

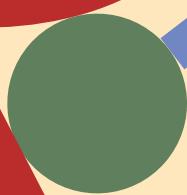


Fitchburg State University

English Studies Department

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Route 2



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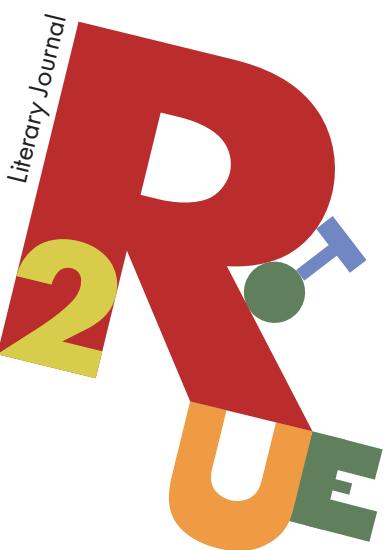


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Route 2

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Whether fantastical tales of spaceships and elves or culturally relevant soliloquies on age, race, and power, the works in this edition of *Route 2* embody the human spirit in all its complexity.

These poems, essays, and stories ask questions, incite wonder, bring humor, pathos, intelligence, and, on occasion, grace. Organized around poems selected by our editorial team, each section seeks to highlight the shifting and subtle nuances within individual pieces by putting them in conversation with each other. We hope you enjoy the talents of your fellow Fitchburg State students.

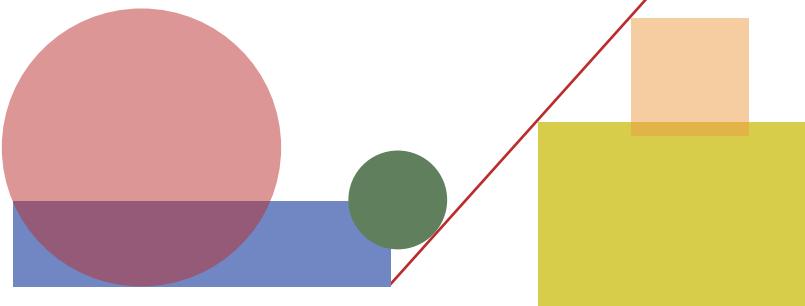
—The Editors

Designer's Note

In 1919, the Bauhaus was founded by Walter Gropius who wanted to reimagine the world to reflect the unity of all the arts. He pushed for the unity of art and technology by creating new advanced ideas about form, color, and space that soon were integrated into design vocabulary. A combination of fine and applied art to find an objective design language that could overcome the dangers of past styles and personal taste. Typography was seen as both a means of communication but also an artistic expression. Gropius' ideas and many other artists of the Bauhaus movement inspired the artistic style of this journal you are about to flip through. Simple forms that were manipulated by rotating, repeating, and overlapping to create a composition. Typography that carries your eyes along the page with section dividers that make you question what you see. A basic color palette yet interesting composition displays my taste in the Bauhaus movement.

Every story and poem in this journal were thoughtfully written and submitted by a variety of students. Each having their own memories and emotions connected to the literature. I would like to congratulate and thank the students for submitting stories and poems because you are the reason why I could create this journal.

I hope you enjoy the literature and artwork.
Thank you.



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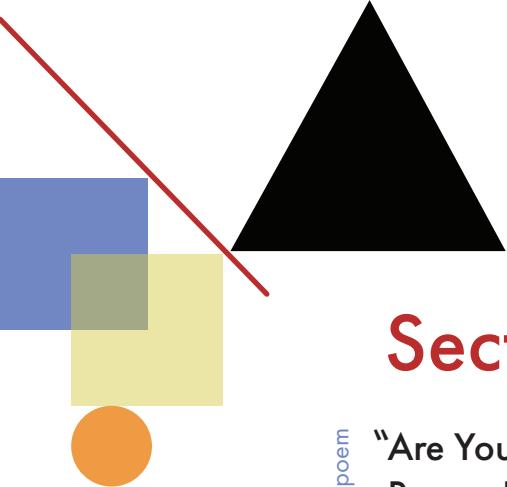
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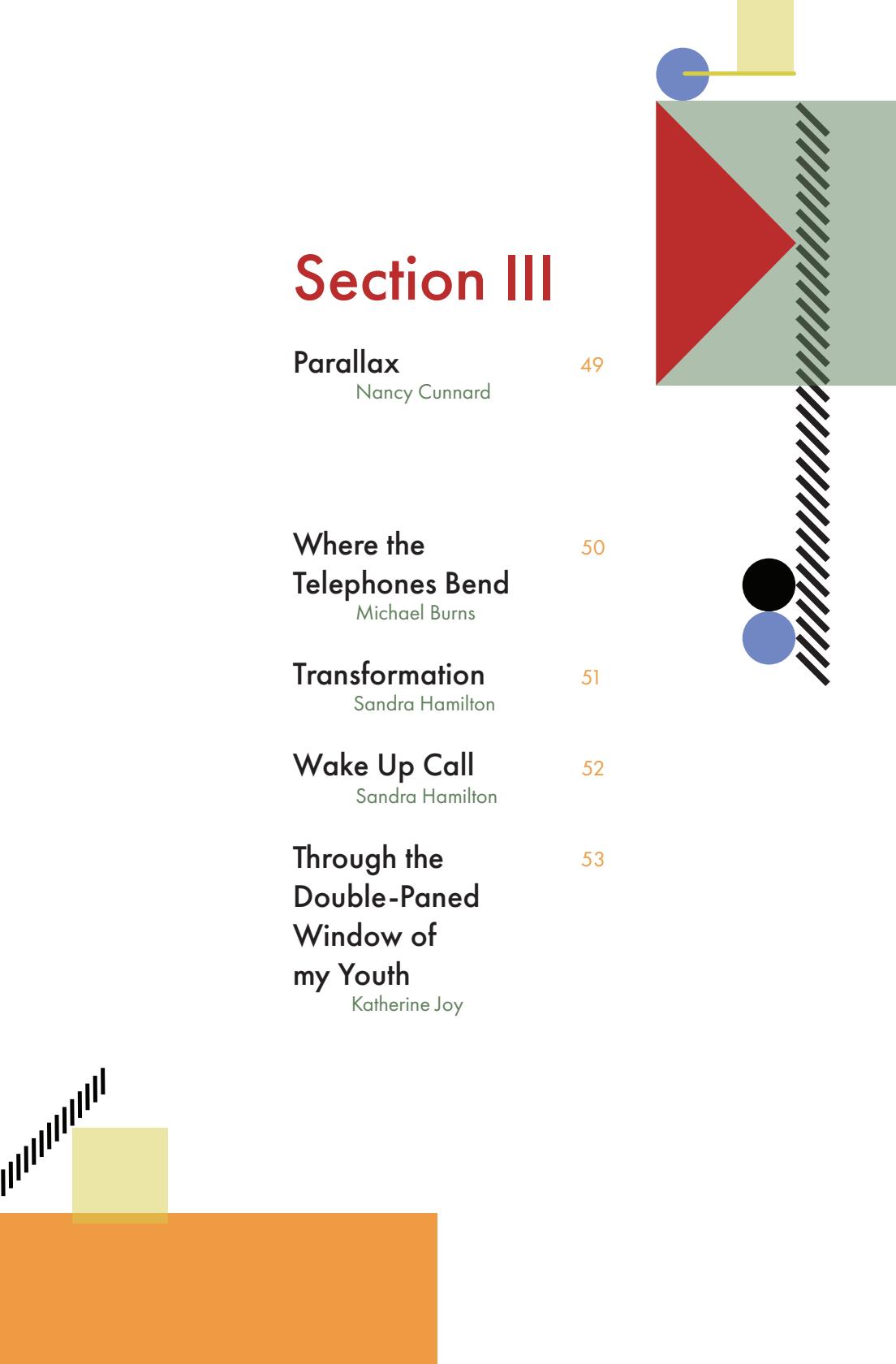
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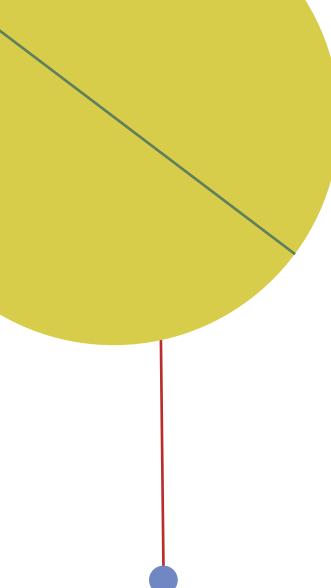
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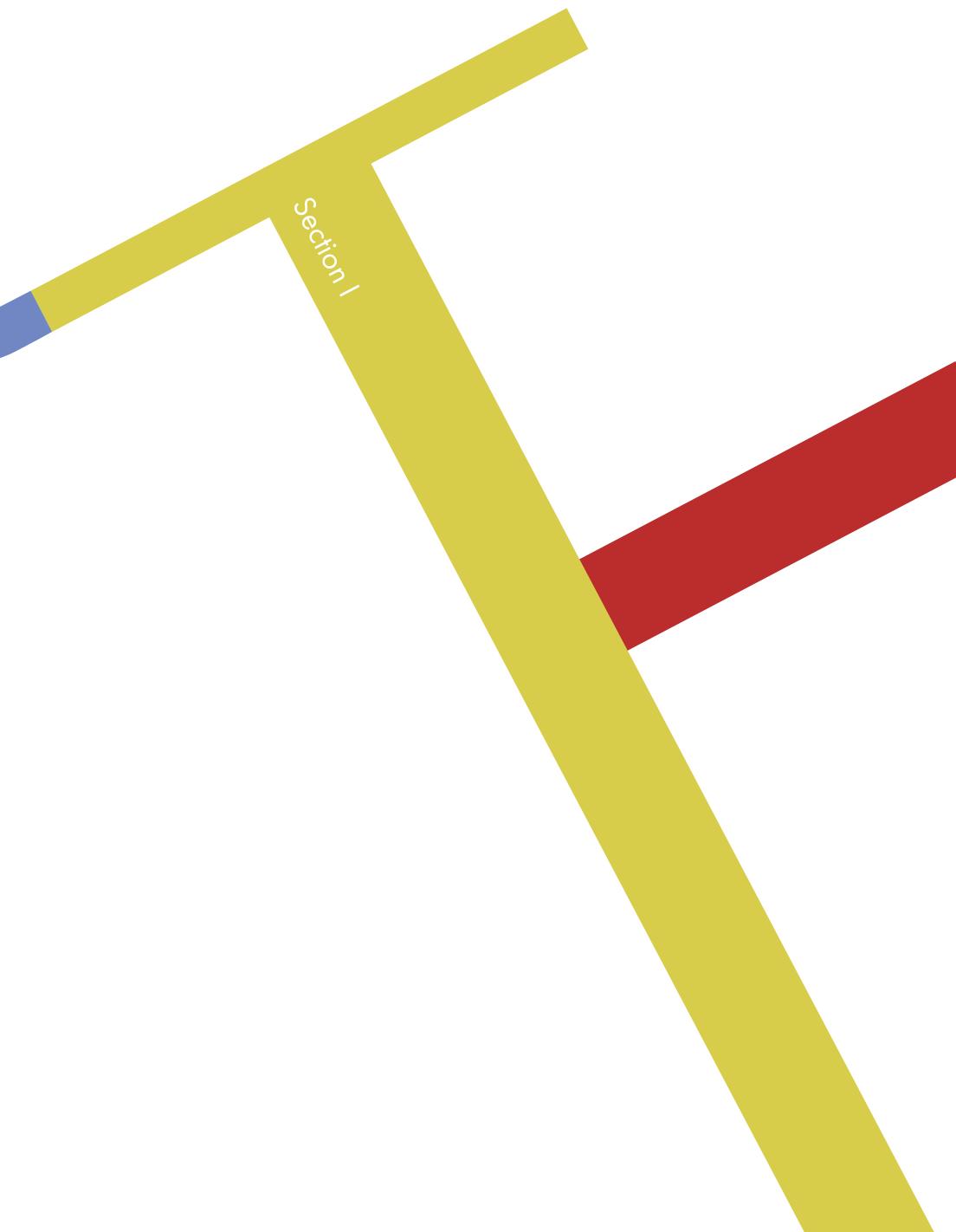
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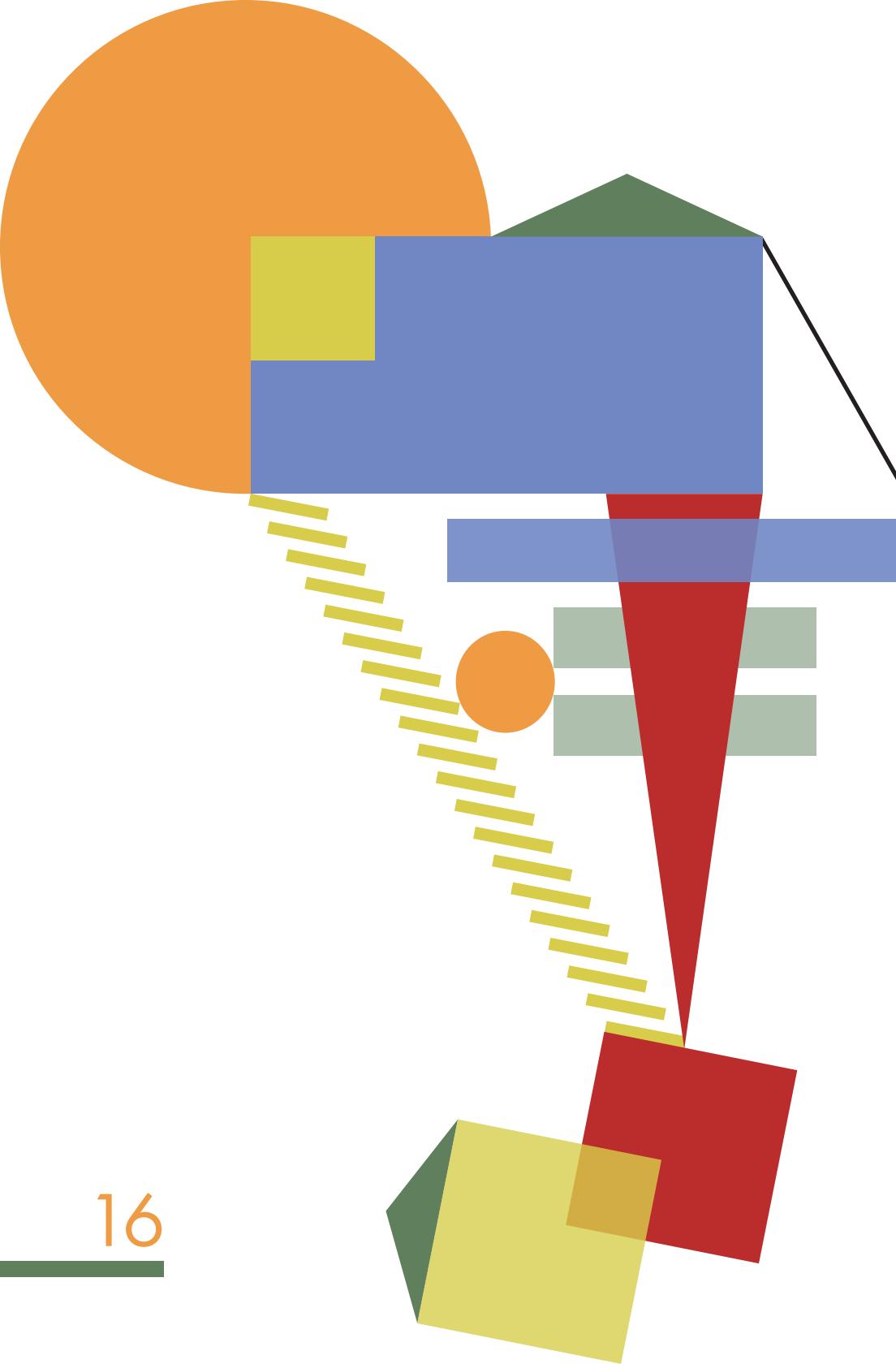
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Section 1



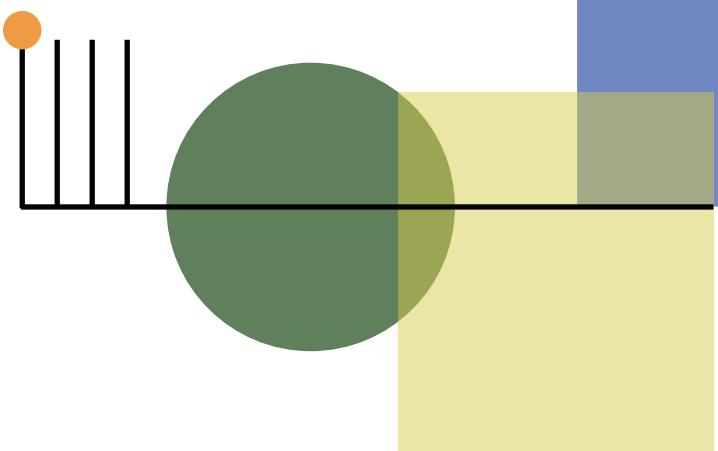
Gwendolyn Bennett

Nocturne

This cool night is strange
Among midsummer days...

Far frosts are caught
In the moon's pale light,

And sounds are distant laughter
Chilled to crystal tears.



Chains

Reaching out only half way,
Jaw dropped, noise comes out, echoing across the world,
My eyes, dark brown now fading to a foggy white mist,
The last movement in my left hand was a clenched fist,
My dark rigid yet soft skin begins to drip off of my flesh,
My right hand, open palmed, trying to not miss,
The very last chance before you and I enter the abyss, shit...
My fingernails are now crackin,
The whiplashes on my back look at each other and say
"what's crackin?"
Laughs from that man who thinks he has power,
The sun going down, it's almost that time of the hour,
My teeth... covered in blood, i guess I'm bleeding internally,
my last hug was in the mud,
Who am I reaching for? Nah don't ask who...
Ahh fuck it i might just say it in part... two... to you.

