



*Grandma  
Her Life and Art*



## *Grandisie*

Blanche-Mary Grambs was born in 1916 in Tientsin (now known as Tianjiang), a large industrial city two hours north of Beijing, China. Her mother was the daughter of missionaries, her father a runaway from Seattle who had landed in China and ran the Ford Truck assembly factory. Her socialite parents were a stunningly attractive couple, sophisticated and elegant, whose evenings consisted of parties, dancing, drinking and flirting with the other expats. She had one brother, a year younger. When she was six years old, she fell ill with what eventually was diagnosed as tuberculosis of the hip and was bedridden for five years in a body cast from her waist to her toes, confined to sleeping at night out on an open porch. She never attended school, a fact that shamed her throughout her life. By the time she was allowed out of bed, when she was a young adolescent, her hip had fused. For the rest of her life, she could not sit completely upright in a chair and one leg remained significantly shorter than the other, giving her a pronounced limp.

She began to draw when she was twelve or thirteen; as soon as she was allowed out of the cast, she would travel by rickshaw into the “Chinese section” (as all of the city that wasn’t the English Concession, the Russian Concession, or the American Concession, was called) to draw portraits of Chinese fishermen, old women selling their wares, people on the street. This was a fairly risqué thing for a girl of her age, not to speak of fragile physical condition, to do. Soon she was having shows of her portraits in various cities in China, to great acclaim; she was only fifteen years old.



In 1934, having gotten a scholarship to attend the Art Students League, she traveled by herself from China to New York City, a trip lasting several weeks by ship and train. She turned 18 as she passed through Chicago. She arrived alone, terrified and determined. She was dressed in lovely outfits which her mother had designed, in which a parasol — dyed to match her gloves, hat, and dress — doubled as a cane to help her walk. She had become an arrestingly beautiful young woman, and soon photographs of her turned up in the newspaper and Vogue magazine.

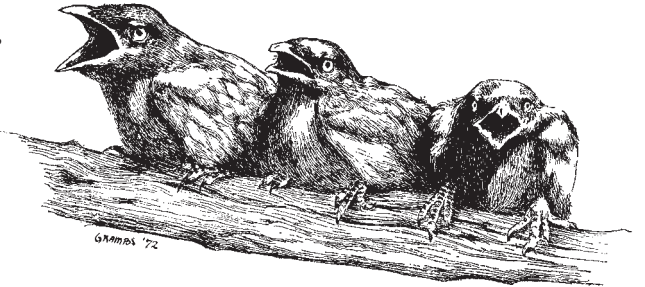
The Art Students League was a hotbed of radical activism. When her fellow students learned she had arrived from China, they eagerly clustered around her and excitedly asked her about Mao and the Revolution — this being around the time of the Long March. “You mean, the Red Bandits?” she answered, embarrassed, not having the faintest idea what they were talking about. Her new friends decided that her name Blanche-Mary was unacceptable, and she agreed, so they decided to call her “Grambs” or “Grambsie,” and that is the name that she has been known by the rest of her life.

Before too long she was hired by the Works Project Administration (WPA) — she was the youngest of the artists — to produce lithographs and etchings — one a month. Hers were powerful, stark, and dramatic; stylized black-and-white depictions of homeless and hungry people on the streets of New York City, of miners in Pittsburgh, of the desperate and hurting.

These works were as dissimilar to the realistic and vibrantly colored Chinese portraits of her adolescence as any two types of representation could be; it’s hard to believe they are drawn by the same hand. Her lithographs are collected by those who know and appreciate this period, and hang in private collections throughout the world.

Like her fellow art students, Grambs became a radical political organizer, working on every picket line, march, and demonstration that came by. There is a newspaper picture of her, cigarette dangling jauntily from her lips, being arrested for protesting the imminent de-funding of the WPA Arts Program. Years later, ever an idealist, she joined the Communist party, attended the Workers School, and continued her political organizing.

She married a fellow artist, Lefty Miller, hence the name by which she was thereafter known as an artist, “Grambs Miller.” Due to his insistence that the only place for young artists to live was in Paris, they traveled to France in 1939. Not great timing. They were there when France capitulated to the Nazis; the borders closed, but the couple managed to escape to Spain, where they caught an ocean liner for America. During the next few years she and her husband divorced, and she began working as a commercial artist for a women’s magazine, doing paste-up and illustrating advertisements. She became a very skilled and successful self-supporting artist.



The Forties were hard years for Grambsie, as she tells it. She drank a fair amount; she was insecure and nervous and was in psychoanalysis several times a week. She was mourning the end of her marriage and she was deeply confused about where her art was heading.

Grambs continued her Leftist activities, and was active in a radical organization, Arts, Sciences and Professions, or ASP, which organized the famous Waldorf Peace Conference in 1949 to protest war and fascism.

In 1950 she met Jim Aronson, a celebrity in Leftist circles. He had resigned as a reporter from the *New York Times* to become co-founder and editor of the *National Guardian*, the nation's premier left wing newspaper.

Grambs and Jim got married in '52; it was his third marriage, the first two having produced a daughter each. Thus began an exciting, fruitful, and loving partnership that lasted until Jim's death from cancer in 1988. During that time they traveled widely, both to her country of birth, China (he was among the first Western journalists invited into the country to teach) and to Cuba and Mexico. They had a large and varied circle of friends, comprised of artists, musicians, and "Anyone" who was "Anyone" on the Left, including Alger Hiss, to whom they were very close. She was a phenomenal cook and hostess and they entertained regularly.



Jim was something of an anomaly, though, because, while very radical in his views, he did not join the Communist Party nor adhere to the Party "line," and although he embraced socialism he was outspoken in his criticism of Stalin's and Mao's excesses. Still, he was called before the McCarthy hearings but refused to testify. Eventually he left the *National Guardian* and for the last eleven years of his life taught Journalism at Hunter College. Today, Hunter sponsors the James W. Aronson Awards for Social Justice Journalism given annually to outstanding journalists and political cartoonists.

Grambsie was the couple's primary financial supporter throughout many of the years of their marriage, working successfully as an exquisite illustrator of children's books, cookbooks, and books about nature and animals. In addition to all sorts of plants and animals and, particularly, birds (owls being her favorite), she loved to draw skulls and weeds, using the finest of ink pens. She was an incredible portrait artist, drawing mostly friends and family. She said she could see an "aura," or the soul, of those whose portraits she painted, and this was extraordinarily apparent in the renderings. She also tried her hand at watercolors, drawing beautifully intricate and delicate flowers, many of which were sold by a New York City art gallery.





