

THE Inheritance

ELIZABETH A. POVINELLI



THE Inheritance

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THE Inheritance

Elizabeth A. Povinelli



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To Emilia Ambrosi
Long gone, never absent.

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Preface

The following is not a factual history. It is a meditation on the activities and processes through which we come into or take possession of something as if a birthright. My reflections roam from the US South of the 1960s and 1970s to the turn-of-the-twentieth-century Austrian-Hungarian Alps and then back again. I am certain that members of my intimate and extended family have different memories of the events I describe—and different archives supporting or undermining their factual basis. In other words, although it is a piece of nonfiction, *The Inheritance* is not a strict history. In the guise of a memoir, *The Inheritance* examines the patterns of violence, dislocation, racism, and structural inequality that have shaped not merely my life but all lives within what Hortense Spillers has described as the American grammar of race.


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Act I

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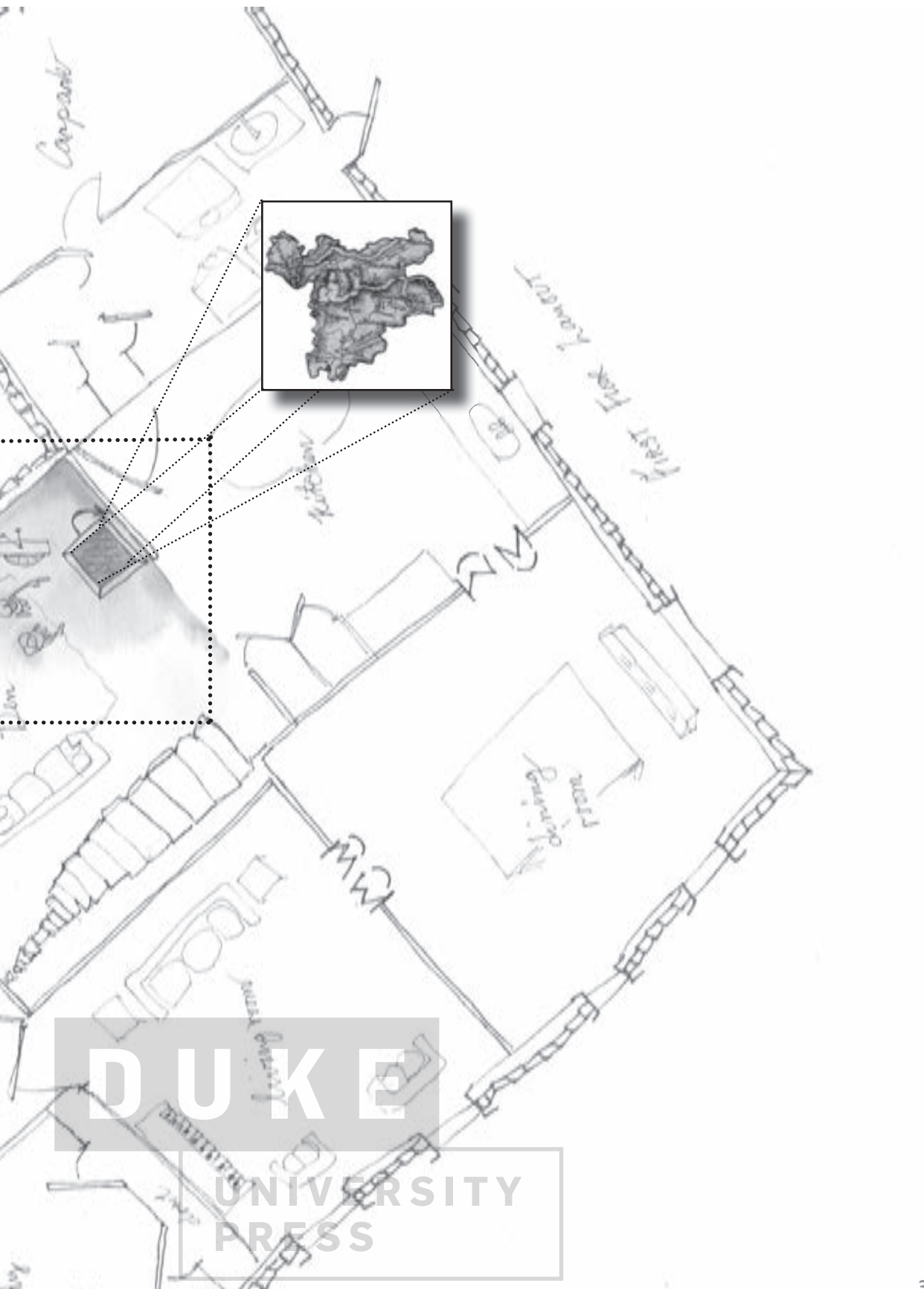
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Most people believe that their inheritance is passed down through blood or soil.