Get-Back

Switchblades don't pop out till nightfall,
An empty stage will make emotions start to crawl,
Out of dark caves where them shadows be so don't
fall brotha...
Yeah them alleyways can get tricky when them crossways
finally let it dump/
so don't lie just be Oprah,
Eww them passageways will leave you stuck in place so get
a grip and make a run/
for it... but don't trip
fella,
The energy you gain they want to take so don't pass,
hit the fake,/br/>yeah you shook em'
Don't be too... late or else it'll be doomsday and that's when,
mouths drop/
and weapons spray but do,
pray because one slip up will make your soul sway then the
demons pray,/br/>but head up, royalty mustn't fall
all they can do is say "In Jesus name" that's when
demons shake/
like "damn who upped the weather",
Now this is when the poem actually starts,
Even though it may have fallen apart,
But it's better to see two things a part,
Not just for the good and the bad but to understand... or just
laugh a little... /br/>and remember it'll be okay...
it'll be okay...

Goodmornin'

Mind on alert, operating on a different frequency,
Eyes still shut, trying to process how are you alive when just
last night/

on the freeway wishing something
can take this all away,
I guess i made it back home drunk and all,
Sirens blaring throughout the hood and the smell of weed
piercing my window screen/

from people who
are going through it too,
The sun, dancing, finding its way through my shades
again, hoping/

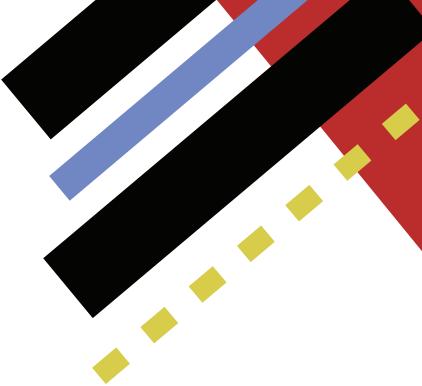
that it'll stop because i hate warm
introductions,
And my heart beats heavy like percussions but I see it as a
precaution/

due to the lack of offense, forcing
me to give up what i've been practicing because i
got distracted,
The tv, still on to symbolize what I was doing last night,
The room, cluttered with my feelings reaching out to be put
away again.

Pages upon pages scattered all throughout the floor from
when I couldn't stop/

till I got writer's block,
watched a lot of writers block themselves, they them selves
blocking the chance/

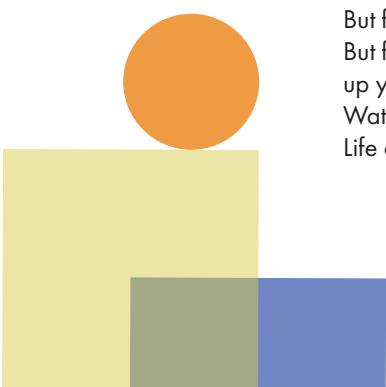
of writing, and the chance
of writing is blocked and now remains by themselves, alone,
Shit... i gotta get ready for work, overslept.



Joseph Asare

Life of.

Run it up, double cupped, splashing all over the extremities,
Obtain the check, spread it instantly, all you care about,
limited possibilities,
Dim the lights, up the volume, roll up another, let's blast off
into infinity,
Generic lines, white lines placed on that crystal clear table
and you, now a chimney,
Got the girls, free drinks and an attitude to suffice,
Ignore the niggas, false claiming, steady aiming, getting their
rocks off/
from the scenery, i guessed the life
of the party.
Three steps back, reflecting last night, let me, dress up again
and do it all over again/
because man, that
patron left niggas up in the stands,
But where is your money though, does the life of the party
follow, did you know/
that time dances as you
grow, but i don't know though, guess I'm just another
bread getter/
because my carbs are too low.
But fuck it, let's light another one,
But fuck it, a mess will be the aftermath soon after you picked
up your phone,
Watching the views flow, feels like a new show,
Life of the party where night holds hands with crows.



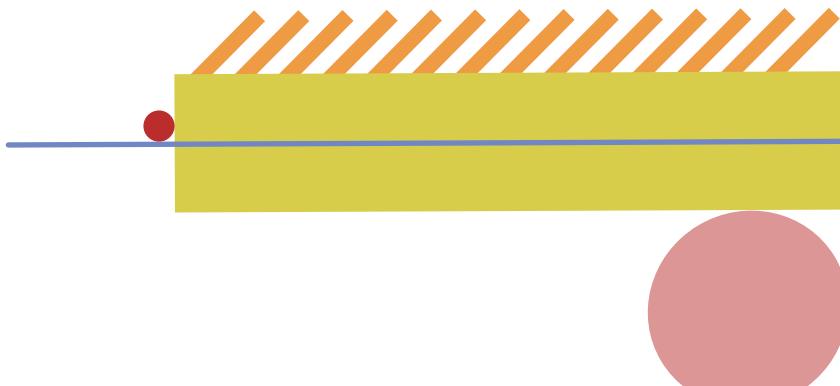
Lullaby

Count to three before you enter fasting mode,
Count to three before you empty out those words,
Now count with me as we conquer the world,
I'm convinced that people are comfortable with
being hypocrites,
I'm convinced the moral of man is heading into an abyss,
And the thought of being somewhat alive is viewed with bliss,
And the bullshit sits with toxic cross-pit,
Logic seems irrelevant to the common being scrolling endlessly
to get a buzz,
And envy, anger and sadness multiply within the blinded
creation(s) even though/
they need love,
The man above, sure does need a hug, his people still idolize
the one that could kill you/
and roll you up in
a rug,
The shell casings held in hand by empty faces, looks towards
tomorrow as heaven/
seems to be just a bit
closer,
I've witness demons within Heaven-sent beings laugh at
me knowing/
that they aren't worth saving,
Or are they?
What should I say,
May Yahweh bless you.

Cambelt

Pulleys and chains
Pistons, spark plugs
string me up
pull me, rip me apart
tens of thousands of miles.
My creaking, squeaking, screaming
drowned out by the motor
against which I glide.

Take care,
I have a limit.
If the wheels turn too long,
I may break.
For I am critical.
When I break loose
your engine is reduced
to a relic.



[Imitation]

Because I did not know What-Else-
I failed a many time-
Choosing what was last on My list-
Yet still I don't regret.
Time has now become - where I can
Sit to watch the snow fall
Transfer the graphite dust between,
The Whited space un-Deemed-
The Children chore the shoveling
I sit warm – studying-
Now able to Undo my Failings-
And prove myself to me-
My own uncertainty-
No longer Questioning my path-
Of my Future - nor of my Past-
But the Present, at Last-
The struggles of Awakening
Accepting and Content-
There's beauty in the life I've lived-
Burn the seeds – resentment-
Powerful journeys - overcame
Bested by a Courage
Late were many of Achievements Won
My soul now - has Rested-

In Between

She thinks...

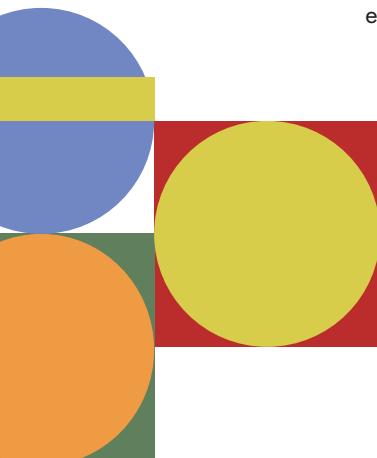
She wanted to let him speak first, of course, because why would she disclose everything she's been storing in her heart, knowing, he would just shake his head yes with disagreement.

She wants to tell him, exactly how she feels. To remove any doubts as to the existential and eternal depth of her want and need of him. Of her endless loyalty, earned or not, but still has decided on its incapability, to waiver.

But she also wants him to be sure, she is not looking for an obligation, she is not looking - to change - even the infinitesimal, of what they currently have. How she would never jeopardize what either, has built of their lives.

What she does not know, is how to explain everything. How do you tell someone how you feel, without being cruel, even if it is to tell them you love them?

She sits beside him on the bench, squinting from the sun that plays peekaboo through the trees as the breeze plays with her bangs.



She forges her way into the conversation she, wants, to have on the only day, she will have the chance of having it. She shamefully erupts before collecting herself.

She says...

"I am not afraid of what you would say to me.
I am not afraid to say what I want to – to you.
I am here to renew my memory, of your presence in my life. How your shadow is cast over me.
Your frame and your physique that embodies, your soul.
Your demeanor, that portrays confidence yet shyness.

"The smell that is you, that triggers – fondness.
How, when you speak, your voice and your body dance in sync. And how when you talk with me,
I not only hear your tone, but I can also, see – it - too,
the gentleness in your eyes and in your smile.
I only need these memories so when I am thinking about you, I don't falter in the least.

I do not seek out your eyes, because eyes give people away and I am not - through with you.

"I am not afraid to tell you,
how I feel. I am not worried about,
how you feel about me, I do not need to know.
I do not expect reciprocation. I do not need - anything from you, but your renewal. I do not have any - grand illusions or expectations in having you fulfill anymore than what I am confessing. Just listen.

I do not, no no, I cannot to tell you the kind of feeling that it is, because feelings are a living thing.
It is not the same, from day to day. It changes like seasons, and the needs follow the same uncertainty.



"The air that I feel from you, cares for me,
and all the needs my air desires. They know
each other well and they exist together
on their own, intuitive to this need.
I can feel the air down to my bones.
It penetrates down deep replacing
the warmth I need for my own survival.
All this is unbeknownst to you."

She begs...

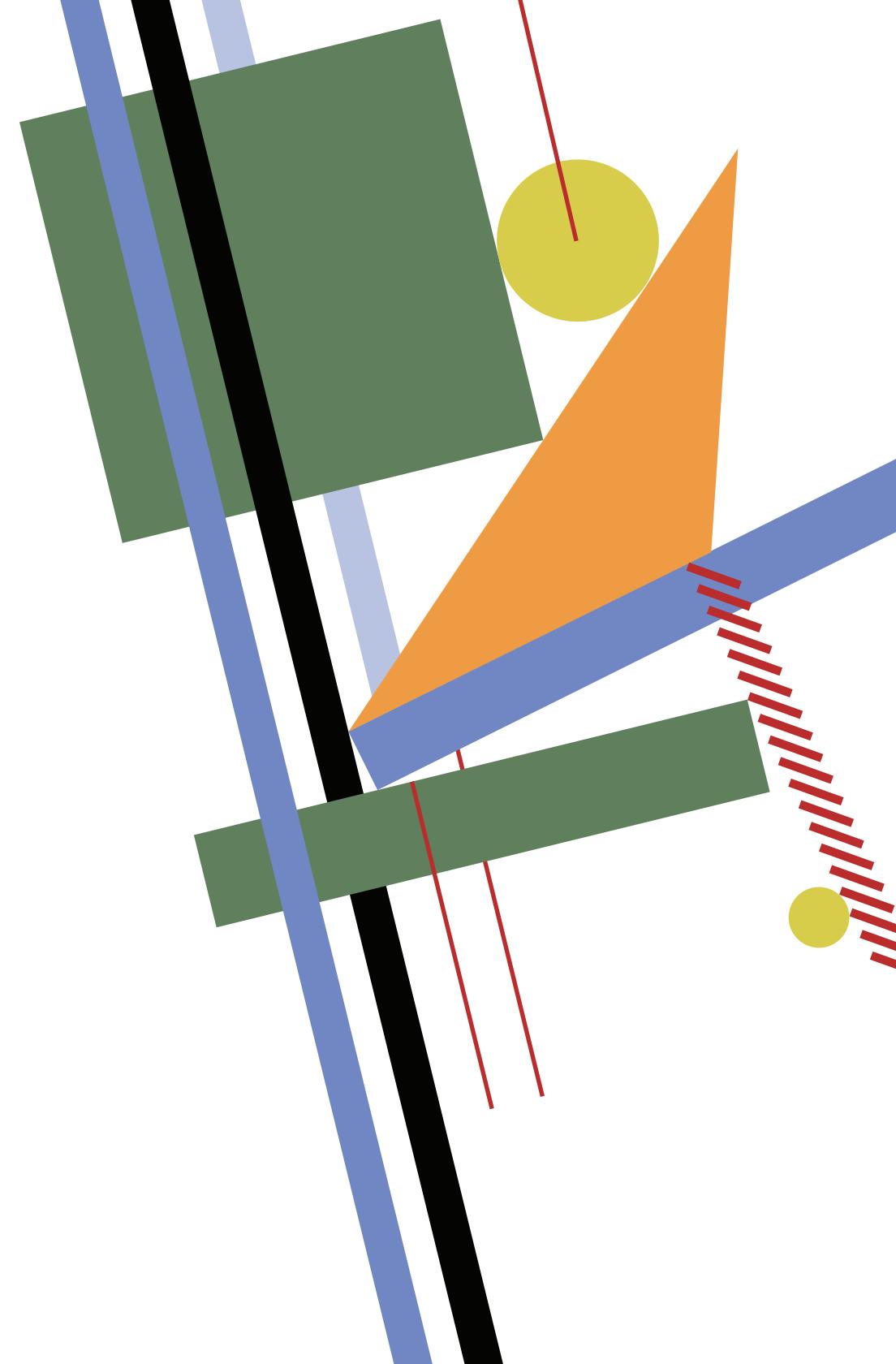
"So why am I sharing this? Why should I be
so SELFISH! to not share the unseen
miracles that live and breathe in between the spaces.
I am sharing this with you because it needs
to be released back into the spaces, we lay blind to,
for it to live how it should, not attached.
You need to know I can sit across from you,
with my thoughts that you cannot untangle
from my mind and know you are safe.
"There is no alarm, rather my confessing such an attachment
is to assure you what it is not.
No need for anyone to suppress the growth
of my own bacteria. No need for anyone to rescue me
from my thoughts. No need for my conscious cleared
from perceived desperation. No need for an
explanation, justification, validation, confirmation,
and rationalization.
You are far too polite to admit what your,
true opinion of me and any of my intentions or interests are.
And I am guilty.

"This guilt is mine alone and is the core
of my being. I can only choose to love
and be devoted... because the person becomes

part of my hardwiring and nothing more.
I once thought I was an overbearing weed
that grew and wrapped its forceful and smothering
vine around the necks of everything that breathes.
But it is the opposite, it was me allowing
the weeds to suffocate me
and when they cut ties, I was weak and frail,
fading. If I let another infiltrate, it is going to be
an overwhelming - sensory - overload of my mind
and matter.

"I can feel the air touching me. On the surface
every follicle weeps in worship, siphoning
it through my skin. It travels deep. It runs
in my veins and is encrusted to my bones.
With the slight of every move, I make, I can feel
it flowing in me.

I wear cavalier in defense
to ward off loving the breath of heaven,
as to not be tormented by the radiating sensations
so profound, and at times - unbearable."
She's silent...



Section II

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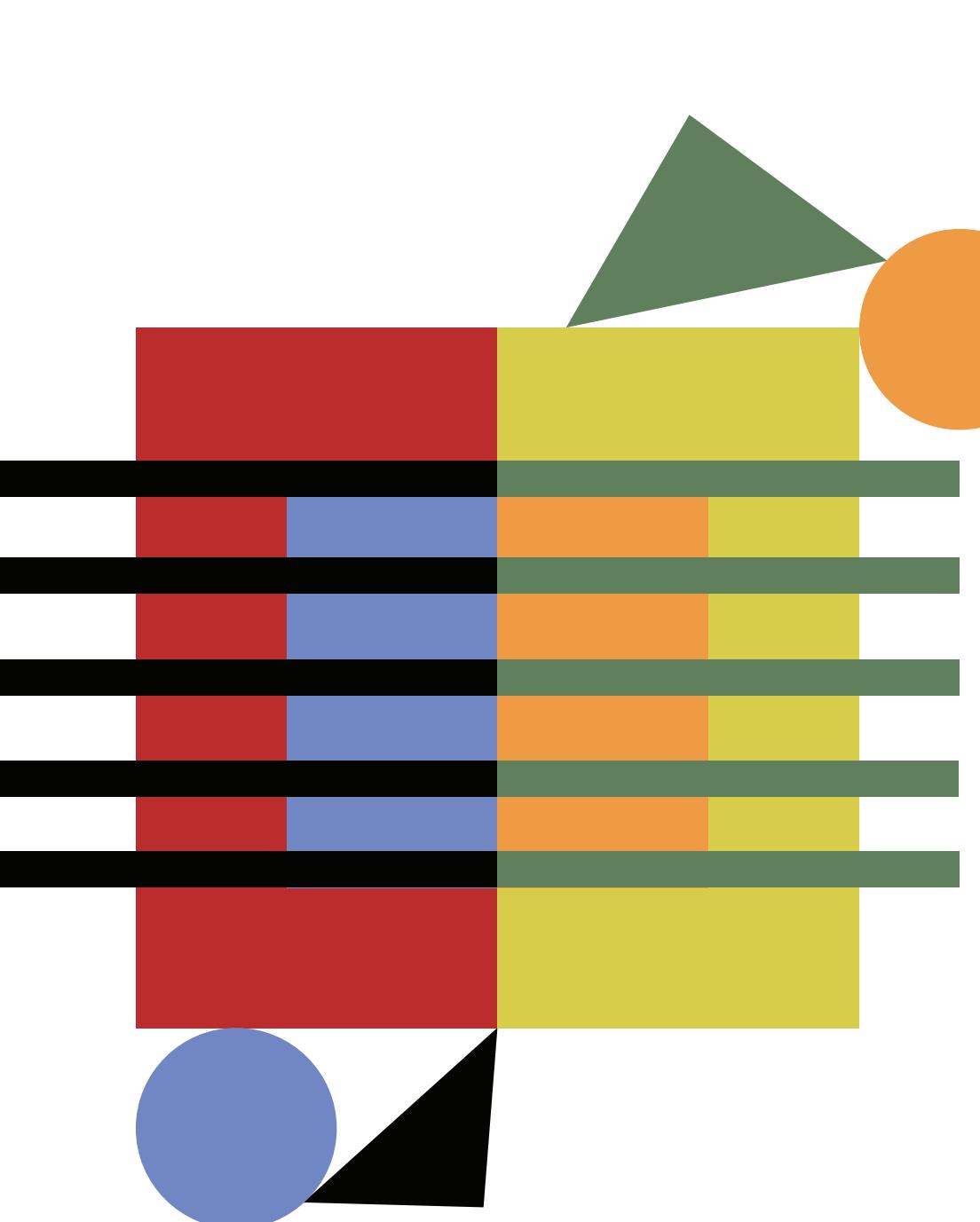
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Walt Whitman

“Are you the new person drawn toward me?”

