On account of the famine throughout the land, his current sales campaign stressed its supplemental vitamin and mineral contents.

"Where do you come from? And where are you going?" inquired Chuck.

"I come from City A," the salesman answered. "On my way to City B." Obviously his vitamin

sales pitch had affected his speech so that he reduced most names to letters and numbers. Hoping that he might garner from Mark the means of recovering the 144 nutrients lost among the mere 12 enrichments in blight bread, Chuck asked if he might accompany him.

Mark complied, but advised him to leave behind the horse. The starved populace of City A had resorted to eating the exotic animals in the zoo, the dogs in the street, and the cats in the alley. Mark had driven past one rampage through a shoe store which a hungry mob had looted to boil for lunch all the leather. Rumors circulated of the latest diet craze, which enacted very literally advertisements to "Frye Boots."

The salesman explained that the fate awaiting a horse in City B might well be culinary. So Chuck dismounted, tethered his horse Radish beside a grassy grove, and accepted Mark's invitation to share a ride in his car. While the car's body was newly repainted and freshly waxed, the interior upholstery was ripped to shreds, and empty vitamin bottles, discarded wrappers, and crumpled promotional brochures were piled atop and under the seats. Chuck shoveled some aside, and sat in the front passenger seat. Immediately he perceived a putrid stench of rotten food which emanated from the empty bottles. As the car pulled away, it left behind a cloud of white smoke.

From afar, Manganese Mark appeared fit and vibrant--the very person whose picture of health made him a worthy source of nutritional advice. But closer, from arm's length, Mark's glow appeared only cosmetic, and rather thick at that. His hair was a wig, his eyelashes false, his complexion pallid yellow, his gums bleeding, and his breathe foul. But what most captured Chuck's attention was Mark's shiny gray polyester suit. "One-hundred percent petroleum distillates," Mark boasted. "And like petroleum, pure and natural."

Mark then recited his sales pitch, always on the tip of his tongue for those who could swallow

it. He claimed that food was superfluous for consumers of his product. Derived from a single, natural source, his pill offered only a proper balance of vitamins and minerals so that an otherwise large dose of one nutrient could not inhibit the effects or create deficiencies of others. In other pills, C destroyed the B-12, zinc acted against copper, and phosphorus increased the need for calcium. But not in Mark's! He began to enumerate some of its components: tocopherol and tryptophan, linoleic and linolenic acids, cyanocobalamin and carotene, pangamic and para-aminobenzoic acids, molybdenum and magnesium, and of course his namesake, manganese.

The list had only begun, but already it reminded Chuck of his childhood music lessons. He would listen with disinterest and vexation to his music teacher lecture about breves, semibreves, minims, crotchets, and quavers, when instead Chuck wished to hear only music. Likewise Mark peddled measurements instead of meals. "Excuse my interrupting," Chuck said. "Could you tell me from what single source your superpill is derived?"

"From wheat," Mark answered. "More specifically, from the wheat germ and bran left over from the white flour used in Blunder Bread." Mark seemed proud to be able to associate his product with a staple name brand known throughout the land. "No, thanks," said Chuck. "I no more want to eat isolated nutrients derived from food than to eat chemicalized food deprived of its nutrients." Manganese Mark remained most cordial, and for the rest of the ride they chatted about the weather.



oison City soon poked its jagged skyline through their horizon. Chuck's journey at its end, he had not much else to do except to return to his horse. But Mark presented Chuck with a fresh possibility. Perhaps in admiration for Chuck's search for proper food, he offered to escort him

to his brother Mack Rowe, a city resident. Unlike Mark, brother Mack retained the family name. Mack Rowe, largely unknown to local Toxins who sought their food wholesale rather than whole, was a learned sage more respected elsewhere than at home for his disquisitions concerning natural foods and holistic lifestyles.

Chuck gratefully accepted Manganese Mark's generous offer, so together they continued through the city. Along the way they saw a nuclear powerhouse and an animal slaughterhouse. Supermarkets on superhighways and black markets on back alleyways. Homing pigeons fed on white bread crumbs and homeless poor fled from Black ghetto slums. Endless eateries and merchandise paradises such as Burger Kings and Dairy Queens, Pizza Huts and Radio Shacks, Dunkin' Donuts and Sears Roebucks. A billion billboards: Coca-Cola, Mazola, and Motorola; Colonel Sanders, General Mills, and General Motors.