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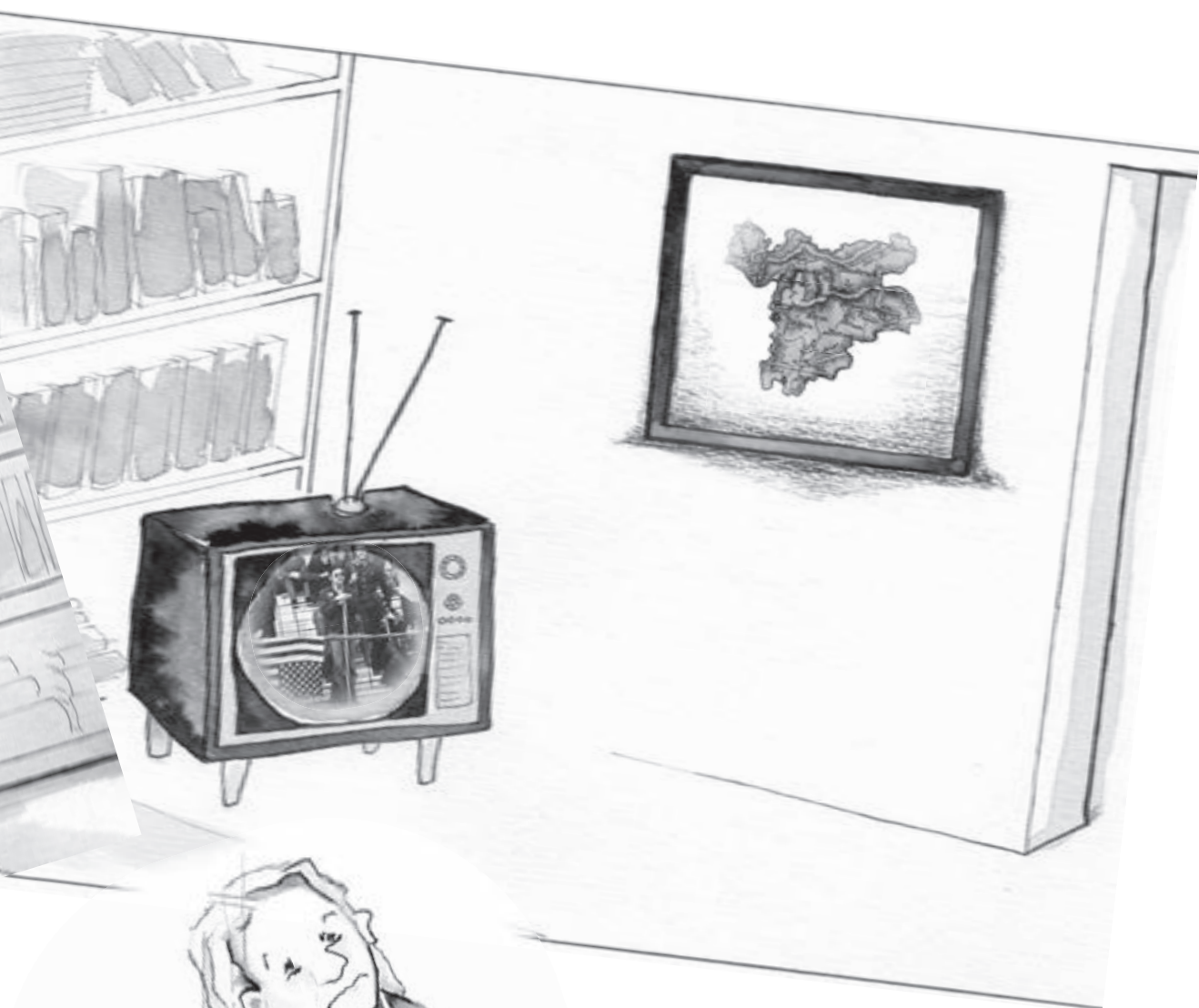


Mine hung over our TV like a purloined letter. It throbbed like a wound you found you had but couldn't remember getting.