Are you the new person drawn toward me?
To begin with, take warning, I am surely far different from
what you suppose;

Do you suppose you will find in me your ideal?
Do you think it so easy to have me become
your lover?
Do you think the friendship of me would be
unalloy'd satisfaction?

Do you think I am trusty and faithful?
Do you see no further than this façade, this smooth and
tolerant manner of me?

Do you suppose yourself advancing on
real ground toward a real heroic man?
Have you no thought, O dreamer, that it
may be all maya, illusion?

The Cookie Snatcher

I come home from work after an exhausting day crunching the numbers at my boring but necessary nine-to-five job. I open the front door to a large, empty basket that had just been full that morning. White hot rage rushes through my veins, but I try to keep as calm as I can as I hang up my jacket and place my work bag by the door. Then, I notice him sitting on the couch in all his blue, furry, food-snatching glory.

"Did you have a little mid-morning snack?" I ask him casually, motioning towards the basket with my head. Black beady eyes look up to meet mine as he gives me a look.

"Me see cookie. Me want cookie."

"I see," I say coolly. There's a brief pause as I try not to snap at him. "You do know those were a gift from my mother, right? She spent all of her vacation time baking those for me."

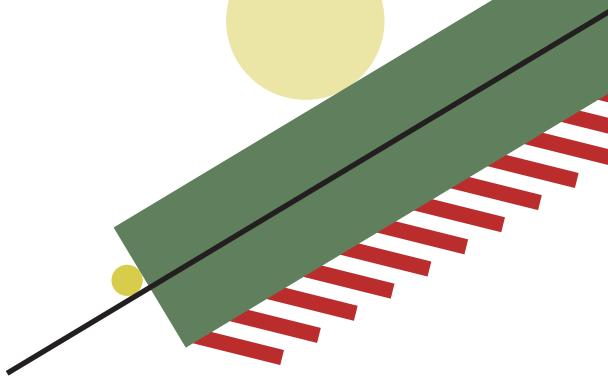
"Me sorry. Me see cookie.
Me want cookie."

"Yes, but –" I let out a long exhale, as if I'm talking to a 3-year-old, which I might as well be, "-- you have to ask before you take."

"Me sorry. Me see cookie.
Me take cookie."

Another sigh.

"It's okay," I shrug. I make myself busy putting some water on the stove to boil. I ready a mug with a tea bag and some



sugar before opening the fridge to get the milk. There's a carton in the fridge. But - oh, *look-ee-there!* - it's basically empty except for one drop left.

"Cookie Monster," I say through gritted teeth,
"did you have milk with those cookies?"

He looks up at me and nods. "Me did.
Me had a nice cold glass of milk.
Me enjoyed it very much."

I run my hand over my face in exasperation, dragging it down from forehead to chin. "Yes, but – the polite thing to do is to get more milk when you finish the carton."

"Oh," he says slowly as his eyes widen.
"Me see. Me sorry. Me get milk tomorrow."

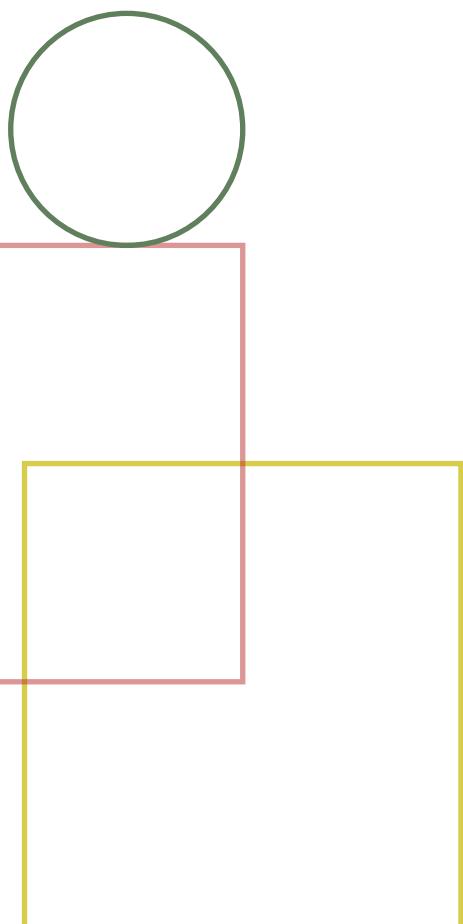
I've only been home for 10 minutes, but I already see an escape route and take that opportunity.

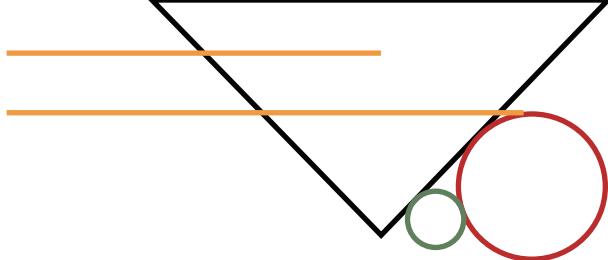
"No, it's okay. I'll go out and get some now." I move the tea kettle to the back burner and look longingly at my cup of tea. *I'll be back for you*, I think to myself. I go to the front door, pull on my jacket, check for my wallet, and am about to head out the door before I turn around and offer bitterly but politely, "Do you need anything while I'm out?"

Cookie Monster looks up from his television program. "Cookies?" he asks, his eyes alert and hopeful.

I groan and slam the door behind me, leaving him
in my dust.
"Sure, I'll get you cookies," I grumble.
"Oatmeal raisin ones."

I guess this is what I get for posting a roommate ad on
Craigslist. I see why he was evicted from Sesame Street.





Where's Daddy?

I wait at my aunt's for my mom to come get me / with my brother and cousin playing ball

but won't let me

I hear the car door as it forcefully slams / and I know something's wrong as my aunt

mumbles, "Damn"

She walks through the door with a scowl on her face / For the next words she said, there

was no way I could brace

I asked the same questions as I did every day:

"Where's Daddy?"

"Is he dead?"

After the answers, my world would turn gray

With my six-year-old mind, death was just a vacation / I knew he would return shortly just

after its duration.

A party was planned! How I felt so ashamed / to not even know that I should have been

pained



Instead, I had fun! Family, clothes, and limousine rides /
Although it seemed odd that my

mother had cried
First, I watched my father sleep;
I was so glad to see him
I wanted to play, but he looked oddly slim
Mom told me to pray so I kneeled and I asked,
"When are you coming home?"
Little did I know those words would be our last

Next, we were brought to a quiet, grassy field / but the
silence was interrupted by all of

my family's squeals

I didn't understand why a tear fell from my cheek / as they
lowered a box into a hole away

from its peak

Next was the best; it was time to eat / By now I was worried
but I still saved him a seat
I still had no clue as I lay in my bed / I honestly believed that
our reunion was soon ahead
Every day, every night, "Where's daddy?" were my final
words to my mother / Every day

until age ten, when I got the news from my brother

"I thought by now you would have caught on, but it's time to
accept that daddy is gone"

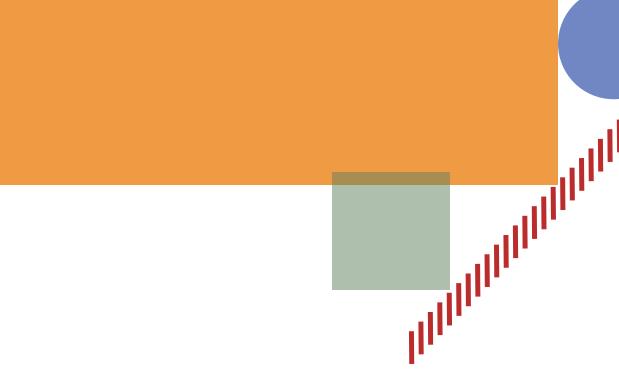
"Yes, he still loves you, and no, he's not mad"
"Just remember the good times with John, our dad"

The Things I Carry

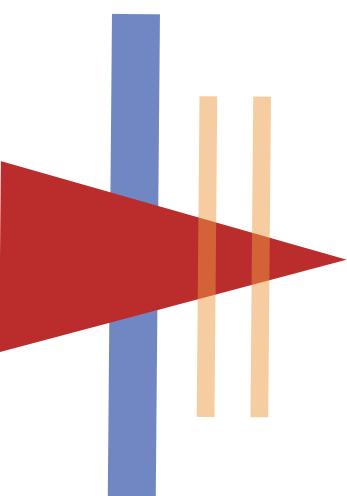
When I leave the house on a typical Monday morning, I carry the things that will prepare me for the day; I carry the things that will both encourage and impoverish me; the things that are neatly tucked away in my backpack, pockets, and glove compartments, and the things that cling to my subconscious, bundled up as intricate as a rubber band ball and as complicated to unravel as a Rubik's cube. On my way out the door, I reach for my keys; the same keys that my grandmother once used to operate her little silver Toyota Camry that once smelled of Febreze car scents and the slight aftermath of cigarettes. Sometimes I hold the keys in the fists of my hands, the sharp side pointing outwards, wondering if it could penetrate skin if I was desperate and cornered. I carry the weight of being a slim woman walking alone, an easy target for any man. When I walk the long, narrow sidewalk, leading me to my adventures to come in Edgerly Hall, I pull out my phone that I've been carrying around in my back pocket, fully charged, and tap the screen to inquire about any life updates. Nothing. It's no matter though. As I shove my phone back into its proper place, I still carry the hope that I could effectively dial '9-1-1' in case of an emergency. I always leave it on and nearby just in case that one person I spoke to once, seven years ago, wants to talk. On my wrist, I carry around my rose gold Apple Watch. It does the same thing as my phone, only it's on my wrist. This comes in handy for when I'm too lazy to pull out my phone. In this, I carry the privilege of coming from a position in which I am able to make expensive, and yet futile, purchases.



On my way back to my grandmother's car, I pull out my phone. Nothing. I get in the car and instantly reach up to grab hold of my late dog's collar, which permanently resides hanging from the rearview mirror. I carry her collar with me, an astonishing 60,000 miles, as it is now her full-time job to



look out for me on the road. Every mile, I carry the heartache and the trauma that I obtained from holding her and looking into her eyes as she took her last breath. She knew. I carry around the woe that her absence has created in me and the expectancy that these grim events will no doubt happen again.



When I turned eighteen, I bought a pack of cigarettes. I didn't like the taste very much, and so I just lit up in the car, windows sealed tightly up, to make the vehicle smell more how it should. My grandmother's scent is gone, and now it's only a vivid memory that comes on in strong but inconsistent waves. In those moments, I carry the weight of the last words I said to her. I carry the weight of the words I never said to her.

The ride home is numbingly cold. Winter is approaching and the thermometer is reading 41 °F. The broken heater is getting harder to ignore, and so now I carry around a portable heater that sits on the dashboard. Its heat barely makes the trip to the tips of my fingers. I carry a fuzzy wheel cover, gloves, and blankets in my grandmother's car, all to stop the brutal cold from affecting my driving. I carry around the financial burden of my car, which sits heavily on my chest, as I continue to make fruitless purchases, eat out, and sign away the potential quality of my future on some paper titled Master Promissory Note.

When I get home and take off my heavy backpack, sore shoulders aching, I carry the weight of the day, the stress of the expectations that I set for myself. My mind tells me to get everything done at once, but there's too much.

"I should finish four weeks' worth of homework tonight."
"Did I shut the garage door when I came in?
"I should clean the bathroom floors tonight."



“I need to wash my hands...hands...hands.”
“I should wash my bedsheets for the third time this month, tonight.”

“I really think I should double-check to make sure that the garage door is shut.”

I carry my obsessions and compulsions everywhere, begrudgingly. This isn't working and time is up; I need to go to work.



I get back in my grandmother's car, turn the sad excuse of a heater on, and cruise on down to work. I carry the fear of having the responsibility of a supervisor. I am responsible for closing the front end tonight, ensuring that I've completed all closing tasks while simultaneously guaranteeing the safety and productivity of my employees and the happiness of every customer.

“Am I worthy enough to hold this position? Am I competent enough? Did I forget to lock the store's doors on the way out?”

As I make my way home from work, heater on and a blank phone screen, I internalize the day and what it all means. I carry around hope for the future, hope for my future, and that it will be worth the long path I've chosen. I carry hope for my relationships and dream of my future picket fence house, supporting kids and dogs aplenty. I carry the hope that everything will be worth it in the end because in the end game my shoulders are free, my pockets and hands empty, and there's not a care in the world about what's next, only that there is content in where I have landed.

Assurance of a Frozen Moment

"Hold on for a sec. I need to..."

Stephen trailed off, his eyes sliding towards the sidelines. A flash of orange had captured his attention: vibrant wings to a monarch butterfly coming to a rest on the biggest of a cluster of rocks on the side of the trail. Stephen immediately dropped to a crouch and inspected the insect as it crawled around on spindly legs. It was testing the terrain, currently seeking out the shoots of grass jutting out from a crack in the rock half a foot away.

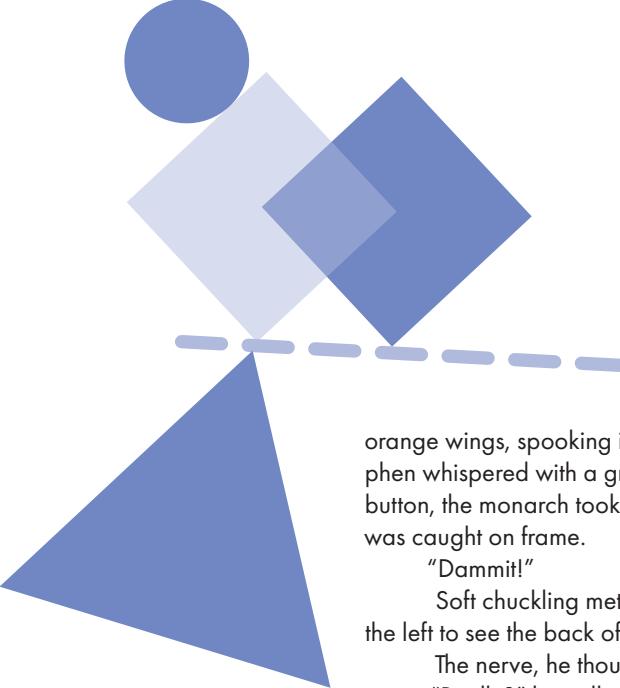
"Come on, li'l buddy," Stephen coaxed, gentle and sweet, "you're not going to find much nectar from there." A little ways off, he heard the crunch of gravel: Andy's heels twisting against the coarse mix of sand and pebbles as she turned to see what had distracted him this time. The huff which came from her lungs – like all the others that brought her to terms with Stephen's sudden diversions – was not made out of annoyance, and when she spoke, he could hear amusement lace her tone, amusement like the endearing smile and shake of her head that usually paired with her reactions to his behavior:

"Dude, you have a problem," she quipped.

"I'm enjoying nature," he defended, fingers scrabbling around a pocket on one of the thighs of his cargo shorts. Without looking, he pulled out a digital camera. "Be glad I'm not going for the sketchbook this time."

"Yeah, I will not sit for a ten minute colouring session again," said Andy before twisting her heel back into the dirt and facing the trail ahead again. "Just make it quick. We have seven more miles to go today."

Stephen carefully aligned the butterfly in the camera's frame and lightly pressed the top button to focus. A green light emitted from the device and landed on the butterfly's



orange wings, spooking it absolutely still. "Gotcha—" Stephen whispered with a grin, but just as he dug harder into the button, the monarch took off. A fuzz of brown was all that was caught on frame.

"Dammit!"

Soft chuckling met his ears. He whipped his head to the left to see the back of Andy's head quivering.

The nerve, he thought with a wrinkle to his nose.

"Really?" he grilled, but despite his frown, her laughter didn't land in the chinks

of his armour the way it might have if coming from someone else.

Andy pulled her gaze over her shoulder.

"Scared it off, didn't you," she stated.

"The focus did," he grumbled. "Stupid light. Doesn't make sense why it does that."

Pushing himself to a stand, he shut the camera off and started shoving it back into its pocket home.

"Why don't you leave that out?" she said.

"And hold it the entire time?"

She shrugged. "Fair point. Maybe you should start enjoying the journey with just your eyeballs, instead."

Stephen barely allowed the thought to register.

"I wanted to draw it at the next camp," he said.

"Just use your memory of what a butterfly looks like."

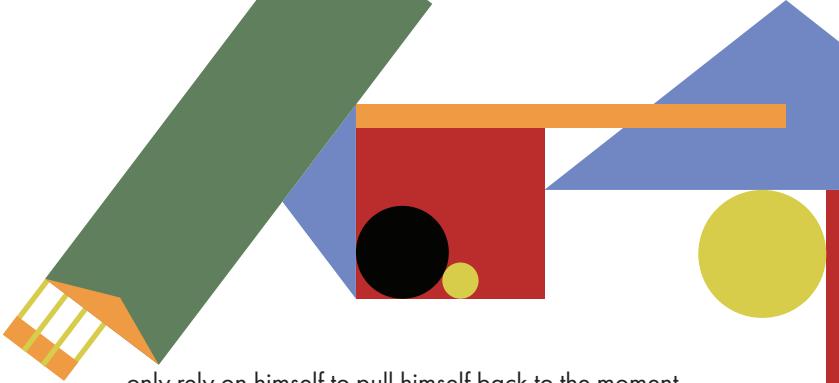
He felt the weight of the camera sag in pocket.

"No," he answered, "why?"

"I think you'll survive one journey without a perfect picture to remember it by, Stephen."

What was it about her? he found himself wondering.

