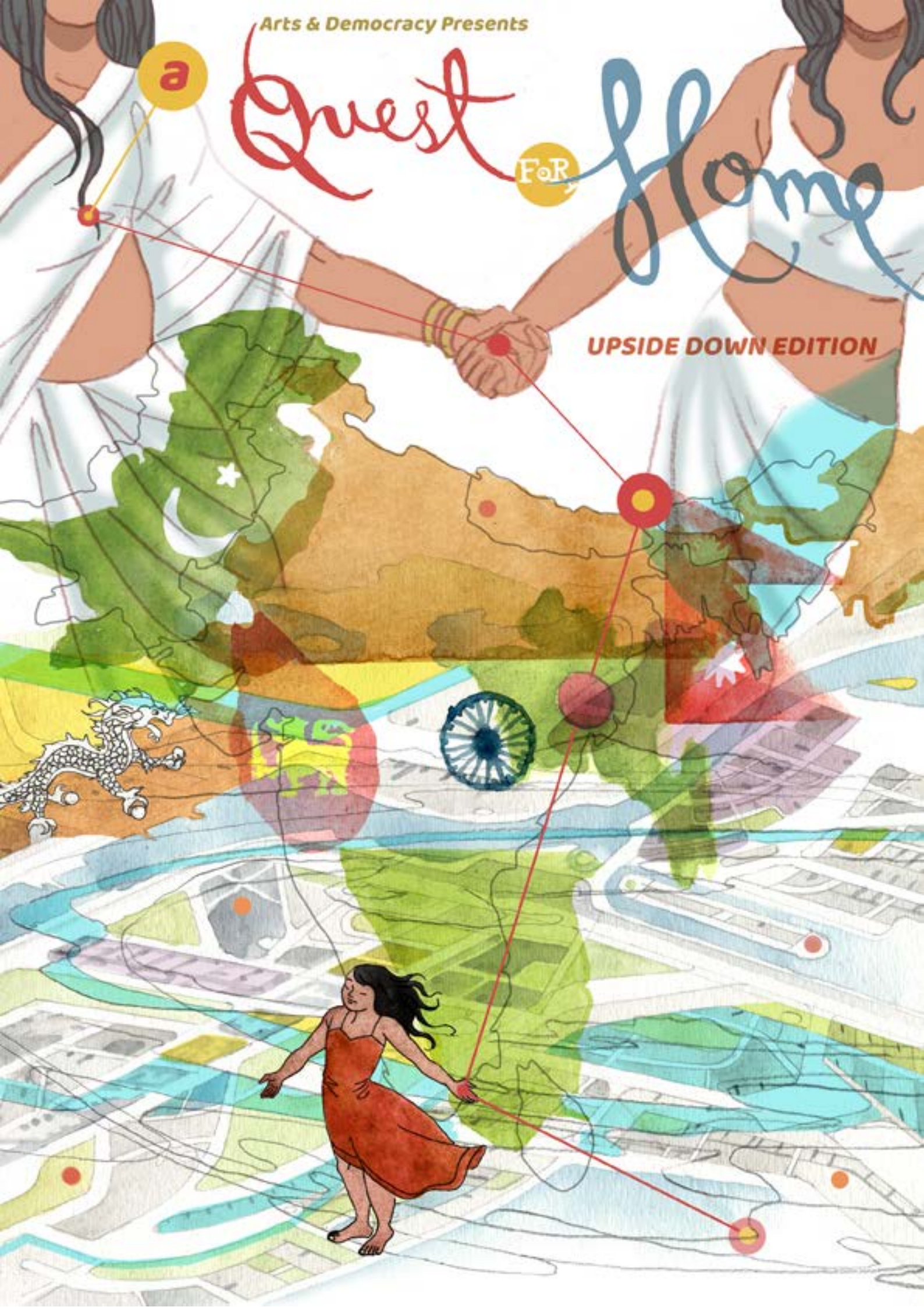


Arts & Democracy Presents

a Quest For Home

UPSIDE DOWN EDITION



a

Quest For Home

This zine was created by the participants of the second installment of our writing workshop series "Quest for Home: Upside Down Edition" organized by Arts & Democracy and facilitated by Roohi Choudhry. Cover art by Bishakh Som.

upside-down edition

Fabliha Anbar, Editor

What does belonging look like? For those of us who grew up in the South Asian diaspora, it's a feeling of floating in between, unsure where to land. Those of us who grew up in South Asia, have a different understanding of South Asian identity today and what it means to be rooted to your homeland. Trying to balance ancestry and future, the journey to find home is filled with desperation and hope. At times, it feels like a never-ending cycle.

But the global pandemic has changed that, too. We spent our lives trying to find a home, but now we find ourselves wanting to escape. The deadly virus forced us to be separated from our loved ones and deprived us of affection, connection, and warmth. While filled with grief, we are also starved of community. And so, we are trapped inside with whispers from our spirit. We are now no longer able to escape our deepest thoughts and desires.

We now had to reimagine healing, grieving, and community. To do this, we listened to our own deepest yearnings that we could no longer avoid.

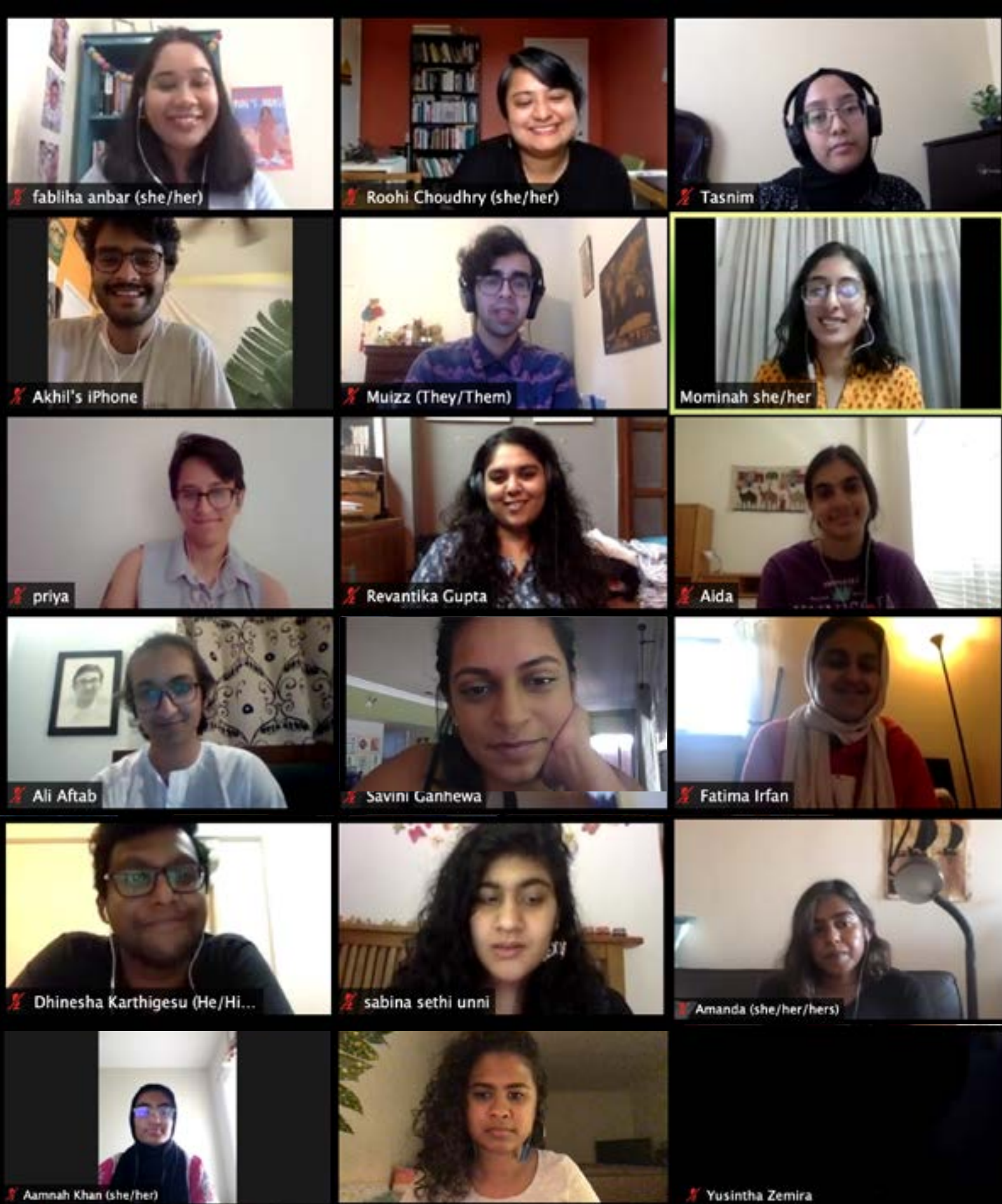
On a spring day in 2019,, we had just ended our first installment of the writing workshop series. We celebrated the last session with a picnic at Prospect Park. Ten of us sat on lush grass, our arms touching each other side-by-side, seeing each other's lips form into smiles.

A year later, it had become a faint memory and almost seemed like a dream that never happened. The Arts & Democracy team came together over Zoom and reminisced about the days before the pandemic where we were able to enjoy each other's company. We decided to organize a second installment of the writing workshop series, but we were hesitant. We were afraid that people wouldn't be able to bond with one another virtually. We worried that the screens would get in the way of making actual connections.

People from all around the world applied to the workshop. We received applications from our home in Kensington, Brooklyn, to Malaysia, Pakistan, India, Texas, Alaska, and more. We eventually chose 15 participants from across the globe who had a desire and passion for storytelling. As our first session began, we anxiously waited for the boxes of stranger's faces to appear across our screen. Was it going to be a total failure? Was it going to be tense and awkward?

Every Saturday morning for six weeks, the comradeship grew stronger and stronger as we allowed ourselves to be vulnerable through the stories we had told each other. Although we were sitting in our homes, thousands of kilometers away from each other, the kinship we had built with each other made it felt as though we were right in the same room. As if the barriers of our computer screens had slowly started to disappear. Through our writing workshop sessions, we were able to momentarily escape the world and scribble our thoughts away.

