

One Year & 15 Seconds

For six lives, the deep fissures of 5:04 p.m. Oct. 17 will not easily be sealed

Sometimes at night, when the world around her is silent and still, Angela Sinicropi dreams of things falling. Heavy, unseen things. Hurtling toward her head.

Angela has been living with these nightmares for nearly a year now. Yet each time the earthquake invades her sleep, it comes cloaked in shadow.

Her mind will not show Angela her

for whom Loma Prieta remains a warning and a promise of future earthquakes. He in particular knows that those who choose to live atop the Bay Area's restless geology cannot afford to ignore the experience of Loma Prieta. Like the dimly remembered objects of Angela's dreams, its lessons are far too important to leave behind.

5:04 p.m.

On Oct. 17, 1989, 11 miles below the dark, damp redwoods of the Santa Cruz Mountains, the earth ruptured, releasing

ruined concrete of the Cypress Street Viaduct. She cannot see the blood soaking her lace shirt, cannot feel the glass crunching beneath her hands and knees as she crawls between sandwiched slabs of decking toward a pale patch of light.

And when she wakes, Angela can remember only this: She always gets hurt in her dreams, but does not die.

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For some, the terror lasted 15 seconds. For others, like Angela Sinicropi, the Loma Prieta earthquake has never gone away. At 5:04 p.m. Wednesday, even those of us who long ago swept away the broken glass and pushed back our fears will pause to mark an anniversary we'd rather not dwell on. Then we'll go on with our lives.

This is the story of six people for whom the quake has lingered:

Angela Sinicropi, 31, an artist who tries to conquer her fears by drawing dark objects crashing through the sky and angels spreading protective arms over crouching figures.

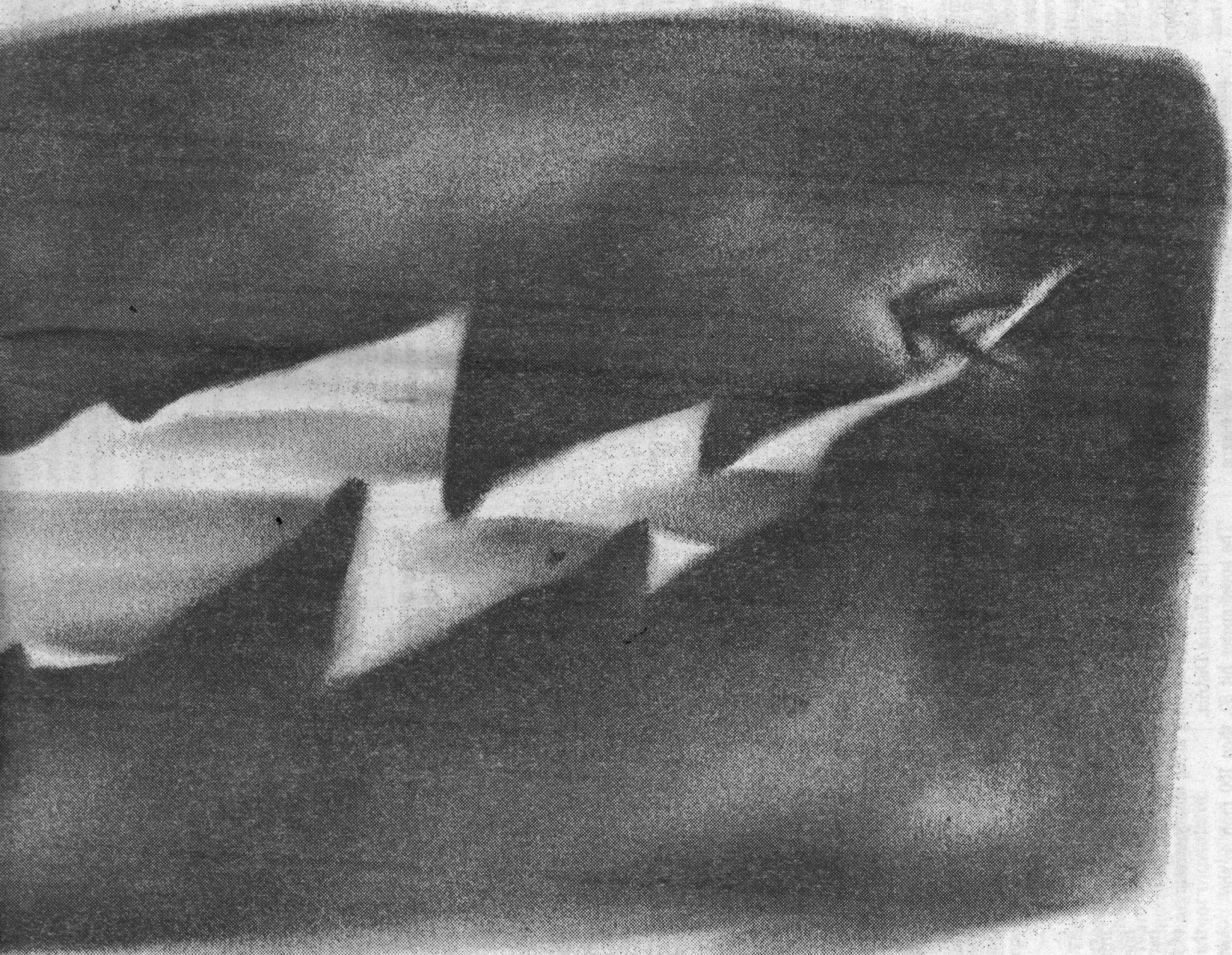
Rosa Ortega, 34, a Watsonville mother of five whose year of mending included cold, comfortless nights shivering with her children in the family station wagon and days spent fighting for food.