Was it something in her past that made her so scarily intuitive, so capable of knowing exactly what the problem was rattling around inside the other person's mind? How did she know exactly what to say to snap them out of their tunnel vision and look with objective eyes at the truth behind their hyper-fixation? He wished he knew the secret, for then he could always



only rely on himself to pull himself back to the moment. If there was one thing he despised, it was relying on others for his own wellbeing.

"Just think," she continued, "Lewis and Clark had nowhere near the technology we have available nowadays, and they mapped out a whole half of a country!"

Glancing away, he grasped his backpack straps, lifted the backpack to his knee, and swung it around his shoulders. "So? We don't have to be like them anymore."

"Stephen." It wasn't mocking. It wasn't condescending. But it did tell him off.

Stephen fidgeted with the hip buckle instead of meeting her eyes.

Andrea reached an arm out and sent her reassurance from her soul, through her fingertips, and around his wrist. He felt it in the form of warmth blazing up his nerves to his mind and heart.

"Stephen, it's fine."

He still didn't want to look at her. Just imagining the blur passing across the camera frame caused another round of frustration to take him by storm. He shook off her hand and finished adjusting the buckle.

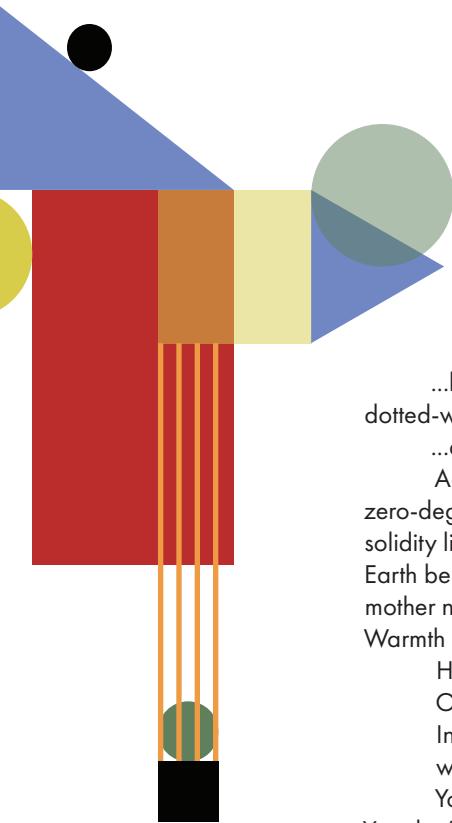
Don't look at her. I'm not looking at her.

"You will be fine."

But he didn't feel fine. He felt unsettled. Maybe it was because they were in South Dakota within the very regional jurisdiction of the mother he left behind two years ago. Maybe it was because his mind was always on the fritz searching for satisfaction. He needed his camera, he needed his perfect shot, he needed something to go right. He craved his pen and journal and the ink strokes he could make to ease these jitters. Something right there, something poised in his

fingertips, something kinetic in his feet or his hands or his body and blood; he had to match the buzz in his brain. He had to. He had to. Andrea's hand hadn't pulled away yet.

So, he looked at the outstretched hand...



...he looked away, out across the beautiful, grassy, dotted-with-rocks type of landscape...

...and he curled his fingers between hers.

Again, spreading up his arm was a warmth like his zero-degree sleeping bag on a chilly night. There, he gained solidity like the paper of his leather-bound journal, like the Earth beneath his feet, like the gravity from the very center of mother nature tugging on the very core of his being. Warmth and grounding.

His lungs inflated with breath.

Oh, you never fail, Oxygen, he thought.

Inhaling another round, his shoulders all the way eased.

You don't need a camera, Stephen told himself. You don't need the digital proof of being here, you don't need it as reference. The camera distracted him from what really mattered—no, even more than that, what really existed.

Little by little, here and there, Andy showed him what existed. Dropping reminders ever since they embarked on this hike, he'd been too naive to pick them up until now. He locked eyes with hers of brown and could hear a voice in his head, sounding like hers, whispering, stay in the moment.

You are more than enough.

"Thank you," Stephen muttered, a little sheepishly at that.

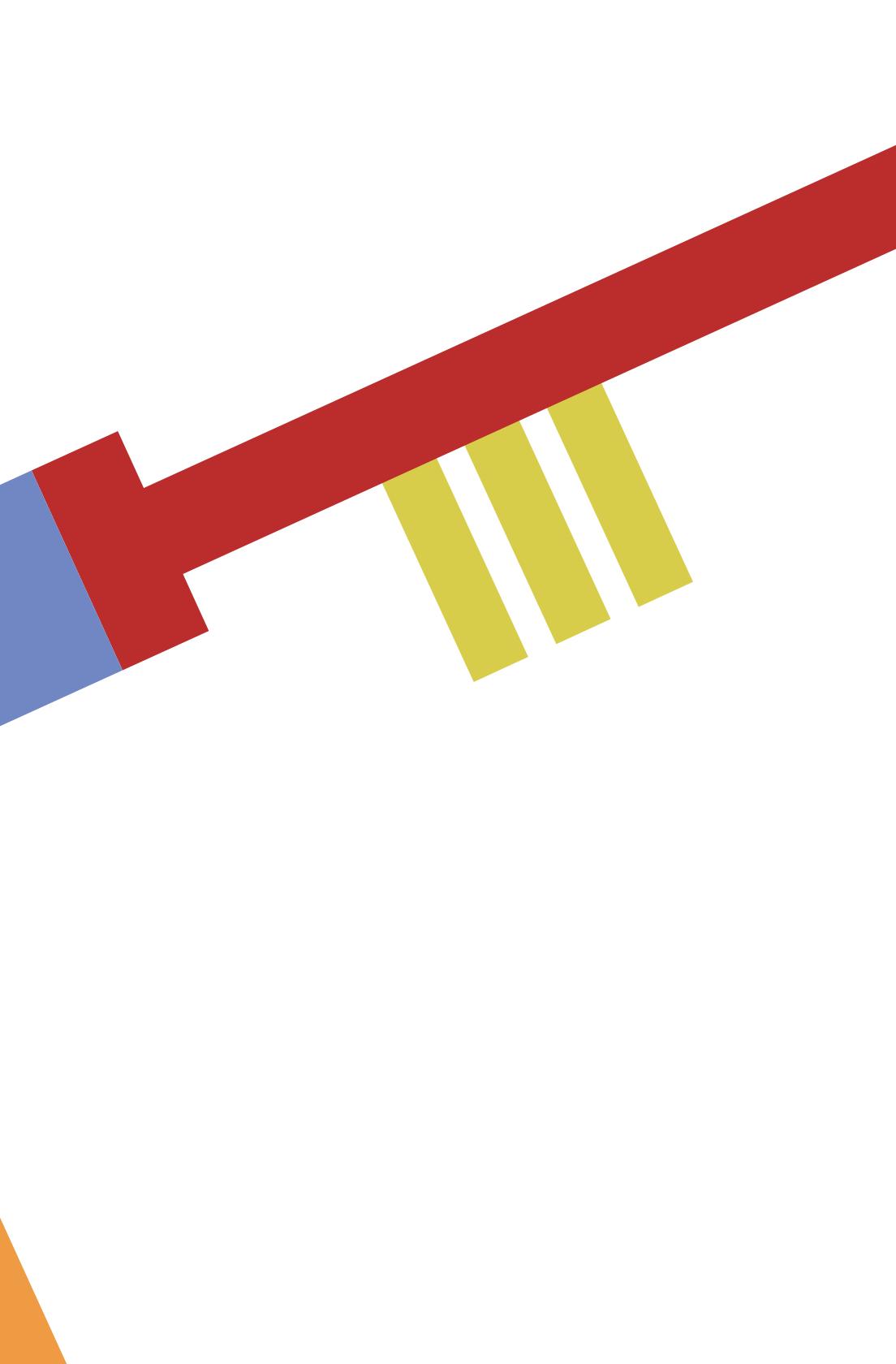
The smile Andrea parried back was all the reply he needed.

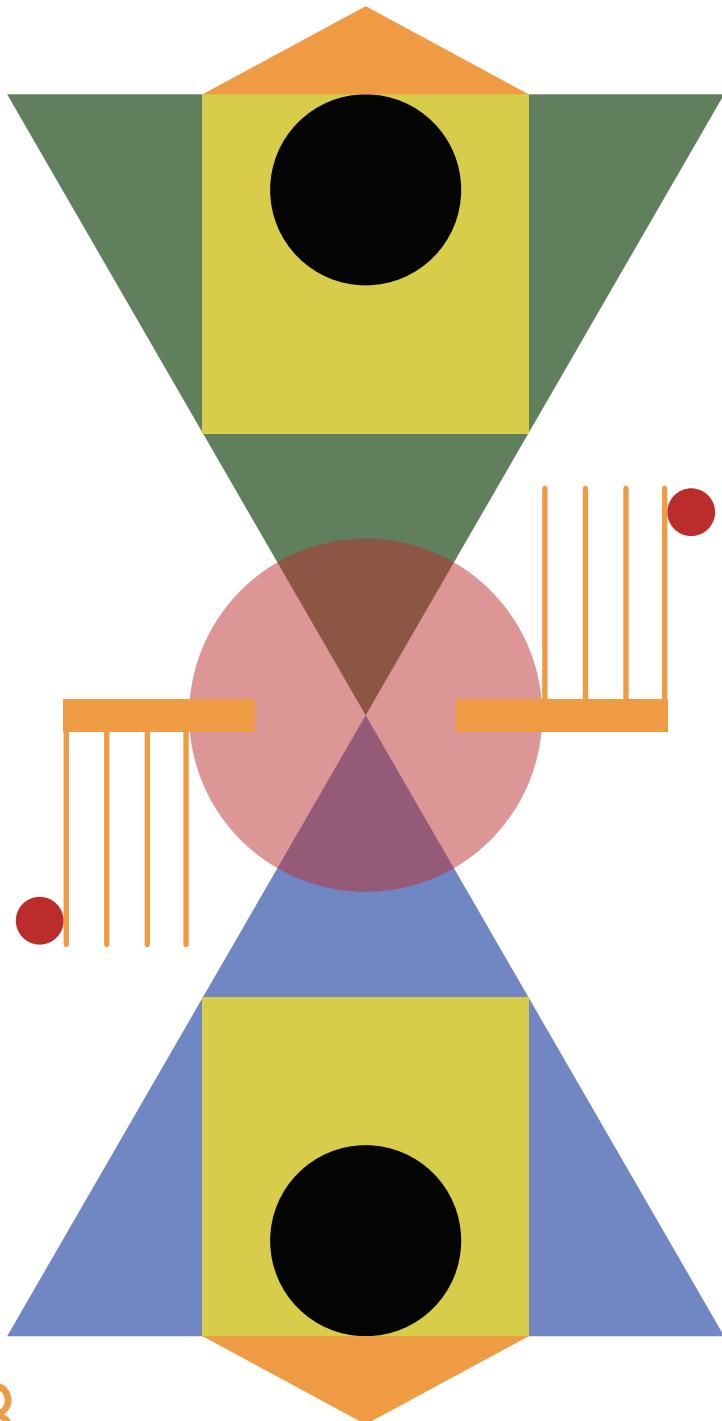
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Section III







Parallax

This thin edge of December
Wears out meagrely in the
Cold muds, rains, intolerable nauseas of the street.
Closed doors, where are your keys?
Closed hearts, does your embitteredness endure forever?
Torpidly
Afternoon settles on the town,
each hour long as a street—
In the rooms
A sombre carpet broods, stagnates beneath deliberate steps:
Here drag a foot, there a foot, drop sighs, look round for
nothing, shiver.
Sunday creeps in silence
Under suspended smoke,
And curdles defiant in unreal sleep.
The gas-fire puffs, consumes, ticks out its minor chords—
And at the door
I guess the arrested knuckles of the one-time friend,
One foot on the stair delaying, that turns again.

Where The Telephones Bend

What connects us to this physical material world is the tangible, the things we can touch, feel, and see right before our eyes. The intimate. So is it that I love the mountains because when I reach the top everything is small and far away creating contrast and an outlier from everyday life? No, it's because I've seen the intimate enough to know that something of this grandiosity takes more intricacies than I can imagine or dare to dream. It brings me a strong sense of peace and even pride to know that I am a being existing on the same plane as something so large and to be able to experience every single detail from the millions of pine needles on a single tree to the sight of cities skylines in the distance and to the flickering of the bugs that pass over the dirt, worn in and honed by centuries of historic feet that are being shown and showing the way. A timely discovery as opposed to a timeless one, I am here at this moment present, along with the minute details that no one will ever see, will ever care about, indulging in the moment

Before it's gone.

Transformation

You were just here, I saw you

But, where did you go?

I believe in your presence

But just like the snow

It came over night

And erased all I knew

Then, that snow turned to water

Your absence, it grew

I sat down alone

And realized what's right

You're not really gone

You're just out of sight

Wake Up Call

Morning moves across my body

Mixing yesterday with today

Which mountains will be maintained?

Which will melt away?

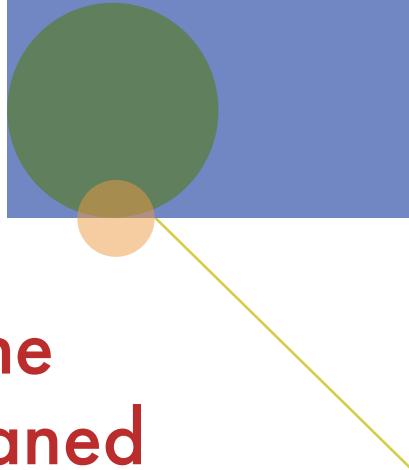
This tender alarm invites motion

With a calm, as soft as snow

Just as though morning migrates

There's no time to mourn

Just go



Through the Double-Paned Window of my Youth

The black tree limbs beyond my window dance unexpectedly
as a Spring gust excites them with
the hope of newness.

The sun has retreated but the sky pulls me in with its hues and
mysterious callings.

Heavy, dark clouds amidst the grey-blue tinged sky as it
creeps into slumber.

This sky-

There is more to do in this day but it beckons to me saying--
stay awhile, my life is short.

It alters by the second, this sky full of voluminous,
haunting clouds.

And then the sound of the wind truly it does whistle, and at
a different pitch it seems as I sit at this old double-paned
window of my youth.

Swaying branches dance before me and that whistling de-
light tickles my ears and gives that old butterfly feeling in the
middle of my belly

Like the childlike thrill of hearing thunder crescendo to
its height.

The wild, erratic moments of the bedtime ritual are subsiding
into soft, sweet breaths –

I can almost feel them breathing through this wall.

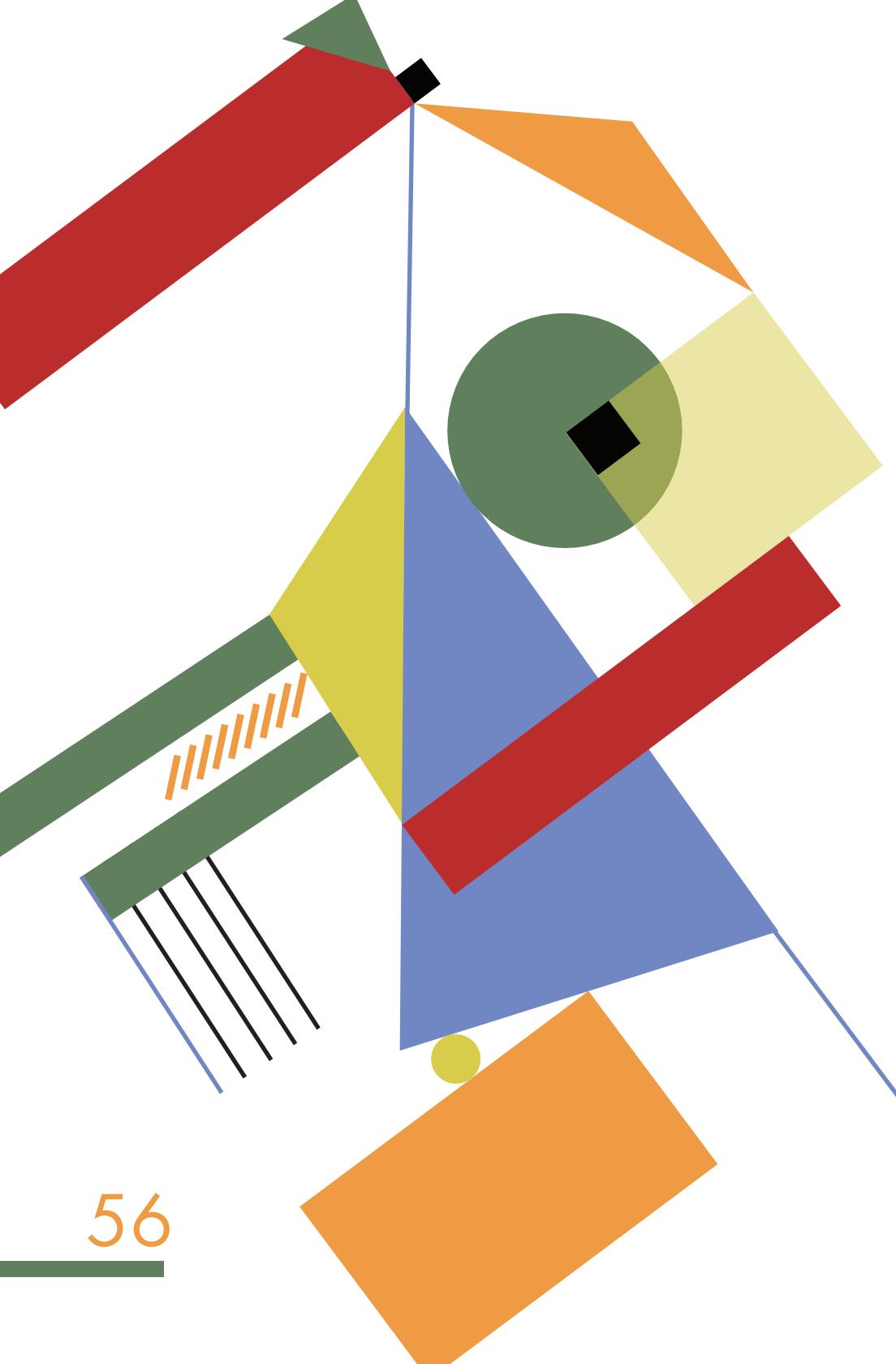
I imagine my grandmother next door settling in for
the evening.

