



THE AUSTERITY  
KITCHEN  
BY CHRISTINE  
BAUMGARTNER

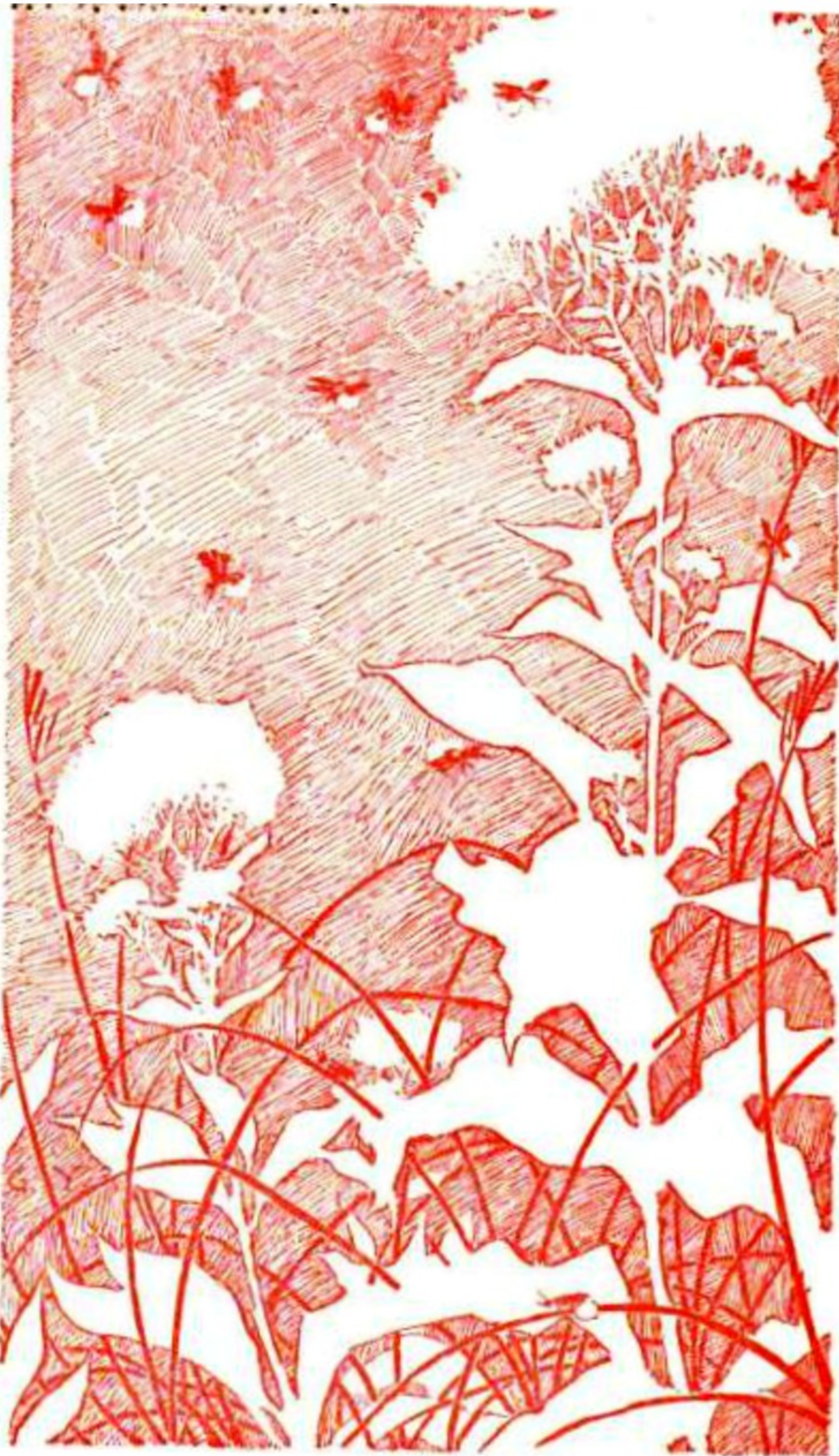
Where the alimentary is  
elementary.



If seen by day / A firefly / Is just a  
red-necked bug.” — Bashō (Date  
unknown)

