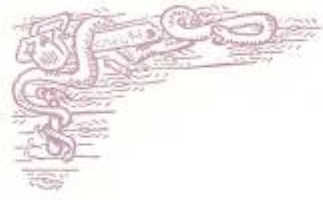


Macauley's Thumb

Lex Williford



Macauley's Thumb

by
Lex Williford



Saffron Press

*for my father,
Donald French Williford,
artist, architect, cabin builder*

The first paragraph of the text is very faint and illegible. It appears to be an introductory sentence or two.

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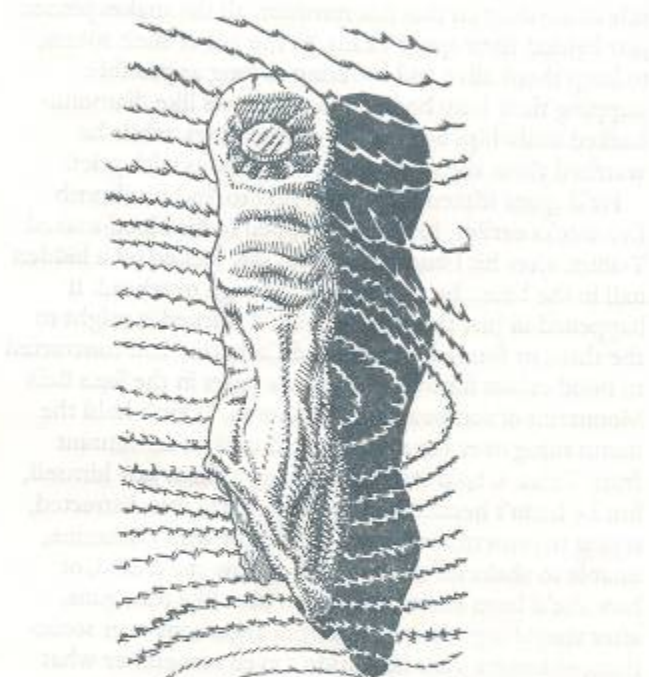
The second paragraph is also very faint and illegible. It likely contains the main body of the text.

Three months after his wife Catherine died while she picked dewberries at dusk, Cal Macauley nailed his own left thumb over the front door of their log cabin, just above the long rows of rattlesnakes he'd nailed on either side of the door all that hot summer, all the snakes pinned just behind their spade heads, to the left of their spines, to keep them alive and suffering as long as possible, slapping their long bodies and rattletails like diamond-backed bullwhips against the chinked logs, while he watched them die slowly, sick and furious with grief.

He'd spent fifteen minutes trying to find his thumb five weeks earlier, his hand wrapped in his blood-soaked T-shirt, after his Husqvarna chain saw kicked off a hidden nail in the beam he was cutting through overhead. It happened in just the same way he'd warned it might to the three or four couples he and Catherine had contracted to build cabins for over the last six years in the Sans Bois Mountains of southeastern Oklahoma. "Don't hold the damn thing over your head," he'd told an accountant from Tulsa, who'd insisted on using a chain saw himself, but he hadn't heeded his own advice. He was distracted, trying to remember his last argument with Catherine, unable to shake off the thought of how she'd died, of how she'd been taken away from him like *that*, gone, after they'd argued, a silly, stupid argument over something so insignificant he couldn't even remember what it was about. And when the chain saw kicked back, it slipped out of his hand, then caught him where he'd held the grip, cleaving his thumb off raggedly at the joint where his pointing finger and thumb came together in a V, throwing the thumb off into the woodpile behind their cabin. He was ten feet away from the woodpile when he stopped looking for his thumb fifteen minutes later, more afraid of passing out and bleeding to death looking for it than of what might happen if he didn't find it in time to throw it in a



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bloody ice bucket and take it with him to the hospital in Wilburton to try to get it sewed back on.