The quiet finds me with the help of this wind, of this
treasured sky

that has now disappeared to black.





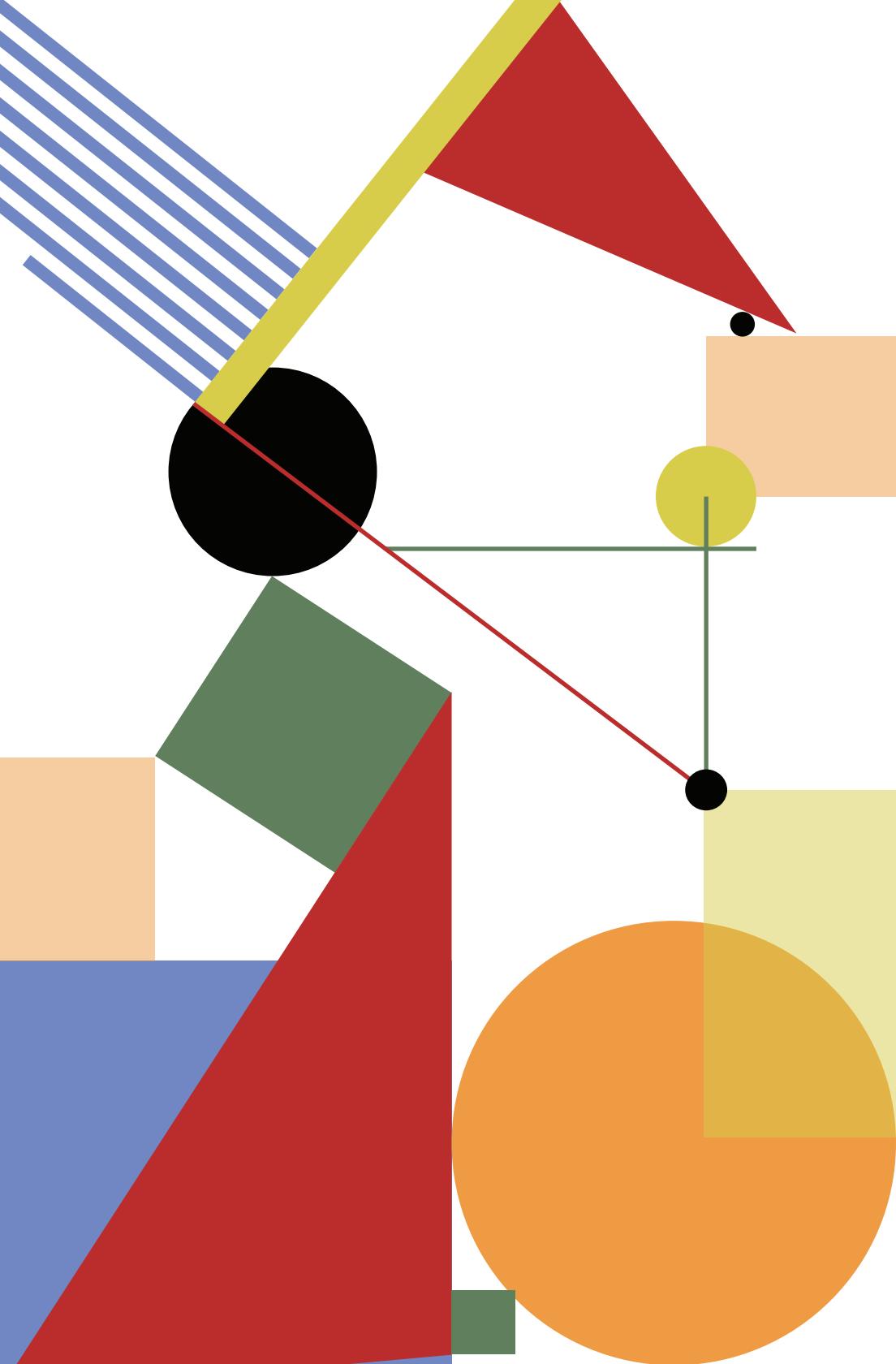


Call to Account

The drum of war thunders and thunders.
It calls: thrust iron into the living.
From every country
slave after slave
are thrown onto bayonet steel.
For the sake of what?
The earth shivers
hungry
and stripped.
Mankind is vapourised in a blood bath
only so
someone
somewhere
can get hold of Albania.
Human gangs bound in malice,
blow after blow strikes the world
only for
someone's vessels
to pass without charge
through the Bosphorus.
Soon
the world
won't have a rib intact.
And its soul will be pulled out.
And trampled down
only for someone,
to lay
their hands on
Mesopotamia.
Why does
a boot
crush the Earth — fissured and rough?
What is above the battles' sky -
Freedom?
God?



Money!
When will you stand to your full height,
you,
giving them your life?
When will you hurl a question to their faces:
Why are we fighting?



Plutoed

FADE IN

INT. NIGHT CLUB - DUSK

The scene is an entrance to a night club where ambient music from within is heard. A large poster with pictures of the planets stands by the entrance. In large letters the poster reads, "Homecoming planet party from dusk 'till dawn!" Beneath in smaller letters reads, "Must be a planet to enter."

Standing outside the club as the bouncer is THE SUN. He is tall and hefty and dressed in white. He wears sunglasses and holds in his hands a clipboard with the club's guest list. PLUTO arrives. He is a tiny guy dressed in gray and pink.

PLUTO: Pluto?

SUN (checks list): Not on the list.

PLUTO: What are you talking about?

SUN: This is a planet party. You have to be a planet to attend.

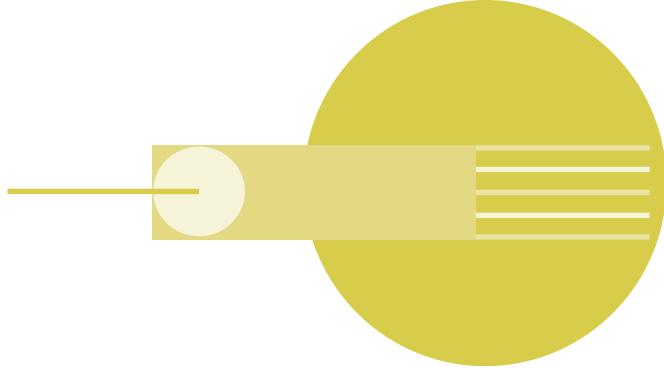
PLUTO: I am a planet.

SUN: Actually, you're a dwarf planet.

PLUTO: Excuse me?

SUN: You were demoted.

PLUTO: What? When?



SUN: Sixteen years ago, Pluto.

PLUTO: How come I never learned of this?

SUN: That's what happens when you live so far from the rest of society.

Pause. Pluto gapes at the Sun.

SUN (CONT.): I don't know what to tell you, bud.

PLUTO: Let's start with why I was demoted!

SUN (hesitantly): You're just so little. We wouldn't want you getting squashed by the rest of us would we?

PLUTO: I won't get squashed -

SUN (Quickly): Plus you're messy.

PLUTO: What -

As they speak, MERCURY arrives. He is also a tiny guy but a smidge larger than Pluto and dressed in gray with a gray hat.

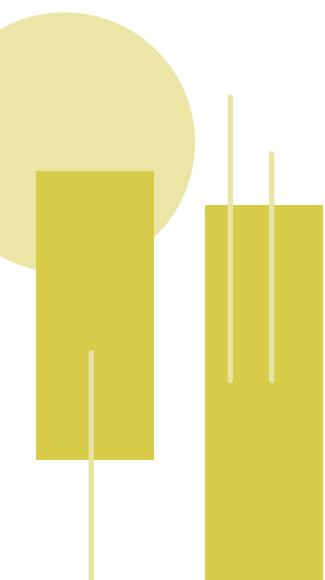
SUN (to Pluto): Excuse me. (to Mercury) Yes?

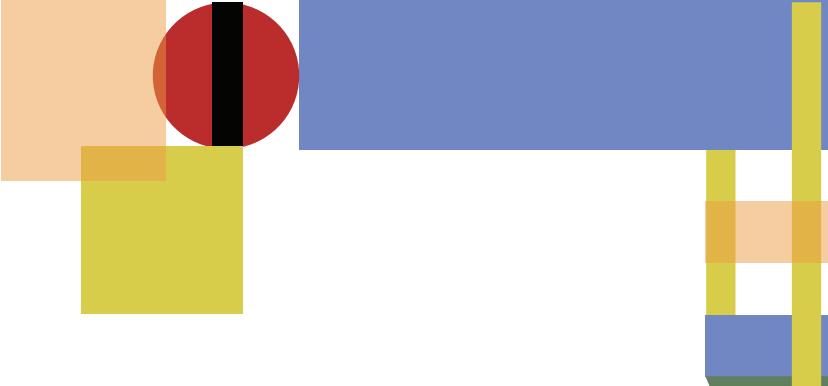
MERCURY: Mercury?

The Sun begins to check the list when Mercury slips something into the Sun's pocket. The Sun looks at Mercury and grins.

SUN: You're good.

MERCURY: Awesome.





Mercury enters the club.

PLUTO: Did Mercury just bribe you?

SUN: You're loitering.

PLUTO: Mercury's about the same size as I am!

SUN: Please remove yourself from the property before I call security.

PLUTO: Oh my gosh are you and Mercury -

SUN: Security!

PLUTO: Okay fine! I'll leave.

Pluto begins to walk away. He looks back at the Sun.

PLUTO (CONT.): Not cool, Sun.

Pluto walks away as VENUS approaches the Sun. Venus is beautiful and seductive. She is a little bigger than Mercury and dressed in beige.

VENUS (flirting): Venus?

The Sun doesn't even bother checking the list.

SUN (smitten): You're good.

Venus enters the club.

SUN (to himself): Mercury may be sweet but Venus really is the hottest planet.



INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The scene is an apartment living room with a neutral color scheme. On one end of the room is a TV. On the opposite end is a couch and coffee table. Pluto is sagging into the couch with a bowl of ice cubes in his lap as he gazes at the TV. On the screen is an interview with an astrophysicist.

INTERVIEWER (O.S.): Dr. Sage Burtz. Thank you so much for joining us this evening.

ASTROPHYSICIST (O.S.): It's my pleasure, Celeste. Our team has been hard at work analyzing the findings of our most recent probe mission.

INTERVIEWER (O.S.): How would your team react if the samples taken reveal evidence of Martian life?

ASTROPHYSICIST (O.S.): Well, if such a situation arises we would first have to determine if they're living organisms or just relics of ancient life. Mars' current environment is not very suitable to life as we know it. But it might have been billions of years ago.

INTERVIEWER (O.S.): It sounds like we're in the midst of the final stages of life in the solar system.

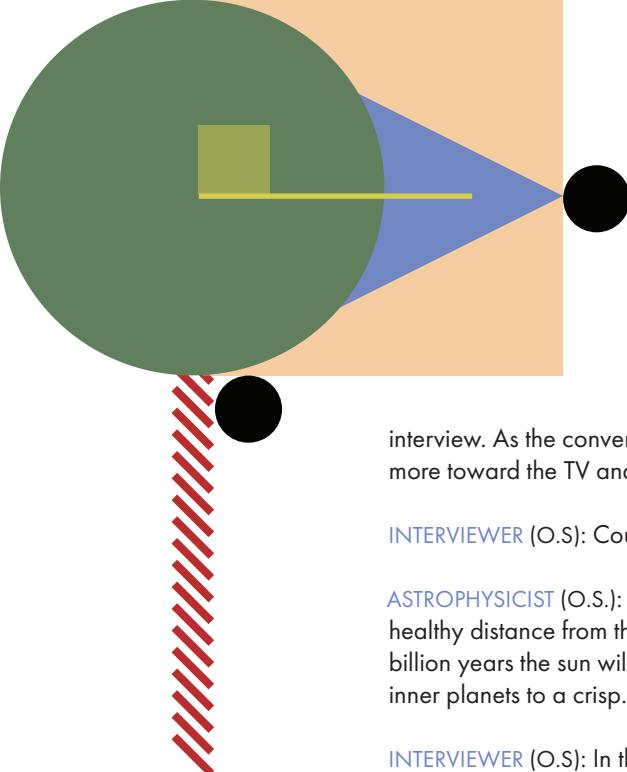
Pluto sighs and rummages through the ice cubes.

ASTROPHYSICIST (O.S.): Quite the opposite actually.

INTERVIEWER (O.S.): Oh really?

ASTROPHYSICIST (O.S.): Yes. In fact, someday Pluto might be our new home.

Upon hearing this, Pluto perks up and focuses on the



interview. As the conversation continues, he leans more and more toward the TV and his eyes get wider.

INTERVIEWER (O.S.): Could you elaborate that?

ASTROPHYSICIST (O.S.): You see the Earth is currently a healthy distance from the sun to maintain life. But in four billion years the sun will expand into a red giant and burn the inner planets to a crisp.

INTERVIEWER (O.S.): In that case forget Mars! We should be moving to Jupiter instead.

ASTROPHYSICIST (O.S.): The outer planets won't go unharmed either. The increase in heat will strip them bare of their atmospheres. It's the smaller, further bodies like Pluto that will be the places to be. It'll be like Miami, Florida out there. I don't know about you, but Pluto's where my spaceship would go.

PLUTO: Hm.

Pluto pops an ice cube into his mouth.

CUT TO BLACK

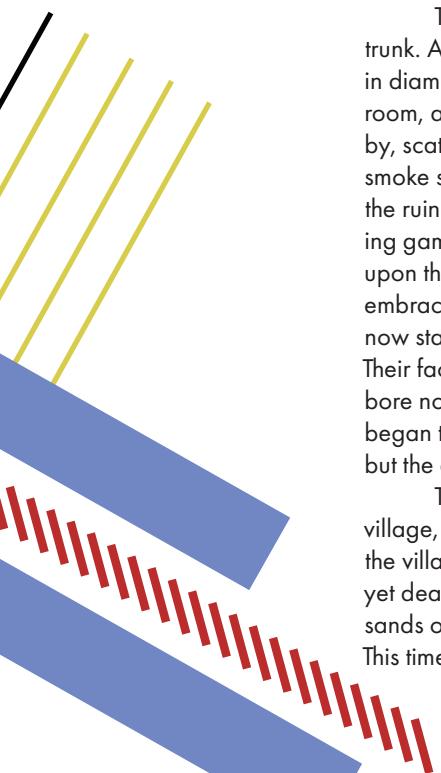
Ashen Memories

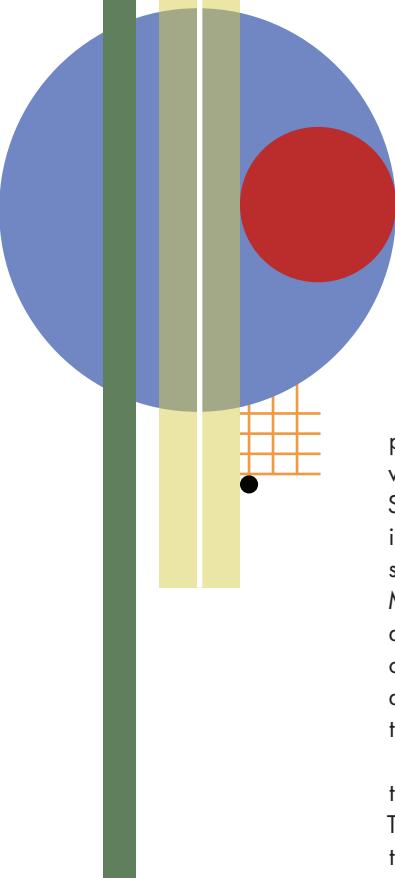
Wandering the woods that had been since before the time of kingdoms and legends once past, a lone Wood Elf gently ran a pale hand along the scarred and ashen trees. The scabbed wound of the surrounding nature was felt as the hand's thumb stroked and brushed against the bark, peeling some of the detritus away. This land would take much longer to heal, much longer. Lifetimes would pass as the land would attempt to return to what it once was before its ruin. The flames were remembered vividly.

Even today, anyone that had once resided here could easily see the few remaining embers here and there strewn about the ash and soot. The few smoke particles still within the air, the smell of it all filling their nostrils. Yet only one former resident returned, the rest still residing here amongst the great trees no longer.

The lone elf wandered over to a collapsed, shattered trunk. All these trees and what remained were large enough in diameter to contain a large enough dwelling for a single room, as whatever was expanded upon remained close by, scattered over the forest floor. As the elf breathed in the smoke scented air, he could see the faint traces of life before the ruin and collapse of this village. Visions of a father bringing game from a recent hunt as he set his bow and quiver upon the floor. A mother joyfully greeted her husband before embracing him, and the two stared back to where the lone elf now stands, looking down as if he was a child. Their faces were mostly blurred and fuzzy, yet they clearly bore no smiles, rather frowns and seemed scornful. The father began to speak and then the vision faded away into nothing but the ash around the forest.

The elf moved on, continuing to wander this ruined village, soon finding a massive tree in the heart of not only the village, but the rest of the forest, burnt and harmed, not yet dead but dying. Kneeling down to touch one of the thousands of exposed roots, his eyes received yet another vision. This time of the same couple kneeling in front of their Elder,

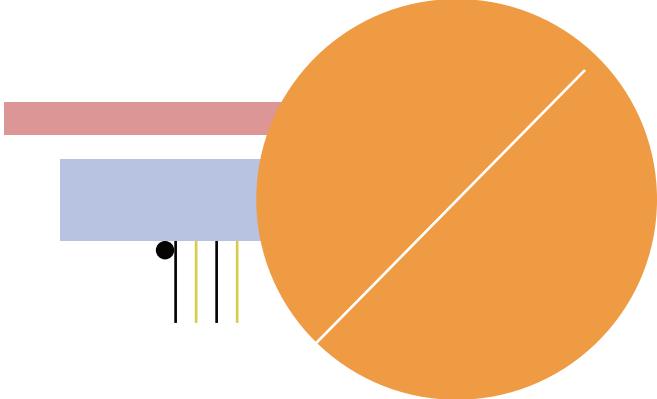




praying to the Moon that gently touched the ashen grave with its caring light. She had already done the same to the Sun earlier in the day when it had reached its highest point in the sky, but now the Moon was full and at the peak of the starry night. The elder chanted in her native tongue as the Moon gently glowed slightly brighter, her voice just barely audible. The couple in front of her was to receive a Healer, one touched by the gentle glow of the Moon itself, and soon after the couple rose to their feet, the vision once again faded to ash.