Gathering Light

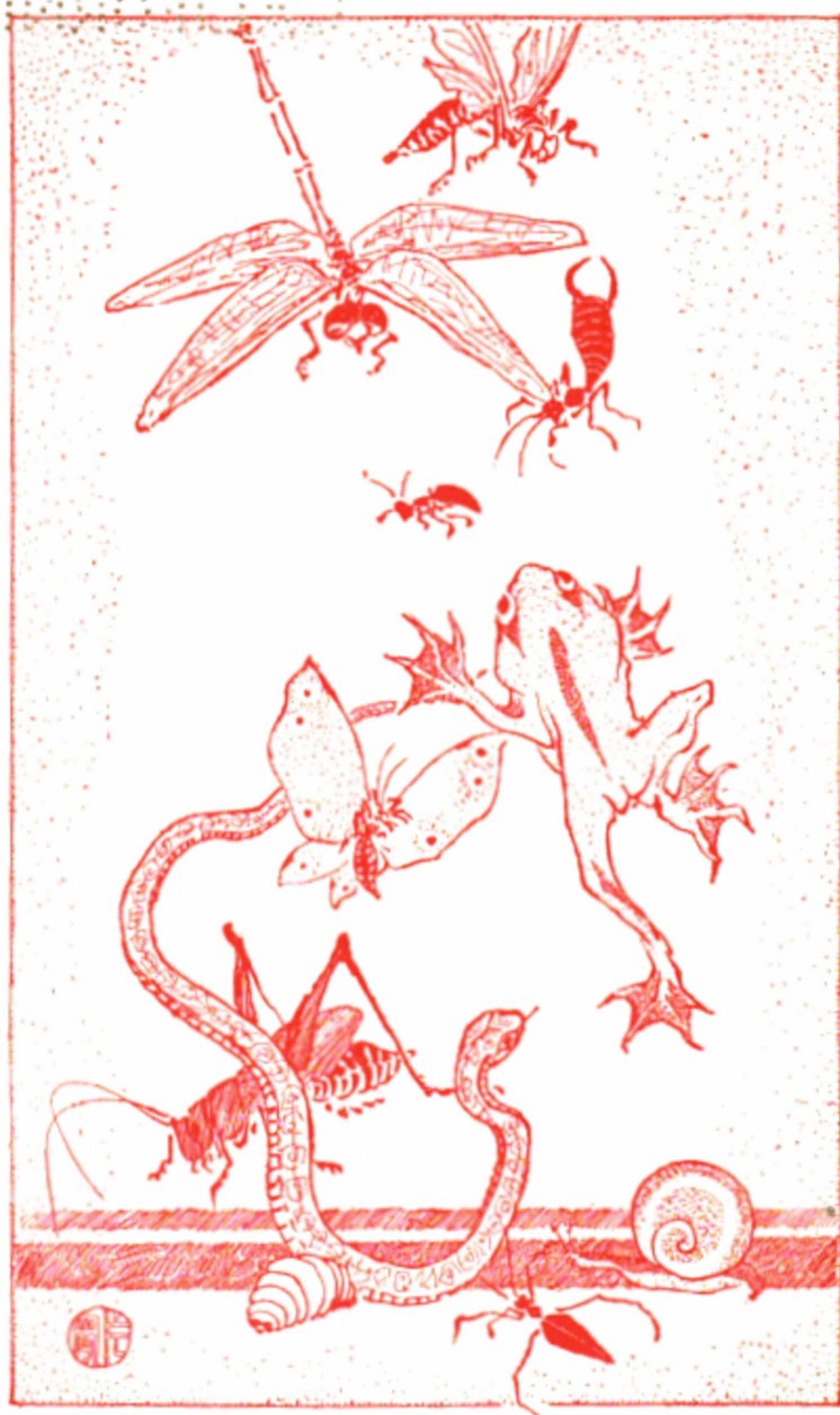
By CHRISTINE BAUMGARTNER



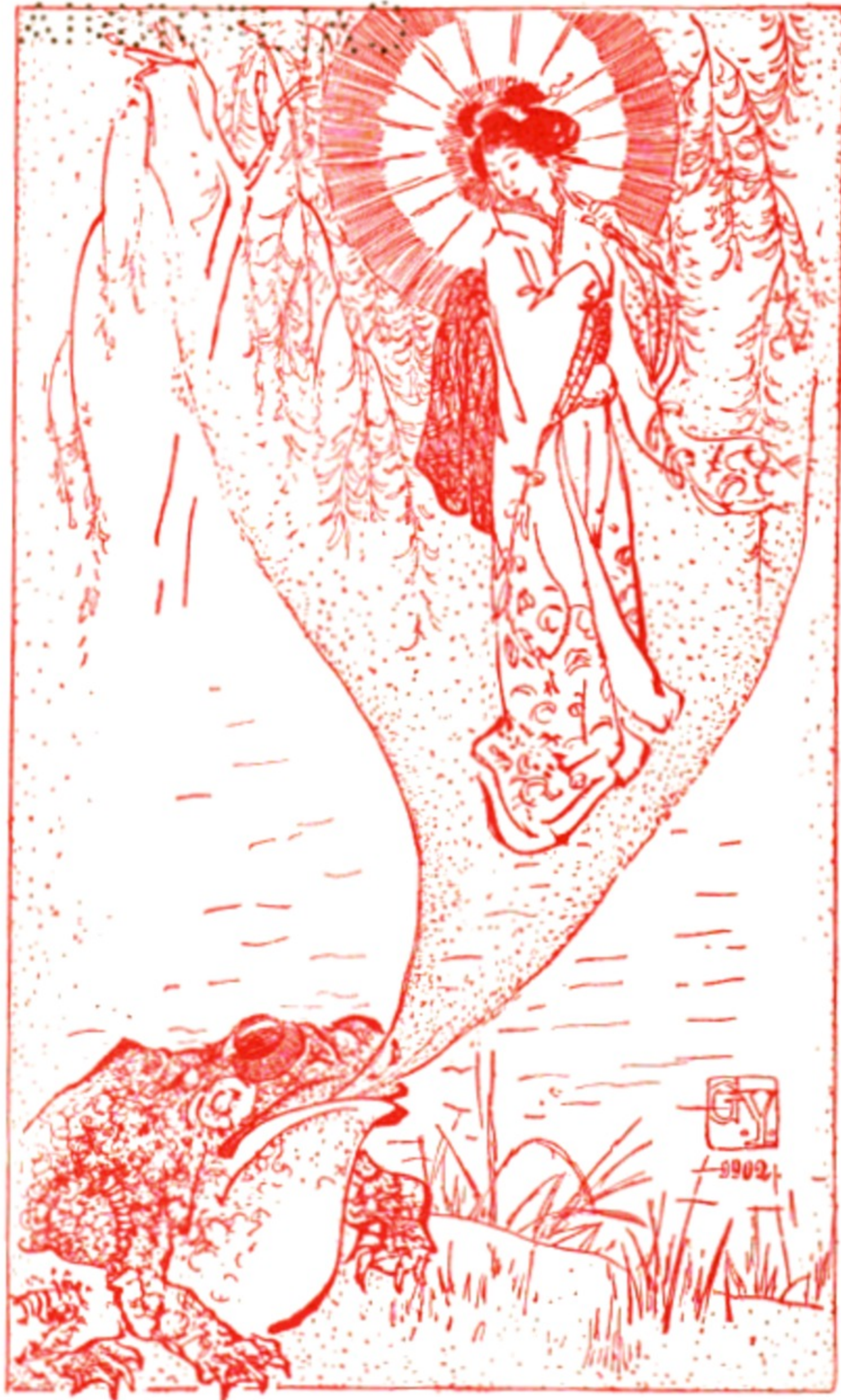
Of the glimmering swarm gathering at twilight the catcher of  
fireflies entertained few romantic notions. To him his quarry  
— which drew gasps from the crowd gathered at the  
riverbank, which drew sighs from many a moonstruck poet —  
simply meant business.

On summer evenings he began work at dusk, a long bamboo  
pole hoisted on one shoulder and a bag of brown mosquito  
netting wound around his waist.

Thus equipped he stumped off for the willows among whose  
boughs hid his prize. He examined them for the tell-tale glow.  
The most luminous he struck with his pole. A rain of fireflies  
followed. Stunned from the blow, they proved easy pickings,  
their pain making them flare brighter. Before they could  
recover he scooped them up, popping them in his mouth to  
save time. Only when his cheeks bulged would he pause to  
spit them in his net.



The firefly hunter worked into the small hours. Often he  
caught two, three thousand fireflies, which he would bring the  
next day to the local firefly broker, who appraised them  
according to their brilliance: the brighter their bellies, the  
higher their asking price. The insects usually fetched from  
three to thirteen sen per hundred. Once sorted the broker  
thrust them, handfuls at a time, into gauze-wrapped boxes,  
which he placed on small wooden tables inscribed with the  
names of customers. He had to be careful; delicate creatures,  