For many decades she and Jim lived in a beautiful Victorian at 244 East Fifth Street, in the East Village. It was filled with art and books and friends, and had a magnificent circular wrought-iron stairway in the middle of the house between the first and second floors. They bought a lovely small house in Menemsha, Martha's Vineyard, where they

spent months every summer. Together, they haunted junk stores and garage sales and filled up both houses with an aesthetic array of odds and ends that somehow came together as if designed by the most fashionable and sophisticated interior decorator.

Grambsie had become a dedicated New Yorker, passionately in love with the City. Never was she afraid to walk the streets, even though she was not particularly steady on her feet. And although the neighborhood of their house in the East Village became quite seedy over the decades (before it began to come back “up”), she was never mugged. She made friends with every grocer, every fishmonger, every tailor, and every purveyor of the hard-to-find. Whenever she shopped, she went to at least five tiny, hidden specialty shops where she knew how to find the best of the most exotic. The City was in her blood; she could never imagine living anywhere else.

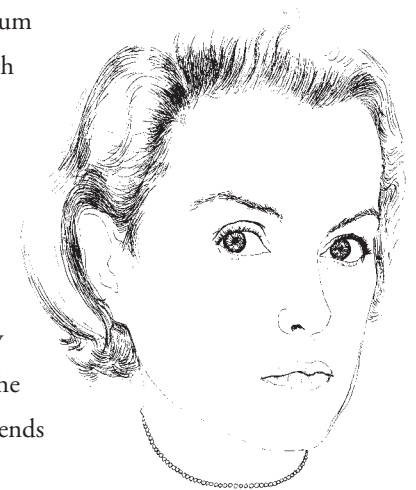
She has remained spectacularly beautiful throughout her life. She is a striking combination of loveliness, grit, passionate conviction, gracious warmth, independence, delicacy, strength,

a bit of princess, and a dash of saltiness (she could swear like a sailor when needed). Jim would laughingly say that she had a “whim of iron.”

Every December for two decades she and Jim sent out — to a mailing list of their friends and colleagues that numbered about 500 — a holiday card featuring one of her magnificent nature drawings accompanied by a prose poem written by Jim, drawn in her fine calligraphy, mourning the fragile state of our environment and conveying a longing for peace.

This book contains those holiday cards, and a few examples of her earlier art, in order that they may live on.

Grambs is, in 2003, eighty-seven years old. Due to macular degeneration, she sees a circle of blankness in the center of her visual field, so she cannot read or draw. She gets about mostly in a wheelchair. She lives in an airy, light-filled condominium overlooking Union Park in her beloved New York City with her two finches. Her mind and wit are sharp and lively. She avidly follows current events via public radio and television news, firing off phone calls every other month to the White House to protest the Administration's latest idiocy in the firm belief that the world today, and especially our country, are in more trouble than at any time in her life. Many of her friends have passed on, but she is surrounded by a strong and close circle of family and friends who continue to be enchanted by and devoted to her.



*Nature*





GRAMES

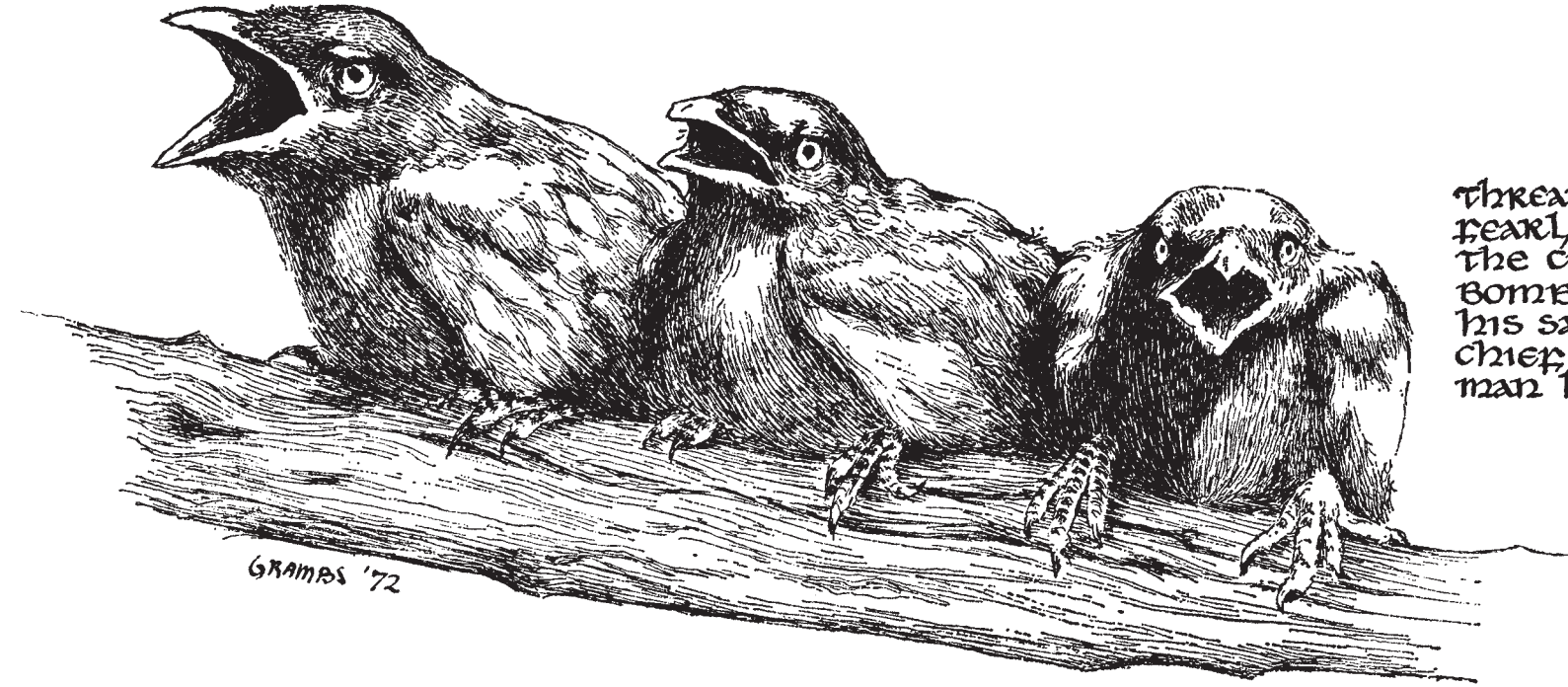


T'AO

FROM BUD TO BLOSSOM TO FRUIT TO  
WINTER VINE, AND EVER THE SEEDLING  
IN THE STONE, T'AO, THE PEACH, IN ITS  
NATIVE CHINA IS THE FRUIT OF ETERNAL  
LIFE. AS THE WORLD JOINS WITH THE  
PEOPLE OF CHINA IN THE FAMILY OF  
MAN, IT IS A MARK OF HOPE FLOWERING  
WITH T'AO HUA, THE BLOSSOM OF  
THE PEACH.