We wrote about the places and people we longed for, and talked about maps and counter-maps and imagination as a kind of knowledge. We drew each other's faces and made clay with flour and water. Holding our hands up to our screens, we showed each other the objects that contained our deepest stories. This way, we built kinship and community when it seemed that finding tenderness wasn't possible. We formed lifelong friendships that we will cherish for the rest of our lives. Though it was broken up into little squares, *we made a kind of home.*



NOTES:

Include other participants' video?

Remove names?

Include a brief description on this page?

our last goodbye

amanda goonetilleke

the morning you died it was raining,
I cry at the florist when she asks for the occasion.

she arranges a vision for my grief:
white & yellow roses in full bloom.

I cradle them home in the rain, & on arrival,
my apartment floods with the smell of wet flowers,

& it is so disarming that I misplace my grief,
relax & cycle back, this goes on for days

until they begin to wilt, an exhausting reminder,
that beautiful things never last,





I throw them out, but moments later,
I am on my knees —

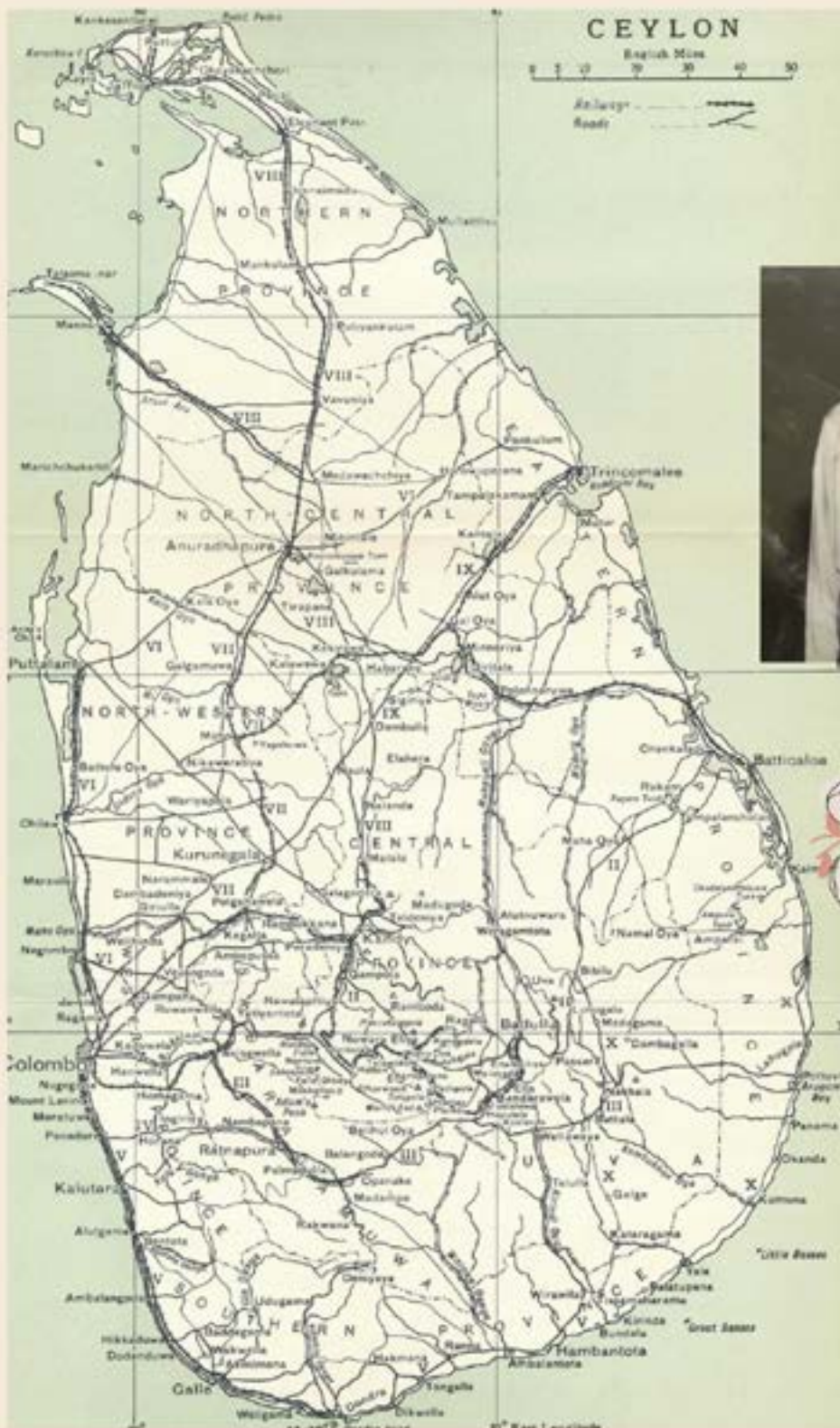
trying to salvage some petals & leaves,
trying to postpone a bitter ending,

I keep replaying our last goodbye in my head:
you cried into my palms & I promised I'd be back soon.

today I give you a more honest goodbye,
something more parts thank you than sorry.

I press the petals into my heaviest book:
preserve the moment, honor their grace, let everything dry.





WRITING PROMPT

We have all experienced great loss, and if you are like me you struggle with wanting to be sad forever & the reality of having to move on in some way. Writing is the only way I have learned to manage both. Write a letter to a lost loved one about how you are doing now: share your love, show them your growth, & try to make them smile.



FROM FAN FICTION TO FAN DICTION

BY MUIZZ AKHTAR



"Wow, what the heck is this?"

A friend had caught me not taking notes in my school planner, but instead doodling comics onto its pages that were inspired by whatever world I was into at the moment. That day, swirling purple and black lines depicted the haunting hellscape of Dark Aether from *Metroid Prime 2: Echoes*.

Explaining my vision to my friend, I said, "Don't you ever think about what we don't get to see in the game?"

Looking at my work unimpressed, my friend replied:

"Wow, this sure looks like a fanfic."



"Fanfic."

That day in seventh grade was the first time I had actually heard the term, but I shuddered, instinctively feeling that my innocent doodling was a form of transgression. This kind of derisive comment would soon enough pass through my own lips to condemn whatever I perceived to be poorly written. Not that I particularly had any animosity towards fan fiction or its writers specifically, but the pop culture circles I came to frequent on and offline unfortunately imbibed me with this condescending "truism" that fanfiction was inherently inauthentic and deviant. Looking back on that day now though, I realize I had actually merely closed myself to a beautiful form of expression that spoke to vibrant imaginations and worlds percolating within me just below the surface.

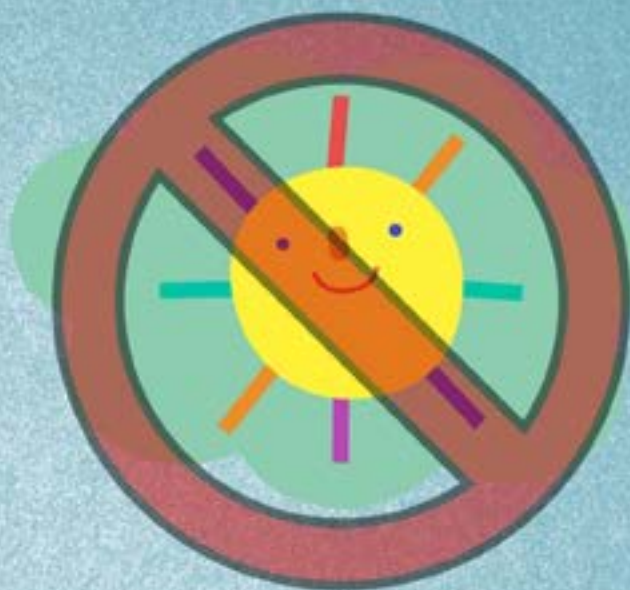
Throughout my youth and adolescence, I was a huge fan of anime, manga, video games, young adult novels—all the media where fandom culture was at its strongest. From the intense battles of *Weekly Shōnen Jump* to the whimsical monsters from the *Legend of Zelda*, it never took me more than a minute to be daydreaming into all manner of fantastical worlds with unbelievably cool characters. But wittingly and unwittingly, I had accepted white patriarchal and capitalist notions of objectivity regarding what is “proper fiction” that demeaned and marginalized those—mostly femme and queer folks—who sought to convey their ardor for their favorite stories in the form of a fanfic. These notions shamed femme and queer sexuality and insisted that to produce fanworks was the height of intellectual bankruptcy. “Why spend your time with another writer’s creations when you could be crafting your own?” was the all too common concern troll refrain. I came to believe that fanfiction had no more merit than schlocky pornography. The success of a story like *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which was originally a fanfic of *Twilight*, only conveniently confirmed my preconceived prejudice.

My faulty convictions didn’t just prevent the worlds and storylines in my head from materializing. I fundamentally assumed that I didn’t have what it took to write or create my own stories, at least not for anything more than a high school English class assignment. It seemed to me that those who could write or draw or generally create art were simply gifted in some fashion or another.



I unfortunately was just another mediocre millennial.