As dusk descended, they arrived at Mack's apartment house which was on the same block as a brightly blazing neon sign promoting Blunder Bread: "Builds strong bodies twelve ways." Mark sent greetings with Chuck to his brother and a message that he was in a hurry tonight, but would stop by tomorrow. Soon enough, Brother Mack greeted Chuck with a bow and an offer to join in dinner, which after two hours of preparation was almost ready. Dressed only in a kimono and sandals, Mack requested Chuck to remove his shoes at the vestibule, and then ushered him inside.

The entire apartment was actually a single spacious room, and a kitchen at that. Not the kind of kitchen piled with dirty dishes and lined with electric appliances, cramping into a leftover corner a small space for human habitation. Rather, a very low dining table surrounded with seiza benches dominated the center of the room. Three walls displayed scroll and screen paintings, while the fourth wall housed on its right a deep porcelain sink, on its left a long chopping block,

and at its middle a monstrous wood-burning iron stove.

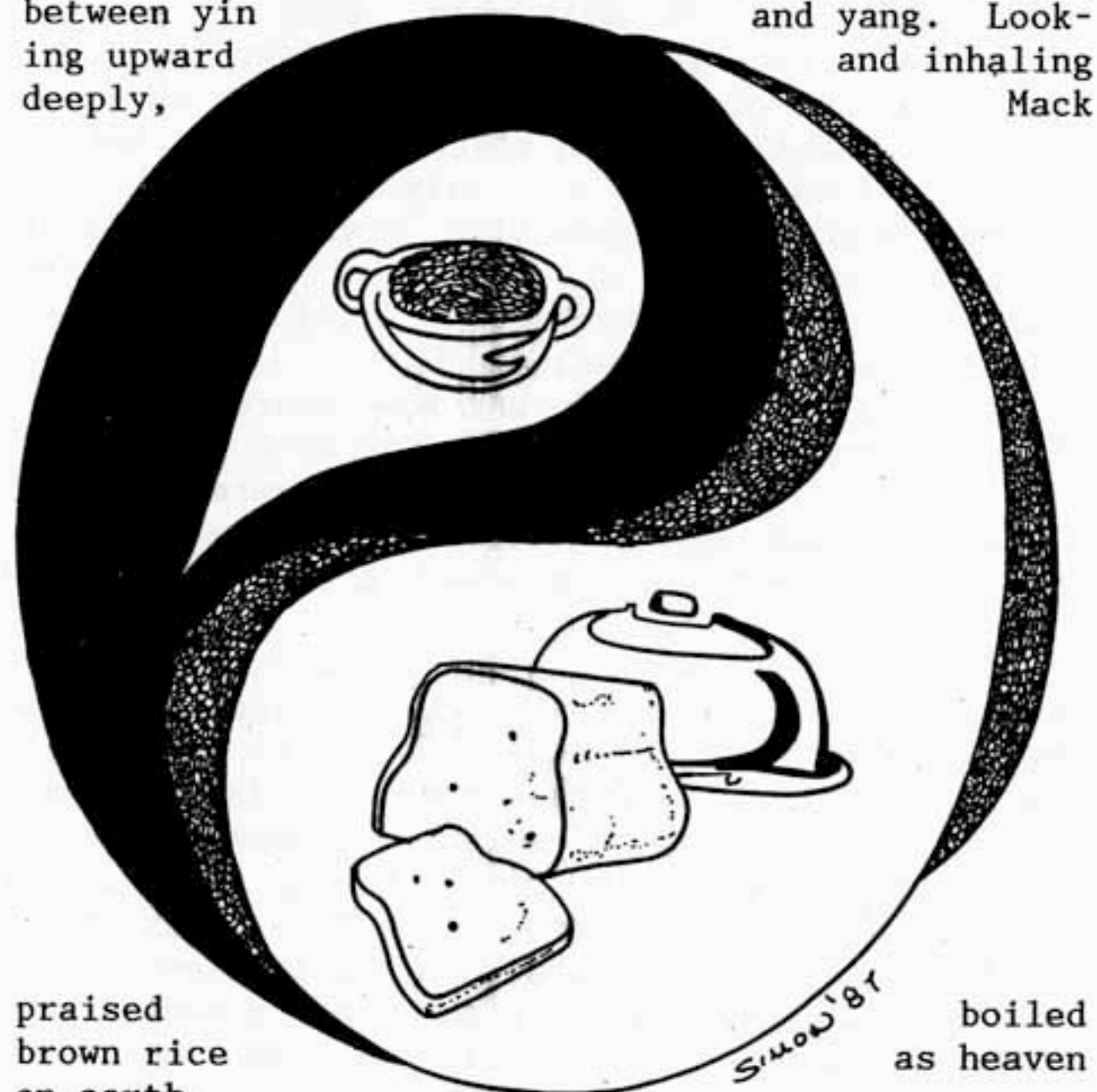
Standing in front of the steaming stove in his loose-fitting robe, with shaven head, and nearly bare feet, Mack looked like a priest at an altar offering sacrifice to the god of Fire. While applying final touches to a broth and preparing last minute additions to a sauce, he conversed with Chuck. Chuck asked how, despite a famine throughout the land, he saw endless streets of fast food parlors selling more slop now than ever before. Mack explained that now, just as before, the fast food parlors sell only glamorous cellophane wrappers and seductive styrofoam boxes all designed to disguise the fact that packaging contains no food whatsoever. "Kind of like the King's New Cokes," concluded Mack.