He'd been left-handed until the accident, still barely holding onto whatever dignity he could muster in public shows of sympathy about Catherine's death, at the lumber mill in McAlester, at the feed and seed in Red Oak, after he'd wept and shouted and cursed long hours in the loft of his cabin every night. But after the accident, he couldn't hold onto *anything* with his left hand anymore—a spoon or a fork, a pen or a pencil, a coffee cup or a shot glass—and he was worried about losing his grip in other ways. Without his thumb, there was no way to hold onto a hammer or an ax, so he decided to reteach himself how to split wood right-handed, how to strike a hammerhead against a nailhead with his right hand without hitting the fingers on his left hand, without smashing the skull of a rattlesnake he held there against a cabin log, wriggling under a nail point. He was thinking about how Catherine had died, about how he'd failed to, when he was trying to split wood for the winter and smelled something dead, awful, and found the shriveled black thumb wedged between two splintered logs. He picked the rancid thing up with his right hand, held it out at arm's length, and walked to the cabin, nailing through the bone and half-rotted flesh where the black thumbnail had already fallen out weeks before, then stood back to look at his own thumb, dead and detached from him forever, smiling at it with the same feeling of nausea and triumph he'd felt when he found the second rattler coiled under a flagstone, then nailed it to the cabin wall next to the first rattler, the one that had killed his wife.

It was just the kind of thing Catherine would do, Macauley thought: reaching for the biggest, sweetest berry, deep inside a tangled dewberry bush down the dusty logging road from their cabin. She'd been angry

at him when she left after supper, after their stupid, forgettable argument over the supper table, but he knew she wouldn't've stayed angry long—she'd made her point, whatever it was, and had probably already let it all go, had probably been thinking instead about a way to transplant the yellow wild roses growing along the roadside into the rich mountain-slope humus behind their back porch without exposing the roses' roots to the air and killing them. Killing things was not something Catherine would tolerate, certainly not the slow, cruel killing of the thirty-four rattlers that hung along the cabin wall, things that had a *right* to live, she'd say, not even the pine beetles that rattled under the loose bark of their cabin at night while he and Catherine made love, dripping with sweat in the humid loft heat, shouting each other's names as loud as they wanted to without fear of bothering their nearest neighbor half a mile down the road. And that's just what they would've done, Macauley thought, if they hadn't argued. That's what they would've done anyway, even *after* they'd argued, after she'd come back with a sun hat full of dewberries, to make up. It was her way, to fight hard and fair, not to give in, because she had a right, then to let go. It was one of those things she did much better than he did, one of those hard things she made look easy, maybe the best thing about her, the one thing he'd tried hardest, and failed the most often, to learn from her. It's what she would've done. *If she'd come back.*

At just the moment when she reached for the biggest berry, the rattler uncoiled from inside the bush like a cocked spring, struck at her mouth, its mouth wide against hers, its fangs like two curved, wide bone hooks, piercing her upper lip, the snake hanging there, both fangs wedged fast between her gums and teeth, injecting their venom before she ever had a chance to shout his name. And Macauley imagined she did just that, as loud

as she could, in the terror of that unimaginable last moment, before she blacked out and fell into the tangle of berries and furry thorned vines.


But he didn't hear her. She was too far down the road, and he was too busy feeling sorry for himself in the cabin they'd built together, wishing he hadn't said whatever he'd said to run her off, wishing she hadn't said whatever she'd said to make him stay in the cabin feeling sorry for himself, where he couldn't hear her shout his name.

And because he was feeling sorry for himself, he'd been too stubborn to go look for her, even after the point when he started to worry, even after it was dark for a good long time. And when he finally did go to look for her, his Coleman lantern too bright in his eyes and hissing in his ears, he lost heart too quickly, allowing his anger at her to grow greater than his concern for her, imagining she was out to spite him for what he'd said, whatever it was, and he turned back up the logging road, to spite her. *The hell with you if you'd run off and make me worry about you like this.*