Again, the elf moved on, closer to the Great Tree this time, entering the large doorway carved into its trunk. The interior still remained mostly, less ravaged by fire than the rest of the woods, and yet the damage was devastating enough. Small beds filled most of the many rooms where healing was practiced, with a small but grand library in another, filled with a various collection of old scrolls and tomes and other books dedicated to healing and its history. Some books, however, were focused on the village's history. Few survived the flames, and none documented the events that fanned them. More visions this time of clear smiling faces and chatter as those now gone worked dutifully to maintain, heal, cure, document, and guard these sacred halls. This is where the elf practiced healing, although a male in this society, still touched by the moon.

Another vision appeared as he entered the library, finding the elder standing next to a young boy with her hand on his shoulder as he read through the scroll. It quickly faded, being replaced by a trail that led into one of the healing rooms. The elf followed, entering the next room to where this time he found a small crowd of what he remembered as some of the best healers in the village, all surrounding him as he slowly healed a gravely wounded knight. The Knight was a Human, of whom were usually never trusted by Elves of any region. It had seemed that he had been struck by a rather large beast located in the region. The elf didn't recall his

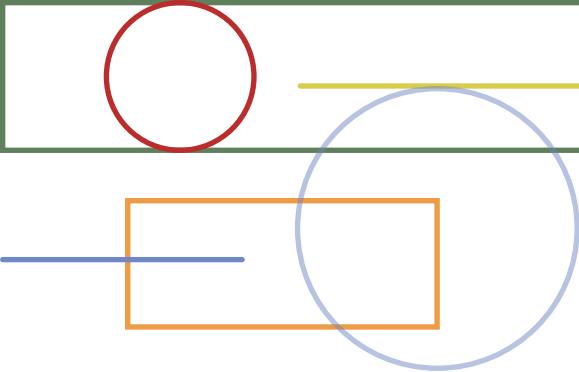


recent memory; however, he remembered the wound vividly: three claw marks that were rather deep, and strong enough to make a sizable hole within the steel cuirass near the bed on the floor. The attack had cut deeply into the knight's abdomen, and had he been found by any of his colleagues, his fate would have surely been sealed. Humans were never the most adept in the arts of magic and sorcery. Some were gifted; yes, however the Elves were always naturally gifted in these teachings. They originated from their ancestors, after all, and as such, they held yet another trait highly.

And though certain sub-clans were further akin to either the Moon, the Sun, or another aspect of the greater natural universe, some lucky or rather talented few were able to develop skills within another branch of the old arcane arts. For example, one touched by the Sun could potentially be touched by the Moon as well. And through such gifts, certain talents could be discovered at any time in one's life. The elf, finding that his gift of the Moon had done little to ease the knight's pain as he struggled to breathe.

The elder placed her hand on the elf's shoulder, saying something that was unintelligible to the knight. Soon the elf closed his eyes, concentrating as he placed his hands on the wound, grimacing before clearing his mind and breathing. In and out, inhale and exhale. Soon, his hands grew warmer with each passing second until the knight began to scream out in pain as the elf's hands burned the wound, cauterizing it. He paused soon after, quickly pulling his hands away, unable to remove his gaze from the flames as the vision once more faded away to ash.

Again, the elf ventured deeper into what was once his village's World Tree. Each elven clan had one, as their species viewed these trees as sacred and holy, but also the only things able to grant them their magic, their arts. As long as one such tree existed, their use of spells shall be infinite. Regardless, it should also be noted that each clan views their specific tree as the center of the world, with each kingdom



or empire that the Elves had once carved (no matter the multitude of different clans and sub-clans), those who journeyed on a pilgrimage ventured to the empire's capital to see that specific tree alone. That specific tree, and its subsequent clan, was regarded as favored by the Elven pantheon, and received almost divine status.

Soon, the elf had reached the other side of the trunk, finding a mausoleum of elders and warriors within his clan. Currently, no such empire of the elves exists, rather each clan fights one another for total supremacy over the others, with this having been the case for centuries as of now. Here in this chamber is where priests and healers perform ceremonies for those passed for their spirits to join the nature that surrounds their world (including the world tree itself). Their tombs are carved into the trunk of the world tree and sealed inside with the sap of the Tree, with an Elven carving inscribed on their seal detailing their name, and deeds (albeit some are exaggerated). Now, however, the mausoleum had been largely burnt away, with most of the tombs now gone, and only some of those at the base of the trunk had survived. One of which was of the elder, and so yet another vision had formed.

The knight was now healed, giving his thanks to the elf. Human society had up to these past few decades been largely made up of squabbling city states and small kingdoms, yet now they seemed to have settled their petty claims, albeit reluctantly, and stood under one greater kingdom. Of course, though humans were rare where the elves had lived, some had indeed colonized other parts of the nearby world, but now they seemed to be growing in numbers. Perhaps they were to be just as ambitious as some had foretold.

To the far west across the sea, a Human kingdom was growing in strength, rapidly expanding unchecked into much of the known world. And it was here that this village would meet its fate. They demanded subjugation, with the warriors refusing such a demeaning display of posturing.



The army, led by a most renowned and feared general, sacked and looted and burned every inch of earth in their wake. The warriors maimed, priests slaughtered while defending their artifacts, children kidnapped and slaughtered with their mothers. None were spared except two. As the ceremony in the mausoleum was halted, the remaining warriors closed and boarded the entrance, sending the elf into a lower level of the tree that only those chosen by more than one aspect of nature may enter. The knight, before drawing his own sword in defense of the village, handed the elf a crossbow, and pushed him down lower into the depths of the tree before sealing it off.

"My thanks, kind elf. Though you may not understand my native tongue, I regret that I shall never know thy name in this lifetime. Farewell."

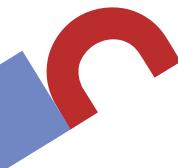
And so, the flames were remembered vividly. An all-consuming warmth that filled the Tree with smoke and blinded all those that remained inside. The ensuing struggle that would have been a massacre if not for the smoke, lasted for minutes on end, and all that could be heard were the clashing of metal and sounds of pain and weary exertions of the body. The elf soon wandered through the old catacombs of the elders, emerging from the ground to find himself far away from the village. With haste, he ran back to where he thought he might find his home, yet when he had reached the village, he found nothing but burnt ruins. The flames were indeed remembered vividly.

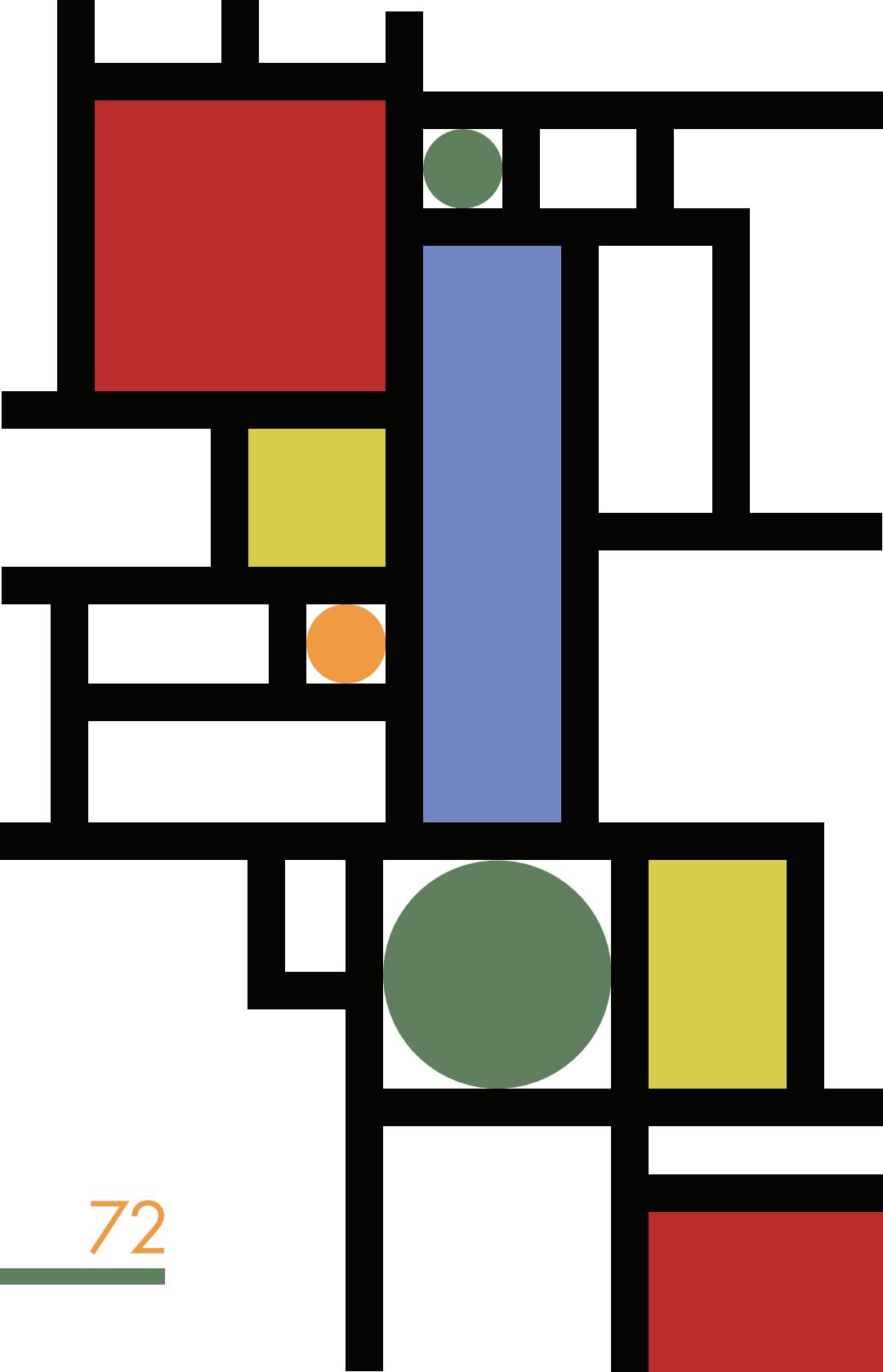
The final visions had dissipated, as the elf left what remained of the world tree. Wandering through the ruins that nature had begun to swallow whole, he soon found himself in front of an old, rusted sword embedded into the ashen earth with a broken helmet resting on the hilt. He dropped to his knees, slowly and gently, clasping his hands and closing his eyes before bringing one hand down to touch the earth in front of him.

"Aerlin." He spoke softly. "Yet I regret that I shall never know yours."

S

Section V





The Lamb

Little Lamb who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee
Gave thee life & bid thee feed.
By the stream & o'er the mead;
Gave thee clothing of delight,
Softest clothing wooly bright;
Gave thee such a tender voice,
Making all the vales rejoice!

Little Lamb who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee

Little Lamb I'll tell thee,
Little Lamb I'll tell thee!

He is called by thy name,
For he calls himself a Lamb:
He is meek & he is mild,
He became a little child:
I a child & thou a lamb,
We are called by his name.

Little Lamb God bless thee.
Little Lamb God bless thee.

Strangers

Someone left the chat today
I saw when I scrolled down
There was no hug or last goodbye
There was no warning sound

Someone left the chat today
I guess that's no surprise
There was no fight or final spite
Just tears and lonely sighs

Someone left the chat today
Fifteen is down to nine
Our group was never perfect
But at least I called it mine

Someone left the chat today
My wound is rubbed with salt
I stare up at my ceiling
Asking "is it all my fault?"

I think I'll leave the chat today
Too much is done and said
At this point we're just strangers
And our childhoods are dead

Experiences

From inside my home, I observe hungry turkeys and think
about what I'll soon do:
what works I'll soon write, the problems I'll face, but at once I
take note of the day.
The sky is a radiant blue.
I notice my parents and what they chose to play,
it's some tried-and-true rummy, but what's off about this game,
what I've never once seen of any deck,
is that both sides are completely the same.
Whether they cared, I'd forgotten to check.

I needed to go out and feed the birds, it was a task I
simply had to do,
but when I mentioned this to my parents, they paused
their impossible rummy,
and they said "Don't let it all get to you"
after glancing up like I had just said something
quite funny.
The implications toyed with me, as I don't like
unknowns, since sometimes
they crush you, and sometimes they bless you, but
they're always a leap of great faith.
Absence of thought led me straight out the door and
onto the hill where fate's throned,
apparently, but it's fine if she's the only ghost I meet;
for me: no phantoms, reapers, or wraiths.

Now it begins, my warmth-wrapped promenade, not a
singular cloud to be seen,
but what I did see was the flock of local turkeys.
There were four times as much than I'd seen grow from chicks
to adults; what could this mean?
As I move, they move, a fact untrue for the surrounding woods;
is this a lie or is disaster lurking?
Well, my question found answers and my heart filled with fear

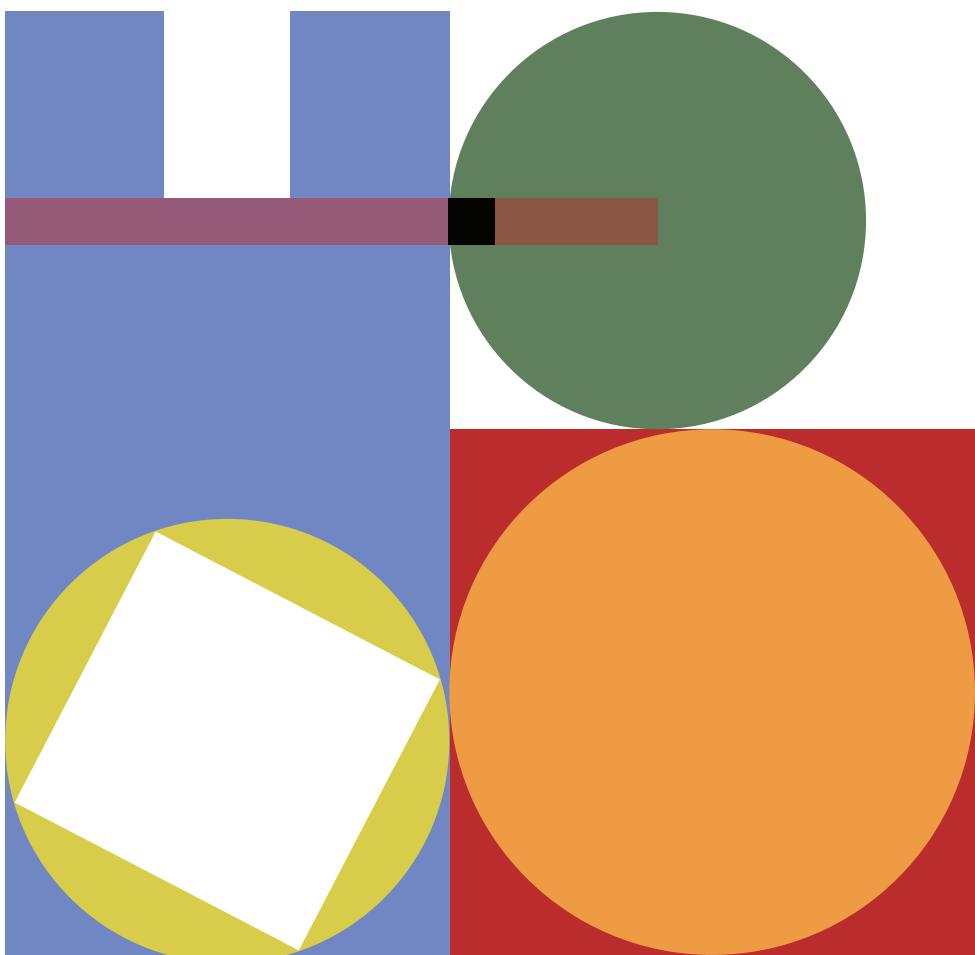


as indistinguishable beasts
all around me were here,
and upon my beautiful, bountiful turkeys, they feast.

The feathers are flying, the bodies mere morsels,
I turn 'round and run
to not meet my end mortal
but the day feels unreal now, I can't see the sun,
but the light is still present,
for however long.
My mind incandescent
but thoughts aren't for now; for all I now gather
is that thinking is wrong.

The creatures don't tackle, don't charge, and don't bite
but the urge to look straight at them, I just can't muster
up yet, for as much as they clearly don't fight,
I can't gather my own spiritual luster
to shake off my fear and just peak, just a small,
passing glance.
I quit running and change my mind.
I looked at the beasts who around my yard pranced
and what would it be that I could possibly find
is that they simply weren't impossible horrors to face
but that they were just bears I'd seen before and to whom
I'd paid little mind.
I noticed they'd oddly halted their pace
and it seemed there were turkeys left over.
What could it be but the certain amount
that I'd watched grow up and whom over I hovered
to ensure their safety for as long as could be, I was sure
this was them, each one I could count.

for when comfort's outnumbered,
I can just know that it's the price we often must pay
for the right to one day be sheltered inside,
finding a young one's lack of experience funny
while out the window watching them refuse to hide,
giving more joy to your impossible rummy.



Crown

Her crown is her power
Her crown makes her strong
Her crown sets her apart from others
Her crown given to her by her ancestors
Why must she hide what makes her whole?
Why should I feel ashamed for what God
gave me?

Ashamed for her uniqueness
Young girls degraded
Taught to envy her white peers
Shut out by society for being different
Beautiful crown diminished to nothing
Power of mine gone
Leaving me unholy
Empty without purpose
Her crown is her treasure
Why hide away her greatness?

