

Sacred & Mundane

ARTIFACTS OF CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

Rituals of Spring

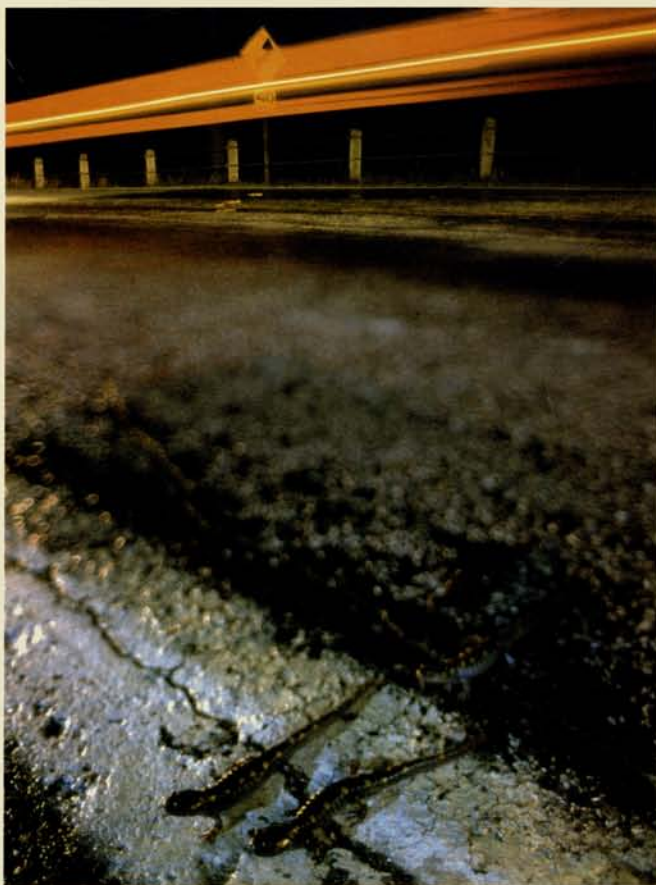
BY CHERYL DAIGLE

Imagine a pitch-black night in early spring. The rain has been coming down steadily since afternoon, with the temperature hovering around forty degrees. Not my favorite weather to walk the streets, but the perfect weather for mole salamanders and their companions, the wood frogs, to migrate to vernal pools. I have volunteers to call and people to meet.

It is known where most of their migration routes cross major roads, and where the rarer species seem to coalesce, so it is these roads that we will be walking this night, about twelve routes in all.

I connect with the volunteers and send them on their way. Soon my friend Katherine and I are standing alongside a major road that hosts one of the larger salamander migrations—and the fastest traffic. We press strips of reflective tape on rain-soaked gear, then head out along the road, carrying flashlights and clipboards with Rite-in-the-Rain paper and pens to mark our findings. Each salamander or frog that we find will be tallied, alive or dead. Live ones will be moved to the side of the road in the direction they have been traveling.

This year, I have decided to remove the dead frogs and salamanders from the pavement also, and to place them in grass or leaves alongside the road. A fel-



low volunteer had mentioned that she does this, out of respect. At the time, I thought it odd, almost silly, because I knew that crows and other wild animals would eat the dead before sunrise the next morning. A deeper part of me said it is the proper thing to do.

The task of removing the dead is not an easy one. Amphibian flesh and bone do not hold up well against a fat rubber tire carrying several tons of steel, spinning by at forty miles per hour. Spring peepers, tiny frogs that also migrate at this time, are nearly impossible to remove—rather like trying to lift thick spit off pavement

with your fingers. I don't bother. When I lift the partially flattened body of a large spotted salamander that I judge to be nine or ten years old, its internal organs spill out and rest against my palm. The eyes bulge, and its mouth is agape, as if emitting a silent scream. It is gross, and in part familiar; the smoothness that I love about salamander skin is still there. I say something that amounts to an apology, before setting it down gently in the grass. I do this repeatedly, the feeling of repulsion interrupted frequently by pleasure in finding living amphibians and feeling their toe pods as they try to escape my grasp.

By the time this night's exercise ends, my senses are more attuned to salamanders; to the forest that surrounds them and me; to the rain that soaks my skin and makes me shiver, this rain that gives them life. And my hearing, dulled by the time spent slogging along the road, is suddenly amplified when I am too slow to save a blue spotted salamander several yards ahead of me and a tire hits it square on, the sound of it being crushed echoing in my ears.

Exhausted, I barely notice the spotted salamander on the path when I return home that night, and almost step on it. It stares at me accusingly. I squat down and stare back, caught by the power that has brought us together in the cold rain.