Chuck's next question was from where, despite a famine throughout the land, did Mack procure all of his food? "From Japan," Mack answered. Chuck looked around and realized that everything in Mack's apartment was Japanese. Everything--except for Mack.

The table was set. Wooden bowls, ceramic cups, cloth napkins, and chopsticks. Dinner now was being spread upon the table. Cubes of tofu afloat in miso soup, brown rice topped with daikon sauce, stir-fried bok choy and shitaki mushrooms seasoned with tamari, and twig tea. Having eaten little all day, Chuck proceeded to stuff himself. Meanwhile Mack talked more than he swallowed, and chewed more than he talked. Despite eating with great deliberation, he still managed to expound his philosophy of diet.

"To see a world in a grain of rice," began his incantation, "and a heaven in whole wheat flour." He explained to Chuck that as the sun and stars are fire in the heavens, so fire is the firmament on the earth. Thus fired foods best suit humans who aspire to become angels of the heavens rather than to remain animals of the earth. Plants, he continued, are products both of our common sun and

of soil distinct to every community. Thus foods that are locally grown and in-season best suit humans who wish to eat according to their environment rather than to their whims. And the best of all foods are whole grains, seeds, and beans, because these encompass the essence of the entire plant within their tiny selves. Of all grains, rice comprises the perfect nutritional balance between yin and yang. Looking upward and inhaling deeply, Mack



praised
brown rice
on earth.

boiled
as heaven

Now what was that, Chuck drowsily thought to himself. Aesthetic balance between sin and song? Or was it trade balance between yen and yank? Chuck, however, could pay attention no further, so thought not to ask questions. Exhausted from a strenuous day and satiated from a heavy meal, he reclined onto a nearby bamboo mat and promptly withdrew into sleep and into dreams.

Early the next morning he was awakened by a gong clock. Breakfast was being served. "Holy Macro!" exclaimed Chuck. "This is the same meal as last night." Indeed it was. Not leftovers; rather the same foods begun again from scratch. Mack ate as heartily as the night before, but Chuck, no longer famished, now was able to talk between mouthfuls and to ask questions.

He wondered what was the hocus-pocus about rice? When eaten in combination with other foods, what mattered its perfect balance between, what was that, yum and bland? He acknowledged that all this food must currently be imported from Japan because of the famine throughout the land. But rice was impossible to grow nearer than a thousand miles south, so even in the best of times, how could it be local?

And if one truly were to eat according to the environment, then here in Toxic City, should not appropriate food be what was found on every street corner, that being pizza and cola? As for fire, Chuck admitted that reversion to an animal state, free from all human desires and disorders, did not seem such a bad idea. Besides, he reasoned, fire is a natural ingredient only if the food were setting in a field swept by a forest fire.

Immediately upon his mention of a forest, Chuck stopped with his questions and thanked Mack for his gracious hospitality. Without waiting for any answers, he suddenly departed, hastening to the forest where he had left behind his trusty horse Radish.



If the earlier ride to the city seemed long, it must have been because Manganese Mark chose many unnecessary detours. In any case, the hike back to the field where Chuck had left his horse was not a long one. During the walk, Chuck pondered that his horse was more beautiful, more loving, and more faithful than any person he knew, so perhaps he should emulate his horse. And to do

as his horse did, maybe he should eat as his horse ate. Radish never ate rice, but mostly oats harvested from Chuck's own yard. And Radish ate those oats and every other grain and grass only raw.

Chuck resolved to monitor Radish's diet, to analyze the feces, and to weigh daily the horse flesh, food, and feces to discover, if possible, what food made the most horse sense. He planned even to apply for a government grant to provide funding for his experiments, which he would title "Equine Nutrition and its Socio-political Applications to Human Economy." His ambitious new project, however, could not be fulfilled. Chuck no longer had a horse.

