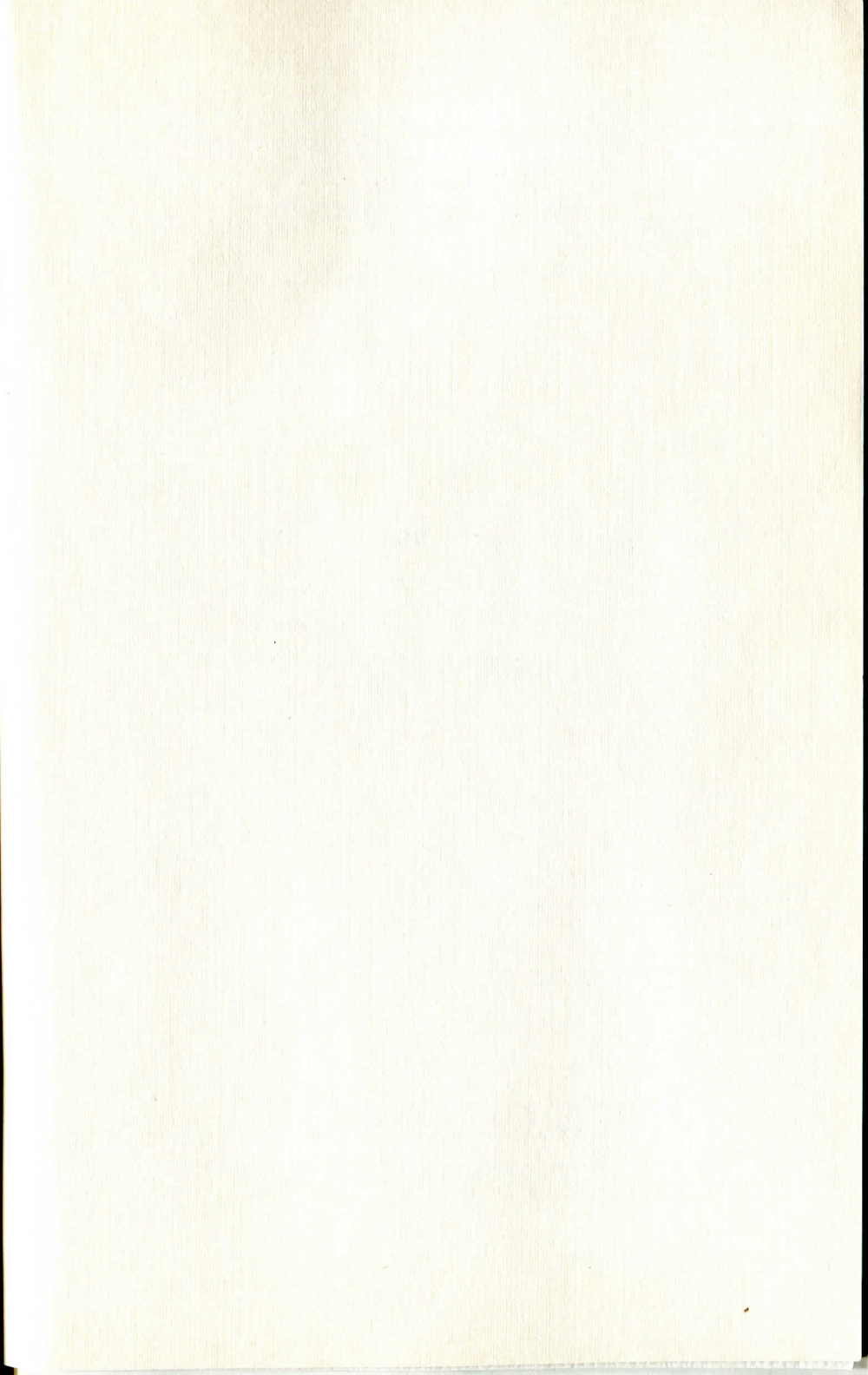


LIVING IN A HOUSE I DO NOT OWN

Mab Segrest





I LIVE IN A HOUSE

I live in a rented house.
Mr. Tucker wouldn't sell,
even if I could buy.
Besides, termites gnaw inward.
It'll collapse in fifteen years,
the neighbors say.