Gretchen Wells, 35, a KGO radio reporter whose meticulously planned life in San Francisco's Marina District was both impoverished and enriched when her neighborhood burned.

Shirley Hammond, 56, a rescue worker who thinks about the people she and her dog Cinnamon might have saved — had they been given the chance.

Jim Malley, 32, an engineer whose work in strengthening buildings against earthquakes has made him all too familiar with the hazards hidden in the brick and concrete walls of California's urban canyons.

Paul Reasenber, 42, a seismologist



tive force of a thermonuclear bomb. Thirty miles north, an alarm sounded in the lobby of the U.S. Geological Survey in Menlo Park. Paul Reasenber knew the survey's network of instruments had detected a substantial tremor. He tensed against the coming shock. A second passed. Two seconds. Three.

Then the quake struck like a semitruck slamming against the building. As Paul dived beneath a table, his mind was already at work. Quakes traveled many times faster than the speed of sound, he knew, so this one had to be pretty distant. Yet it was frighteningly powerful.

Before it was over he'd picked three possible epicenters. All, he later learned, were wrong.

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At the Edward A. Hall Middle School in Watsonville, the ground buckled and writhed in a series of convulsive shudders. Moments before, Rosa Ortega had checked her watch and smiled. A few chance green lights and she had gotten her boys, Adam, 9, and Nicolas, 8, to soccer practice on time.

Now the field was crumpling like a discarded dinner napkin. Rosa tumbled, screaming, 5-year-old Mia falling by her side.

Chimneys collapsed. Water mains exploded. And from the row of working-class houses facing the school, Rosa could hear the hiss of broken gas pipes. As the earth continued to roll like a ship's deck, a woman on her knees began praying aloud in Spanish.

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Twenty minutes earlier, Gretchen Wells had kissed her husband and infant son goodbye at their Marina District home and headed toward KGO for what promised to be one of the most exciting days of her career: anchoring the evening news during the radio station's World Series coverage.

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Eleven miles below the Santa Cruz Mountains, the earth erupted

with the destructive force of a thermonuclear bomb.