During the night a roving band of starved hunters discovered Radish and roasted and devoured the animal on the spot. Chuck found at the grassy grove only a smoldering campfire, a pool of blood, and the skeleton of a headless horse. Down the path, not far away, a solitary old man with his back turned was seated on a rock. Chuck approached silently from behind, and saw the man was cradling in his hands the horse's skull. Chuck was poised to clobber him, but restrained himself when he saw tears moistening the man's wrinkled cheeks and heard cries of lamentation. "Alas, poor Flicker," mourned the old man, "I knew him well. He had borne me on his back a thousand times."

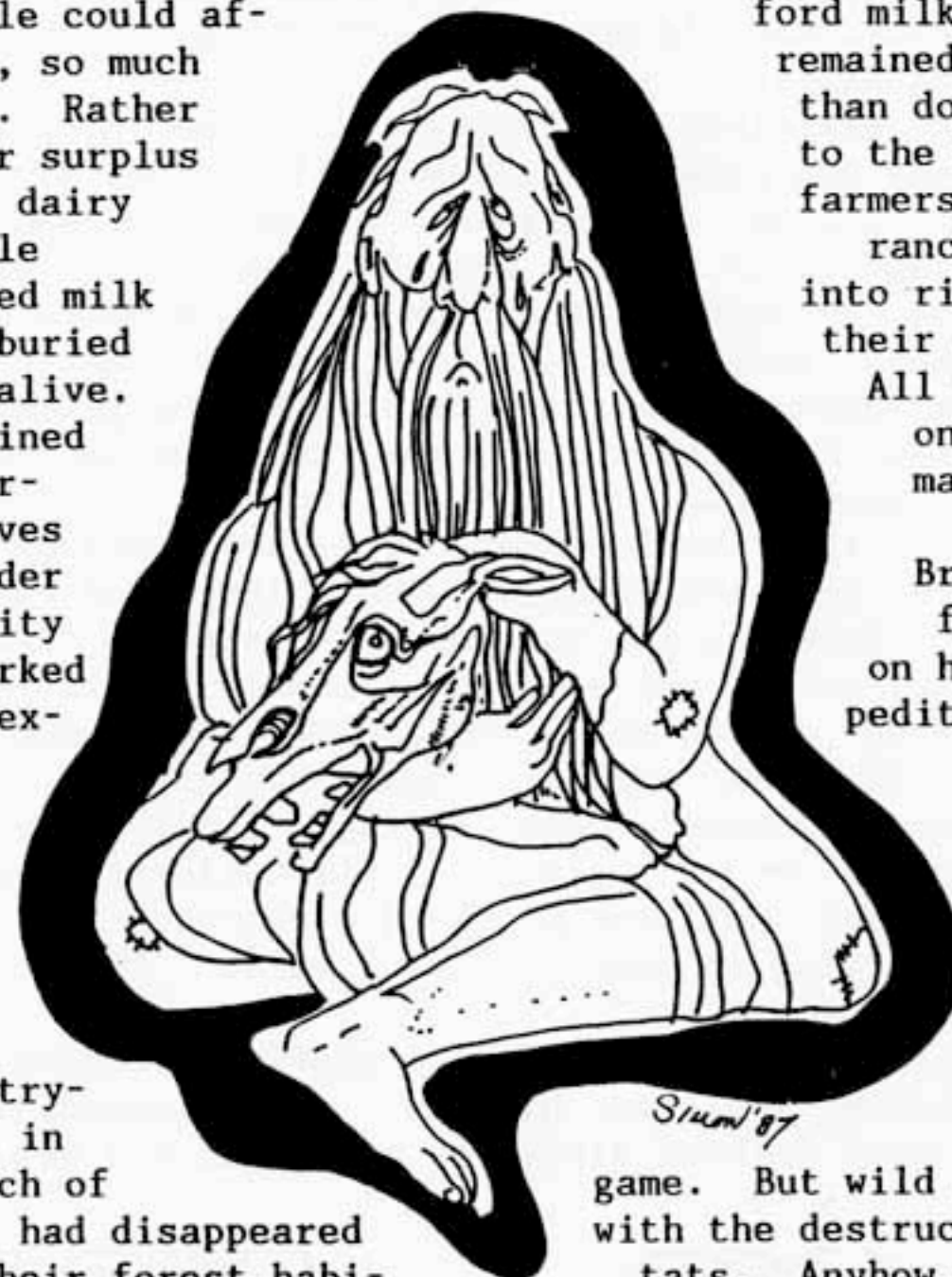
Chuck introduced himself as a friend of the deceased and inquired if the old man knew how it had happened. "Yes," he replied, "I know exactly how it happened. It happened on account of the famine throughout the land." He continued to explain how the famine had occurred. During the past generation, more and more forests were chopped down for paper and wood, and the land converted into pastures for cows and cattle. But the cows and cattle overgrazed the pastures and turned them into barren wastelands. Convinced that the better source of protein was milk from

cows and meat from cattle rather than wheat from farmlands, people fed wheat germ and bran to the cows and cattle and kept only the white flour for themselves. The cows and cattle grew stronger and healthier nourished on wheat germ and bran, but the people got weaker and sicker nourished on milk, meat, and Blunder Bread.