One morning last summer
spiders spun dew.
They decked the tree in webs.
I wanted to break off the branches
and bring them inside.

I found a butterfly
dying on the road in a month of butterflies.
They flecked the air, migrating to different skies.

I have watched its slow demise
on my shelf: feet curl, antennae drop,
wings splinter ebony,
still dusted gold, vermillion.
But no longer breathing late August.

And there are times our bodies arch
to the clear touch
and what I say is not enough
for all these shades of light and feeling.
And times when wanting you
is wanting noone else to have you.

How to capture this glisten this quiver
carry light in a sieve
when I live in a house I do not own.

811.914
5455
L785
1982
L.C.2

THE
JOURNAL
OF THE
ROYAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL INSTITUTE

VOL. LXXV
PART I
1945

CONTENTS
PAGES

THE
JOURNAL
OF THE
ROYAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL INSTITUTE

VOL. LXXV
PART II
1945

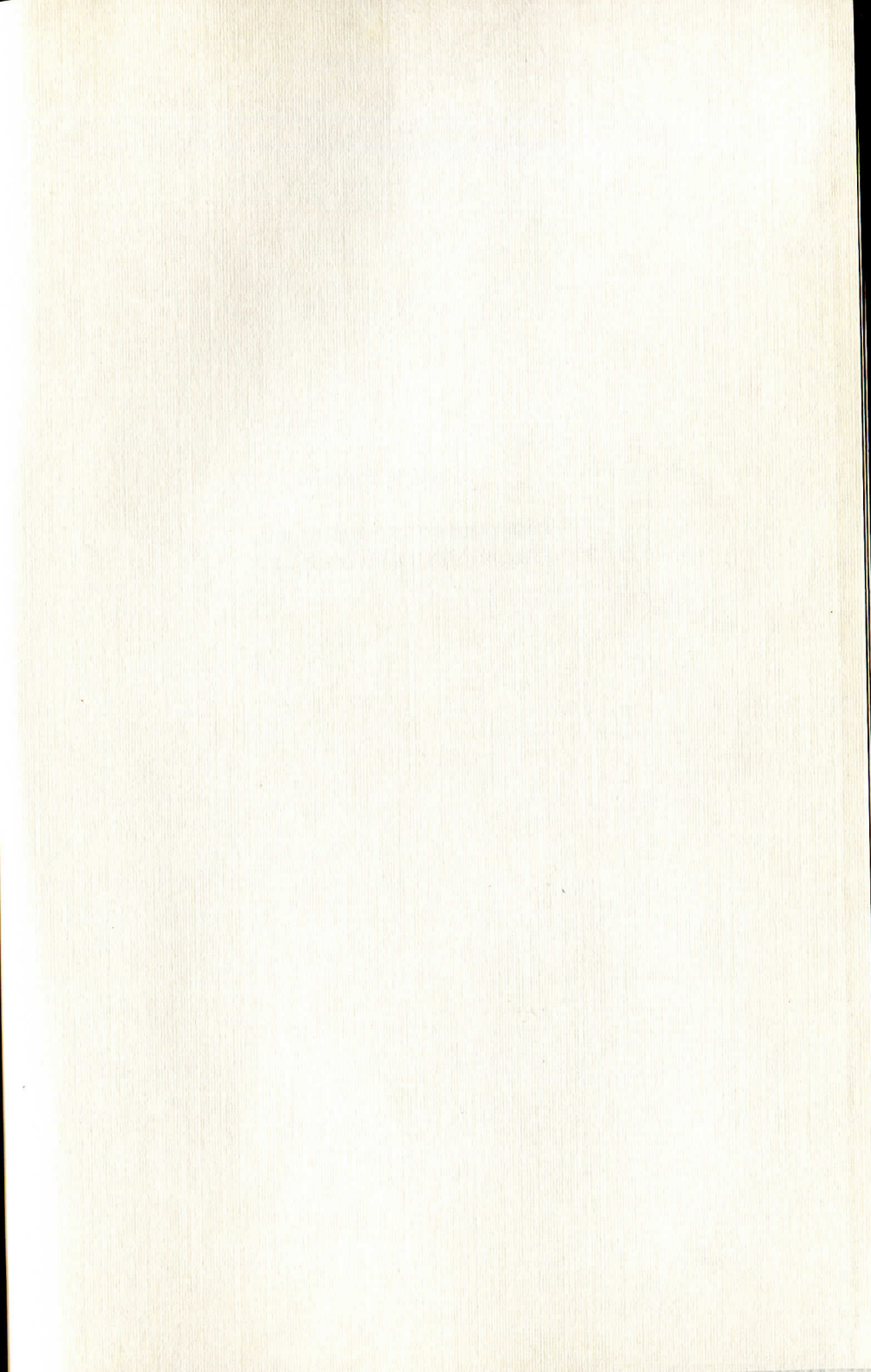
CONTENTS
PAGES

THE
JOURNAL
OF THE
ROYAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL INSTITUTE

1945

for Frone and Nute Tucker—
the land lady, the land lord

and for Barbara



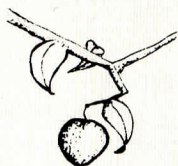
JAPANESE BEETLES 1

By the mailbox
insects whirl in the thicket.
It is June at my new address.

The beetles are back.
All over the county they seethe
in yellow traps.
We dip full cans in soapy water
and pour them out like pennies.
Copper glints in the grass.

Then I come home to the plum tree gone,
or nearly,
fruit oozing insects,
leaves filigreed,
the meadow showing through.
And now pits hang where the fruit was.

And Frone Tucker, who had a taste for plums,
sits up at the end of the road
and says,
"Looks like everything a person has,
there's something comes to take it away."



THE STRAWBERRY CAPITOL OF THE WORLD 2