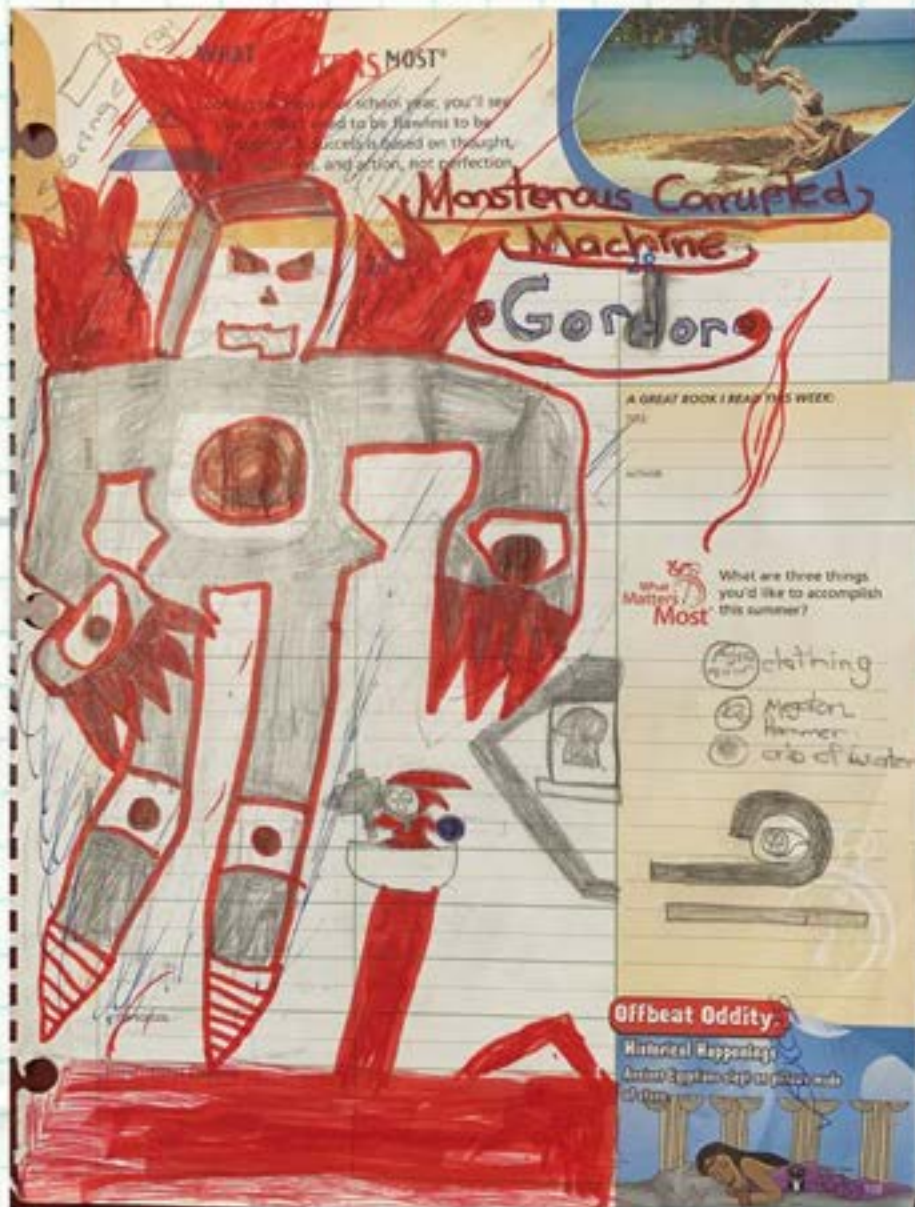
Everyone has ideas, but most people will never find a single day of success. And what did it mean to be a successful writer? We all know of successful writers; even if we haven’t read their books, we probably saw the movie adaptations. And if we didn’t even see the movie adaptations, we were sure to have nodded along when our friends discussed one story or another in-between classes. I barely grasped my own home city, but you could bet your bottom dollar that I knew all the ins and outs of Middle Earth. I and most of my fellow classmates were not meant to be Tolkien though. I was never going to be able to make even a modest living off of being a writer, so why even consider the path?



And thus, having not only drawn literary borders around my own imagination, but also literal ones around my reality, I proceeded through my school days with the confidence of what I was clearly not meant to be, eventually reaching the much vaunted world of “adulting.” I would eventually throw aside all of my childhood hobbies to focus instead on finding a “passion” that I would not only enjoy but would also be “practical” and financially stable. But forsaking the “unproductive” parts of my life did not succeed in molding me into a successful neoliberal subject. I felt instead as if I was floundering around, not as a fish out of water, but rather a human sinking to the bottom of a glass half empty.

I wondered desperately, why can't I just find something I'm passionate about?





A couple of years after college, I crashed and burned out of a soul-crushing job. Within the abyss of unemployment, I realized that, despite forsaking the joy of storytelling, the vivid imagination from my childhood was as strong as ever, sneakily clouding my eyes the second I let my guard down after losing the motivation to send in the next forty nine of my fifty planned job applications.

Reflecting on it now though, perhaps it was more accurate to say that I had mistaken the barren earth below my heel that I refused to take my eyes off from as all that existed of "reality."

At the advice of some good friends, I got back into my old hobbies and searched for creative outlets. It finally dawned on me that the one thing I had always enjoyed throughout my time in school was writing. Whether it was simple journaling or the academic papers I'd sacrifice my piddling sleep hygiene for, I felt invigorated tapping into the exciting thoughts buried within me. I decided to explore this side of myself further, joining a sociopolitical collective of kindred spirits, interning at a communications company, and finally, taking part in a certain creative writing workshop.

More than anything else, I came away from these experiences with a fundamentally simple, but powerful realization: I am a person who writes, ergo, I am a writer. Although society is filled to the brim with gatekeepers, in many ways, you are your own worst gatekeeper. It didn't matter that I didn't have a fancy position at some magazine or that I had never published a book. Regardless of my net capitalistic worth, I am a writer. Just as important, though certainly helpful, I didn't need something like a college curriculum to get better at writing. Like any skill, it's not akin to catching lightning in a bottle; I merely had to make a continuous earnest effort at it and I would get better at it over time.

But how would I go about getting that practice in? As the *A Quest For Home: Upside Down* writing workshop concluded, at the last second, I decided to take part in a writing competition for speculative fiction. Though I only had a week to write a short story, I wasn't concerned about the competition; I just wanted to use the deadline as a way to motivate myself to write something that would cap off my experiences in the workshop. Nevertheless, despite my newfound confidence, I had a difficult time getting started. I tried researching a topic and location for a science fiction story, but I kept hitting a wall, not knowing how I should proceed.

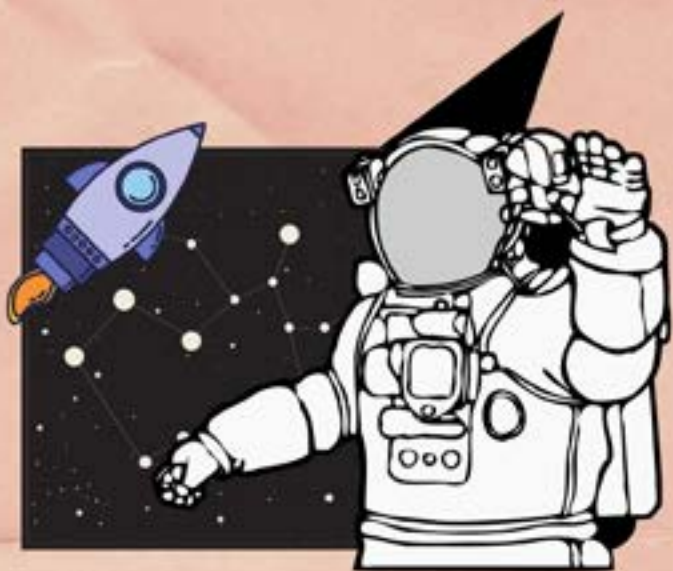
However, realizing that there's no objective path to brainstorming a story, I decided to just call up a good friend and bounce ideas off of them until I settled onto something. I decided to write about what I knew rather than what I didn't. One of our first prompts in this writing workshop was "I Know Dragons," related to something the great speculative fiction writer, Ursula K. Le Guin once said about "writing about what we know." As it turns out, I know a whole lot. What I knew was all the stories I had read, seen or played through, the various relationships I had cultivated and lost, the knowledge and skills I had gained and refined, and so much more. We contain entire universes of worlds and realities, some we are aware of, but many we are not.

I know dragons, or in other words, I know sci-fi...by tapping into what I know, a geyser of ideas erupted from which I was able to get the ball rolling.



And that's when it hit me: what I was constructing was, in essence, fanfiction. Everything is actually fanfiction in one way or another, as no story or world exists in a vacuum. Some of the stories held up as the greatest works of fiction in the Western canon are at their core fanfiction, such as every story based on Arthurian lore or the Bible. Intertextuality is inherent in every story no matter how conscious a writer is of it or not. Even in seemingly "nonfictional" stories like memoirs, a writer is constructing a world that is uniquely their own. Old clay can very easily be molded into shapes exciting and never before seen, and thus no New York City is wholly like any other.

At the end of the day, fanfiction is ultimately an expressive outlet that allows us to weave realities out of our dreams and dreams out of our realities.

