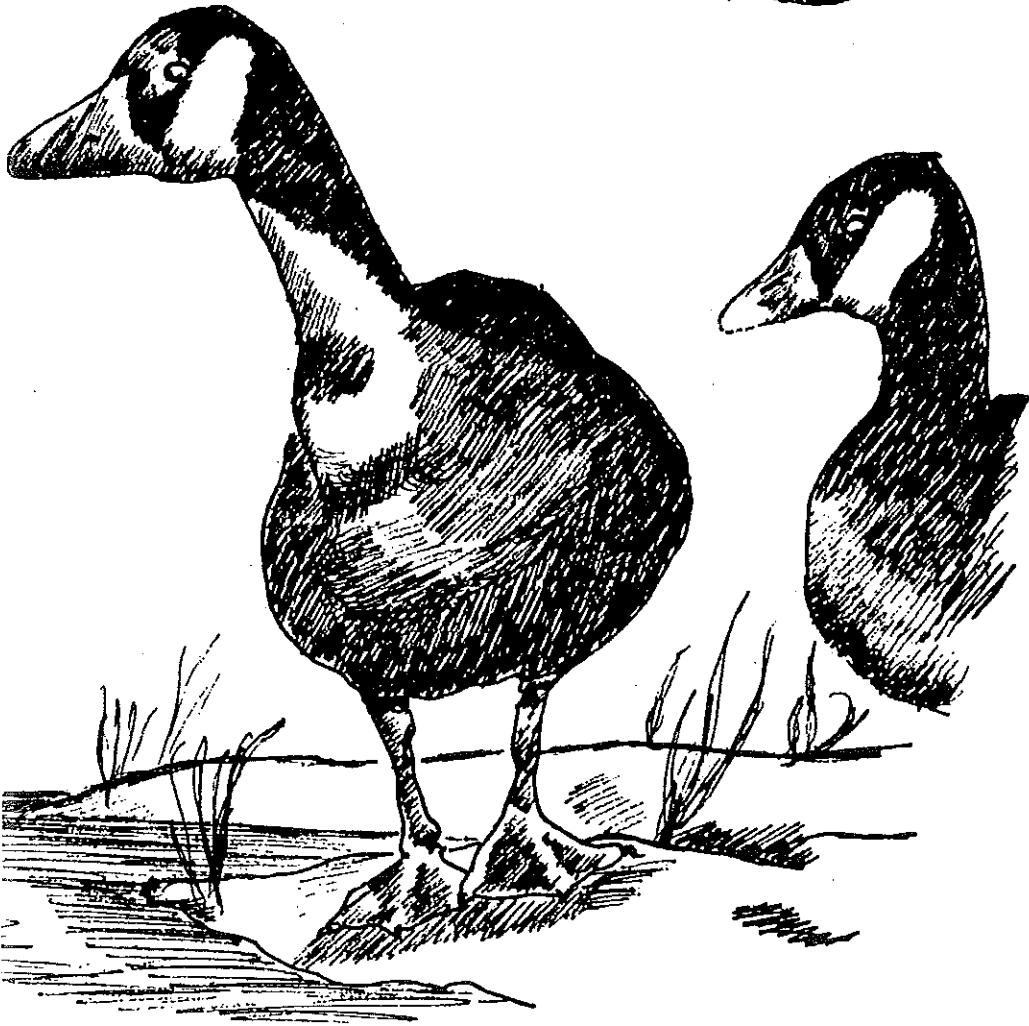


The Piper



WINTER 1986

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THE DENIZEN

I am swimming in waist-deep water, my destination one of the pair of islands that rest in the center of the strange, unnamed lake; my limbs are becoming weary; I reach out with my hands to grip the sharp point of rock that protrudes from the surface of the water. Hugging my arms around it and kicking my feet furiously underwater to keep whatever is beneath me away, I begin to wonder how the stone had gotten this way; it wasn't part of the island, and it didn't seem to be attached to anything on the bottom. I do not count on getting an answer, however.

Looking down into the murky depths, my eyes are barely able to make out the fuzzy silhouette of an unknown object wedged between two rocks on the bottom; reaching my hand down to touch it, it springs loose, floating to the top, turning into an upright position as it does so.

It is the head of a dark-skinned woman, crowned with a turban of blue satin; out of its mouth spews a fountain of water. As I realize that it is very much alive, I watch it in horror as it winks at me, smiles in a sinister manner, and then returns to its domain in the depths.

I freeze as if I have just seen the Gorgon's head; my light color turns twilight gray as my internal fluids solidify. Now, I am forever a part of the rock in the lake.

-Kristi Peterson