The Day I Die

I woke up in a sweat, drenched from head to toe from a nightmare of glimpses of the future. To be exact, it is today's future. Today would be the day that I die.

The alarm rings, and I sit on the edge of the bed. I had woken up hours ago. I let the alarm ring for a few minutes. I knew I would not disturb anyone. I reached to turn it off, and my mind returned to my previous thoughts. They were silly thoughts that a person might have on their last day of life. Would I withdraw all my money and go on a spending spree? Maybe I will drive until I run out of gas. Would I choose to do something stupid and free, like jog down the street wearing only a swimsuit as people went past me and laughed.

I got up and planned how I would dress for this special day. First, I found my best suit that I had dry-cleaned several months ago, and it has been in the closet since that day. Next, I found the perfect necktie that my wife had given me on our fifty-first anniversary. The necktie would go with the light blue shirt I found in the back of the closet. The shirt was given to me for Father's Day by my children. Finally, I dusted off the new shoes I bought several months ago when I last wore my suit. I was going to die dignified.

Finished, I picked up the Book on the table I had laid out earlier. I got in the car and drove a mile down the street. When I arrived, I grabbed the Book and the keys to the building and entered. It was empty, as expected. This is where I found peace.

I sat quietly on the front pew and opened the Bible. The Bible was a gift from my beloved at our wedding. Tears of heartache and joy stained several pages. Many pages were underlined, some were faded, and notes

were jotted in the margin. The imprint of my name had disappeared years ago.

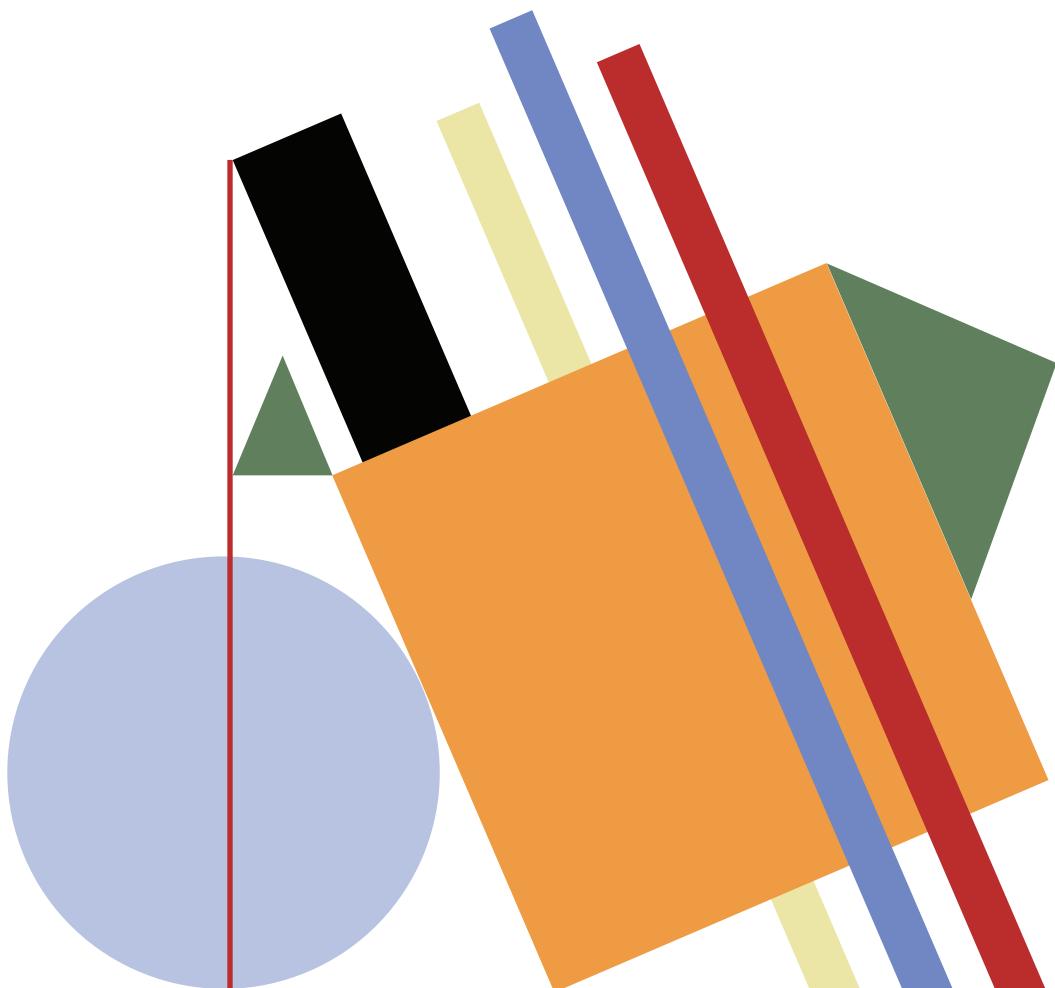
I read several passages I had underlined over the years that always comforted me. I opened to Matthew 28:20 and read, “I am with you always, even till the end of time.” This one scripture meant more to me than any other during these last few months. I had kept this close to my heart, even as a teenager and through my rebellious years. It was comforting to understand that I would not face this day alone.

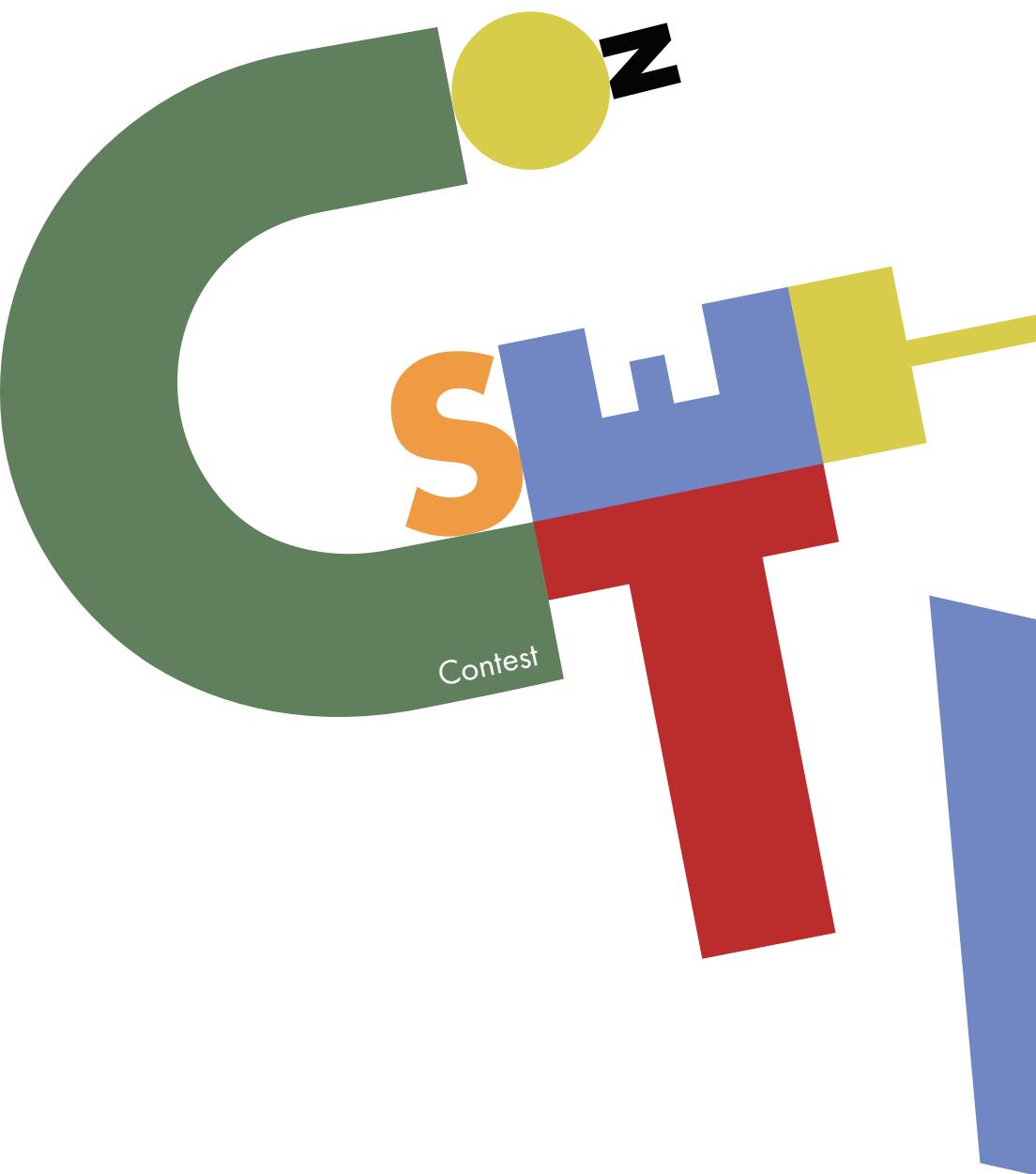
When I finished my quiet time, I returned to my car and drove to my special place, which I visited several times a week. Coming to this special place started several months ago. In fact, the last time I wore the suit was here. The marker had a name with an inscription, “Wife, Mother, Grandmother.” I sat next to the granite marker and ran my fingers over the cold stone. Memories came rushing through my mind of our long life together.

I took a deep breath, and tears of joy came to my eyes. Finally, finally, I was going to see her today. I had waited for this day since I said my earthly farewells to her. I had sat there several hours when I felt the wind rustle my thin hair. It was like her hands were brushing through my hair, and I believed I could feel her chest press against my cheeks.

Picking up my phone. I text my sons. I tell them I love them and hope to see them when it is their time to come Home. I explained that my heart could no longer live without their mother. I miss her so much. I told them where I was physically and signed the text – Love you forever, Dad.

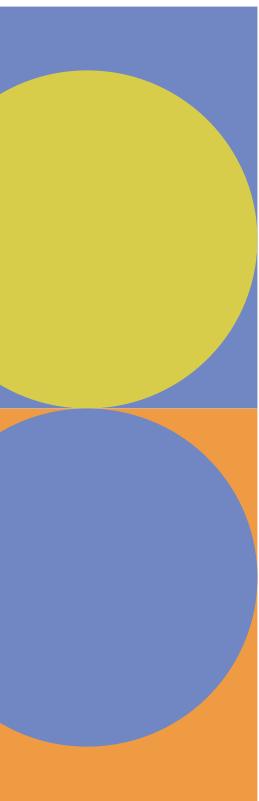
I lay on the ground next to the marker and pulled my knees up to my chest. Hearing the lawnmower, I could smell the freshly cut grass and feel the cool breeze of the spring day. Closing my eyes, I see my love reaching out as I run toward her. I take my last breath just as our hands touch. I finally realized that it is possible to die of a broken heart.





Winners
R
S
M
A
N
Y

The Curse of the Straight Face



She walks into school wearing jeans and a sweatshirt. Her hair is in a high ponytail, and she is silent until she gets to her class. People that pass her in the hallways don't smile or look, they just keep staring straight ahead. It isn't until she reaches the classroom that she starts talking. Her friends are in there, and they know what the deal is.

That girl is me, and I can assure you, I'm not facing anything serious. There is no case of bullying, or mistreatment from my peers. I just look unapproachable, mean even. I have RBF, and we all know what that stands for.

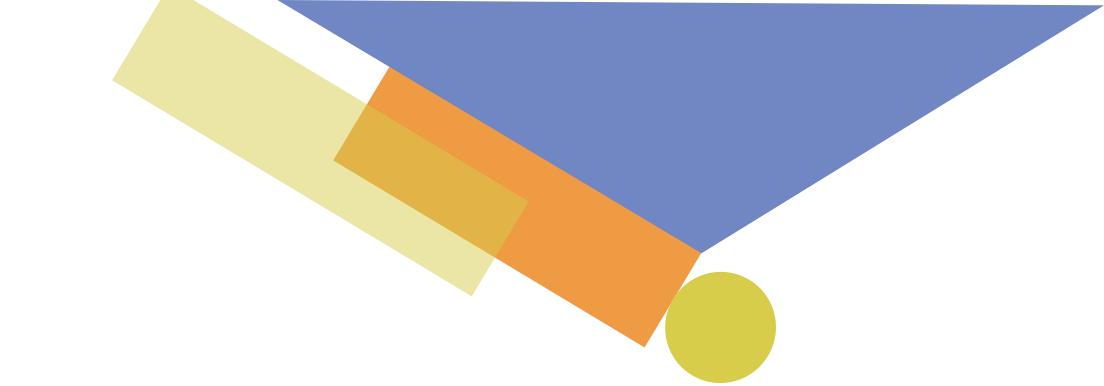
I don't try to keep a straight face, it just happens. Whenever I've tried to lighten it up, I just look sick, awkward, or creepy. So I stick to the way my face is naturally set; cold, unwelcoming, and bored.

My other problem is that I'm not a naturally outgoing person. Socializing is not my thing, so I talk to who I know and that's about as far as I go. This also makes me seem like a jerk. I mean, if I don't talk to someone, that must mean I hate them, right?

This is completely untrue. There are very few people that I truly dislike, and usually if I don't talk to someone it's because I'm nervous. What if they think I'm weird or dumb? What if they don't want to talk to me? What if I'm below their standards?

I met one of my best friends in sixth grade. We sat next to each other in music class, and we would both try to talk to each other whenever we got the chance. I was nervous, and she was too, so it took us months to hold an actual conversation with one another. The reward, however, was absolutely worth it.

Later in our friendship, I learned that she thought I hated her because of my face. I then went through the process of telling her that it's just how I look, and I don't mean

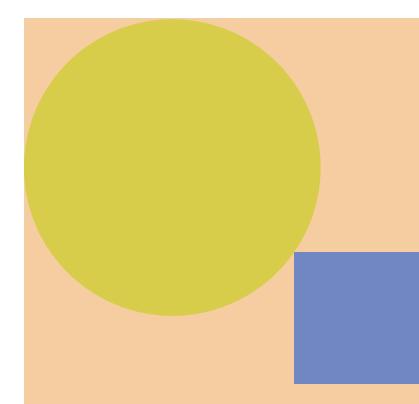


anything by it. On the inside, I really wanted to be friends with her, I just didn't know how to show it.

Unfortunately, that's not the only instance of this case. Countless people have come up to me and said that they thought I hated them before we talked. My explanation is heard again, and the receiver laughs and smiles. I guess if I really want to clear the air, I just need to talk to every single person in my school.

Some people have been so wary of me that they went through my friends to voice their opinion. A friend once said to me that somebody thought I hated them. I was horrified and shocked, and asked why they thought this way. My friend responded by saying that I would always give them a dirty look. Once again, I went through the explanation process.

Of course, I don't blame anyone for thinking this way. If someone looks unapproachable, I won't talk to them either. I've made a straight face in the mirror before, and I agree with what everyone's saying. It's not on anyone else to correct this assumption; it's on me. I guess what I'm trying to say is, if you see an angry-looking girl with jeans and a sweatshirt on walking through the halls of Oakmont Regional High School, don't be afraid of her. She's not judging you one bit. She wants to be friends with you, her face just says otherwise. She'll work on talking more, and she hopes that you'll try and talk to her too.



9 years old

I was at the beach
Holding a net that was taller than I was
Sprinting up and down the shore catching minnows
As I did practically every day that summer.

As the morning turned to noon,
The tide went out
And the people who were swimming gradually returned to
their beach towels.

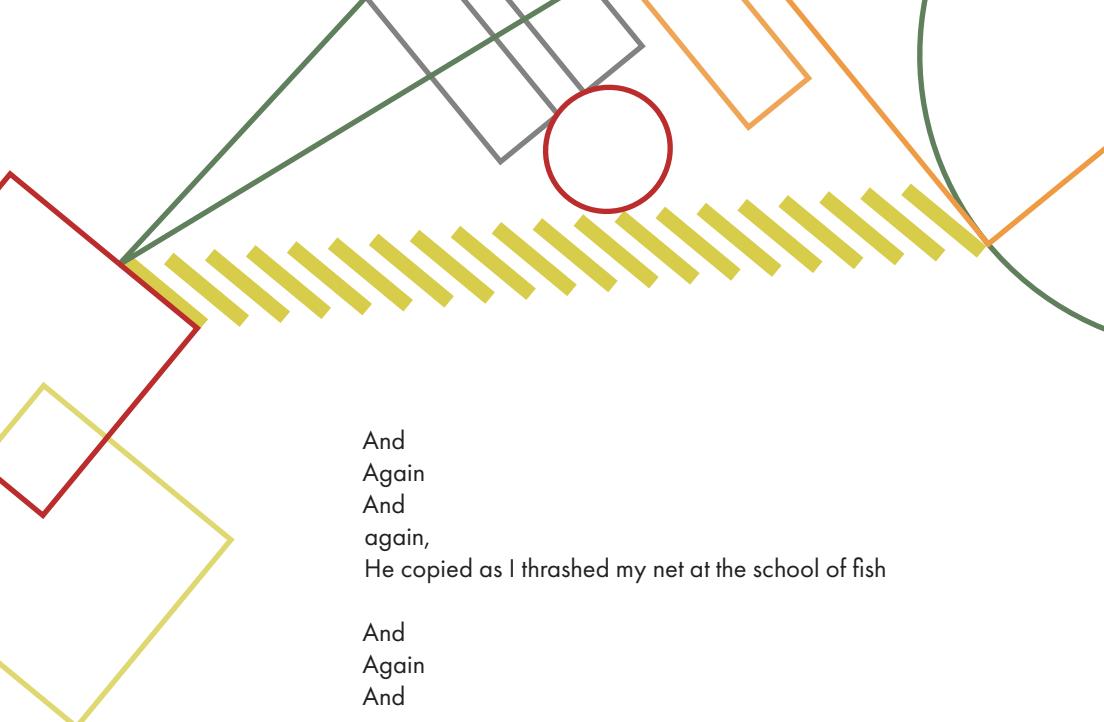
Oftentimes, younger kids would huddle around my bucket,
trying to hold the minnows
Screeching as they wiggled away,
And oftentimes, they asked me to teach them to catch the fish,
So I would.