GREETINGS!





GRAMBS '72

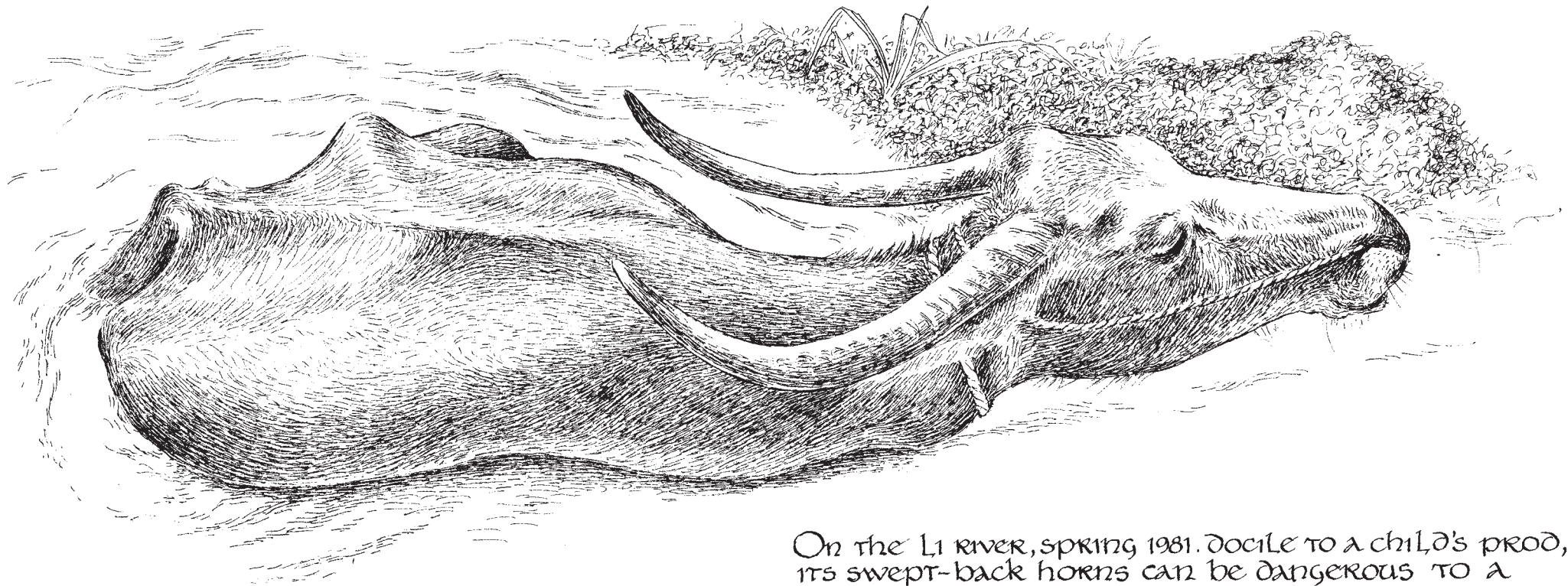
Threatening no species,  
fearless and full of wit,  
The crow has survived  
bombing, shooting, and poisoning.  
His saga offers hope for his  
chief enemy, and for man's-  
man himself.