Meanwhile deforestation produced droughts due to less evaporation from vegetation. As wheat crops failed year after year upon the parched land, the prices of wheat increased ten-fold, and of milk and meat a hundred-fold. Fewer people could afford milk and meat, so much

rather than donate their surplus dairy cattle poured milk and buried the alive. Blunder City embarked into

fewer people could afford milk and remained un- than donate to the hun- farmers and ranchers into rivers their cat- All that on the market was Bread. folks on hunt- peditions the



country-side in search of game. But wild animals had disappeared with the destruction of their forest habitats. Anyhow, the city folks were inexperienced hunters, so instead they attacked stray cattle and unattended horses.

Radish, of course, was such an unattended horse. "And that," concluded the old man, "is how it happened."

Chuck had anticipated an explanation of the events of the last night, not the last generation. But in life we do not always get what we want and must learn sometimes to settle for more. During the history lesson, Chuck centered his attention on the old man's long gray beard and braids, his worn-out but still respectable undyed cotton clothing, his white canvas sneakers, and the mystical sparkle in his teary eyes. Asked of his identity, the old man answered quite bluntly, "I am the Savior."

He explained. A vegetarian from birth, he already had saved the lives of 11 cattle, 43 pigs; 1106 chickens, 39 turkeys, 6 sheep, thousands of fish and fetal chicks, and, in the course of the famine throughout the land, even a horse or 2. And this tally did not take into account hidden animal product ingredients such as the gelatin in candies, the grease in fries, and the shortening in Blunder Bread.

For this achievement, the Savior was certain that he had been rewarded with a long and healthy life. Never having consumed on his plate cows and chicks, he had not yet been consumed in his grave by germs and worms. The Savior then asked how many lives of animals Chuck had saved. Chuck answered, probably none, adding, "But my life once was saved by an animal." His curiosity roused, the Savior implored Chuck to elaborate. "Well, I was starving to death," Chuck said. "I found a fish, so I ate it."

Disappointed, the Savior continued crying onto the horse skull in his lap. Disoriented, Chuck continued walking along the path upon his way.



His horse had been his lifelong companion, so Chuck was unaccustomed to hiking. But now plodding the dusty path with his own two feet, he acknowledged the superfluousness of the quadrupedal gallop. Why run, he thought. As though walking were not fast enough! True, especially when seeking not a destination, but an explanation.

In due time he shared the path with a jogger. Her head was shaven, and she dressed only in tee-shirt, shorts, socks, shoes, and sweat. She looked as though she had been running all day. They engaged in conversation, and in order to enable Chuck to keep pace with her she began running backwards. She introduced herself as Anna Rexia Bulimia. In answer to Chuck's question of where she was coming from, she recounted her past.

At fifteen years of age, disgusted with the white foods of White Man who ate and spoke with knifed and forked tongue, she stopped eating all white flour, white sugar, white rice, and white salt. At sixteen, she became a vegetarian because of the low fiber and high cholesterol in meat and eggs. Then at seventeen she eliminated from her diet all processed foods from the supermarket. When she reached the legal drinking age of eighteen, she abstained from alcohol, coffee and tea. When nineteen, aware of her lactose intolerance, she gave up milk and dairy products. Milk was white anyway.

By twenty, influenced by macrobiotics, Anna avoided tomatoes, potatoes, and eggplants. Upon reaching the age of twenty-one, disciplined by yogic teachings, she renounced onions, garlic and mushrooms. Alert to possible yeast infections, at twenty-two she discontinued her breakfast brewers' yeast and all yeasted breads. By her twenty-third birthday she had studied the ancient Greek philosophers, among them Pythagoras who forbade his disciples to eat beans; subsequently she, too, stopped eating beans. In her twenty-fourth year she decided to simplify her life by discarding her



stove and oven and all the accompanying pots and pans, and she became a raw foodist. "Raw" spelled backwards is "war" and Anna sought war's opposite, peace.