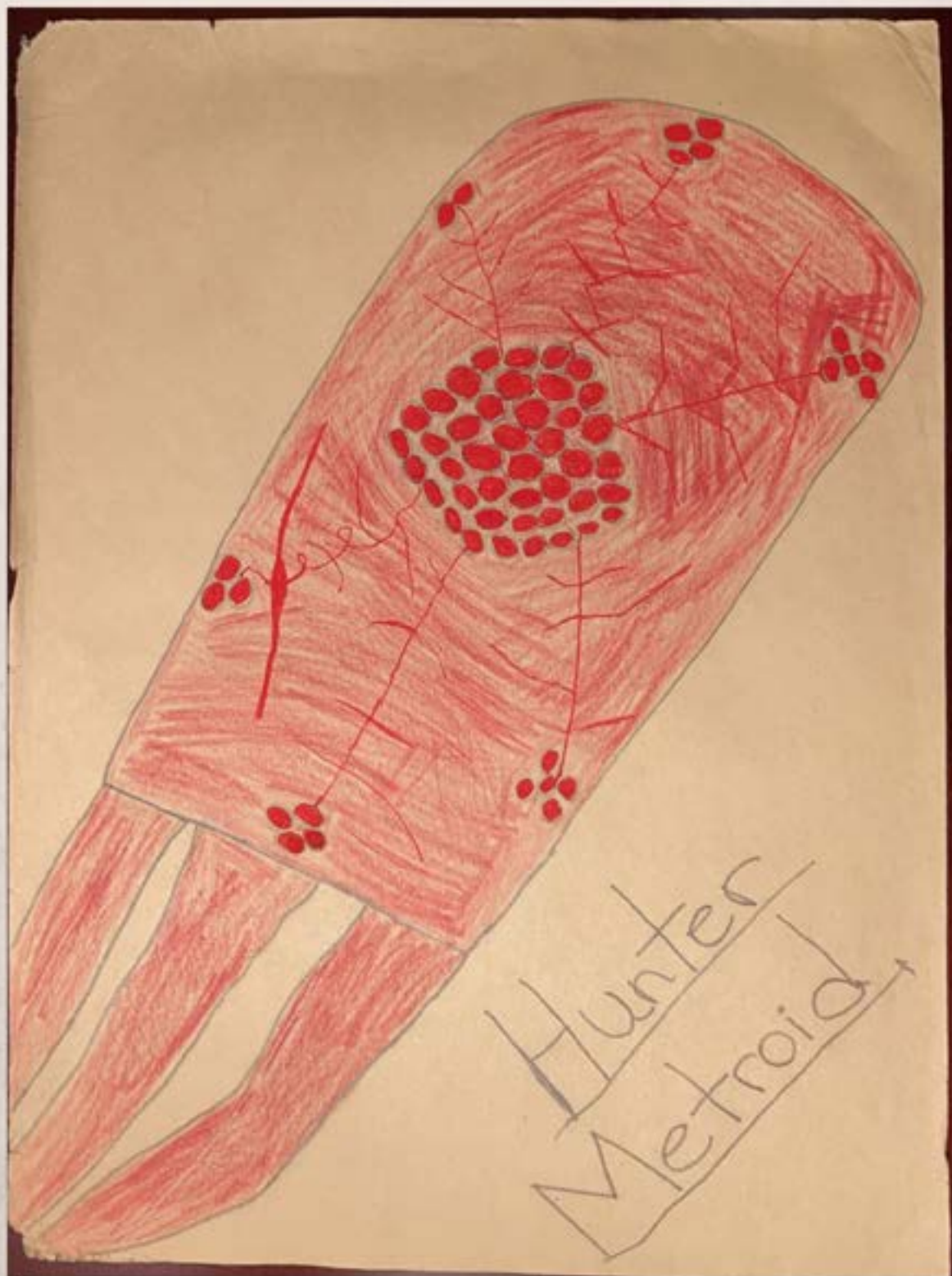


Over the course of four days, including two all-nighters, I succeeded in pumping out a nine thousand word trainwreck of a short story from my unleashed imagination. I ended up pursuing a serious project for the first time in my recent memory with no concern about how it met the arbitrary parameters of “productivity.” I have no idea at all whether this exercise will amount to anything significantly financial in the long run, but that’s just fine and dandy. Writing the story, in all its messiness, may have very well been the most invigorating and educational experience I had all year, and you can’t put a price tag on that.



For many reasons, my time in the *A Quest For Home: Upside Down* writing workshop has been a truly invaluable one that I will forever cherish. Home is difficult concept to grasp and an even harder one to maintain, so I suppose it could be said that we are all always on a neverending quest for home. However, I believe homes are ultimately made rather than given, and in writing, I personally was finally able to find a place I could call home for the time being. Without a single shred of embarrassment, I earnestly look forward to writing copious amounts of fanfiction to both hone my creative writing skills and finally start giving the many worlds swirling around the vast sea in my head a home of their own. What is most spectacular about fanfiction is its ability to constantly redesign, modify, and augment a home to meet the needs of who you are today.

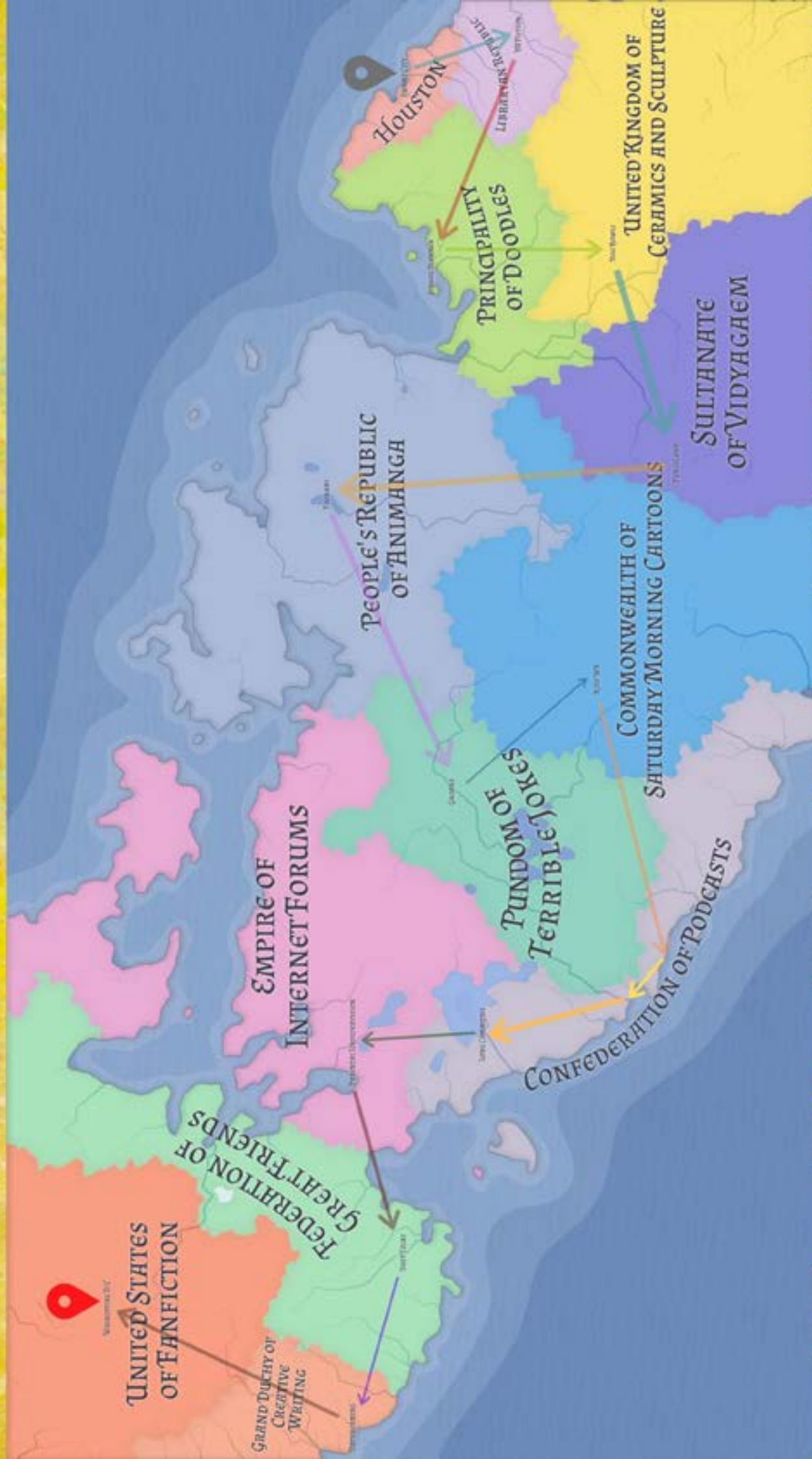
And thus, I wish you, my dear reader, great success in your uniquely marvelous quest for home.



writing prompt

Write a fanfic of a story you initially liked that ended up having a disappointing ending. Create the ending you think it deserved. No deadlines, no word counts, and no limits. Write as much as you can and want.

MAP OF MY FANDOM JOURNEY



the ants, they leave
the dust, they settle
the warmth, it permeates
the winds, they nuzzle
the mice, they hidden
the bedcovers, they hole
the clothes, they gone
the plants, they wilt/wall
the couches, they home
the childhood, it flees.

the smells, they smell
the stories, they lingers
the sounds, they leave
the leaves, they still fall

change, it comes
forgetting, it stays
nostalgia, lingers
memory, it hopes



am I still fun / quirky / twee if I use Times New Roman 2 line?

1

Six questions you may be asking if you're a self-trained digital cartographer slash self-proclaimed feminist urbanist slash Aquarius moon (who doesn't believe in astrology but enjoys any form of a personality quiz)

By Sabina Sethi Unni (me!)

- (1) Does my computer keep crashing because free map-making software is buggy and laggy by design? When Foucault said "*space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power*," was he referring to the qGIS stack exchange, where users continually downvoted my genuine questions and actively bully me in the comment section?

thoughts on space + power?

haha iak lol. texting u is a prison

- (2) Can you map feelings or emotions or affect? Can you map the intangible, or the sensory? Is the sensorium intangible? Can I still call my writing "humorous" if I throw in words like "sensorium?" Can I still call myself a writer while refusing to Google conventions around punctuation and quotation marks?" See what I did there?



You know a joke is funny when you have to remind everyone that it's a joke.

Fig 1 (and only)

A map of my emotions

(aka - mapping the body, but when people say 'The body', do they mean mine? Yours? Theirs? ...?))

obviously
→ destabilize that
the notion can
anything be apolitical

2

- (3) Am I self-indulgent for wanting to write about maps? Is all "apolitical" writing selfish, or worse: counter-revolutionary? My favorite critical theorist (and perhaps writer) Ruth Behar noted once that "anthropology that doesn't break your heart just isn't worth doing." I first heard this during a feminist ethnography course I took during my senior year of college, during a critique of Behar's genre of social science that dismantles the false binary between participant and observer in research. When Behar makes this claim, I hear that "suffering and pain are what make our art, writing, and research legitimate, beautiful, and valuable." At the same time, writing that is full to the brim with humor and joy and everyday mundanities (which is actually a word and shouldn't be) is delightful, necessary, fun, and a source of resistance within itself. I know this, but I still feel bogged down by unresolved fears of self-indulgence. How do I resolve this? Should I surround my writing about maps (or whatever quirky new personality I adopt) with reflexive caveats? Should I continue submitting articles about how to derail work meetings on Zoom to online humor websites? (Yes, of course I did this, of course it was rejected immediately, and of course it included the line "Ask your boss for 'host privileges.' When asked why, mumble something incoherent about 'decentralized meeting structures' and 'non-hierarchical cooperatives.'") Yes, my writing IS embedded in the self, thanks for asking.) Should I seek to balance silliness with writing that explicitly archives or provokes resistance (however broadly that is defined)? Is seeing those as mutually exclusive suffocating? Should I adopt a new writing technique outside of asking meandery questions?



my shreds and
conspicuous tape
usage scream
(anticapitalist)
authenticity, right?

and this sloppy
paper cutting,
jeez.