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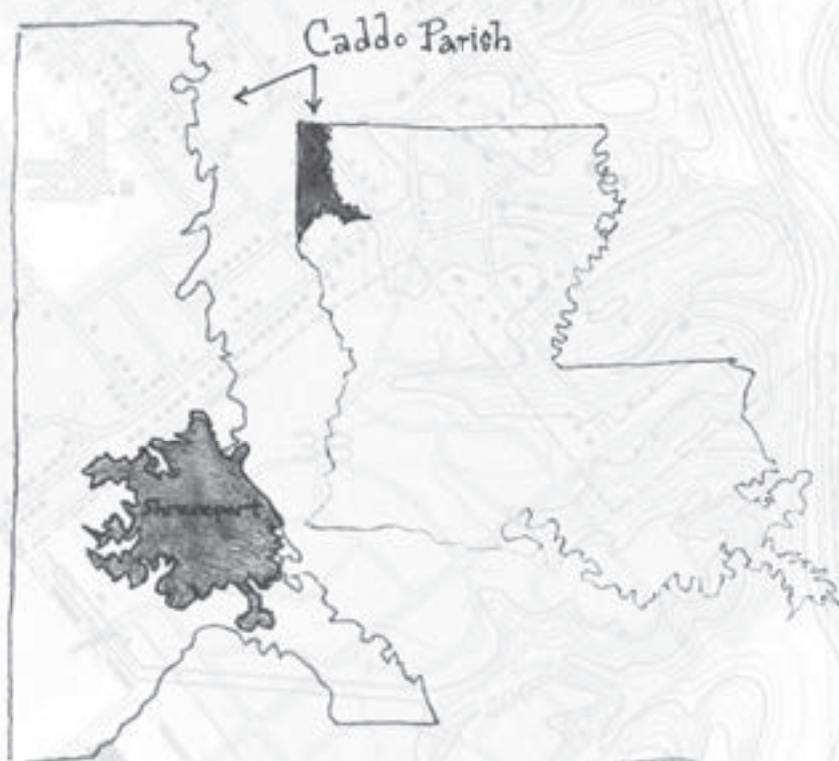
I was probably six or seven before it began to stand out from all the other objects inside and outside our house—before it became strange to me in its difference from everything else.

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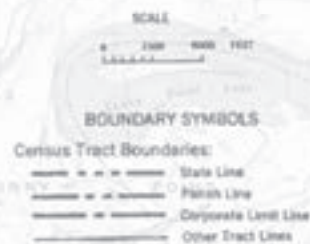
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— CENSUS TRACTS IN THE SHREVEPORT SMSA
INSET MAP - SHREVEPORT CITY AND ADJACENT AREA

