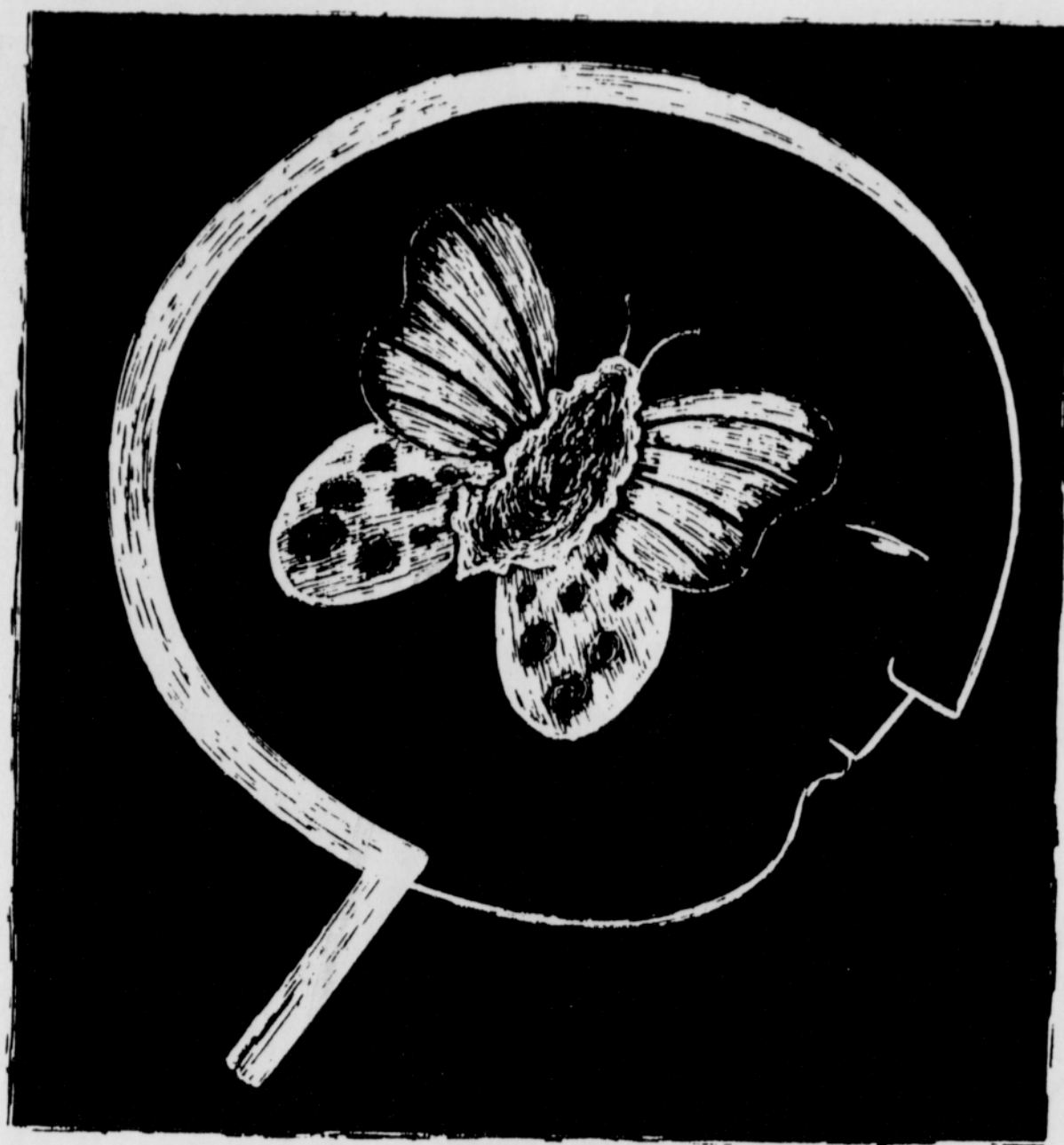




DRAWING BY ROXANNA VILLA

OH, GOD

BY JACK SCHARBACH

I have always wondered about God. I am guilty of playing footloose with faith. I admit that I don't know what I believe, or what it means to believe. It took me a long time to admit that.

It took me the better part of fifty years to entertain the possibility that my concept of God was up for grabs. Any God worth a salt, I told myself, starting down the slippery slope, would want us to think and search. I like to think I have a hard kernel held in reserve, though. I need it as a buffer against death. I hoard that last vestige of faith, guarding it, against the rising tide of unrelenting bad news we call modern history and the cold certitude of a science that only seems to preside over the inexorable decline of life on our planet.

In spite of all the evidence to the contrary, I hope for One who knows and cares — that existence means something. I hope S/He is not the same One in whose name we kill each other by the millions. We send long columns of species down "the dark night that has no morning" on the God-given status of being higher than the angels and having been given dominion. I hope there is a Maker who cares and that S/He might appear on the 11:00 o'clock news and say, "Wait a minute. That's not quite what I had in mind." But there is only silence. With increasing certainty, it looks like we will cap our brief career as a species with unprecedented death and destruction.

We tell ourselves it has always been like this. We act as if we can switch the channel. We claim it doesn't matter because we hold a ticket to the hereafter. God loves those who do not question, and saves them from the tribulation.

I guess what disturbs me is the soft underbelly of being human — the tendency to zone out. We get locked onto the trivialities that we call "real life." When the going gets tough, the tough

get banal: we head for the tube, the bottle, motorized recreation, the digital graphic dream: machines. Dreams degenerate into moribund longing for anesthesia; hope, the desire to possess. Enthusiasm becomes contemptible. How's it goin'? Oh, can't complain, how 'bout those Mets...

It is in bad taste to say that we are dying, that our democratic institutions are in a state of atrophy, that our fixation on sports and violence have pathological overtones, or that the wholesale logging of forests, the mining, chomping, chewing, downhill pouring of the living earth into the insatiable maw of industry, are all symptoms of a species gone terribly wrong.

It is in bad taste, and it is morbid, so we run through the channels one more time, looking for one more comforting illusion. We do it all, and it all works — for awhile. The soft underbelly: the fear of waking up, the efficacious distractions, the soporific slogans, the all-too-human desire to sleep it off. Analogies abound, and they all suggest addiction and denial.

For maybe a hundred thousand years we have played out the human drama against the backdrop of our notions of nature and the supernatural. We took what comfort we could in the illusion that they represent something untouchable and absolute, a backdrop against which the acts of humans would do no more than cast a brief shadow. The admission that most of what we call "right" and "true" are social constructs is one we would rather put off, like rising to consciousness with a hangover, and finding a stranger in the bed. She looked so good last night, in the smokey cave and the flickering light of the fire. She looked like God herself.

Jack Scharbach lives in Nasselle, Washington.

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