(this doodle was
so distractingly
bad that I
had to cover it
up - for your sake
and for mine)

side note,
all I am
is a vessel
for
marginalia

- (4) What Instagram filter looks best on my skin? Yep, this relates to maps! Maps as metaphor / maps as framing, etc. No, you're misunderstanding the prompt!

*It's not about the
filter, it's about the
lighting, I know

Highlighting
this bloc is the
worst aesthetic
choice I've made
since side bangs
in 9th grade



*friends that
learn mapmaking
together*

CAN'T HANDLE

EMPTY SPACE

if that think I think He
you know, that one

(5) If my writing is not embedded in the self, is it even worth reading? How can you write about yourself without interrogating or being flanked by the structural forces that surround you? My favorite anthropology professor taught me that rigorous analysis doesn't look to make normative claims (i.e. "all writing must talk about identity"), but more humbly, to point to tensions in a system or mode of thought. There is a tension between understanding that the self is present in all matters (when I'm writing in the first person: who am I, and where am I materially situated in this world matters), but also understanding that the self is constricting, constraining, and inequitably so. Writing by women of color is expected to be non-fiction, because we are only assumed to be the expert of our own lived experiences. (Even critiquing this line of thought exfoliates new tensions - what does it mean to be an expert? Can you be an expert of a community that you do not belong to? What does it mean to write about people that are not like you?) I'm not a philosophy bro on Twitter arguing against identity politics in a transparent attempt to harass women of color online, and I'm not trying to reheat standpoint theory leftovers and pass them off as a brand new dish, I just feel uneasy when my writing is vacant of my identity (I also feel uneasy when my writing is teeming with my identity, as I question if I'm using positionality as a tool of neoliberal multiculturalism or the diversity/equity/inclusion industrial complex. I also feel uneasy when I consume too much lactose, but that's more of a gastrointestinal issue than a feminist one and I'm still gonna drink boba after this.)

♥ boba ♥ is my analysis

Highlighting is simultaneously narcissistic (obvious reasons) and self deprecating (assumes you'll skim my writing)

(6) Whoaaaa, is Canada really that big?

If you take anything from my piece it's that map projections are basically colonialism (no, you're oversimplifying!)



↑ my Canada map that spurred vitriol

WRITING PROMPT:

Do you think I'm a good writer?
Just KIDDING

To contrast the prompt / advice "write what you know" - write about a tension that is unresolvable: personally, academically, ethically, etc.

WRITING PROMPT



achchi

a nonfiction

I don't really know how to begin or end a story. There is no leaving achchi's home without tightening my stomach. *If you won't eat dinner, at least drink a tea.* There are times when I crave the plates I missed the chance to eat.



a grief story
by savini ganhewa



appachu
a fiction

Appachu had walked across to the endless plains three moons ago. He had gone willingly, calmly acknowledging the call one star-filled night when the embers of the cooking flame were draped in blue tendrils from the mist.

Before he went, he had come to Aiyan and sat down heavily on a kitchen chair. While clutching the hard, flat surface made of mountain rock for support upon which Aiyan cleaned a silverfish, Appachu had shared with him his last dream. That dream now sat with Aiyan, painfully filling the places that Appachu's departing had left hollow.

Over the years, Appachu's eyes had begun to grey, blending into a spherical cloud—the clouding was a marker of the aging of the erekwatkind, who, while cousin to humankind, aged slowly and moved swiftly. A regality to the way their bodies seemed to glide and weather with the earth. Whilst most often taller than the tallest of humankind, the erekwatkind were known to speak in soft tones, and while the two are nothing alike, they are said to be the only creatures that could hear the voices of the bisonkind.

Wizened eyes such as Appachu's came with a knowing of the old ways, which he had tried to pass down to Aiyan, spending days with him in instruction while the restless spirit of Aiyan's youth pulled him to the height of tall trees and the cliffs overlooking the mercurial waters that neighbored their seaward village.

The day Appachu had come to share his last dream, he had looked at Aiyan tenderly through those greying eyes. At the fledgling he had begun to raise when Aiyan was very young, still learning to crawl across the soft dirt of his parents' home. A home that had disintegrated like timber in a blaze when Aiyan's Ammachi and Appachi had been called too, to the endless plains.

Before they left, they had come to Appachu bearing their bundled babe and had parted the care of their small fledgling to him. Aiyan had slept soundly through the night as they walked to the endless plains, carried across by a restless sea. Thus began Appachu's tenderness as both Appachi and Appachu to the erekwat babe that would often bring him memories of the kin he had lost. Though he well knew that departing ensures the balance of living, it ached Appachu, even to the end, to think of them.



achchi

a nonfiction

The night achchi passes away, I wail into the cold air of my brooklyn apartment and plead with the darkness, *wait for me! wait for me! please, just wait for me!* hoping that this time, my voice would have the power to speak a life back into existence. I imagine the volume of my grief splintering the air. I want all of brooklyn to know the sound of my breaking.



appachu
a fiction

Appachu and Aiyan's ties had deepened as they learned to cope with their hollowing loss together, growing more tender with the passing of time. In the nights when Aiyan's sleep was visited by shapeless dreams, there was only Appachu left to soothe the dreaming babe who knew not why he dreamt.

Still, on those nights, Aiyan would wake with a sour stomach, burning from the acidity of his thunderous dreams. Knowing well that dreams often carry buried meanings, Appachu never quieted Aiyan's. Instead, he appeared with a gentle hand, cradling Aiyan's face as he wiped the small one's fearful tears. Only then would he search Aiyan's eyes for his slow return from the dream place while singing to him an old song that all erekwat children knew well.

*The moonlight calls the ones who are near
To the tenderness of your landless home
Remember that mountains are steeper in seas
That rivers, too, run from the hills*

*Know the passing are never too lost
To soften the edges of your waiting dreams
The bison will whisper to the aged and the new
So know the passing are never too lost*

*To the tenderness of your landless home
The moonlight calls the ones who are near
Remember that mountains are steeper in seas
That rivers, too, run from the hills*

Upon Aiyan's return, Appachu would serve him a clay mug steaming with pounded rice porridge, sweetened by the syrup of the kithul trees. The hot liquid would temper the sourness in Aiyan's stomach and lull him into a noiseless sleep. Appachu's tenderness often appeared like this.






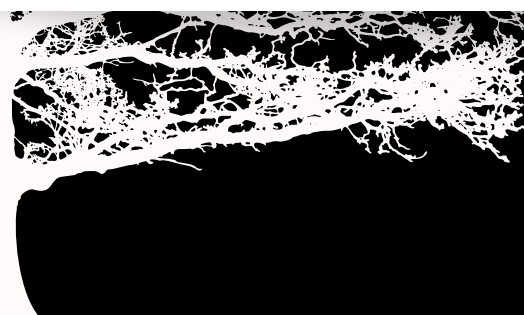
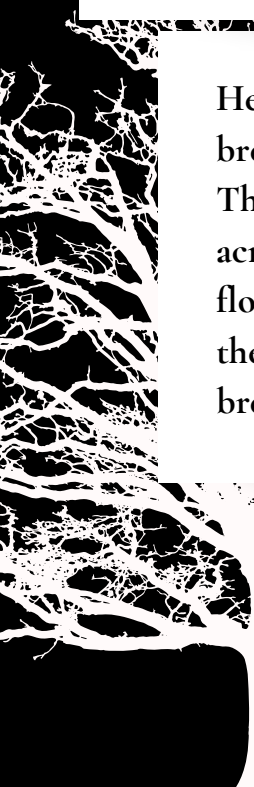
appachu

a fiction

“Have you eaten Appachu?” Aiyan strained to ask in the midst of descaling the tough scales of the silverfish, “this one will serve us tomorrow, but we can curry the hornedfish tonight.”

“No...no,” Appachu said, smiling at the way the years had shifted them. He slowly stood up from the kitchen chair and went to the boy, who was now fully grown, and gently placed his weathered hand on his back. He let out a heaving sigh and laid his head on Aiyan’s shoulder. The long milky-white strands of his aging hair fanned down Aiyan’s back. As the boy, now grown, scraped the silver scales onto the wooden bowl in front of him, Appachu retold him his last dream.

In his dream, he had woken up amidst the tall grasses of a river that looked like the blue river, but that he knew was not. The river glistened under the low hanging sun, and white, glowing shapes he could not quite make out moved like fish within its flowing waters. He wanted to plunge his weathered fingers in and touch the unknown things, but something inside him, a knowing, stopped him. He looked away from the water and scanned his surroundings. A Burabu tree stood majestically a good distance down the river from him, its hanging leaves languidly drooping like a willow. Something looked strange in the way its base seemed to begin high above him on the ground next to the water. Slowly, he realized that the river was flowing upwards, the ground also rising—in a way, against what is natural.



He knew instinctively that he should go to the tree. Appachu took a deep breath and let it out slowly, let his whole chest deflate as he looked around. The gold grasses beyond the river looked infinite—a white mist glazed across the blue ombre sky and tangled into the tall gold petals of the grass flowers. Their petals seemed to reach up, affectionately stretching closer to the sky. Appachu got up slowly, breathing in the air that entered him like a breeze, and began walking



appachu

a fiction

His steps felt slow, lethargic—a syrupiness to the movement of his limbs. He felt no hurry though. The mist seemed to move with him, through him. There was something pleasantly tranquil about it all. While he moved closer and closer to the tree—for the road did get shorter—the tree remained the same size. But next to it, the growing shape of a mountain bison, its faded golden fur glistening, the majestic head raised regally while its horns, like the flowers, reached for the sky, waited for him.