GRAMBS - 1973

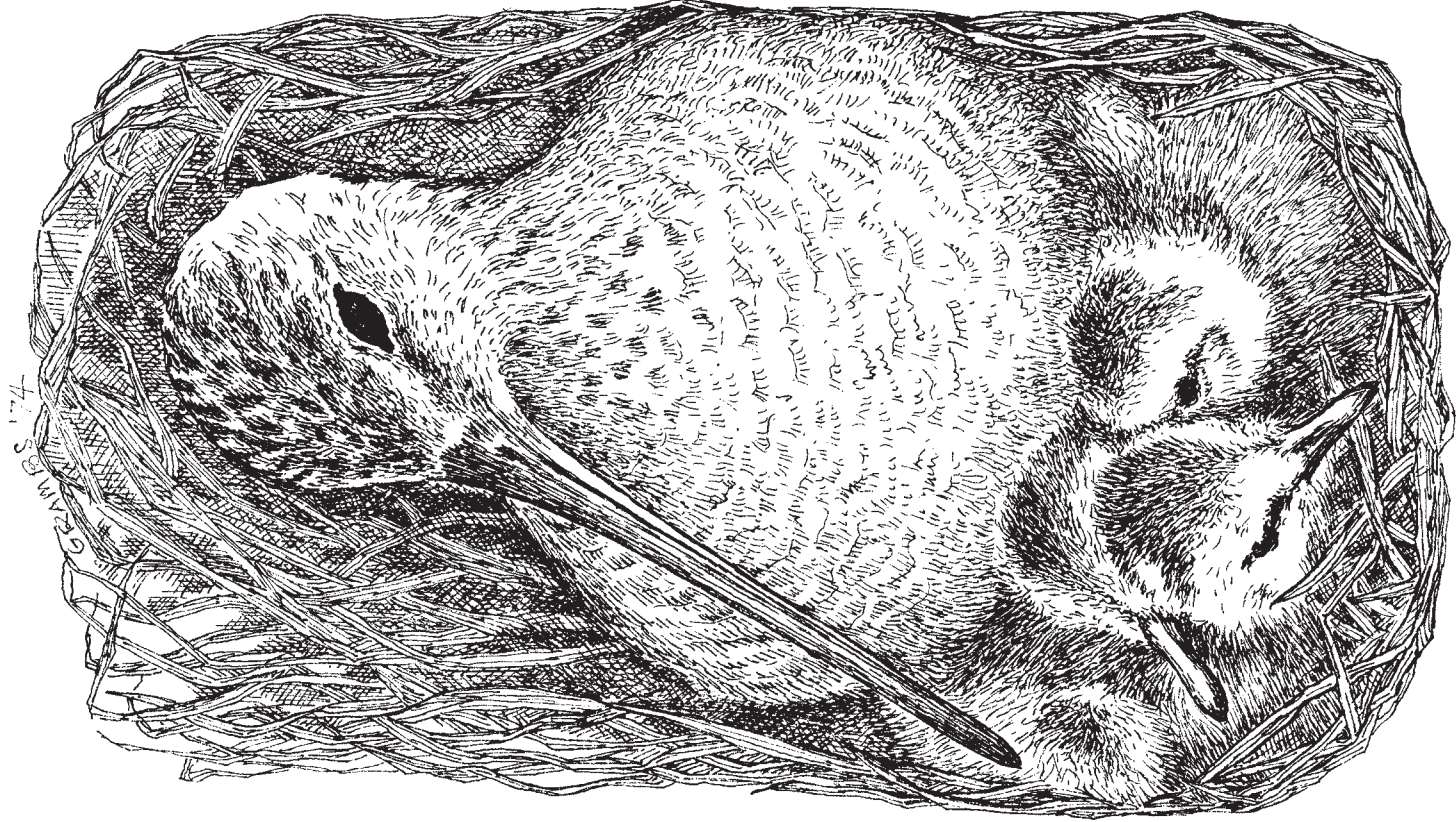
*Bubulcus ibis*

THE CATTLE EGRET, FEEDING ON  
INSECTS FLUSHED BY A GRAZING  
RUMINANT, IN TURN PROTECTS  
ITS FRIEND FROM TICKS & FLIES.  
FROM AFRICA & ASIA IT HAS  
COME LATELY TO HELP BALANCE  
THE FORCES OF NATURE ON OUR  
HEMISPHERE. WE HAVE WATCHED  
THEM IN CUBA & IN MARTHA'S  
VINEYARD, PROUD & SOVEREIGN  
ISLANDS, EACH IN ITS MANNER  
SEEKING TO BALANCE THE FORCES  
OF MAN & NATURE.



On the Li river, spring 1981. docile to a child's prod,  
its swept-back horns can be dangerous to a  
forward stranger. for centuries it has done  
draft service to China's people.





*Limosa hudsonica*

The hudsonian godwit

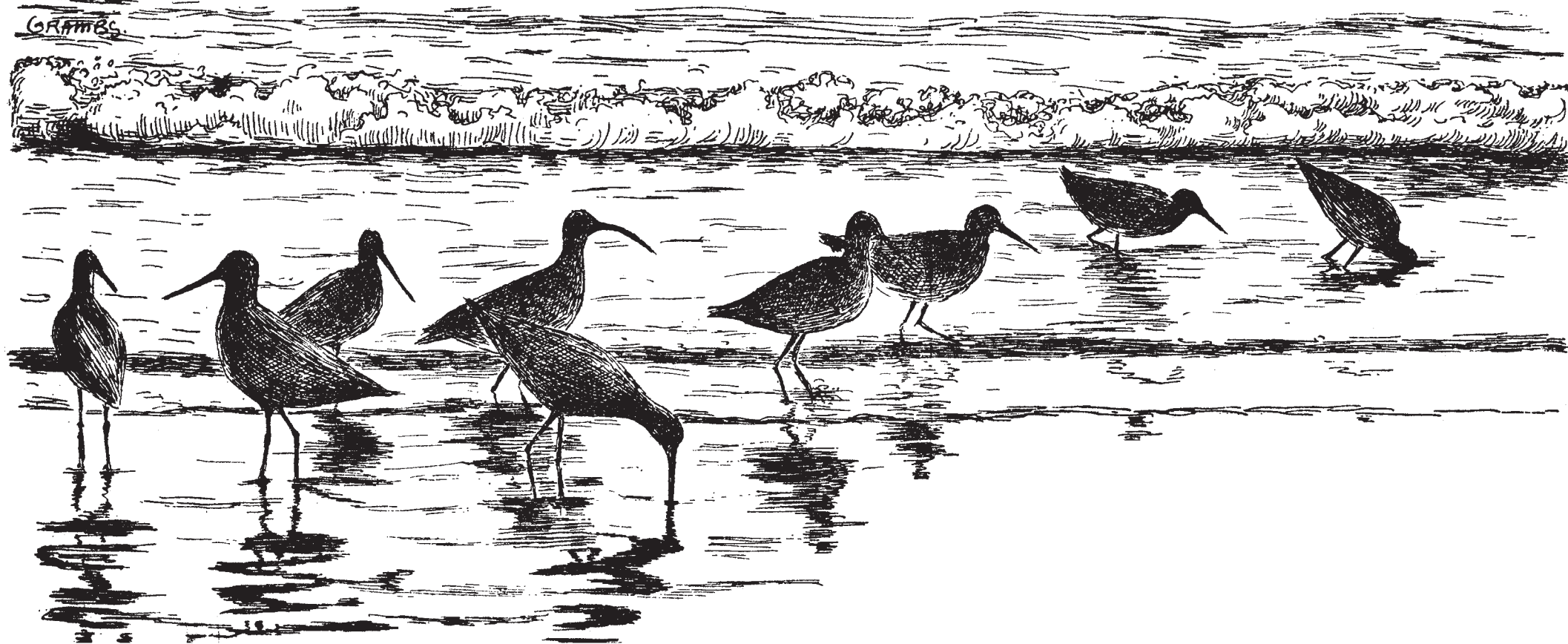
FROM ITS BREEDING GROUNDS  
IN THE ARCTIC TUNDRA  
THIS LOVELY SHORE BIRD  
FOLLOWS THE GOLDEN PLOVER  
IN ITS MIGRATION PATH  
TO THE STRAITS OF MAGELLAN  
IN DARING FLIGHT  
FROM THE PLUNDER OF MAN.



Saw-whet owl  
*Aegolius Acadicus*

Tiny, streaked-brown, unsuspecting, flies like a woodcock, nests in woodpeckers' old hollows. Its late-winter rasping call is like the filing of a large-toothed saw. Should you meet in the forest, it may bid you gentle greeting, -

GRAMBS.







white-tailed deer  
(*Odocoileus virginianus*)

PROUD ANTLERS UPRIGHT  
THEIR TINES UNFORKED,  
FIERCE WARRIOR IN FALL,  
GENTLE FORAGER THE REST,  
SPOTLESS MUZZLE TO THE FORE,  
WHITE BANNER AFT, SOARING,  
WITH HEART-CATCHING GRACE  
THROUGH DAPPLED WOODS  
TO NIBBLE THE SHALLOW POND,  
KEEN EYES, EARS AND NOSTRILS  
ALERT TO THE DANGER OF MAN.

