

My usual confrontations with Bragdon exist almost entirely in my head, and my friends' transgressions of this membrane drench my chest with vinegar. Bragdon furrows his brow and we both press our fingernails into the palms of our hands, infusing the dermal layer with bits of earth and debris that had collected under them.

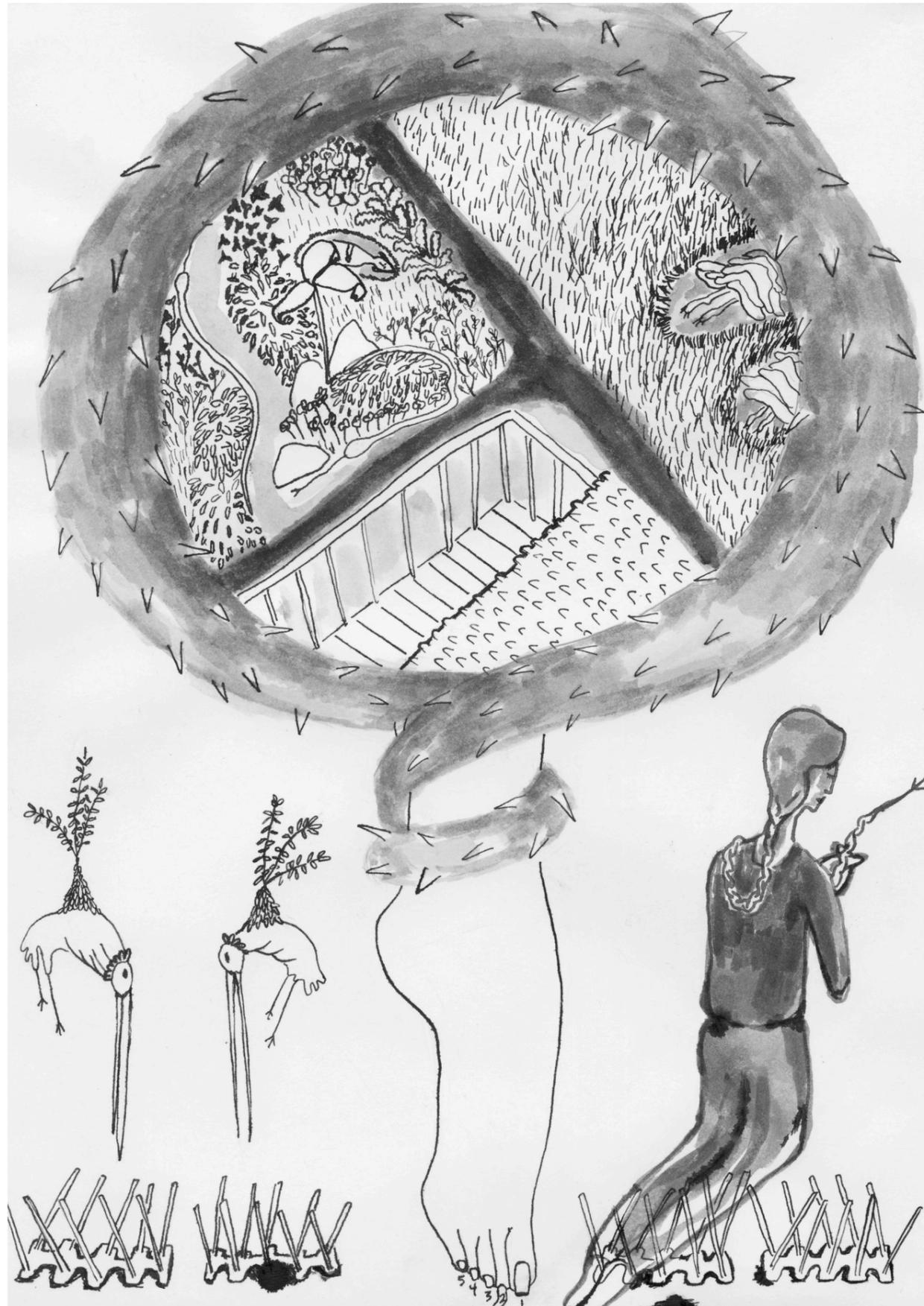
Somehow, Bragdon's most salient feature are his fingernails, which look like whale bones jammed in the sockets of each digit. Calcified husks that are thick and ribbed with cellulose like the stalk of the weed that Robyn and I host. Perched as I am, I wonder if I am the owl and Bragdon is a field mouse, or if I'm just a coward.



Inside my belly, I can feel the mouse's tail has become entirely pickled in the bile of this stand-off. We both let out a puckered squeal as its tail slips cleanly off its body and curls itself around my gallbladder. The sounds of the city amplify themselves into a splitting, syncopated terror in my skull. I massage my abdomen, trying to soothe the foreign bodies now writhing inside me.

Princess sways deftly along the pale fence between the two yards. Closed systems that hover side by side. I notice a particularly faded patch on Bragdon's lawn that recently supported the boots of a small congregation of men. I could hear Bragdon spinning some narrative about the sons of Confederate veterans and their duty to the city. His frosted visage was aglow in the tribute of their company. On this rare occasion, he had left the second story blinds open and I spotted a beige comforter balled up on his bed. I pictured him between the sheets, massaging his signet ring in a curled fist while his wife made breakfast downstairs.

Robyn's wild rose shrub pushes into my consciousness. I often wonder if Robyn and Bragdon have ever laid eyes on one another, devoted as I am to observing them both separately. I think of television shows in which neighbors exchange words between fence posts, but the air in these alleys is so dense with heat and moisture that our words may never reach their destinations. I watch their faces contort as muted words melt back down upon us.



Maybe one day a giant weed will stretch its cellulose arms around us all, smushing our molecules together; reshaping the mechanisms of our separation with its spindly arms.

A neighborly death by constriction.