for Dallas and Erin

Blackberries crowd the ditches
and at night, tractors rust under roses in the dew.
Things turn dark green.
They reach for you.
And last week,
heat wrinkled the air above the asphalt
in the middle of town.

It is summertime,
and we are driving out to pick strawberries
in the "strawberry capitol of the world."

We walk on pinestraw down the quarter-mile rows
that reach like stripes into mists of trees.
My jeans soak to the knee
and plants sag with berries and a full week's rain.

Elsie grew up picking berries.
She says to leave the soft ones,
that ripe is near to rot.
My sister bends beside me. She is pregnant again,
and at the field's end my niece's head
bobs like a buoy in a dark green sea.

My cartons are too red.
There are too many berries,
and I am afraid to waste anything.
I begin to eat the soft ones
as Elsie recites recipes for jam.
I squeeze the berries through my fingers.
Back at the car
I see that berries stain my niece's hands.
I begin to want a child.

I want to learn to live with fullness,
unafraid of summertime.

All summer,
 the Tuckers put food by.
 In June pods filled to seed.
 Frone sat on the screened porch
 and snapped beans into jars.
 Then corn, tomatoes, every week another twenty quarts.
 Irish potatoes mounded
 in the clapboard house
 and apple slivers browned
 in sun and flies.

This summer
 I put nothing by.
 My dill grew four feet,
 flowered,
 cast crystalline shadows
 when the moon was full.
 Butterflies harvest my zinnias
 and late season tomatoes
 drop from the vine.

All summer,
 I've been driving in and out
 past the Tuckers
 sitting in their shade.
 I have finished work
 I long ago began
 and let love come,
 a kind of harvesting
 and planting.

But disquiet ends my summer.
 At the end of the road
 the Tuckers wave as I pass,
 and I look toward winter
 for answers.