What few vegetables she still had been eating at twenty-five, she discontinued altogether, adopting fruitarianism in her aspiration for higher consciousness, and eating only foods from the tops of trees. By the time she reached twenty-six, her consciousness had indeed been raised, at least politically, and she boycotted all banana republic tropical fruits. While twenty-seven, she dispensed with complicated combinations and ate only mono-meals, most often apples alone for breakfast and only oranges for dinner. As a twenty-eight-year-old, Anna quit oranges, deciding that the difference was not great between apples and oranges. So, by twenty-nine, she had settled upon the apple as her sole source of nourishment. Finally at the critical turning point in her life, she greeted her thirtieth birthday with great circumspection. She looked back at half her life of debating every food and doubting every diet, and at last renounced all sustenance. The apple, after all, had been humanity's problem in the first place.

During those years of dietary deliberation, her weight decreased in inverse proportion to her age. Except for her pair of muscular legs, she was just skin and bones with little left of her internal organs. Her entire digestive tract had atrophied and withered away due to disuse. In short, she had no guts. This condition of near-weightlessness, which was every jogger's dream, was more easily attainable now than ever before, what with a famine throughout the land.

His curiosity satisfied concerning where she was coming from, Chuck next asked, "Where are you going?"

Anna answered, "I am going jogging." She had decided that proper diet was only the second most important factor contributing to health, and that

exercise was the most important.

So from sunrise to sunset Anna perpetually jogged, resting only to drink water, to pass water, and to pass over water. Here her story ended. While she was jogging slowly backwards and Chuck was walking quickly forward, they together reached the top of a bridge. Suddenly a strong gust of wind came from the north and blew Anna away. Chuck peered over the bridge to see if he might rescue her, but there was no need to worry. She simply continued jogging on water, and was last seen running out to sea.



What goes up must come down. The sun, already low on the horizon, was coming down. On the road since morning and without his trusty horse, Chuck was tired, hungry, and lonesome. "A pity Anna departed so suddenly," sighed Chuck, "just when I was getting to know her--what little there was left of her to get to know."

In what must have been the exact metaphysical middle of nowhere, a hand-painted sign announced a bed-and-breakfast guest room available at a family farm just minutes off the beaten path. "Adam and Eve Eaton, your hosts," signed off the sign. Chuck followed its directions to a semicircle of trees that looked like an entrance grove to an ancient temple. At each trunk, flowering plants waved their foliage and petals in the breeze. Hummingbirds and honeybees danced from flower to flower. Squirrels leapt from tree to tree, and chipmunks from rock to rock. A path began at the center of the semicircle. And a sign stood at the beginning of the path: "The Garden of Eaton." Chuck had arrived.

He followed the path through the grove to the farm which was surrounded by fields of golden wheat stretching into the blazing sunset. Fruit trees lined the perimeter where the wheat met the woods. Contented cows accompanied by their calves rambled in the pastures. Free-ranging chickens

scratched in the dirt in their proper pecking order. Pigs wallowed in their own mire. And untethered horses horsed around. Immediately adjacent to the farmhouse grew the garden in which Adam and Eve presently were reaping what they had sown. They knew a tired, hungry, and lonesome traveler when they saw one, so they invited Chuck to share in their supper which their daughter, at work in the kitchen, would soon be ready to serve.