fireflies live but a short time in captivity. To preserve them he  
fed them strips of moistened grass.



In these cages the fireflies would abide until evening, at which  
time the restaurateurs arrived. Locating their names among  
the wooden tables, they would take their box off to their  
respective establishments, where for their patrons they would  
release its contents at sunset, as long custom prescribed. The  
firefly hunter meanwhile would take up his pole and net and  
head for the willow grove where the freed fireflies inevitability  
alighted....



June 29, 2012

Illustrations from Lafcadio Hearn's  
*Kottō: Being Japanese Curios with  
Sundry Cobwebs* (1910)

Frogs fill their bellies with fireflies  
until light shines through them like  
a candle-flame through a  
porcelain jar.

“Do I see only fireflies drifting with  
the current?,” wondered Chiyo of  
Kaga. “Or is the Night itself  
drifting, with its swarming of  
stars?”

From Katherine Russell's  
“Japanese Refreshments” (1905): A  
Japanese afternoon or evening food  
should be served in small lacquer  
trays, but large plates of Japanese  
design are a satisfactory  
substitute.... Each plate may  
contain *sushi* (made of fish and  
rice), *kuri-kinto* (made of chestnuts  
and sweet potato), *sembei* (rice  
wafers), *kasutera* (sponge cake),  
*amae* (a sweet), *shoga* (ginger),  
*namkin-maine* (peanuts), and  
*o'cha* (tea).

Previously by  
CHRISTINE BAUMGARTNER

Coweye Burgers and  
Plastic Malts

Dinner with Caligula  
A Contrary Image of  
Steaming Excrement