

THE SOLSTICE OBSERVATORY AT JUNIPER CAVE

BY

WILLIAM C. STRANGE

*In Juniper Cave on a fence where the roof's fallen through, the
sun is worked rising over just such a hill as it does midsummer's
morn to fall upon this working.*

This sun brings life

ends fear,

or stills it for awhile.

Of course we mark the longest day.

Wouldn't you, if

once upon an evening walking home,

your schoolboy satchel spun of Tule grass

and stuffed with fat white roots for the family,

you meet instead this woman,

tall and thin as a reed herself,

and a bundle of old mats upon her back.

Can I help, mum?

But her fingernails

are longer than her hands.

And her face. One side is white
as if rubbed with ash.
It weeps a black tear.
The other side is barred with black
and its eye gushes blood.

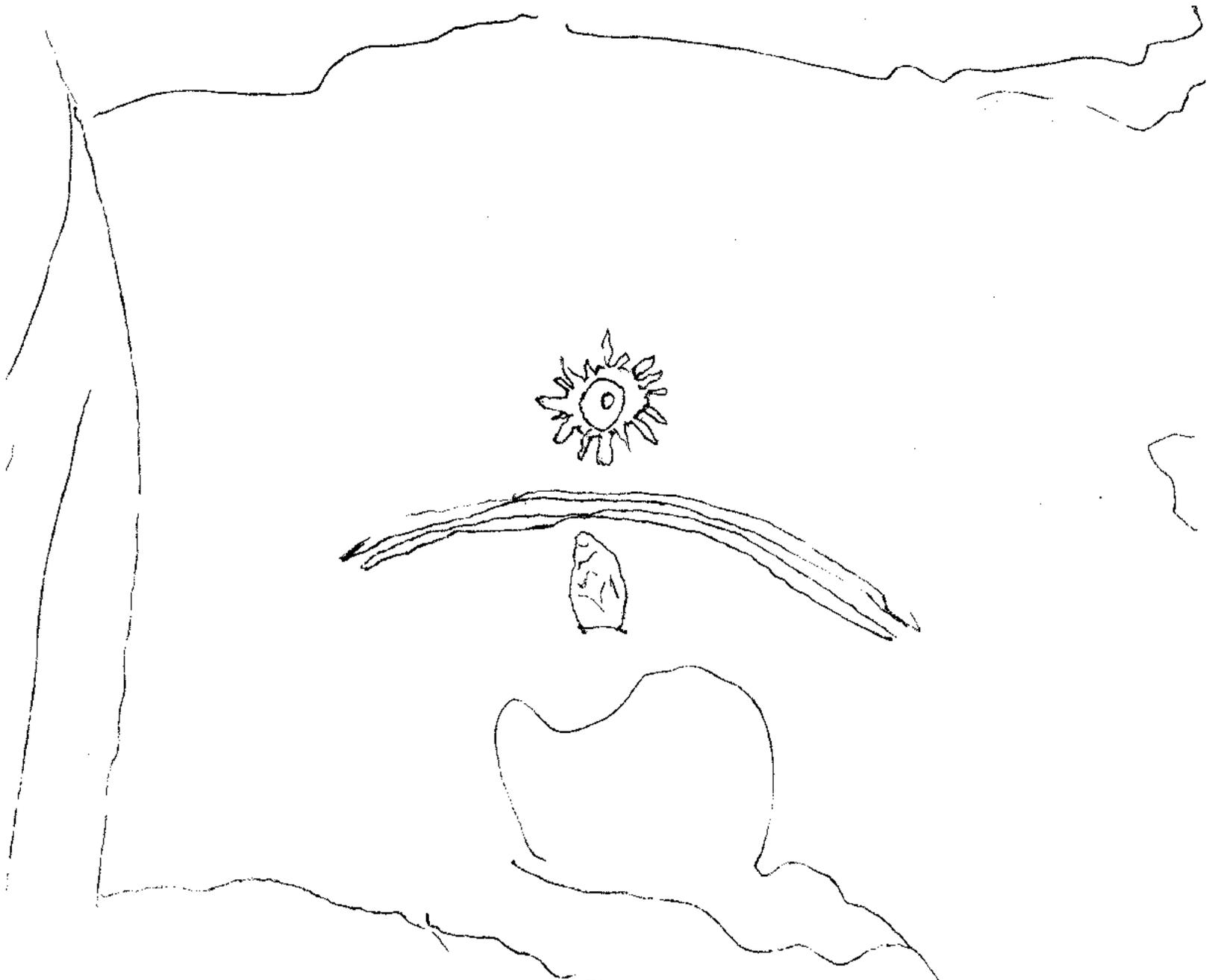
Oh, God.

She pushes me left,
I work to the right against her.
She wants my spirit
but my heart is all she gets
and whirlwinds it away while I die for awhile
to wake no longer boy
with my mouth full of blood.

Even before Ben Wright came
that murdering bastard
we would hide in our houses at night.
Home before dark, honey. You betcha.
Because Thunder ate my father at night.
Mothers and brothers too. Made a
necklace of their ankle bones and elbows.
And now he wants mine.

So I mark the time with care.
Some build their observatories on the hills.
Mine's in a bomb-shelter.

And in it I watch the year tip and
tilt towards fear
and the night fill up again
in this hard land
my home.



(The materials from which this poem was made come mainly from books as now they must. Images and lore began in Jeremiah Curtin's early collection The Myths of the Modocs and Verne F. Ray's ethnography Primitive Pragmatists: The Modoc Indians of Northern California though neither would recognize much in my reworking except, I hope, its spirit. Richard Dillon's Burnt-out Fires: California's Modoc Indian War is a strong history of this people and their demise. It introduced me to Ben Wright; either Clint Eastwood or Sylvester Stallone could play him. Most of all my poem comes from a place and the way it feels. Neither the sometime lushness of Tule Lake, itself, nor the cool high buttes that bracket that lake can claim it. Rather, the poem belongs to the lava beds just to the south. This is a dry, harsh, cutting ground as the Army found out trying to pluck Captain Jack from it. Today, it's all part of Lava Lands National Park, and Juniper Cave is a small lava tube near the park headquarters. Fifty feet or so down its length a window appears where the ceiling has fallen. You look through this window at the hill and sun scratched simply beside you on its frame. The one natural blemish on this otherwise flat surface has been used to form the pointer in the center of the hill. Its presence there must account for the design having been worked where it is and not on the adjacent panel where the sun's rays would strike it directly.)