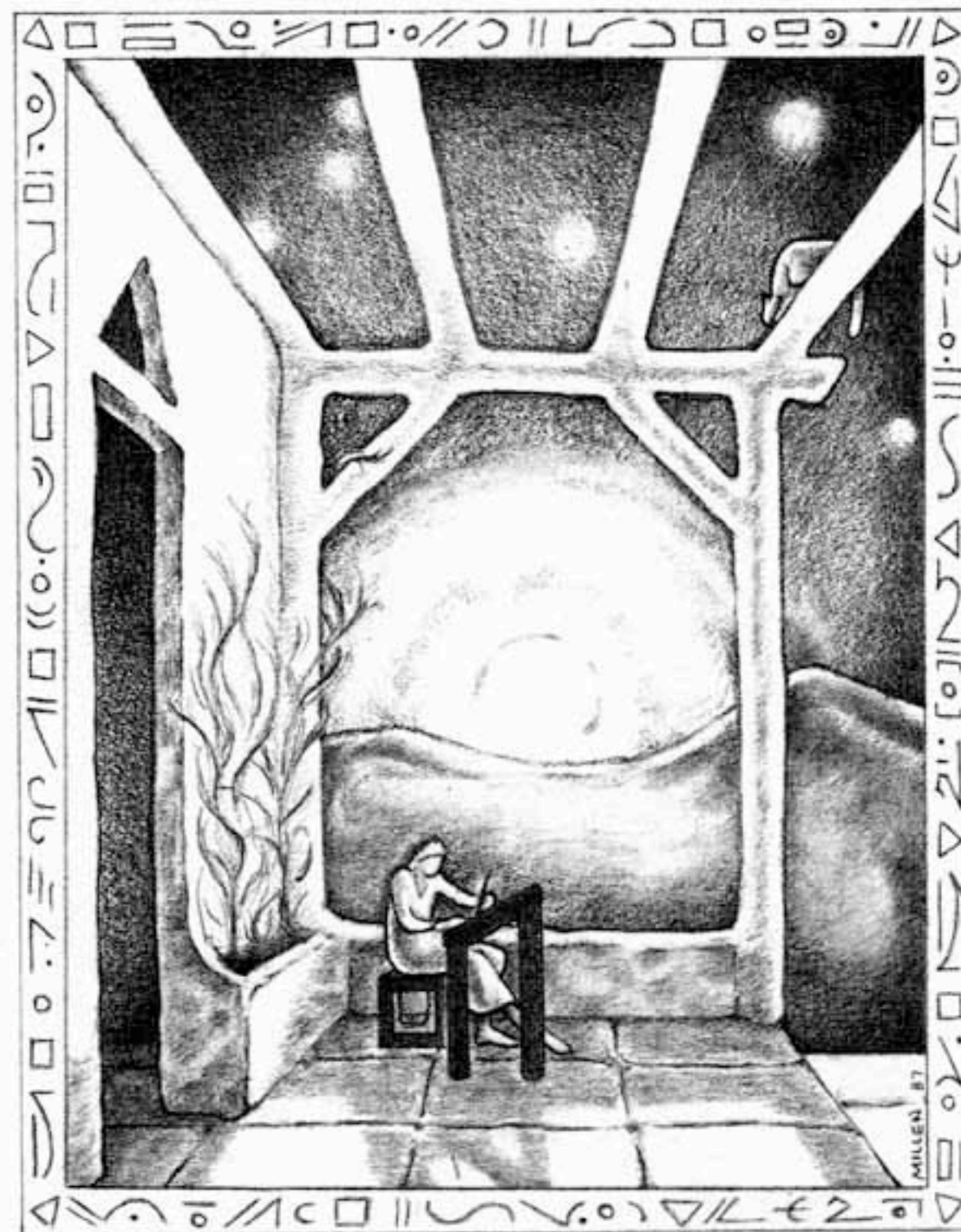
Aromas emanating from the house promised of freshly baked wholewheat bread. The homemade bread, in fact, comprised the entire meal. But man does not live by bread alone. What was setting on the table was unimportant compared to who was sitting in front of it. Her name was Chick; she was the Eatons' daughter. Her hair was long and golden like the wheat of the fields, and her complexion clear and rosy like the blossoms of the fruit trees. Chuck and Chick hardly could turn their gazes from each other. When they broke bread together, it was love at first bite. Yet none of this hanky-panky prevented Chuck and Chick, and Adam and Eve from engaging in meaningful dialogue. The Eatons were especially hungry for the latest news of the famine throughout the land.

Chuck recounted his experiences of the past two days. He ended his tale with his initial reason for embarking on his journey--to search for food better than the bit of white bread his parents had been feeding him. Adam stood up. A deep silence ensued, as though everyone were awaiting words of wisdom. "A man defiles himself not by what he puts into his mouth," said Adam, "but by what comes out of it." He promptly ran to the bathroom, where he and the bread parted company. Chuck came to understand that we are what we eat only insofar as we are what we do not excrete. Exactly as Chuck had suspected, such a conclusion reduced the science of nutrition to a pile of shit.

