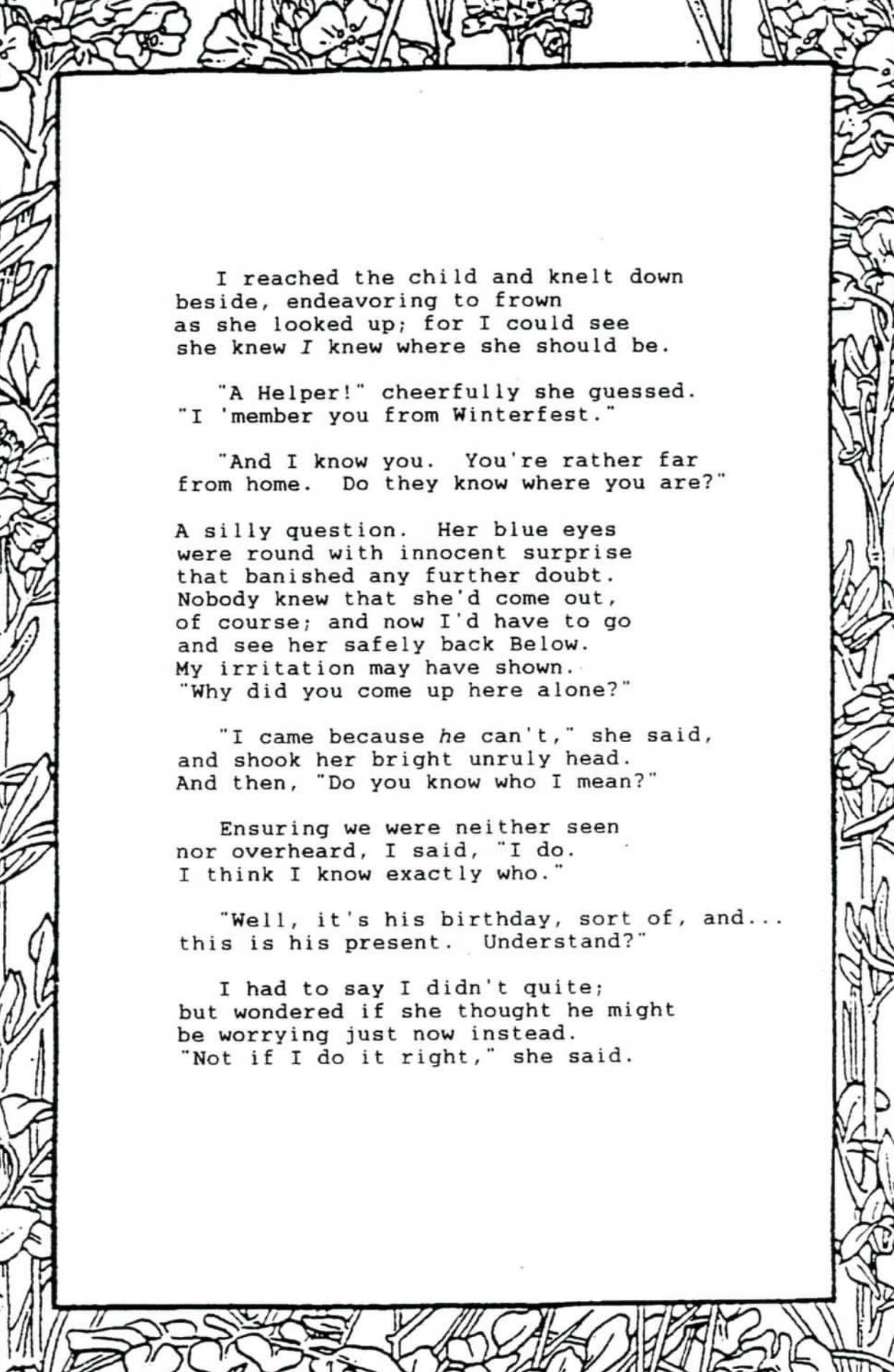


Magic

The January day was warm,
the first unmarked by cold or storm.
This winter-intermission led
me to the Park, where overhead
the trees were caught in stark surprise
against the blue and radiant skies.
The Cityfolk, as well, emerged
from home and office, and converged
on every parkland thoroughfare
to sun themselves and fill the air
with music, gaiety and talk.
I chose a more secluded walk;
and finally strolling homeward then,
I glimpsed a child in a glenn.