When he finally drew close to the large beast, Appachu raised both hands to the sky, then brought his palms together against his face, and bowed his head low—a customary greeting for a creature so mighty. The bison waited for Appachu's head to rise. Then looking into Appachu's clouded eyes, having affirmed their understanding of a shared mutuality—that the balance of all things lay at the equal behest of all creatures—it bowed its head, too. ••

When Appachu began to raise his body from his bow, something inside, that knowing, made him keep his palms grasped together. Slowly, instinctively, he moved towards the bison and gently placed his temple against the silken, gold hair on its forehead. A sharp feeling, something in between pain and peace coursed through him. His youth, a wizening. A bliss within a sorrow. A feeling of everything and nothing—the river and the mountains. He breathed the summer, the winter, all of the cycles. He breathed deeply and awakened.





lokuammi

a nonfiction

I've never known how to make sense of your departure. In some lives, everything real happens somewhere else. an ocean away. a continent. a language.

There are still days when it's painful
to be here without you.

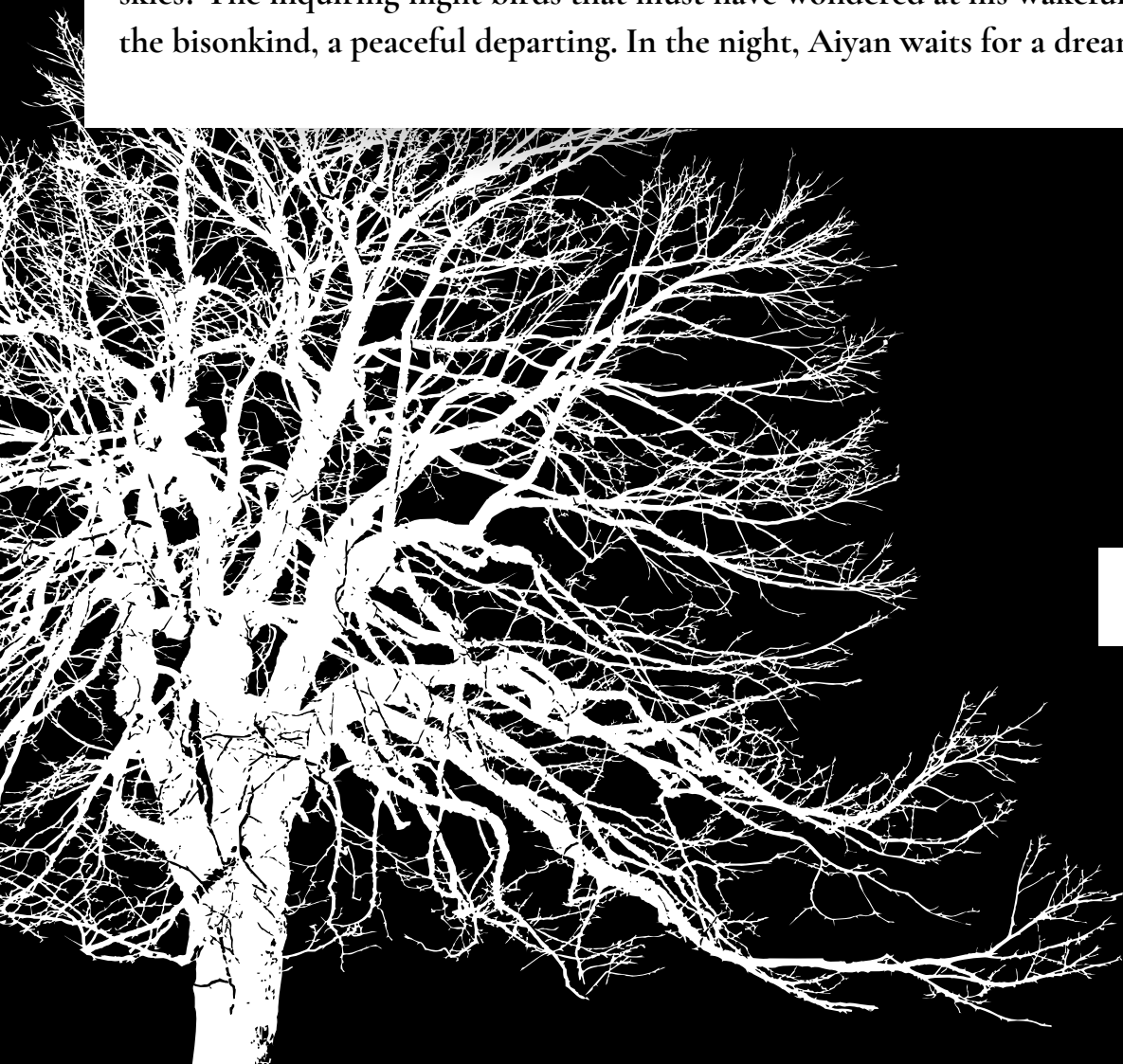




appachu

a fiction

Aiyan pictures Appachu's last waking. The smell of the mist that would have waited, suspended in the tinged hours between dusk and dawn. He imagines Appachu, awake, gazing up at the twilight darkness above him. Did he watch embers of light cross the open skies? The inquiring night birds that must have wondered at his wakefulness. The voices of the bisonkind, a peaceful departing. In the night, Aiyan waits for a dream to visit him.



the end





for the reader

a prompt

pick an everyday experience or emotion (e. g. happiness, anger, loss, awkwardness, a journey with friends, searching for purpose, grief). write a story about the experience or emotion and situate it in an extraordinary place.



Mother My Body

Mama's nails don't ever scratch my back
they pick my skin until it bleeds.

Mama's teeth don't ever shine like pearls
they bite the edges off my dreams.

Mama's lungs don't ever fill with air
they beg and urge her not to breathe.

Mama's arms don't ever hold me tight
they shield my eyes so I don't scream.



Aida Sidi

I'm Here Because

I'm here because of my ancestors; their wounds, their blessings their unapologetic joy

And because of the woman who decided that I was worth raising

I cannot remember the day that I chose to believe her but I do remember

The warmth of a tender "can I speak with you after class?"

I am no longer afraid to Inhale because

Handcuffs do not cut as deeply into skin as needles do and

Because my homegirls and I know how to recreate the plot of Oceans 8 at the snap of a motherfucking finger

I am no longer afraid to Exhale because

When my hands slip into pockets of safety they tend to find a nickel or two or

Three pills that I take each night to stay alive

Because a One Direction reunion isn't like, *that* out of question.

I know that it is okay to be here because Audre Lorde said that I could be but

I am sad that the girl I love(d) is not

I'm here because I have ripped my comb through tangle after tangle until I learned to braid my Islam with my Queerness

I'm here because أَزْشَى زُسْفَلَا عَمَّ يَأَف (With hardship comes ease)

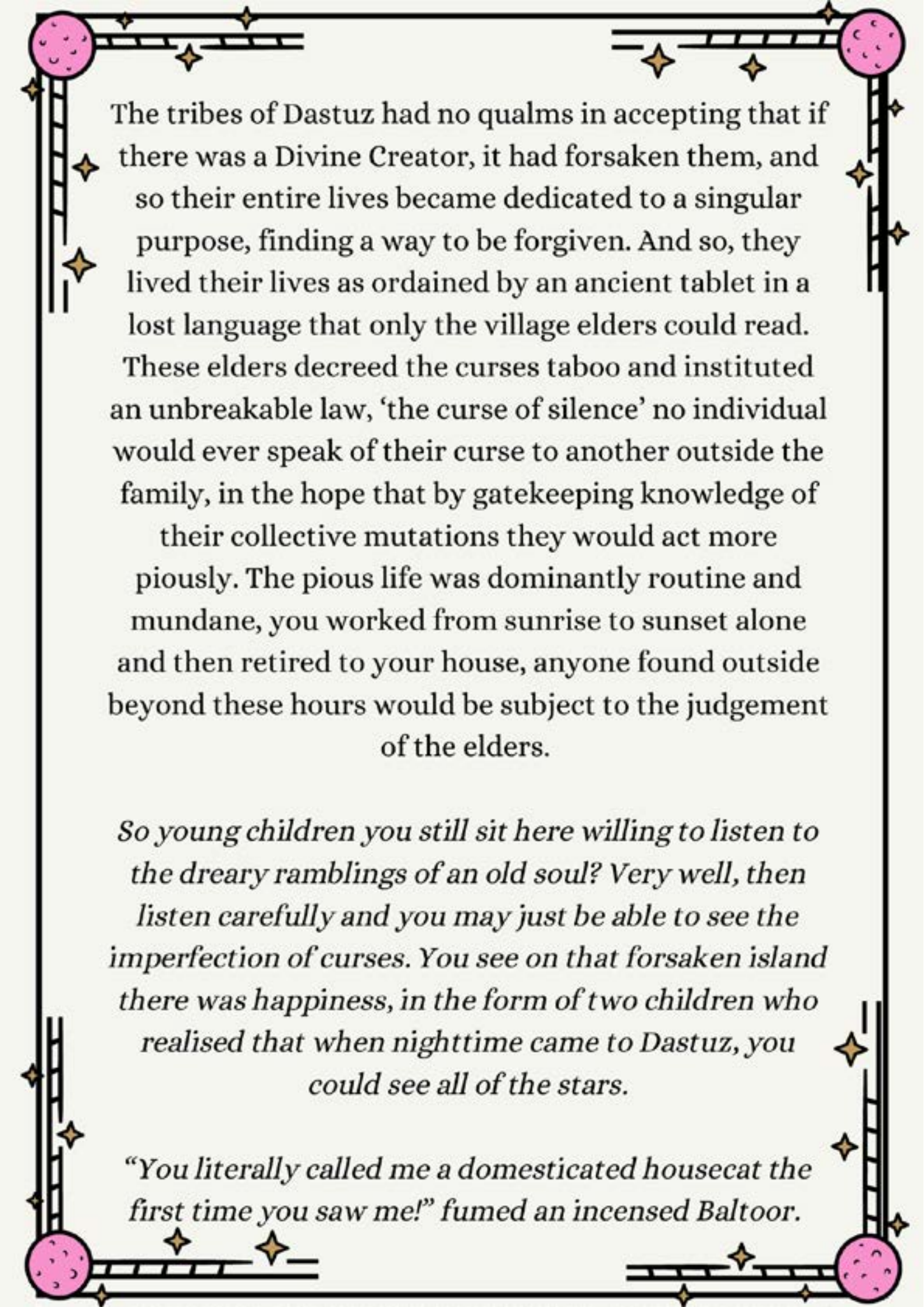
أَزْشَى زُسْفَلَا عَمَّ يَأَف (Indeed, with hardship comes ease)

The Perfect Match

by Ali Aftagb Ghias

They were the perfect match, in the way that arch-enemies tend to be. The story of Raven and Baltoor is not one I enjoy telling, it reeks far too much of the reality I try to escape when I weave tall tales. Nevertheless, I suppose to make end meets I must submit myself as a slave to you, the audience. In this theater I stand, entertaining the deepest shadows and fears lurking in your hearts, so that you may sate your appetite for life; after all, in the madness of your world where else will you look towards to find humanity?