At that moment, he thought of being alone, free of her, free to do whatever he damn well pleased, leaving his wet socks to hang wrapped and steaming over the bathroom light bulb after he'd been fishing, leaving a black ring around the kitchen sink after he'd changed the oil in the Volkswagen bus, not having to hear her say, *You're not listening to me. All right, then, tell me what I just said.* He went to bed alone in the cabin loft for the first time in years, sprawling in their bed because he *could*, because he didn't have to worry about his weight sagging the mattress in the middle of the bed, didn't have to worry about her space and his space, didn't have to worry about wrapping himself up in all the sheets, snoring, grinding his teeth in his sleep, keeping her up half the night. Then, in the next moment, lying

in the depression at the center of their bed, he felt the full weight of her absence, not the fear of being alone—he'd lived alone and liked it all the years before he'd asked her to dance the first time at the Poteau VFW—but the full recognition that he *wanted* her there, *liked* having her there, *liked* talking to her in their bed about insignificant things, *liked* her maybe a little more than he'd managed to love her, always had. Then he thought about her body, about touching and kissing her freckled arms and legs and shoulders and breasts, tasting her musky saltiness, then both of them holding on and holding off, carrying each other into and through those long moments just before.

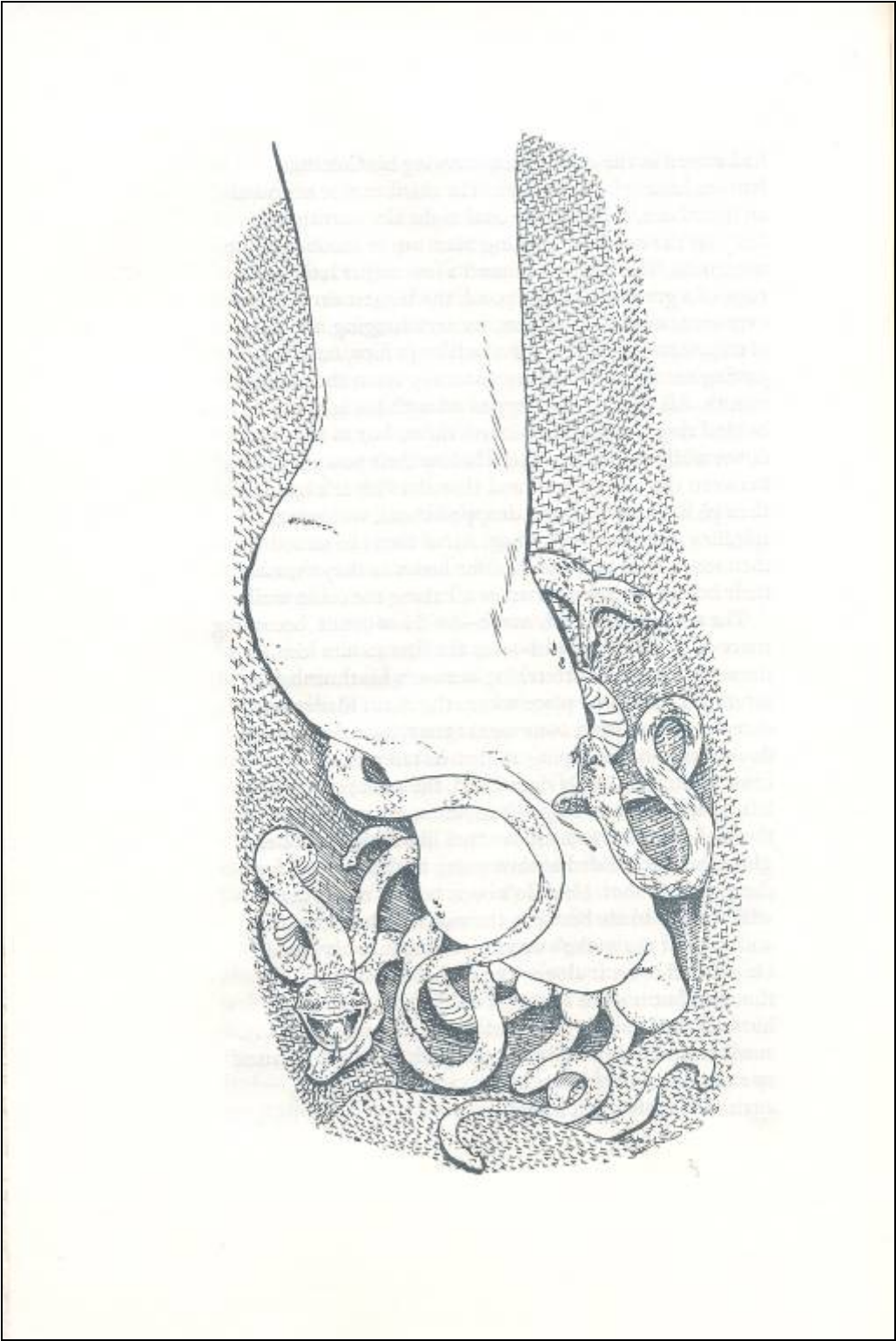
The thought of her in their bed and not in their bed kept him awake half the night in the dark loft, starting to get up to look for her again, then lying back down, wavering between anger and fear, until he dressed and drove the VW bus up and down the mountain road, his headlights scaring up whippoorwills that nestled their bellies in the road gravel, his tires kicking up rolling dust clouds behind, coating the scrub pines and oaks along the road with a skirt of gray powder. Back at the cabin, he listened the rest of the night above the pine beetles' bark-rattle for her sandal soles scuffing the gravel outside their cabin window, then got up from their bed and dressed again at dawn, stumbling a quarter mile down the road on foot, until he reached the dewberry patch on the cliff above Turkey Creek.