My sudden comic double-take
convinced me there was no mistake.
She sat cross-legged in the light,
her face turned up and eyes shut tight,
just like a dandelion there,
so still, so tousled and so fair;
her concentration so complete
the crackling weeds beneath my feet
went quite unnoticed, or ignored
as I stepped off the path toward
the spot. I recognized her, yes;
in any case her mode of dress
was one I'd instantly have known.
Her jacket had been patched and sewn
with loving hands; and stitches laid
wherever raveled hems had frayed.





I reached the child and knelt down beside, endeavoring to frown as she looked up; for I could see she knew I knew where she should be.

"A Helper!" cheerfully she guessed. "I 'member you from Winterfest."

"And I know you. You're rather far from home. Do they know where you are?"

A silly question. Her blue eyes were round with innocent surprise that banished any further doubt. Nobody knew that she'd come out, of course; and now I'd have to go and see her safely back Below. My irritation may have shown. "Why did you come up here alone?"

"I came because *he* can't," she said, and shook her bright unruly head. And then, "Do you know who I mean?"

Ensuring we were neither seen nor overheard, I said, "I do. I think I know exactly who."

"Well, it's his birthday, sort of, and... this is his present. Understand?"

I had to say I didn't quite; but wondered if she thought he might be worrying just now instead. "Not if I do it right," she said.



"Do what?" I asked her, mystified.

"You know," she whispered to confide, "he doesn't get to come outside."

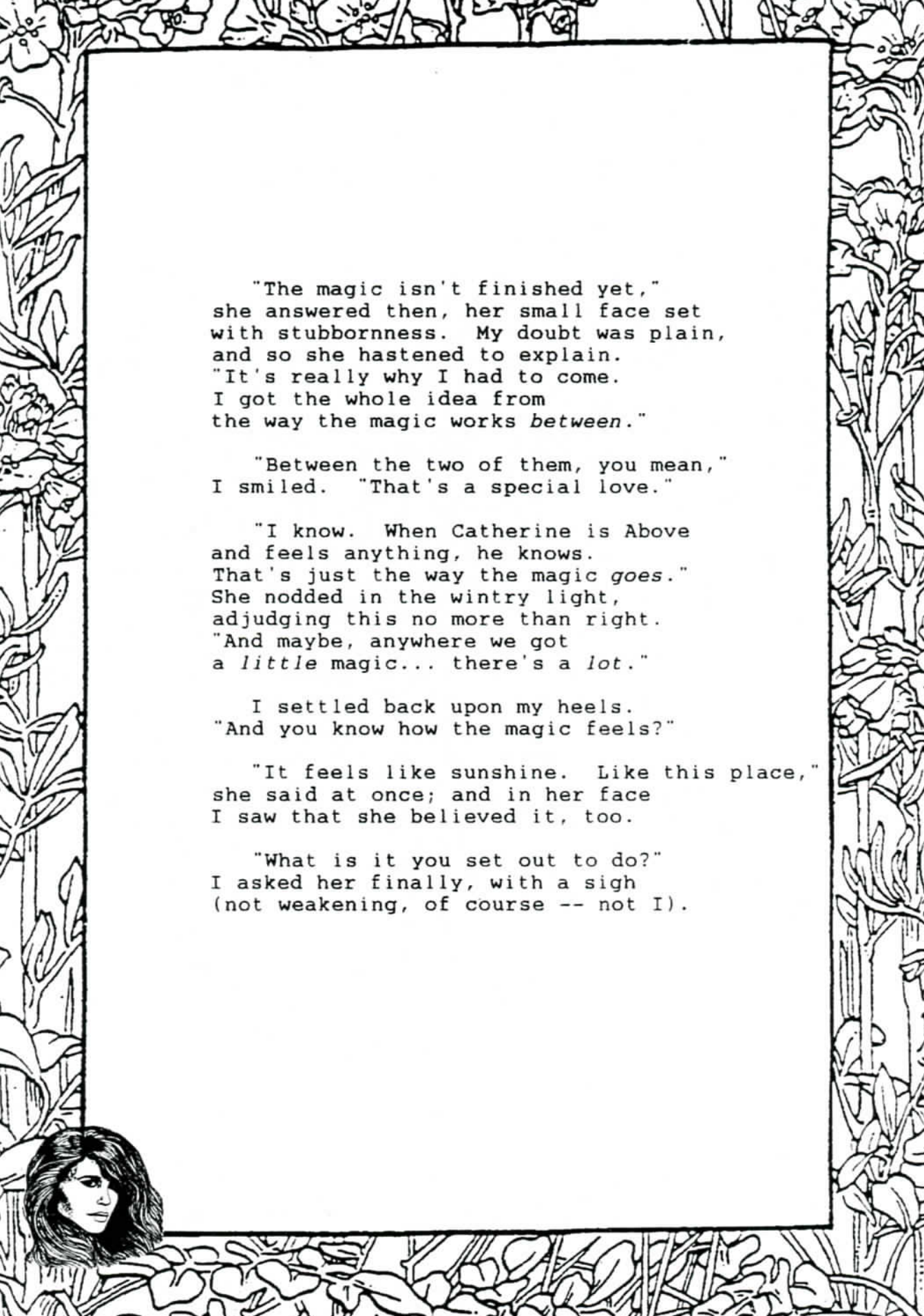
"Not in the daytime," I replied, "but he can go out when it's dark, and see the City and the Park -- oh, anything he wants to see. He's even come to visit me."