Eve apologized for her husband's unsocial be-

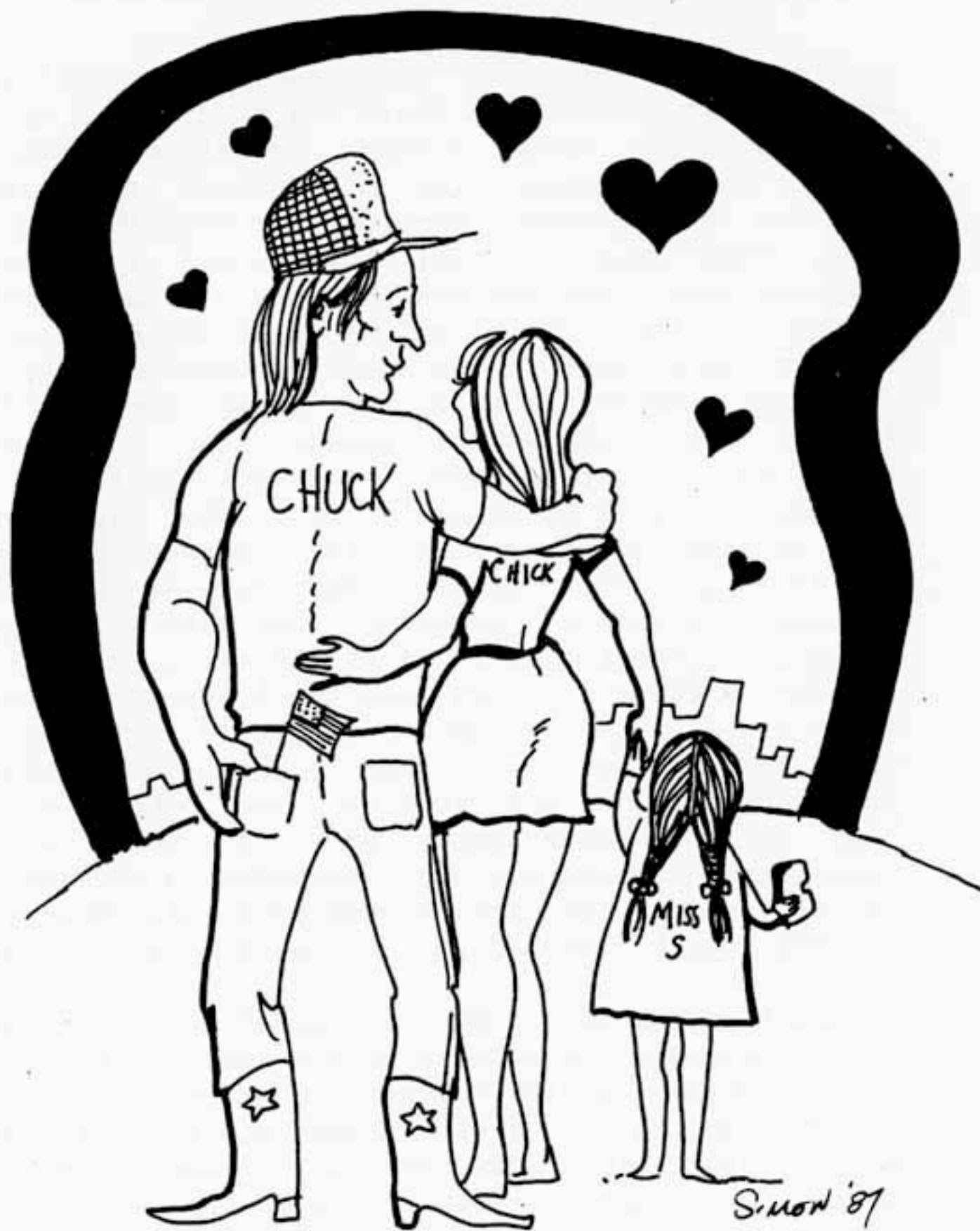
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havior and explained that he was suffering from an intestinal virus. She did boast, however, of Adam's athletic abilities, without which he never could have dashed to the toilet in time. "Proper diet," she said, "is only the third most important factor contributing to health. And exercise is only the second most important." Chuck recalled hearing vaguely similar words earlier, though not

in that precise hierarchy. Eve then added that Adam was the only family member afflicted by the virus, because he alone worried over the wheat crop threatened by drought throughout the land. "Health's most important factor," she concluded, "is peace of mind."

The three completed the dinner of wholewheat bread with a dessert of wholewheat crust apple pie. Chick served Chuck an extra large slice with an extra bit of advice. "Though their food may not meet your approval," said she, "better to share with your household than to separate yourself from your loved ones. What better way than through your love to achieve peace of mind? And if your loved ones indeed eat the food you wish, then you are truly blessed." So much for just desserts.

To make a love story short, Chuck and Chick slept together in the barn where they rolled in the hay all night long. The next morning they left hand-in-hand for Chuck's home. That evening his parents, Ma and Pa Steak cheerfully greeted them with many bits of bread, both wholewheat and white. He gratefully accepted their food and they cheerfully accepted his bride-to-be, both without complaint.

The next week Chuck Steak married Chick Eaton. A year later Chick gave birth to a beautiful little girl. They named her Chick'on Little, but Chuck always fondly called her Little Miss Steak. Thus they lived healthily ever after until they happily died.

And, yes, everyone survived the famine throughout the land.

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