The snake was still alive when he found her. 

Almost every night since, he sat up in their loft bed alone, unable to shake off the nightmare of it, the rattler writhing in its kiss. Half a week after the funeral, the night of the day he found the second rattler sleeping in the flagstone's noon shadow, he sat bolt upright in their bed—shouting, weeping, cursing—and he dressed quickly, emptying the burlap bag of rooting potatoes Catherine

had stored in the cellar, then carrying his Coleman lantern hissing into the dark. The third rattler he found an hour later, coiled in the cool night air, warming its belly on the crooked, heaving blacktop at the foot of the mountain. The fourth he found a few nights later at the edge of a green-scummed pond, the biggest rattler he'd ever seen, seven feet at least, its neck bulging, the hinge of its jaw stretched around a bullfrog's hips, back legs jutting out and still kicking, jittering, from the snake's mouth. All of them he stepped on with his boot toe behind their heads, not to crush them, but to hold them down while he pinched them below their venom glands, between the index finger and thumb of his left hand, then picked them up and dropped them, whipping, spiraling, into the burlap bag. All of them he nailed up, then stood back and watched for hours as they thrashed their bodies against each other all along the cabin wall.

The tenth or eleventh snake—he'd lost count, becoming more and more forgetful—was the first to bite him, in the soft web of skin stretching between his thumb and forefinger, the same place where the chain blades would shred skin and grind bone weeks later. Swinging upside down, whirling, snapping at him, its tail rattle a dry blurred buzzing in his right hand, the snake struck his left hand holding the open bag just as he was dropping the snake inside. His hand swelled like a black rubber glove, but he decided against going to the hospital for the antivenin shot. He didn't even bother to cut deep with a razor blade between the two fang holes, to suck and spit out the snake's venom curling into his blood. He decided to let it alone. The snakebite was a gift, he thought, but it wasn't enough to kill him, only made him sick, laid him up in the loft bed, his hand throbbing, swollen, and heavy under the ice pack in his lap, himself sweating, shouting curses at the cicadas' ratcheting against the July night's heat.