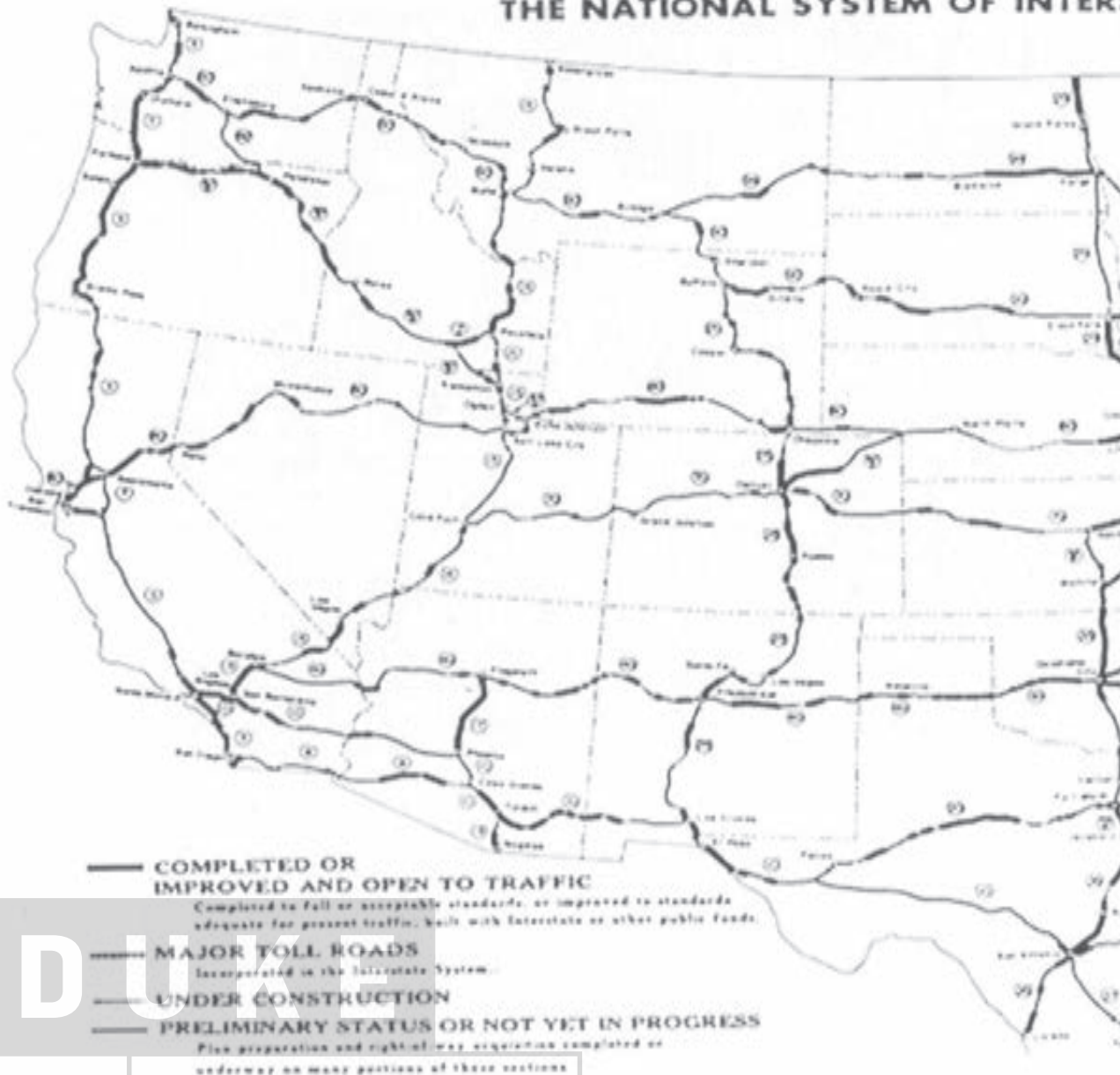


By that time, we were living in Shreveport, Louisiana. Let's say it was around 1969. Five years earlier, we had moved into a new suburb, Spring Lake, located on the edge of a vast pine and oak forest.



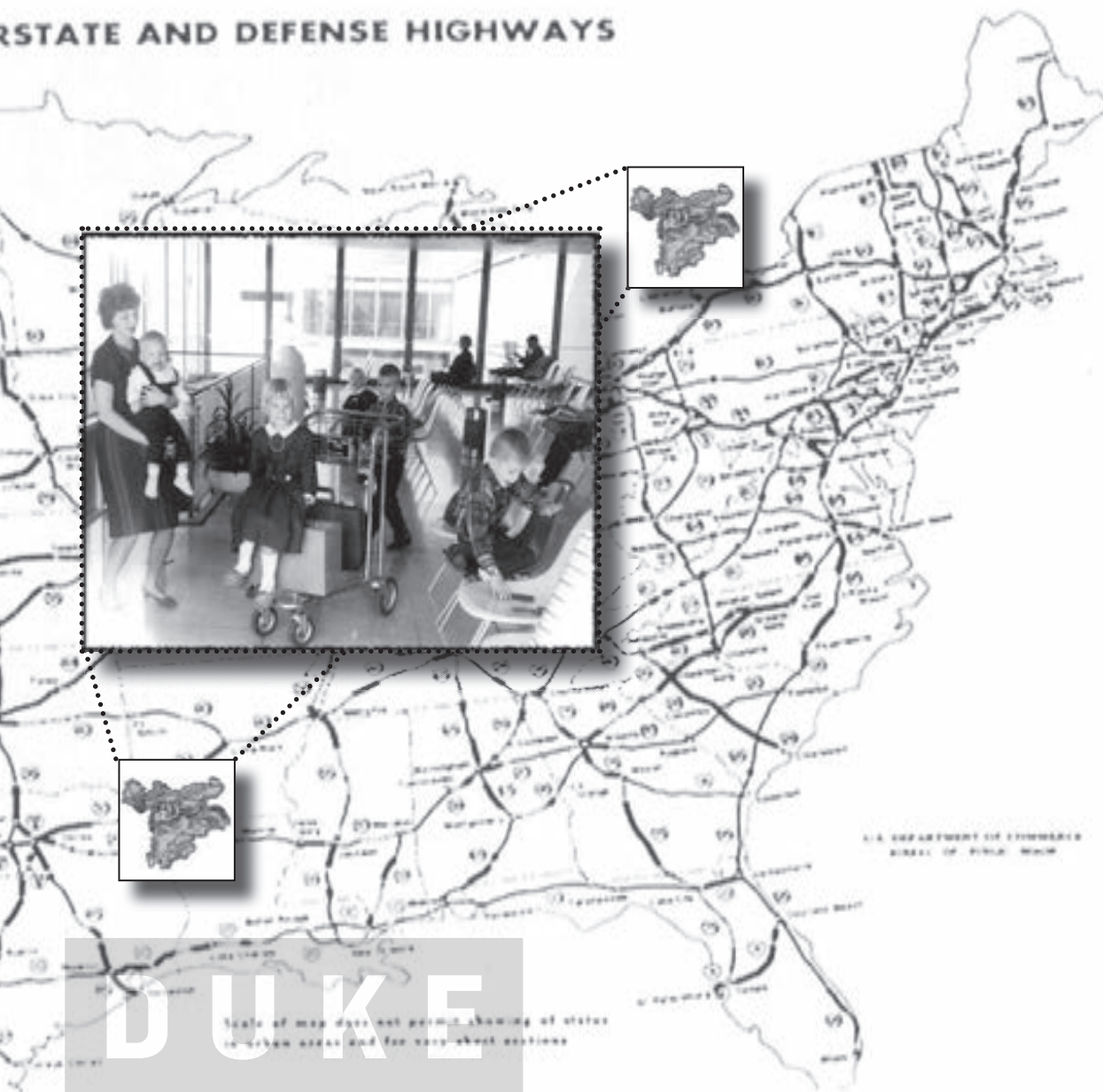
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THE NATIONAL SYSTEM OF INTER