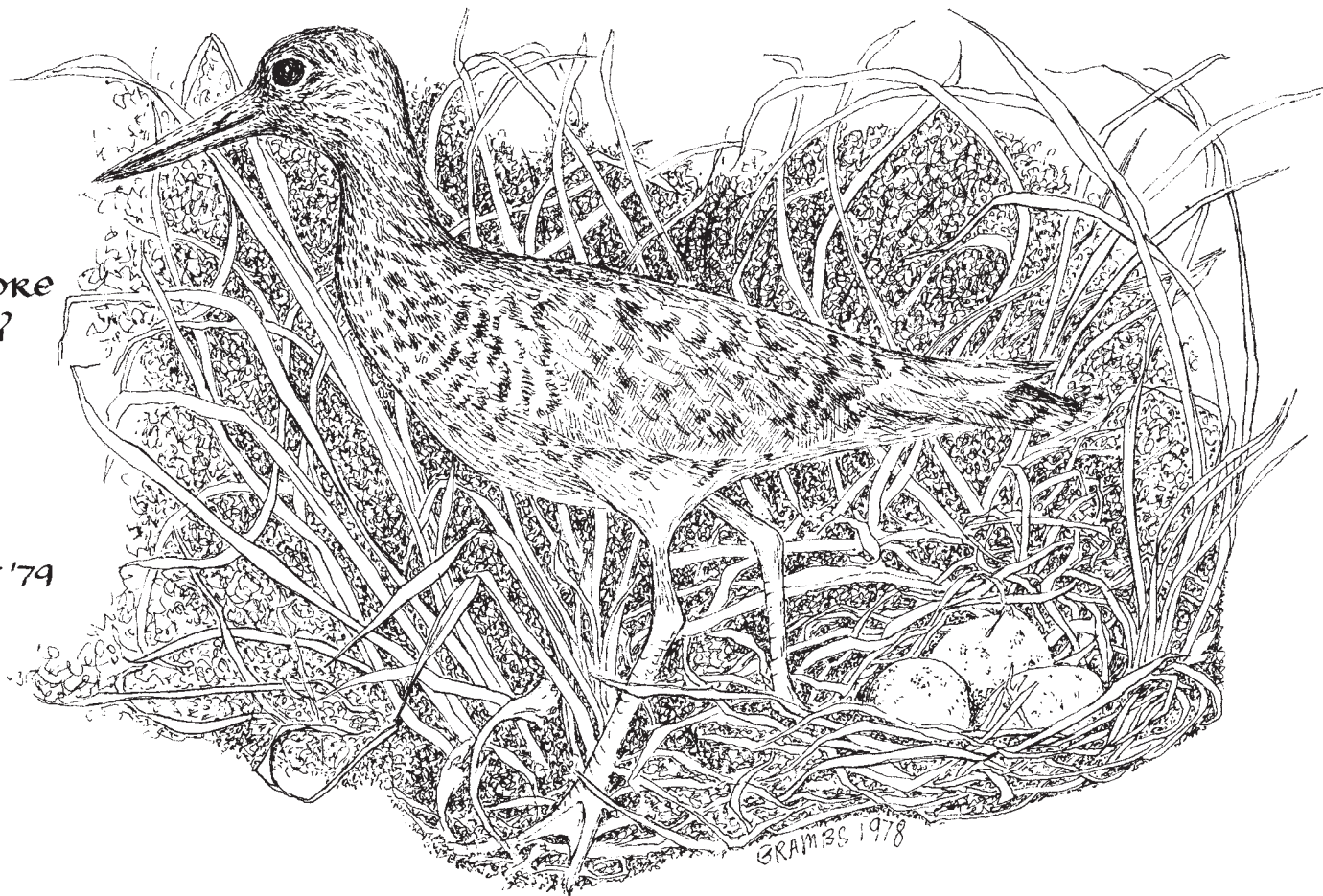
GRANT'S '76

# Willet

*Catoptrophorus semipalmatus semipalmatus*

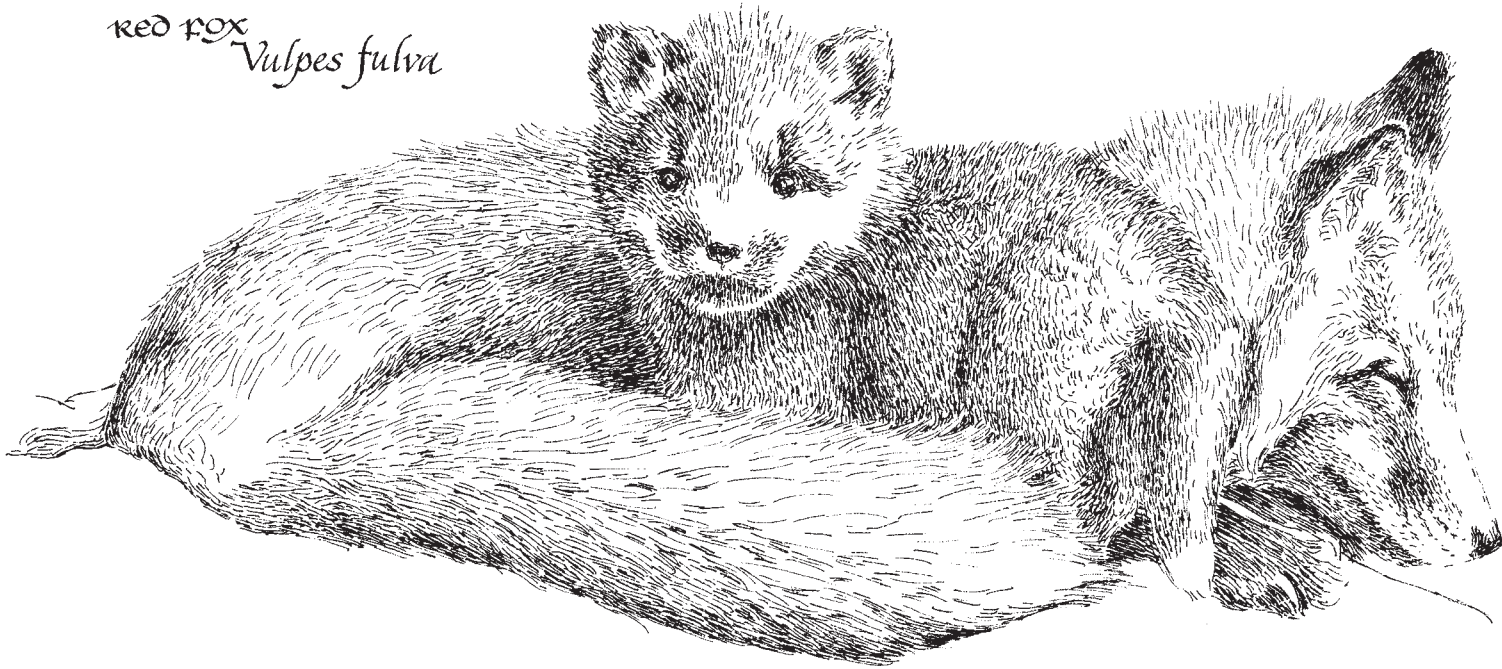
Bedlam reigns on marsh and shore  
when these showy, wary, talky  
birds flutter low over nests  
to draw an intruder away  
with their never-ending cry,  
pilly-will-willet, pilly-will-willet!  
a welcome warning call it is  
to game stalked by hunter.