"It's not the same, and it's not fair," I heard the little stray declare. "That air feels different on your skin than when it's got the sunshine in!"

Her outrage was so young, and clear -- I hoped no one could overhear. "You mustn't let it worry you," I offered. "Even if it's true, he won't be happier to know the thought of it upsets you so. Sometimes, no matter how we try, we can't change things... I don't know why."

"But I been thinking anyways," she hurried on, her earnest gaze defiant now. "I want to share."

"I'm sure they must be wondering where you are by now," I sternly said. "Let's think of getting back, instead."



"The magic isn't finished yet," she answered then, her small face set with stubbornness. My doubt was plain, and so she hastened to explain. "It's really why I had to come. I got the whole idea from the way the magic works *between*."


"Between the two of them, you mean," I smiled. "That's a special love."

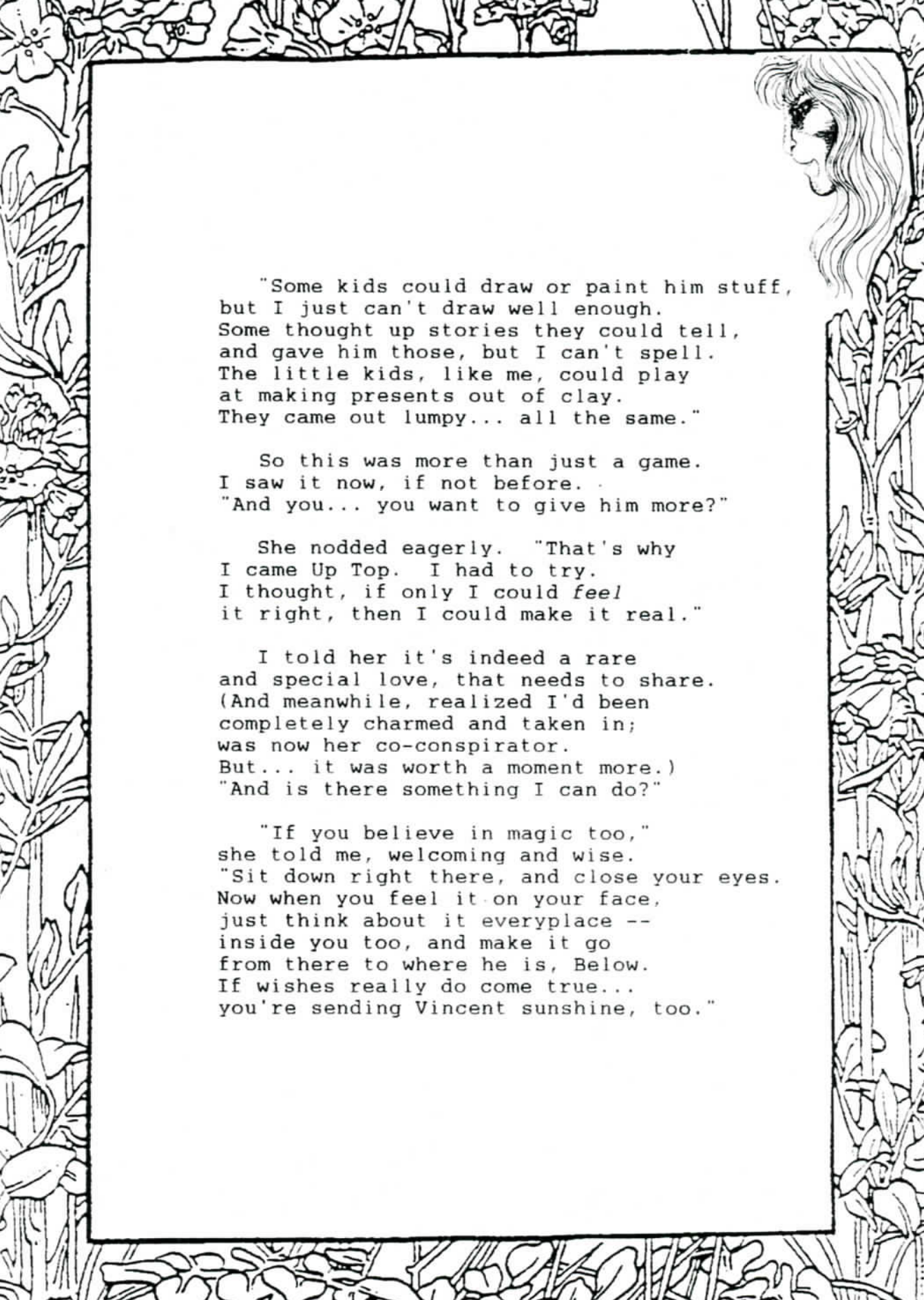
"I know. When Catherine is Above and feels anything, he knows. That's just the way the magic *goes*." She nodded in the wintry light, adjudging this no more than right. "And maybe, anywhere we got a *little* magic... there's a *lot*."

I settled back upon my heels. "And you know how the magic feels?"

"It feels like sunshine. Like this place," she said at once; and in her face I saw that she believed it, too.

"What is it you set out to do?" I asked her finally, with a sigh (not weakening, of course -- not I).





"Some kids could draw or paint him stuff, but I just can't draw well enough. Some thought up stories they could tell, and gave him those, but I can't spell. The little kids, like me, could play at making presents out of clay. They came out lumpy... all the same."

So this was more than just a game. I saw it now, if not before. "And you... you want to give him more?"

She nodded eagerly. "That's why I came Up Top. I had to try. I thought, if only I could *feel* it right, then I could make it real."

I told her it's indeed a rare and special love, that needs to share. (And meanwhile, realized I'd been completely charmed and taken in; was now her co-conspirator. But... it was worth a moment more.) "And is there something I can do?"

"If you believe in magic too," she told me, welcoming and wise. "Sit down right there, and close your eyes. Now when you feel it on your face, just think about it everywhere -- inside you too, and make it go from there to where he is, Below. If wishes really do come true... you're sending Vincent sunshine, too."