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STATE AND DEFENSE HIGHWAYS



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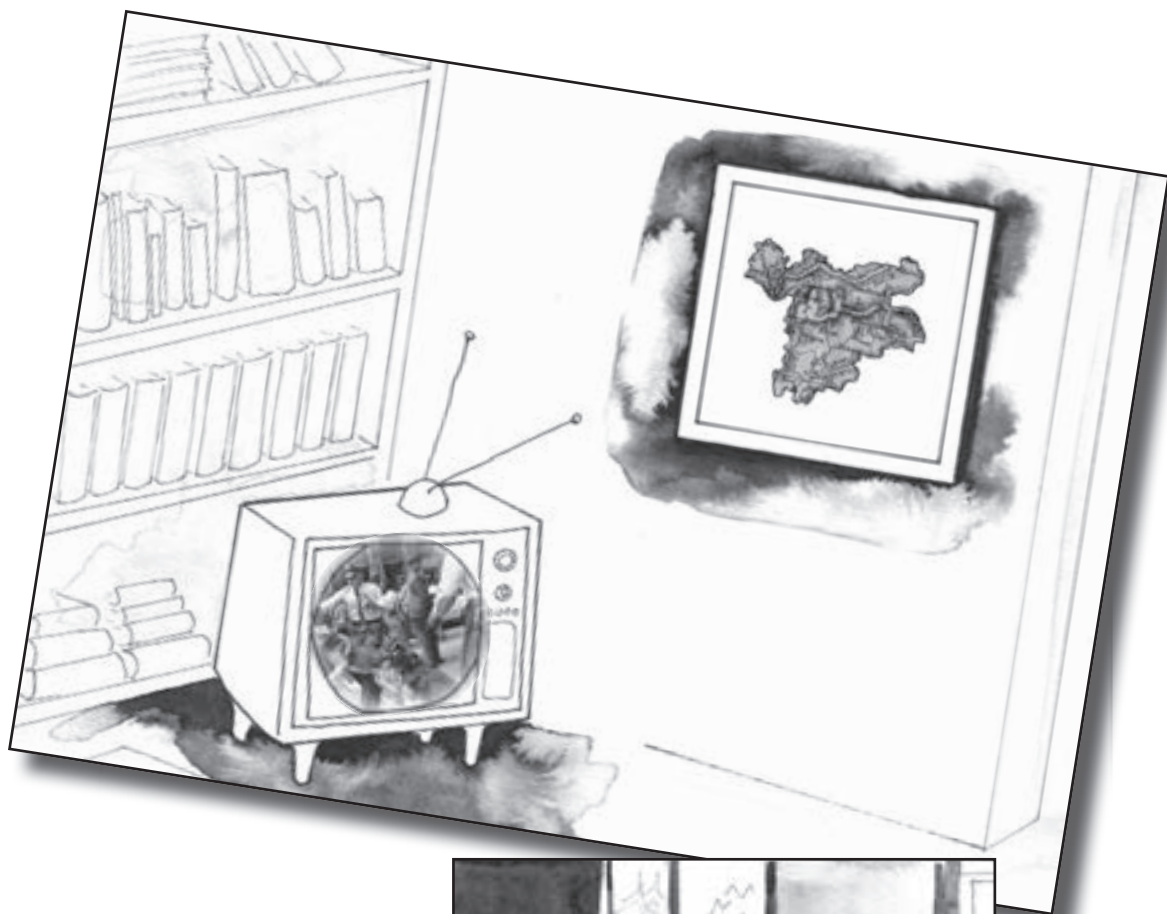
When I was young, I assumed that if you wanted to know what something was or meant, you just asked: What, where, why, how, when? Then you received an answer and all was made clear.