TWO WOMEN MOVING

4

for Shotsy and Denise

The red pickup pulls out of the yard,
riding low.
You are moving now.
It's mid-September.

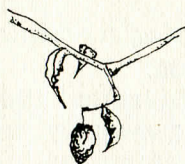
In August clouds blew from the east
and piled against the sun.
Spiders wove webs in windows and doors,
fishing the wind.
We took the garden down.
Mister Tucker mowed the edges,
and we went down the rows.
It was your last garden here,
my first. By evening we were better friends.
We left some zinnias hung with spider webs.

Then September hurricanes rattled the doors,
rain ricocheted off the roof
and leaked into the middle room.
Four years ago you came
after weeks of drought,
earth split to the core,
water red in the taps if it ran at all.
You lit candles in corners and sang,
and it started to pour.

Now it's time to leave.
Everything's changing.
Last night you slept in different rooms.
Walking to the Tuckers last
you went different ways around the barn.
You will not see Miss Frone again
if winter's hard, if ice should lock
around the house and old pipes burst
of two months' cold.

The blue curtain flapped as you took it down.
Shadows of spiders gripped the house,
taunt against no shadows of webs.
Blood ran in the dogwood,
and on the bark husks of locusts clung.
You are leaving what together you have loved—
a house that tilts in winter light,
an old woman who loved you in her own despite—
and how will memories bind you?

We walked to the truck
You both climbed in the cab.
I tied the tarp a final time,
as if anything could escape this wind.



GREENER PASTURES 5

for Barbara

Frone Tucker,
when the beetles ate her plums,
sat on her July porch
and said.
"Looks like everything a person has,
there's something comes to take it away."

I told myself it wasn't true—
or only half so—
for everything that goes away
there's something comes again.

I was thinking of you,
of old times,
both jilted of other loves,
night hollow with no breath for pain
to leave by morning.

Now light shapes your body awake
as it sleeps over mine
in this house where we paint rooms new,
decide what pictures for what walls.

We walk out of the musk of woods
into green fields this side of the fence,
arms linked, the sky surprising blue.
You say, "I'm happy."
I think: we've earned it.

And at night, between cold sheets,
I hold you close and listen to you breathe,
and I am awake with the fear
of all we have to lose.

I know how
to mend the heart's tear
with neat and even stitches,
to build a careful wall of days
against a new invasion.
I have dug the slow stream deeper
in which I dove alone.
I have wanted women I couldn't have,
slept tentative in other beds,
and behind my door
to the plunge and pitch
of my own hands
learned unfamiliar love.

It is hard not to do
what one does well.
It is difficult now
to sleep between pressed sheets
in a warmth only part my own,
to feel the stream bed broaden,
recraft my days,
and to the plunge and pitch
of your dark hands
learn unfamiliar love.

BARD'S FUNERAL 7

Yesterday Bard Tucker died.
All day cars up the awkward drive
brought pies and consolation.

Today I went to pay respects.
It was me and Frone and Blanche and Brax,
the rest were at the funeral.
Brax sat in his chair and scratched his crotch.
Talk turned to funeral parlors.
Blanche was standing by the door,
fiddling with her rings.
"They do such wonderful things," she said,
"with bodies," and Frone agreed.
Blanche waited there to see the hearse
and remembered her father's passing.
"God bless the corpse that the rain falls on,"
she said,
this clear October shining off her glasses.

So it was me and Frone and Blanche and Brax,
till the rest came in for dinner.
Then everyone was tender and sad,
not for Bard so much as for Nute and Frone,
since Bard was a difficult brother.
And Frone lets on she suffers hard
from seventy years of sugar and lard
and minding various husbands.
They came in the door and looked at Frone,
saw time had settled in her bones
while they were at the funeral.

She sat there, stirring in her chair,
and said,
"Bard's gone now, Nute, you know I'm next,"
to make us all fall silent.