Greetings for '79



GRAMBS 1978

red fox  
*Vulpes fulva*



handsome rust coat, tail  
tipped white, black nose  
and ears, quick and shrewd  
to outwit and taunt man  
and his dogs. prefers the  
open to the wilderness,  
feeds on mice, bug, berries  
and an occasional henhouse  
delicacy. risks death for  
his vixen and pups in a  
borrowed woodchuck's nest

*Greetings!*





Eagle Owl - *Bubo ignavus*

A tiger among birds, its horns enhance  
pierce-looking, piercing, yellow eyes.  
Grey-brown, black dappled and barred,  
it is a rare Eurasian predator feeding  
more on rat and skunk than duck or goose.  
Its call recalls the bass bark of a distant dog,  
and only seldom a blood-curdling scream.  
*Whoo-hoo-hoo-hoo, whoo who to you!*



## King Rail

*Rallus elegans elegans*

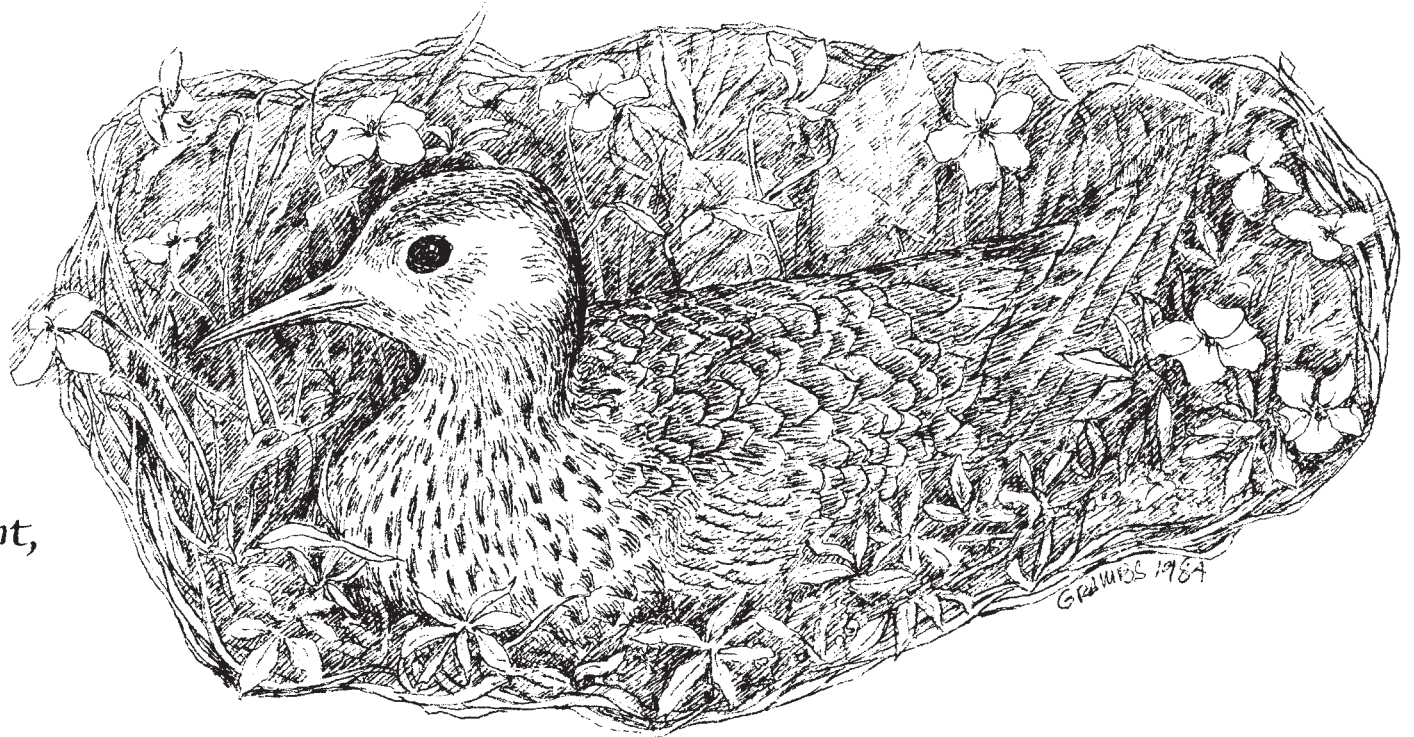
One of 132 species, 70 million years old, this brown bird with cinnamon breast inhabits the marshland, loves the islands, runs the tall grass with elusive skill. Seldom seen, its bup, bup call enhances the mystery of the twilight marsh chorus. The rails cover the world. May sanity prevail in the new year to cover the world in peace.



## Upland Plover

*Bartramia longicauda*

This sweetly shy sandpiper now rare, nests and feeds in grassy plains of the north and winters in the pampas of South America. Its song is a trill rising to a whistle like the wind, then fading to an unforgettable memory. Its flight is swift and buoyant, its landing wide winged to a gentle fold.