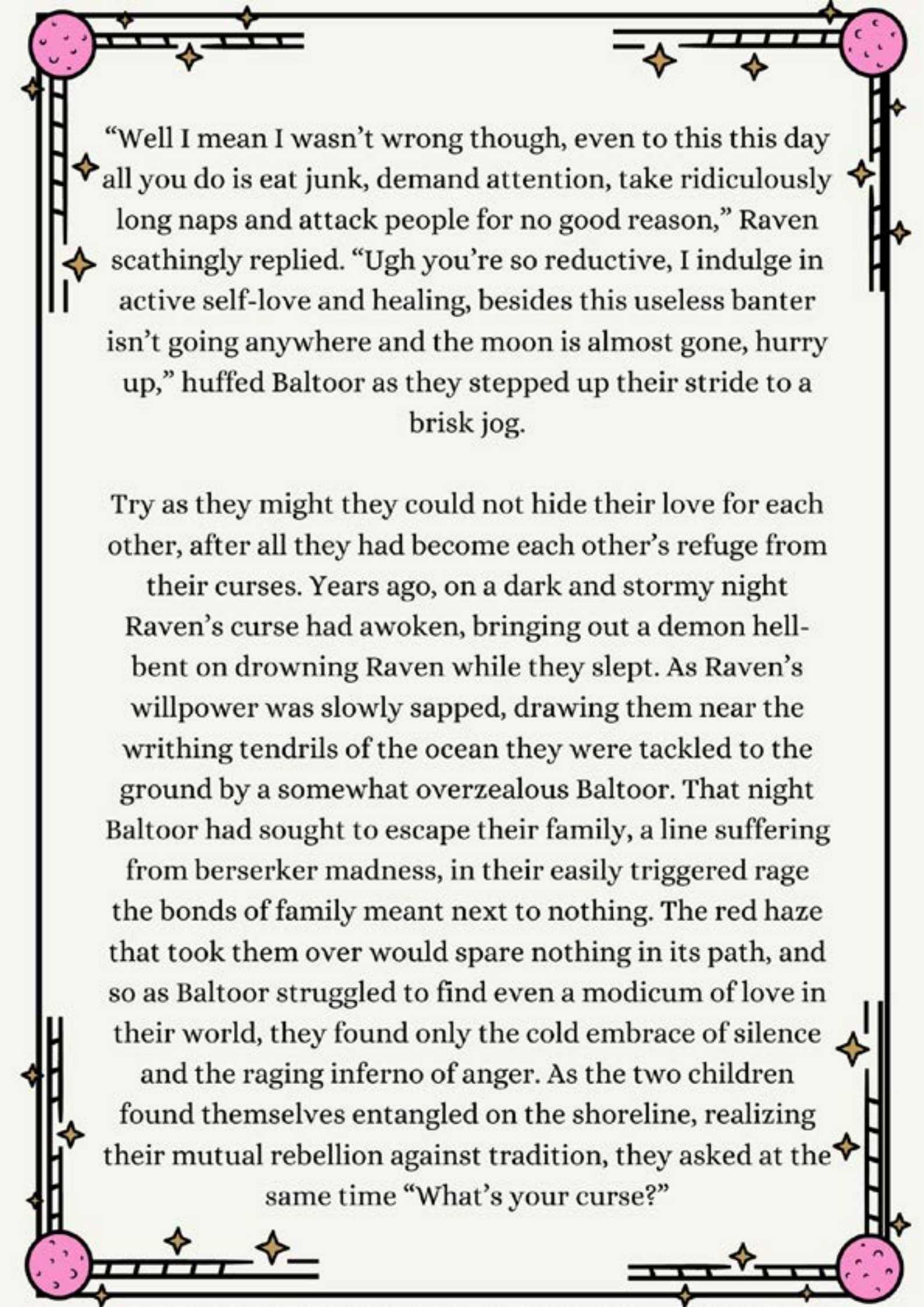
We begin our tale in the mystical land of Dastuz, an island situated in an unknown ocean. The inhabitants of this land called themselves the 'Forsaken Lines'. Every tribe on the island carried a cursed bloodline, manifesting differently in each family. They had many ways to justify this curse-based nomenclature, the churning ocean surrounding them raged with an unmatched scorn as if its only purpose was to drag unfortunate souls that came too close to it down into its crushing depths. The jagged spikes of barren earth that ringed more than half the island reached towards the heavens, a picturesque sight, until you realised their effectiveness at blocking the wind from the sea for the entire day. The morning hours were filled with the sun unashamedly beating down at the tribes, being offered no respite of a cooling wind. The rains that came down brought down a red tide, stripping the mountains of their iron, flooding the villages with brackish water pulling everything in its path towards the ocean.



The tribes of Dastuz had no qualms in accepting that if there was a Divine Creator, it had forsaken them, and so their entire lives became dedicated to a singular purpose, finding a way to be forgiven. And so, they lived their lives as ordained by an ancient tablet in a lost language that only the village elders could read. These elders decreed the curses taboo and instituted an unbreakable law, 'the curse of silence' no individual would ever speak of their curse to another outside the family, in the hope that by gatekeeping knowledge of their collective mutations they would act more piously. The pious life was dominantly routine and mundane, you worked from sunrise to sunset alone and then retired to your house, anyone found outside beyond these hours would be subject to the judgement of the elders.

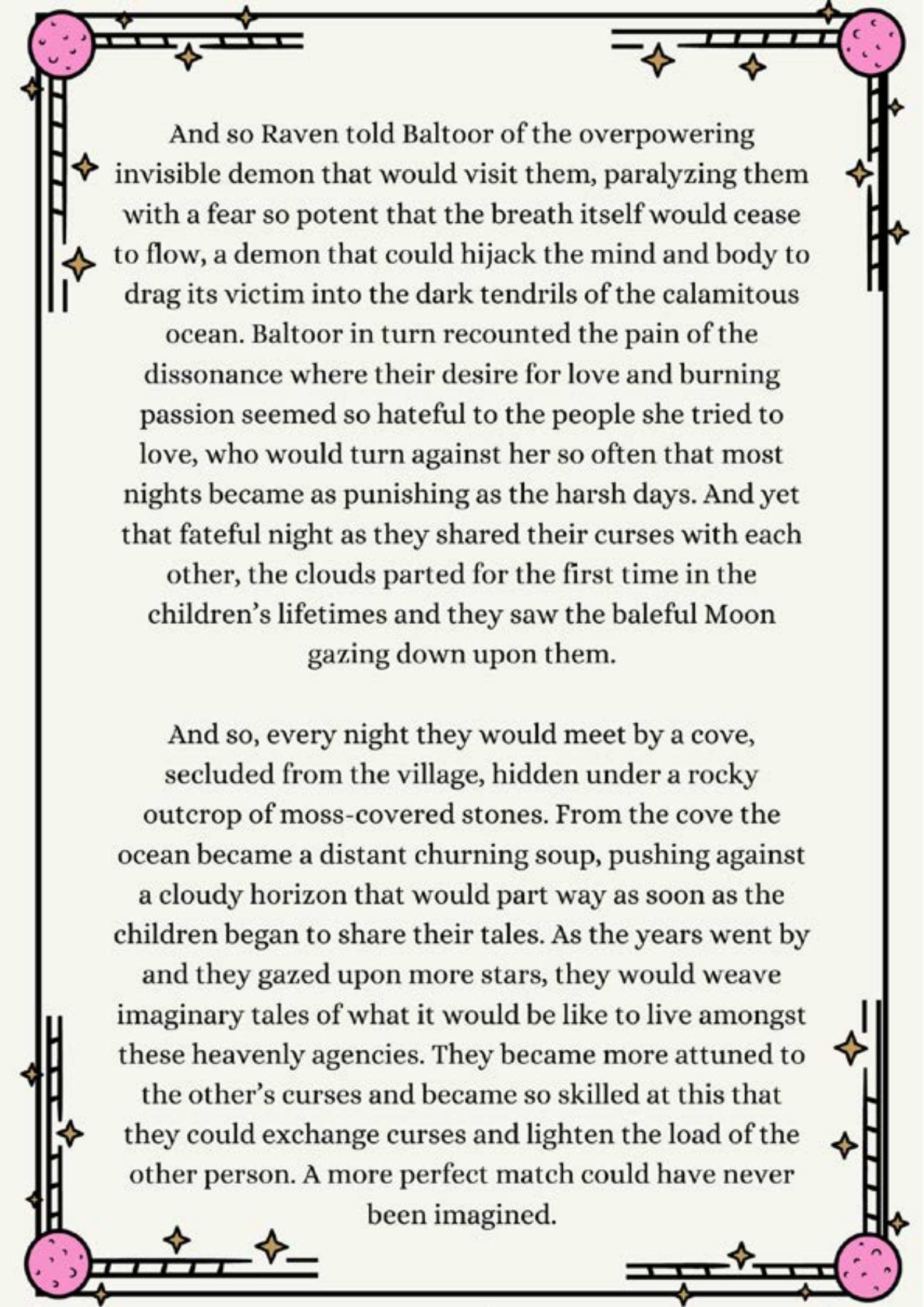
So young children you still sit here willing to listen to the dreary ramblings of an old soul? Very well, then listen carefully and you may just be able to see the imperfection of curses. You see on that forsaken island there was happiness, in the form of two children who realised that when nighttime came to Dastuz, you could see all of the stars.