Who?
What?
Where?
When?
Why?

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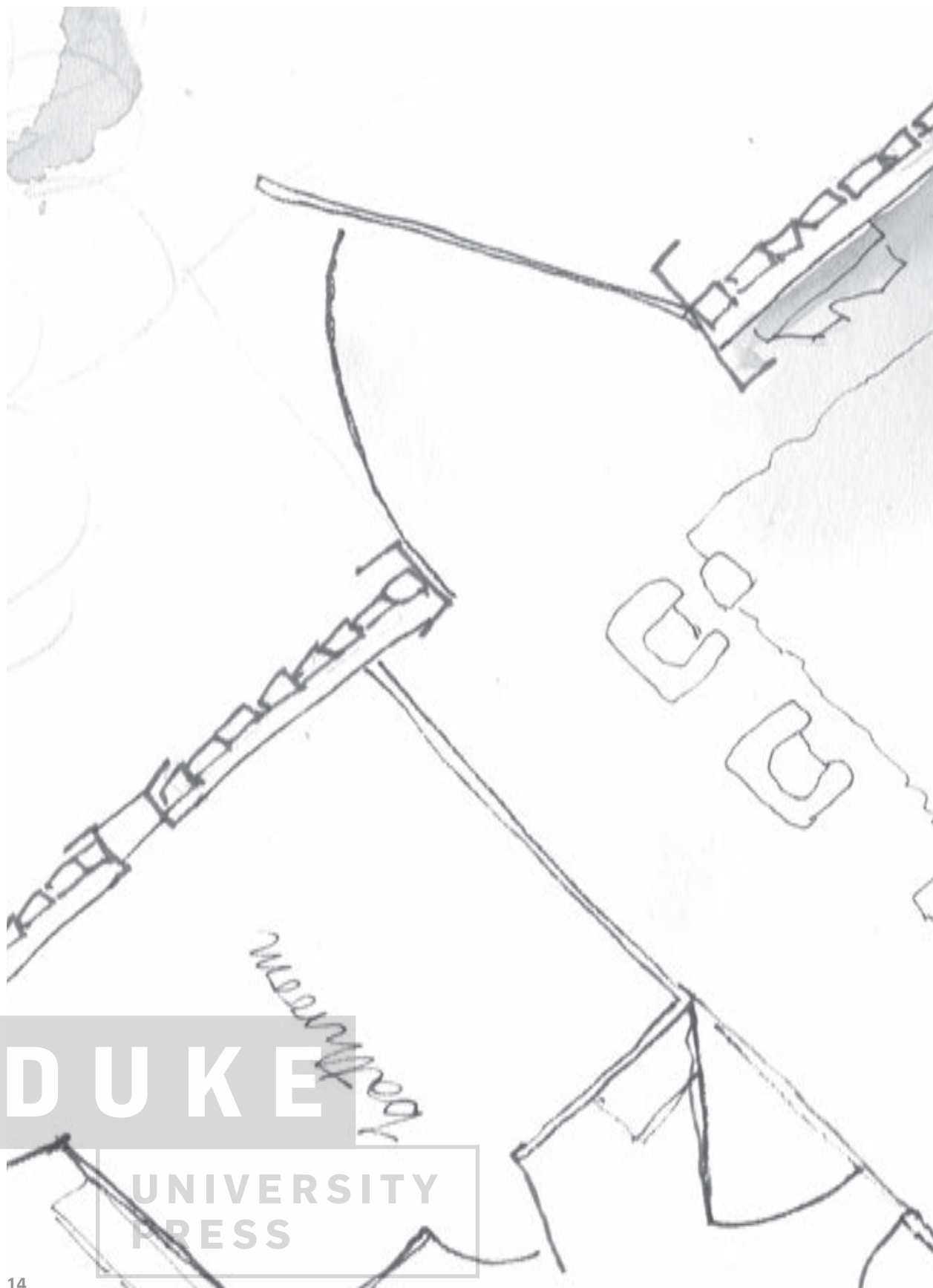