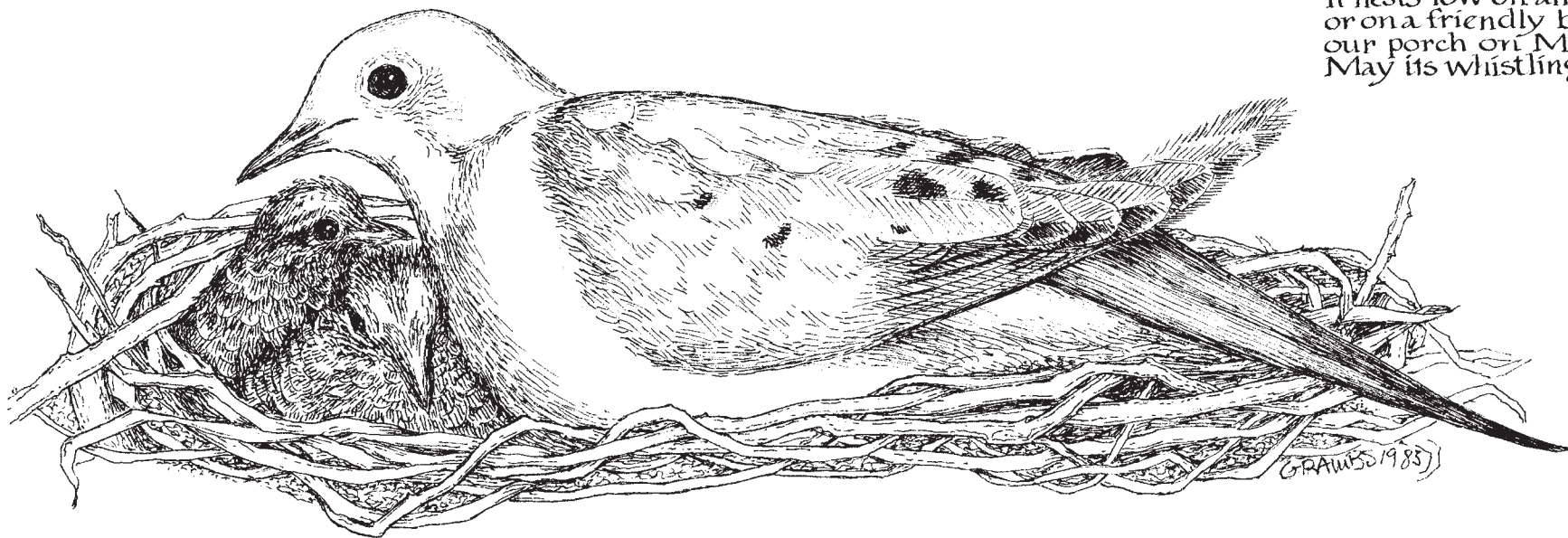
CIRCLE OF LOVE  
QUITE BROKEN NOW,  
IN THE DARK VALLEY  
LITTLE LIGHTS  
GO TO AND FRO,  
BROTHERS AND SISTERS  
SEEKING THEIR WAY ALONE.  
PERHAPS THE CIRCLE  
WAS TOO SMALL,  
TOO PRECIOUS.

THERE IS A NEW  
BEGINNING  
POSSIBLE FOR US ALL.  
DEMOCRACY  
HAS MANY TORCHBEARERS.  
HOLD ON.

*Staughton and Alice*

Mourning Dove  
*Zenaidura macroura*

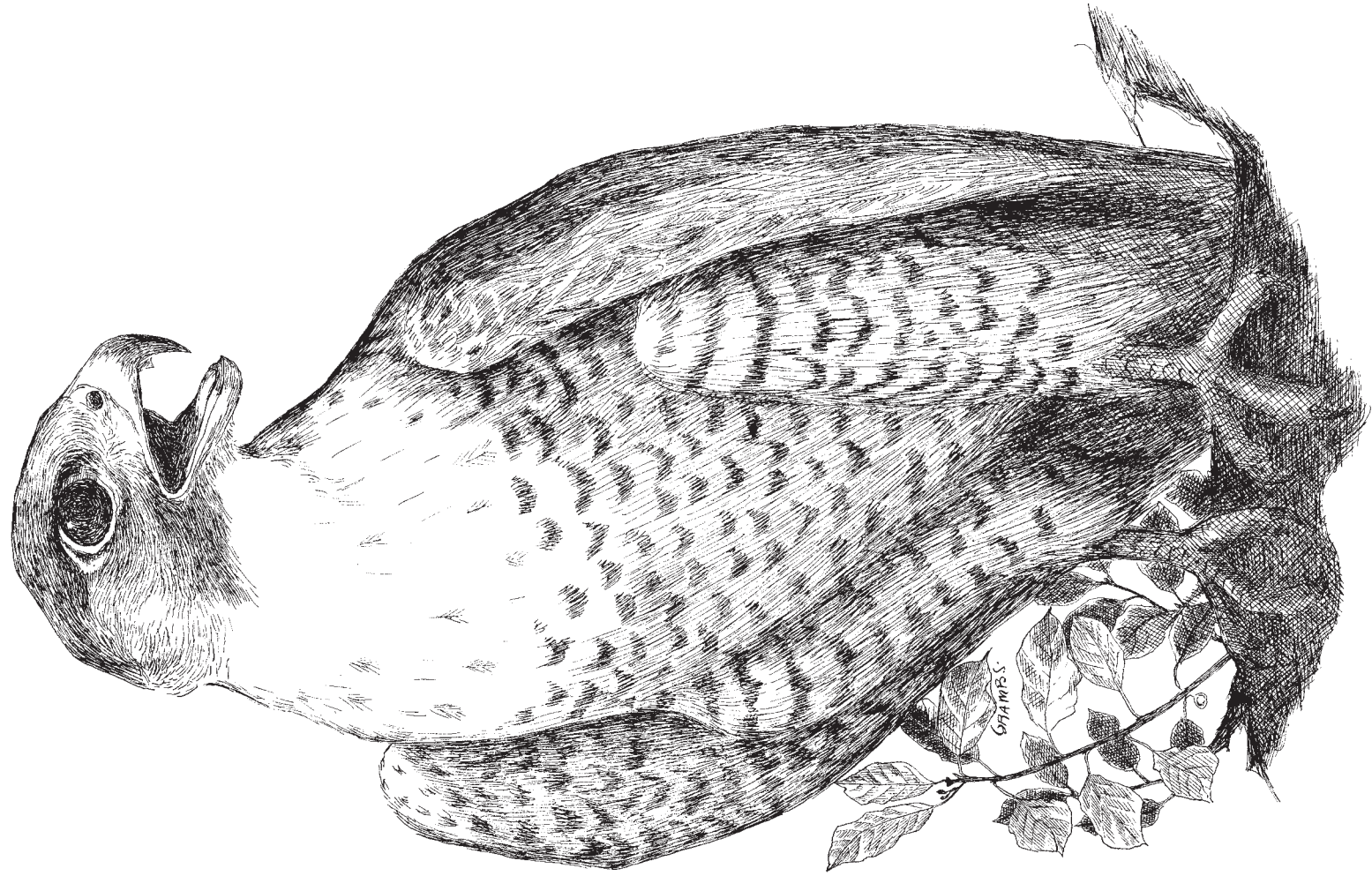
The colonists called it turtle dove,  
The male's sweet tender coo-oo-oo  
is not for mourning but for love,  
It nests low on an evergreen  
or on a friendly bough touching  
our porch on Martha's Vineyard.  
May its whistling wings bring peace.





Monarch Butterfly *Danaus plexippus*

Each fall this fragile black-and-orange scrap of life by instinct wings south through city streets, over plains, down rivers to winter in Mexico's volcanic Sierra Madre, massing with millions of others on oyamel trees, then migrating north in the spring, laying its eggs on underleaves of tender milkweed, as its scant year's span expires.







## Sunflower

*Helianthus annuus*

An American native, it went with Pizarro from Peru to Spain. In the image of the Inca sun-god, it provides nectar for bees, oil for mankind, seed for bird, leaf for forage, tissue for fiber, and dye for cloth. In the glory of its golden corona it is the flower of life sustained.