Poke berries droop,
smear to claret underfoot.
Trees burn burgundy and ochre.
Laced to the air in broken webs
spiders shrink and die.
Between the harvest and the hunter's moon
the russet season comes.

But the morning I woke
to frost blooming in the garden
I wanted to move back to town.
In October, night slid an hour toward noon,
dark clenched around my headlights on the road.
I was afraid. Of the coming chill.
Of shadow men across the sill.
I do not know if I can live alone
this winter twenty miles from town.

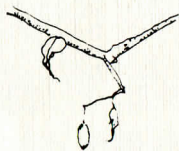
For winter I wait inside.
There's no more preparation.
The earth's too soon for furrows.
The wood's stacked in the shed.
I take jars off the shelf after the long drive home.
The television flickers against the night.

The beetles and flies have died
who kept me summer company.
The night is silent of cicadas,
the wasp cells mute of humming.
Spider eggs hang nearby in neat sacks,
in globed darkness, waiting.
They have left me here alone.
When I dream, I dream of dying.
Birds flutter in the chimney

like the heart above the womb
and I'm afraid to sleep.

I could be lost in the spaces between things.
The pole star pins midnight over the meadow,
the Great Dipper rising from the woods beyond.
Orion climbs the sycamore,
and Cassiopeia drinks the milk of stars
and eats the rind of worlds.

And if you're death I'm fearing,
will you land like a blaze
in the meadow past the moon
and will I step into you sideways and be gone?



I have wanted
winter's secrets:
what the tree leaves
the limbs to know
against an open sky

what the snow covers
why red suns glow
at moonrise
I want a share
in the reflection

you moon who climbs
the paling sky
o spill my roof
my gutters freeze
with moonbeams.

MARCH BLIZZARD 10

For two days
wind blew snow sideways.
It drifted under doors.
Night fell white, and dawn
cows loomed in gradual light
on a frozen plain.

Two days
we lived together in one room
and hauled wood shrinking from the pile.
The snow stretched on for miles.
All night we stumbled up to feed the blaze
and basked in sudden heat. The cracks and pops
would filter into sleep. I shifted sides
as muscles tightened bones. The whole house
creaked and groaned.

I ate while the world froze.
Beans bubbled, cornbread hardened
on the stove. I piled fat against cold ribs
and stupor sank me deeper into dreams

the rock sinks
the bottom the stream
the house where ncthing lasts
the child she eats the day
and gets up empty from the table
ransacks the room
then watches behind crystal panes
night swallow the sun

Banked fires
smoulder and flame.
The house was frigid every other room.
Words froze the air. She said
the words I never want to hear:

I am angry because you are not clean,
you left the kitchen in disorder.
The blizzard moves inside me,
cold with anger hot with shame.
The stove creaks and shudders
with a sudden flame.

This is the day
that winter never ends.
The spring that comes tomorrow
comes too late. I sleep uncovered,
touch the pulse of hate.

PLANS FOR A SUMMER GARDEN 11

I will grow anger —
sweet and acid as tomatoes,
cool as a cucumber,
sliced as thin.
Prickly as poke greens,
slick as okra.

I will give it in baskets
to friends —
pickled, preserved,
with relish.



I walked through the house this morning
opening doors.
Light fell through them.
Yesterday I took the plastic off
I fastened over windows last December.
I tugged out nails and folded spattered sheets,
I piled tobacco sticks back in the corner shed.

Then Frone called
to tell me what the doctor said.
He said Nute's going deaf and blind.
No need to give him glasses.
The doctor said
she'd better learn to drive.

This morning I woke
to find he'd broken up my garden.
He stops to let me thank him.
I shout "I'm sorry."
He ranges in his overalls.
I cannot find him.

I wonder,
deaf and blind how soon?
He didn't ask, the doctor didn't tell him.
But didn't he know it anyway?
And why am I so angry?