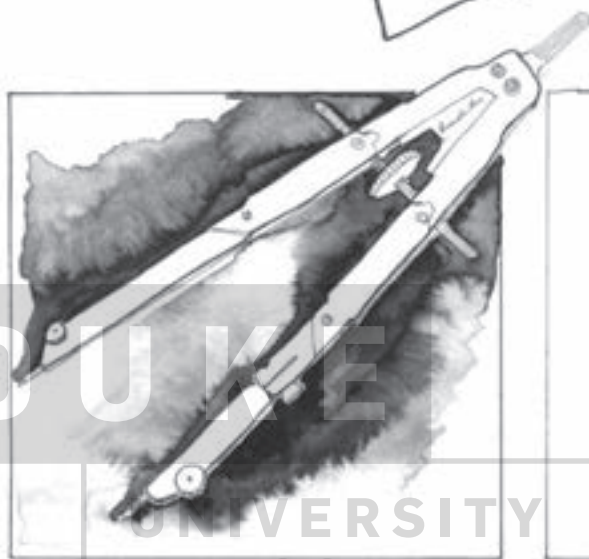
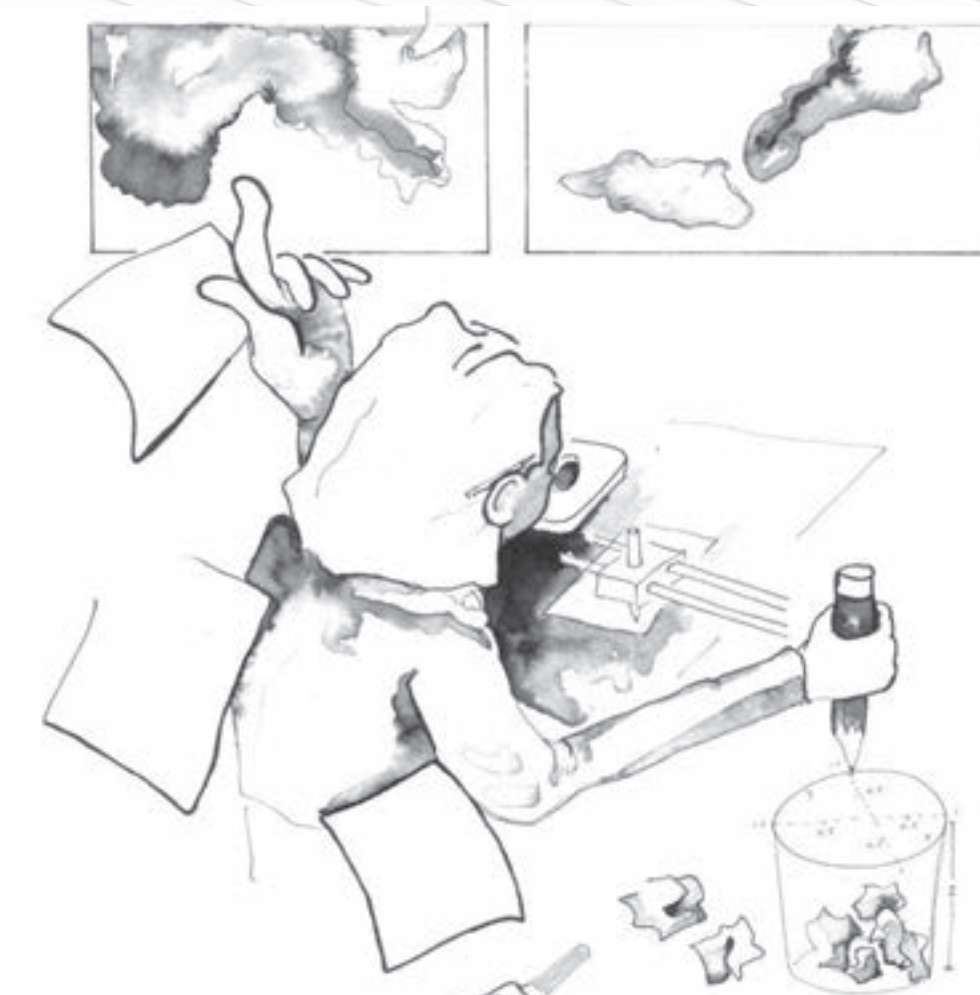
So I tried *what*.