Six weeks later, just after Doc McPhee removed the black catgut stitches from the pink flap of skin stretched over the bone where his thumb-knuckle used to be, he found a nest of rattlers—six of them, little ones—under a rock ledge, scooping them up with his right hand by the squirming knotted handful and dropping them all into the bag, getting bit only once on the tip of his little finger, then taking them up to the cabin loft, his eyes a cold blue burning. He shook the bag, beat it against the bedpost, watched the sides of the bag bulge and bump on the bed as the young rattlers struck blindly inside. He took his time taking his boots and cotton socks off, then thrust one bare foot, then the other, into the burlap bag, waiting for the sharp quick strikes—one, then another, then the next—then sticking his right hand inside, then his left. He considered sticking his head into the bag, too, laughed at the thought of it, but decided instead to nail up the last of the snakes he'd found, all six of them, to the cabin wall before his feet were too swollen to step down the loft ladder anymore, his hands and fingers too swollen to hold a hammer, a nail, a snake. Afterward, he puked three times, then blacked out, in the cabin's gravel drive. In the spinning nausea just before, he had two visions of Catherine's face: the first one of her slender sunburned cheeks, her thin freckled nose, the light blonde hairs growing along her jaws, her delicate chapped lips, smiling; the second one of a swollen blue-black face, head twice its normal size, eyes and nostrils swollen shut, so little resemblance to the woman he'd loved and argued with for the last six years that he'd made the undertaker screw the casket lid shut.

When he came to in a hospital bed in Wilburton, his legs and arms heavy and useless, soggy and spongy with pus, like waterlogged driftwood, he was mad as hell, not just because he'd failed, but because he'd picked such

a foolish and painful way to fail, and everyone in two or three counties had probably heard all about it by now, always hungry for any news of someone else's misfortune, especially of the sensational brand, like something they'd read about in a drugstore tabloid: *Man, struck mad by grief, nails live snakes to cabin, attempts suicide by snakebite.*

But no one had heard, it turned out. Hank Potter, his neighbor half a mile down the road, had found Macauley in the gravel drive—in a coma, close to dead, his lips sunblistered, red ants crawling into the corners of his eyes and mouth—and kept it all to himself. So had Doc McPhee, who made it a point not to tell anyone.

"Look at you, Cal," Doc McPhee told him in the hospital room, shaking his head, swabbing Macauley's bare hip with rubbing alcohol, then giving him a hydrocortisone shot. "You want to tell me what you've been doing up there on that mountain? It's way the hell beyond me. I'd like to know."

Macauley said nothing, refused to talk to the staff psychologist Doc McPhee sent twice by his room the next week. Six hours after he checked out of the hospital, he plugged a spotlight into the lighter socket of his VW bus, then set out again at three a.m. to look for the glowing red eyes of rattlers as they slithered along the cliff ledges above Turkey Creek.

He found his own reeking dead thumb in the woodpile a week later, nailed it above the cabin's front door, as he would a horseshoe, for luck, for perverse bad luck, the rows of twenty dead rattlers he'd nailed up the month before hanging to the left of the door, some of them with skins only partly shed and curling down like shredded rice paper, as if they'd tried to move on to their next lives but had been cut off somehow and couldn't, never would. The live rattlers hung in rows to the right of the door, their flaring scales stacked in gray-brown diamonds as they flung their bodies against

the cabin wall, their black eyes unblinking under horned brows, their pink, wet mouths hissing, spitting, their black tongues flicking the air. He stood back, then looked up at the black fly-covered thumb, at the rusty ten-penny nailhead mashing the end of the thumb against the pine log.

For a moment—as if the thumb were still a part of him and he'd just struck it by accident with a hammer-head—he felt a phantom pain, a sharpness, then a dull throbbing, like blood pooling, trapped, underneath the thumbnail's tender half moon. Then, feeling light-headed and sick, he tried again to remember his and Catherine's last argument, tried to tell himself that, if he *could* remember—what it was about, who started it, who was to *blame*—he could maybe find a way to let her go. He hadn't been able to *stop* holding onto her, not even now, not when he knew she was gone and he had to let her go, or die.

He looked at the clearing in front of their cabin, at the stack of loblolly logs he and Catherine felled and bark-stripped the day she died. He remembered watching her that afternoon, his left boot up on one of the logs they'd just felled, occasionally tipping back and drinking from an iced thermos of sweet sun tea.