My spade breaks velvet earth.
The yard grass swishes
where I have not mowed it.
Redbuds edge the pasture.
The pasture's flecked in yellow turnips,
blooming.

Now in his field
Nute rides his tractor back and forth.
He pushes rusted furrows.
Past my window, back and forth.
he harrows his ground.

i. High Grass

May nights now
I can hear the grass grow.
I wake to find it closer to the house.
Out the kitchen window
rye grass inches higher.

That's why before you left
I bought a mower.
Its engine starts at one quick tug.
Each morning since you left
I wake alone in a summer house
and go outside to push grass back.
The mower spits out dogwood and scents the yard with mint
and onion. Now my lawn has edges.

Frone says
in the grass are copperheads.
One bit Nute once
and he turned spotted
and crawled on the floor.
"If that grass gets too high,"
she says,
"them snakes will suck your ceilings."

Myself,
I dream how nights
grass pries the window up.
Sumac climbs the mantle.
The room is tight with dandelions,
with violets, with ivy,
curled like fists. And you come home
to find me here, dreaming tendrils
twined around the bedposts
and my wrists.

ii. Not Just You

I come home without you
to this strange peace.
As I circle the house
the grass parts shoulder high
and in my wake sway goldenrod and daisies.

Poke weeds crowd the garden
where cabbage spreads
and lettuce curls to heads.
Petals float in puddles from a recent rain.

And over the meadow,
as clouds hold back the night,
it's not just you I'm missing,
not just your absence spun across my path.
Most of my life, you never had a name.

It's knowing that from where I stand
to watch blue shadows break birds' flight,
beneath this waking plum tree,
from this particular slant of ground,
not you — not anyone else — will see.

iii. A Garden I Have Tended

Frone's voice crackles on the line.
"How you today?"
I lie and say I'm fine.
"Well, come up and set sometime."
We hang up the phone.
Today will bear no loneliness but mine.

Over a continent your voice fades.
We have long distance conversations
I cannot afford. Another body's shifting
in your bed. Between us the continent turns,
and over it I lose control.

Then Frone's knocking at my door,
come down to view my garden.
She motions with her walking stick —
"Them weeds near took your flowers."

I have found in this summer garden
I am an erratic weeder.
I've waited till late afternoon
and there's almost too much wildness.
These weeks alone have shown what else I'm growing,
and in her voice I hear the warning.

I start down near the pasture,
flinging weeds to cows.
The first row clears
and something in me settles.
Marigolds stand off from the muttering grass.