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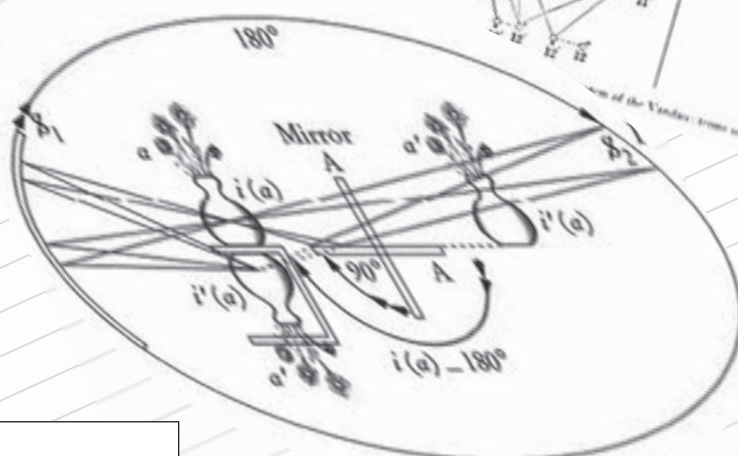
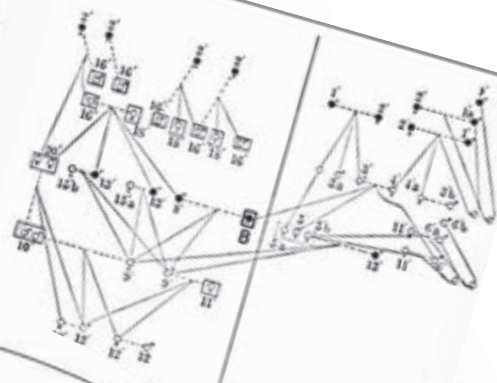
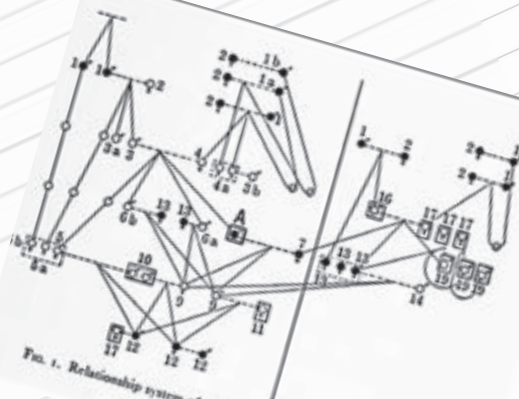




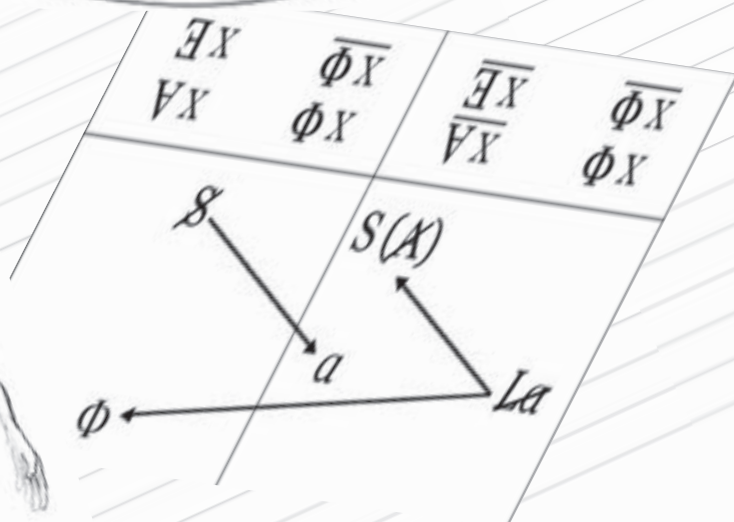
Now, I knew what a problem was. We did mathematics early in my family.

“A problem is a puzzle placed on top of a trouble.”

And even then I knew that one problem . . .



... usually led to another.





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The main problem in my house was one of division. And the main division was kids against parents.

Trouble started whenever we tried to solve it.

$$\frac{3}{2\sqrt{6}}$$
$$\frac{6}{2} = \frac{3}{1}$$
$$2:6$$
$$1:3$$



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Roque in Grocery List!

Saturday

8 Gant green peas frozen
5 mixed vegetables
5 frozen corn

12 tons

1 cans

Cans

for

cans

have

water

also

etch

Prose

orange

10 lbs

fur

hand

1 gallon metro, van
icecream

1 gallon vanilla
icecream

My parents had wanted twelve children. They had seen the 1950 film *Cheaper by the Dozen*.

In the end, there were only six of us spread out across eight years—girl, boy, boy, me, boy, girl.

The first four kids came out one after the other, with barely any breathing room for my mother. Boom, boom, boom, and boom. The last two had a couple years spacing.

I was usually clumped with the oldest even though I was the fourth. It was a good swing position—youngest of the oldest, oldest of the youngest.

Chickens were bigger in those days, but I can still remember looking at our Sunday night bird and wondering where the six extra pieces would have come from had my parents achieved their reproductive goal.



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