Then, again, he was watching her: her chain saw sputtering and whining as she notched one end of a pine log, making vertical cuts and chipping out the pieces with the nose of her chain saw, then rocking the whirring chain blades over the soft pine wood, shaving out a wide shallow U, then smoothing out the rough spots, her saw grips braced against her locked arms, her head and shoulders back, wood chips flying into her hair and face. He watched her hard, squinting expression, her taut, bandy shoulders and biceps where she'd rolled up her short-sleeved T-shirt, her slender waist and tomboy's hips in khaki shorts, her freckled legs. He

watched her focused concentration, her delicate control—almost an artist's touch—then looked over at her chain saw sculptures, standing like totem poles in a circle, like the ones she sold at crafts fairs outside Muskogee and Tahlequah and Ft. Smith.

When he looked back at her, she looked up at him and smiled, then cut off the chain saw, laid it leaning against the felled pine log. She pulled her blue bandana from her back pocket and whipped it unfolded against her thigh, wiping her forehead, then walked to him, her hand out to him. He handed her the thermos, watched her tip it back, drinking, the sweet tea dribbling in rivulets down the corners of her mouth, down her neck, into the sweaty V of her T-shirt, down between her freckled breasts. She handed the thermos back to him, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, then looked at him a long time, sawdust in her eyelashes.

"You're better with a chain saw than me," he'd told her—the very last thing he could *remember* telling her—and she'd laughed, then said, "I know," and leaned into him, kissing him, her lips salty and chapped, almost healed under the pink flecks of lip balm she always kept in her back pocket.

Remembering her, Macauley looked down at the wide scar on his mutilated left hand where his thumb had been, at the smooth pink stitch-ridges like drips of melted candle wax, and he understood how his way of remembering her showed how much he'd already begun to forget her as she was when she was most fully herself, separate from him—as she was when they argued, when she told him, *You just remember what you want to remember*. And imagining her voice, *hearing* it, he heard her accuse him of having forgotten their last argument together, then understood that he *had* forgotten and would never remember. The memory of the argument that made her leave had left *him*. It was gone and she was gone, and he



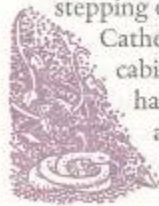
was here, alive, alone, and already he was beginning to forget her.

Catherine stood in the cabin's open doorway, leaned against the door casing, her arms folded. She looked at the snakes nailed in rows on either side of the cabin door, then said, *Cal, take a look at yourself. Take a look at what you're doing.*

He stooped to pick up the hammer and burlap bag at the cabin doorsteps and walked to the cabin wall, slipped the hammer's steel claws over the rusty nailheads pinning down the rattlesnakes, then pushed up against the hammer handle, leaning into it, hearing the nails creak against the wood as he pulled them out, one by one, the dead snakes falling to his feet like rag strips, the live snakes falling, then curling, knotting, around their wounds. He picked them all up by the tails and dropped them into the potato sack, then pulled out the nail holding his thumb up over the cabin door and dropped the thumb inside, too.

Down the logging road, he stood on the high cliff overlooking the place where thunderstorms had washed out the road in the spring, where he could smell the sickly sweetness of the sycamores leaning out over Turkey Creek below. A meadowlark sang *serene serene* from a black telephone pole. He looked back over his left shoulder at the dewberry patch, then at the bush where he'd found his wife. Then he looked down between his boot toes on the cliff ledge, out over the drop a hundred yards down to the gray, still water among the rocks. He heard a woman's shout far off, then imagined himself stepping out into air. Then, thinking of himself and

Catherine rocking together, shouting, from their cabin loft bed, he held the bag out in his right hand, over the cliff ledge, and he let it go.



64 copies of this book were printed and bound by
September Lynne Newman Kirk in the
Spring and Summer of 1995.