On this particular Saturday, a boy named Andy and his
father joined me in my mass murdering
of minnows.
Between breaths,

As I sprinted along the shoreline,
I taught him how to catch minnows.

When I saw the sun shimmer on the sides of the fish
in the shallows,
I would frantically launch my net at them,
And soon after, Andy's net would follow.

Again
And
Again,
He followed as I *sprint ed* down the shoreline,
Water splashing behind me with every step.



And
Again
And
again,
He copied as I thrashed my net at the school of fish

And
Again
And

Again
And
Again,
We would peer into our nets
Yet when I lifted my net,
There was a souplike slew of sand, saltwater, and shiny
minnows at the bottom.

When Andy lifted his net and stared hopefully down at it,
The water would simply trickle through
Followed by the sand,

And he would be left leaning over a

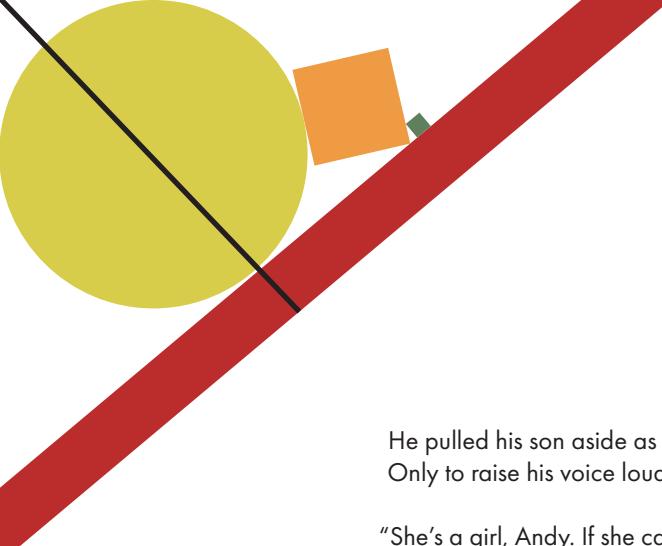
Deep
Empty
Black
Net.

Frankly, my ego was glowing

However

Andy's dad had had enough.

He walked towards the two of us, his lips pursed
In an upset manner that contrasted the lively, upbeat scene of
children playing on the beach.



He pulled his son aside as if to shield me from his words,
Only to raise his voice loud enough for me to hear.

"She's a girl, Andy. If she can do it, you should be able to do it too."

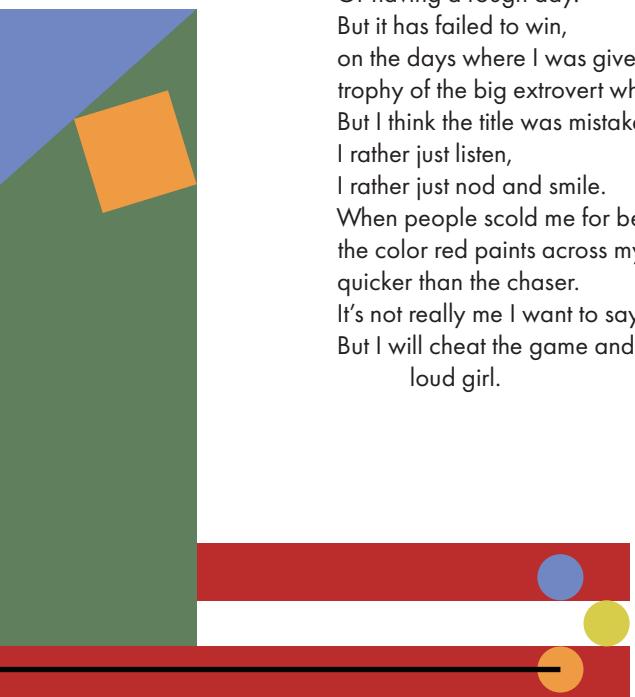
However, from my personal experience, I was lucky enough that this education was relatively distant.

While there were inevitably gender roles in my own life,
I primarily watched from afar
as my teachers talked about sexism from
long, long ago
And far, far away.

Yet I never caught up to the fact that
Someday
Somehow
I would have to face it myself.

And no,
It wasn't the end of the world that my fishing skills
were underestimated.

But in the moment,
I understood that
I wasn't supposed to fish,
Let alone be good at it.



Lily Killieen

Loud Girl

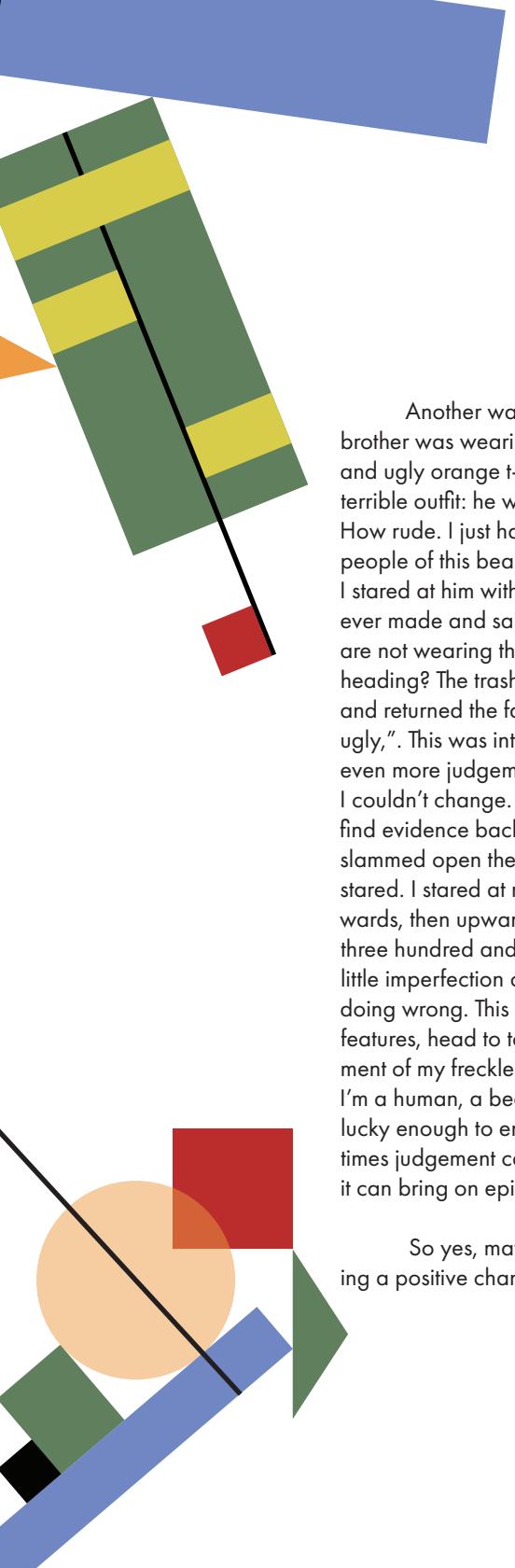
Hi, I am the “loud girl”
who is not afraid to throw herself
in a crowd of judgy people.
Or to introduce myself to everyone or anyone.
These people don’t see me chain up my social anxiety,
And throw it miles behind me,
Waiting for it to catch up to me.
We play a daily game, of catch the leader
I am the leader who is chased by the catcher.
My anxiety is my worst fear and
it never fails to win the game of
when I am public speaking
Or having a rough day.
But it has failed to win,
on the days where I was given the title and
trophy of the big extrovert who always cracking up jokes.
But I think the title was mistaken
I rather just listen,
I rather just nod and smile.
When people scold me for being too loud,
the color red paints across my face,
quicker than the chaser.
It’s not really me I want to say,
But I will cheat the game and I will be the winner of the
loud girl.

Assumptions



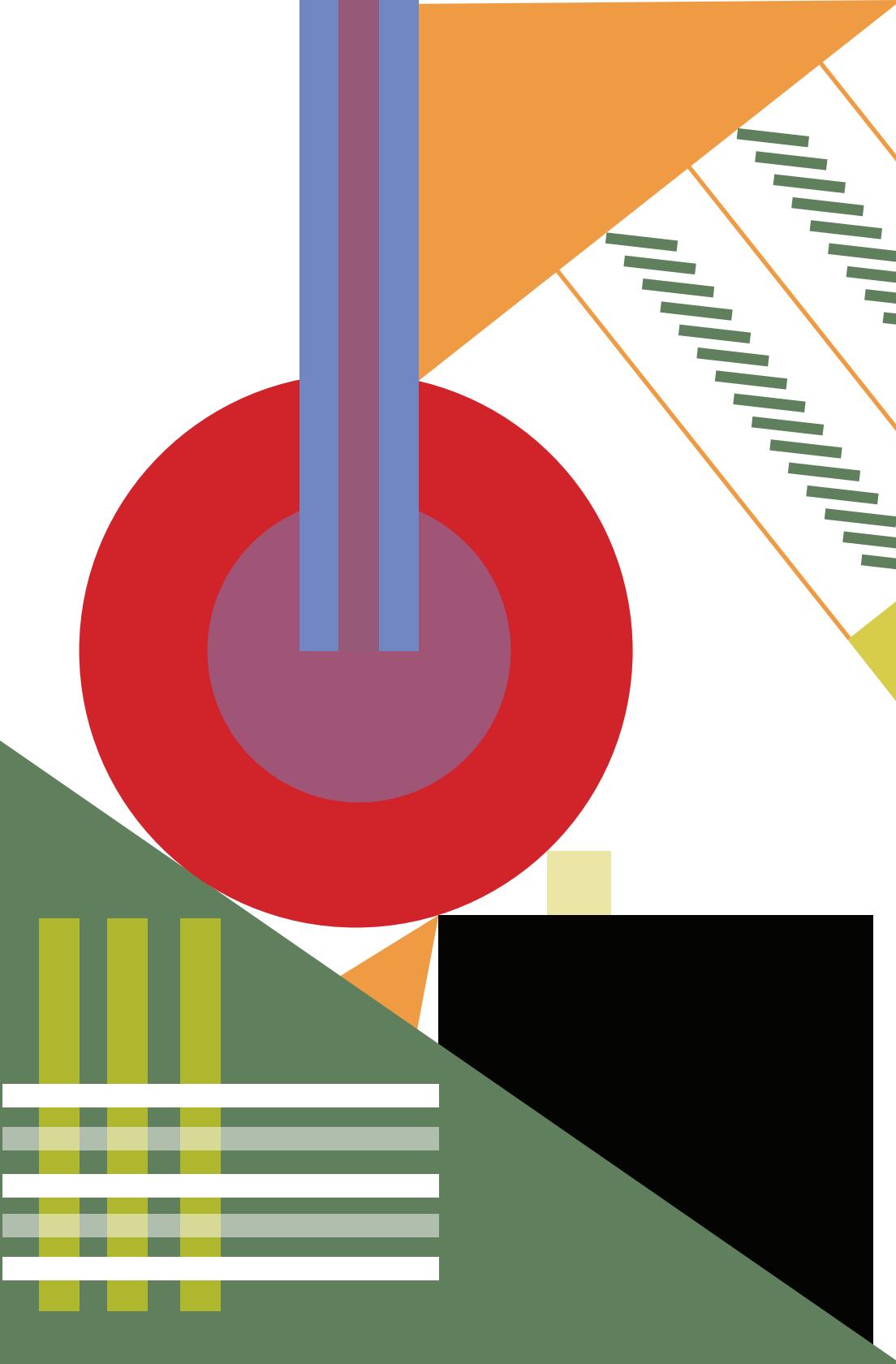
While walking to English class the other day, one of my best friends I've had for my entire life told me I was judgmental. When I heard this, I was slightly taken aback. I went home and wondered where that came from, but as I thought about it more and more, I realized what she had gotten wrong about her assumption. She was right, I am judgmental, I have to admit it. But what she failed to recognize is that I'm judgmental for valid reasons. For example, if someone told me they thought it would be a good idea to go toilet paper their second cousin's ex-husband's new girlfriends house, I would say, "Girl, that's a terrible idea, are you *dumb*?". Some may say this is a terrible way to approach this horrendous idea, and maybe it is, but the important thing is that it's effective.

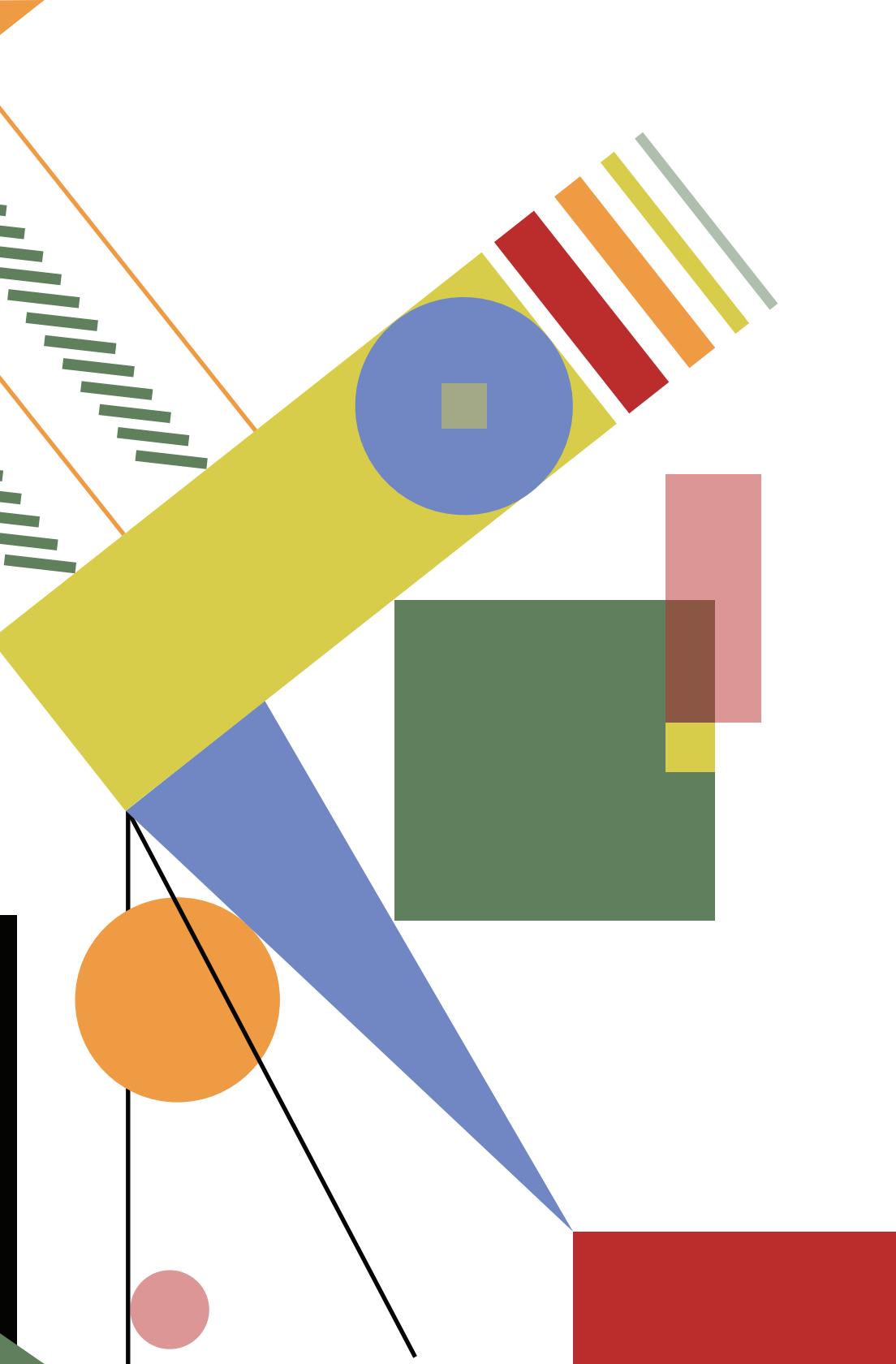
I can prove this is effective with a conversation I had with my father the other night over dinner. Ever since the summer, he's been harassing me about getting a job, like he wants me to get premature wrinkles (honestly, who wants that?). While I was trying to spend quality time with my father, of course he has to pester me with his "two cents" about a job at the nearest Shaw's. "It's a great experience," he says, "You can practice independence," he says. When I had finally had enough of this discussion, I resorted to my impulsive tendencies and turned to him to give him *my* two cents. "You know, dad, this is such an insulting conversation. Why do you think I would be willing to participate in such a self-deprecating job of stacking shelves with refried beans and canned vegetables? I would rather work at Rite Aid where they at least have enough self-respect to stack hair conditioner and pills." After that, the man never bothered me again to get a job (until a week later when he saw a "Now Hiring" sign in the competing supermarket)!! Therefore, my insulting of terrible ideas causes people to think deeper about their stupid decisions before making them.



Another way I can prove this is effective from when my brother was wearing these ridiculous light blue sweatpants and ugly orange t-shirt. He knew what he was doing with this terrible outfit: he was trying to make me throw up my lunch! How rude. I just had to say something - *had* to save the people of this beautiful world from this menace of an outfit. I stared at him with the most discriminatory face I think I've ever made and said, "Joseph Sterling Paradis, I know you are not wearing that repulsive outfit today. Where are you heading? The trash can?". After this, he looked at me blankly and returned the favor but ten times worse, "At least I'm not ugly.". This was intense. A judgement responded to with even more judgement. One that was based on something I couldn't change. So I had to use my last resort and try to find evidence backing up his claim. I jogged to the bathroom, slammed open the door, turned into the huge mirror and stared. I stared at myself straight, then sideways, then downwards, then upwards, and straight again. I turned my body three hundred and sixty degrees so I could see every big and little imperfection on my body but slowly realized what I was doing wrong. This was insane. As I continued studying my features, head to toe, analyzing everything from the placement of my freckles to my arm length I realized... I'm not ugly! I'm a human, a beautiful, revolutionary specimen that was lucky enough to end up with this extraordinary life. So, sometimes judgement can get rid of terrible ideas, and sometimes it can bring on epiphanies that change one's life.

So yes, maybe I am judgmental, but at least I'm making a positive change in the world because of it.





2023