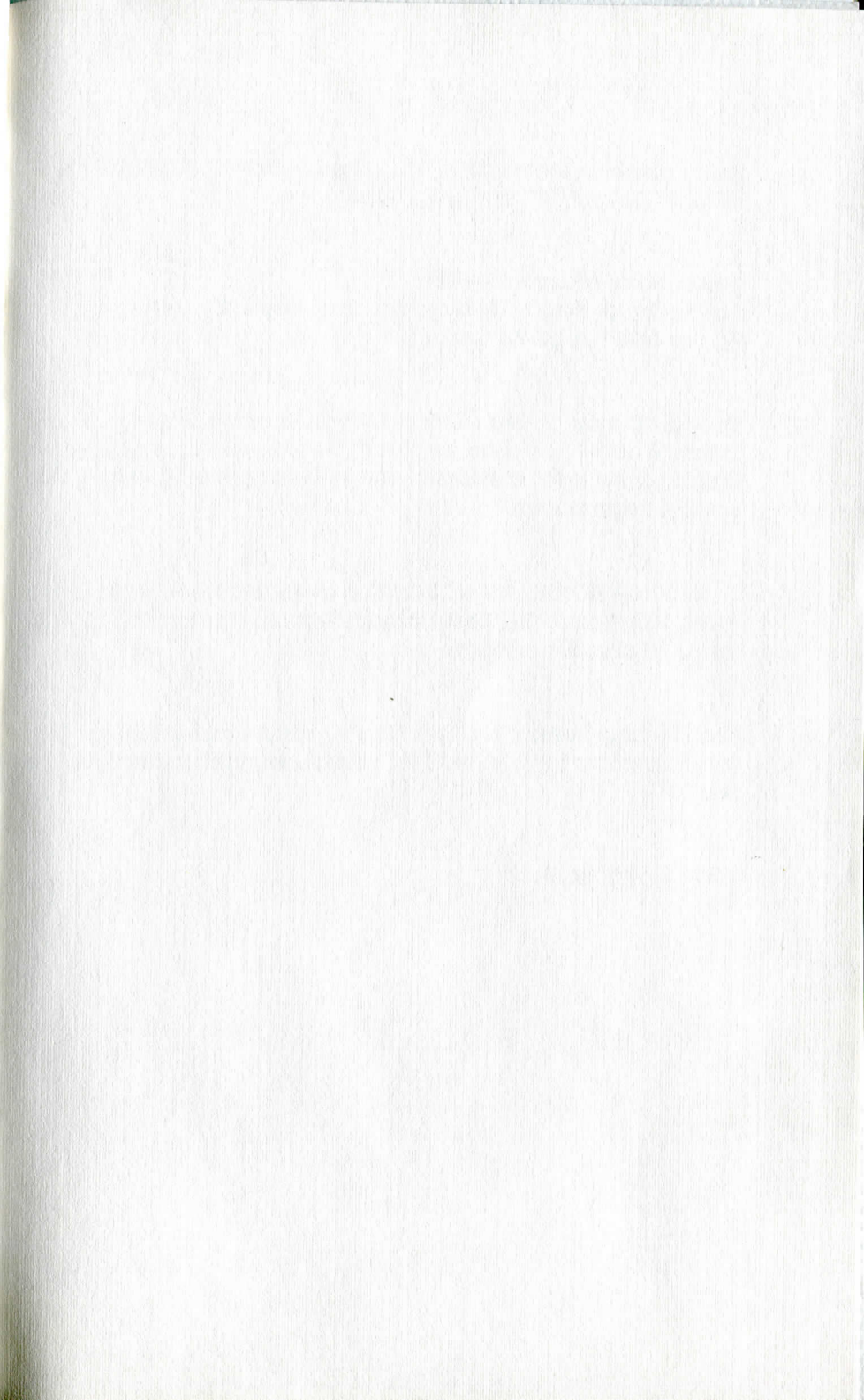
Frone said to hoe around tomatoes.
I sift the earth and air
and from the shed bring cages.
Blossoms settle in the wire
and promise early fruit.
Nasturtiums, eggplant, peppers.

each thrives in its own ground.
I work around a swath of dill,
a gift from last year's gardener.
I leave some crabgrass for a later weeding.

The light's most gone I see by,
my work is almost finished.
Now the dark creek balloons in the bullfrog's throat
in a distant wood.

But this is a garden I have tended,
and standing in its center my heart loosens.
In the trees the fireflies sputter
like some new constellation,
and cross the meadow floats the moment
this world gathers me back in.





Some of these poems have appeared in CAT'S EYE, SINISTER WISDOM, WOMANSPRIT, and THE LYRICIST.

Illustrations: Margie Stewart

Cover Photo: Nancy Webster and Mab Segrest

Printer and Publisher: Cris South

Special thanks to Minnie Bruce Pratt, Monica Raymond, and Susan Wood-Thompson for their poetic house-and-gardening tips, and for their friendship and encouragement while I was writing these poems.

LIVING IN A HOUSE I DO NOT OWN is available from Night Heron Press, P.O. Box 3103, West Durham Station, Durham, N.C. 27705 for \$2.50 plus 50¢ postage.

Mab Segrest lives in Durham, North Carolina and is a member of the collective of FEMINARY, a lesbian-feminist journal for the South.

ISBN: 0-940354-01-2



\$2.50

ISBN: 0-940354-01-2