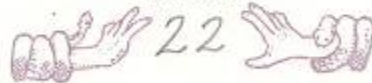
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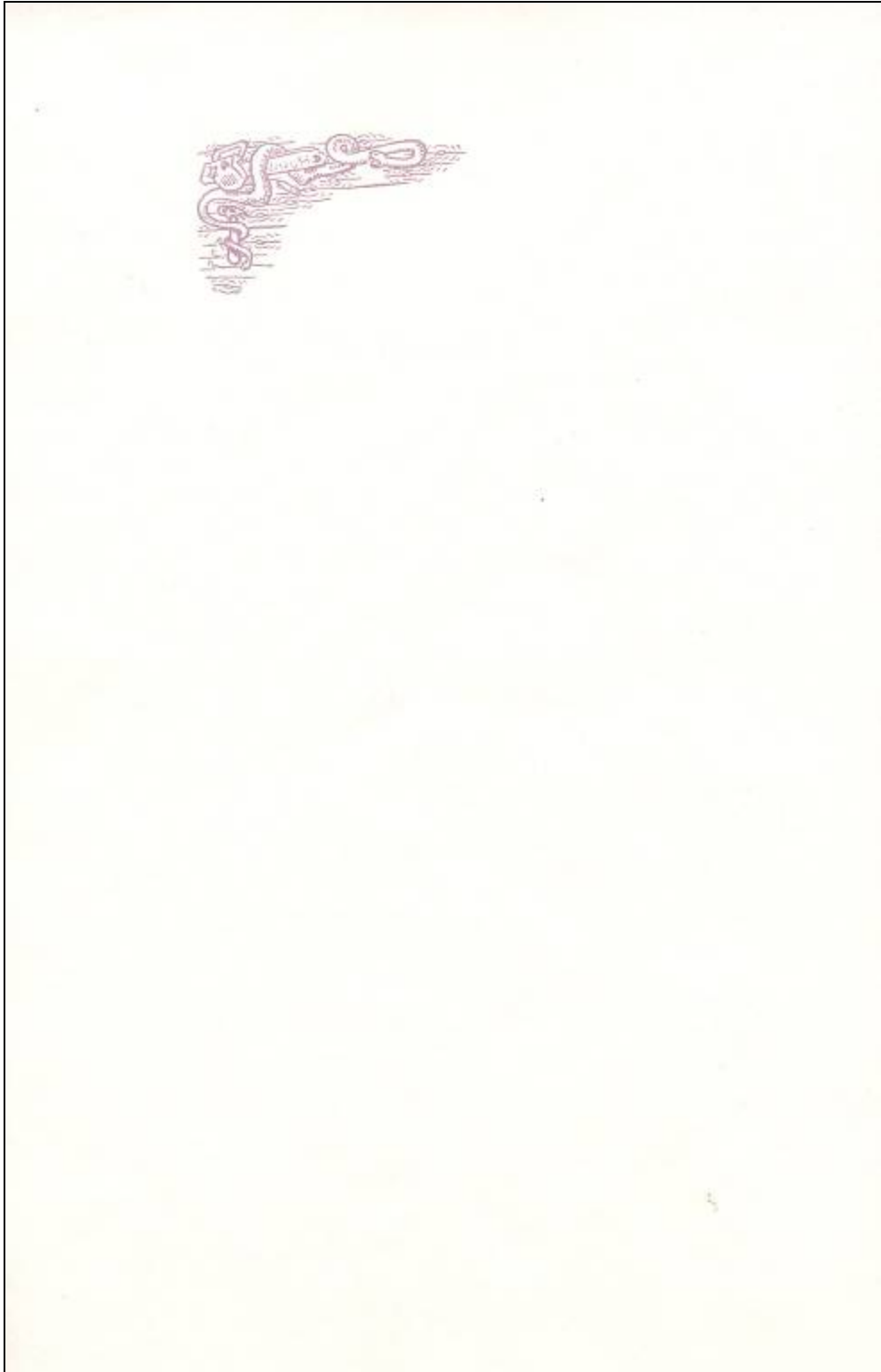
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Many thanks to Jeff Moss for the illustrations.



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