When I'm twenty

When I'm twenty  
Will there be  
Silver fish  
Left in the sea?  
Swallows swooping  
Thru the air?

ALLIGATORS -  
Any where?

When I'm twenty  
Will I find  
Nothing left -  
But in my mind -  
Of these creatures  
Man didn't spare?  
When I'm twenty -  
Will I care?





*China*

**CARDS.**

**BLANCHE MARY'S**

**SERIES**

**of**

**CHINESE**

**STUDIES.**



*Blanche Mary Grambs*

Black and White Reproductions from Pastel drawings of Chinese life by **Blanche Mary Grambs**, the wellknown Tientsin artist.

**30 cents each.**

**with envelopes.**

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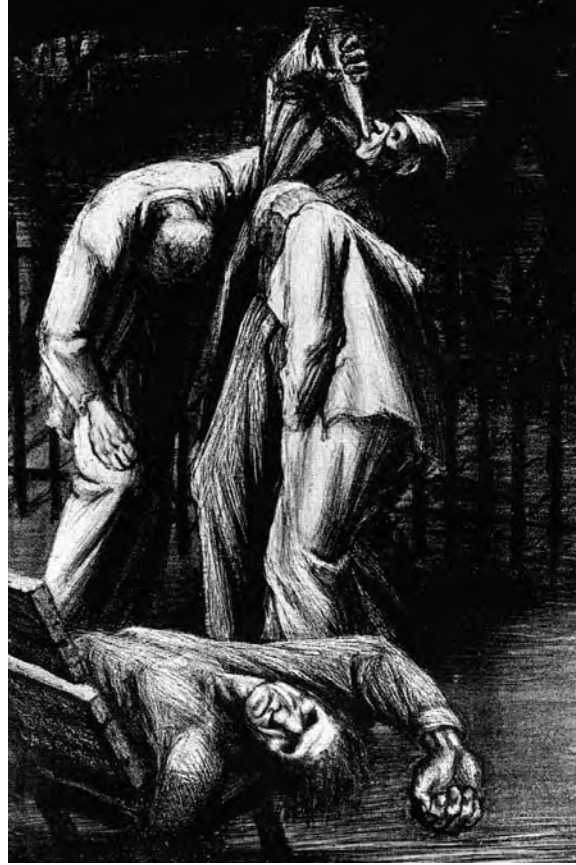




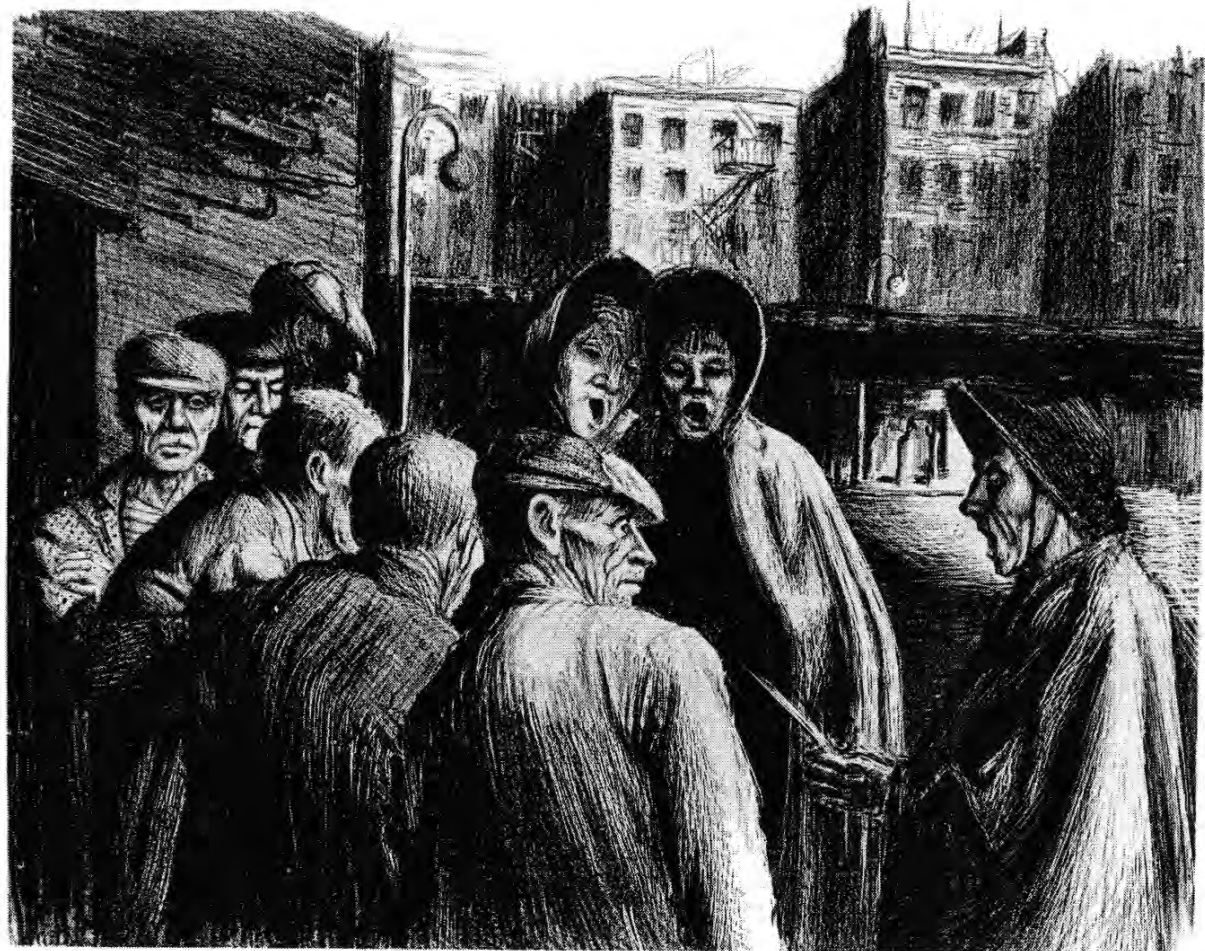
*NPA Lithographs*











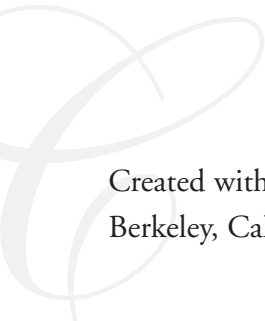


*Granulose*









Created with love by Marya Grambs, niece ([grambs@aol.com](mailto:grambs@aol.com)), with the help of Nicole Vasgerdsian and Jill Davey of JPD Communications, Berkeley, California, September 2003.