"You literally called me a domesticated housecat the first time you saw me!" fumed an incensed Baltoor.



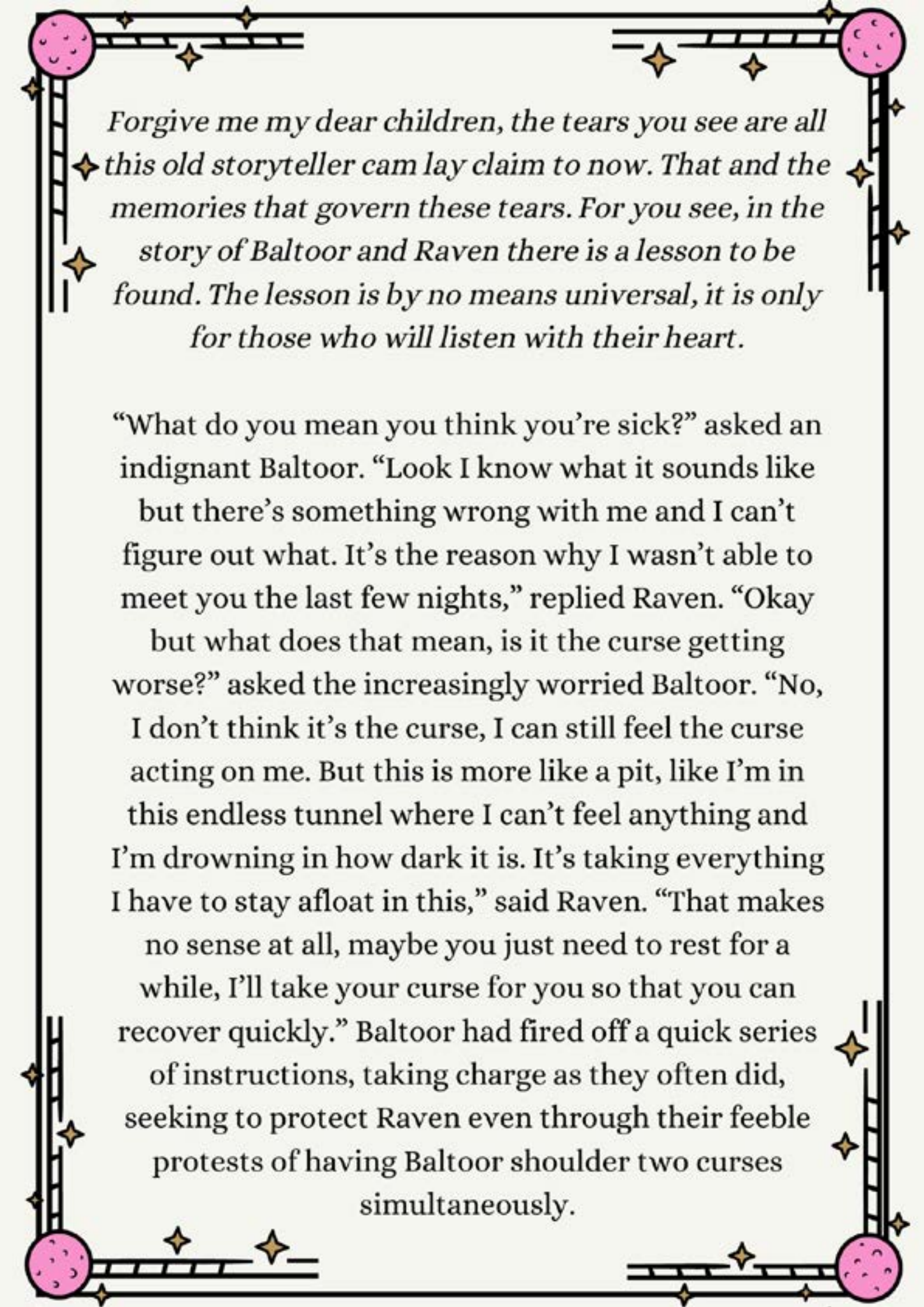
“Well I mean I wasn’t wrong though, even to this this day all you do is eat junk, demand attention, take ridiculously long naps and attack people for no good reason,” Raven scathingly replied. “Ugh you’re so reductive, I indulge in active self-love and healing, besides this useless banter isn’t going anywhere and the moon is almost gone, hurry up,” huffed Baltoor as they stepped up their stride to a brisk jog.

Try as they might they could not hide their love for each other, after all they had become each other’s refuge from their curses. Years ago, on a dark and stormy night Raven’s curse had awoken, bringing out a demon hell-bent on drowning Raven while they slept. As Raven’s willpower was slowly sapped, drawing them near the writhing tendrils of the ocean they were tackled to the ground by a somewhat overzealous Baltoor. That night Baltoor had sought to escape their family, a line suffering from berserker madness, in their easily triggered rage the bonds of family meant next to nothing. The red haze that took them over would spare nothing in its path, and so as Baltoor struggled to find even a modicum of love in their world, they found only the cold embrace of silence and the raging inferno of anger. As the two children found themselves entangled on the shoreline, realizing their mutual rebellion against tradition, they asked at the same time “What’s your curse?”



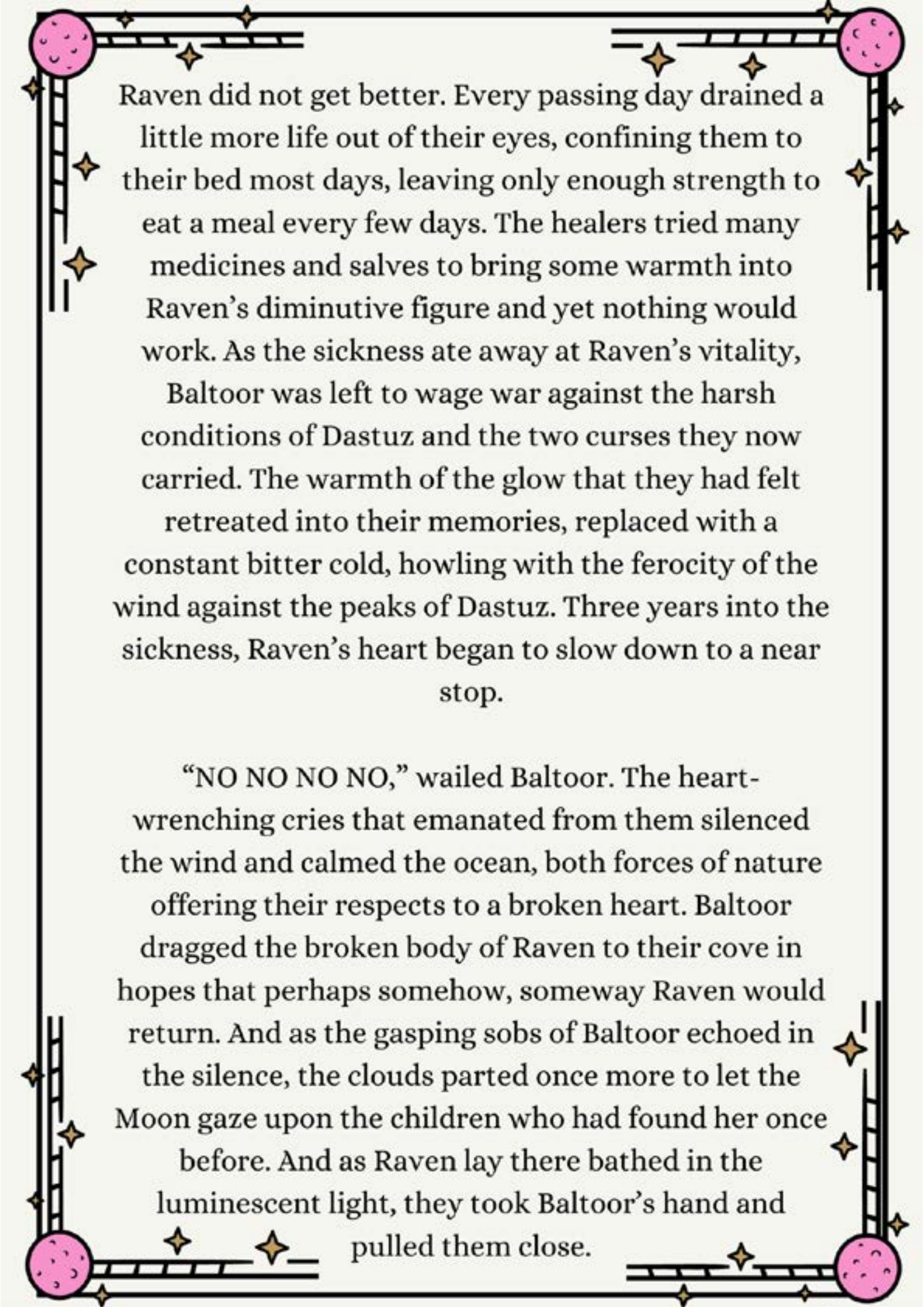
And so Raven told Baltoor of the overpowering invisible demon that would visit them, paralyzing them with a fear so potent that the breath itself would cease to flow, a demon that could hijack the mind and body to drag its victim into the dark tendrils of the calamitous ocean. Baltoor in turn recounted the pain of the dissonance where their desire for love and burning passion seemed so hateful to the people she tried to love, who would turn against her so often that most nights became as punishing as the harsh days. And yet that fateful night as they shared their curses with each other, the clouds parted for the first time in the children's lifetimes and they saw the baleful Moon gazing down upon them.

And so, every night they would meet by a cove, secluded from the village, hidden under a rocky outcrop of moss-covered stones. From the cove the ocean became a distant churning soup, pushing against a cloudy horizon that would part way as soon as the children began to share their tales. As the years went by and they gazed upon more stars, they would weave imaginary tales of what it would be like to live amongst these heavenly agencies. They became more attuned to the other's curses and became so skilled at this that they could exchange curses and lighten the load of the other person. A more perfect match could have never been imagined.



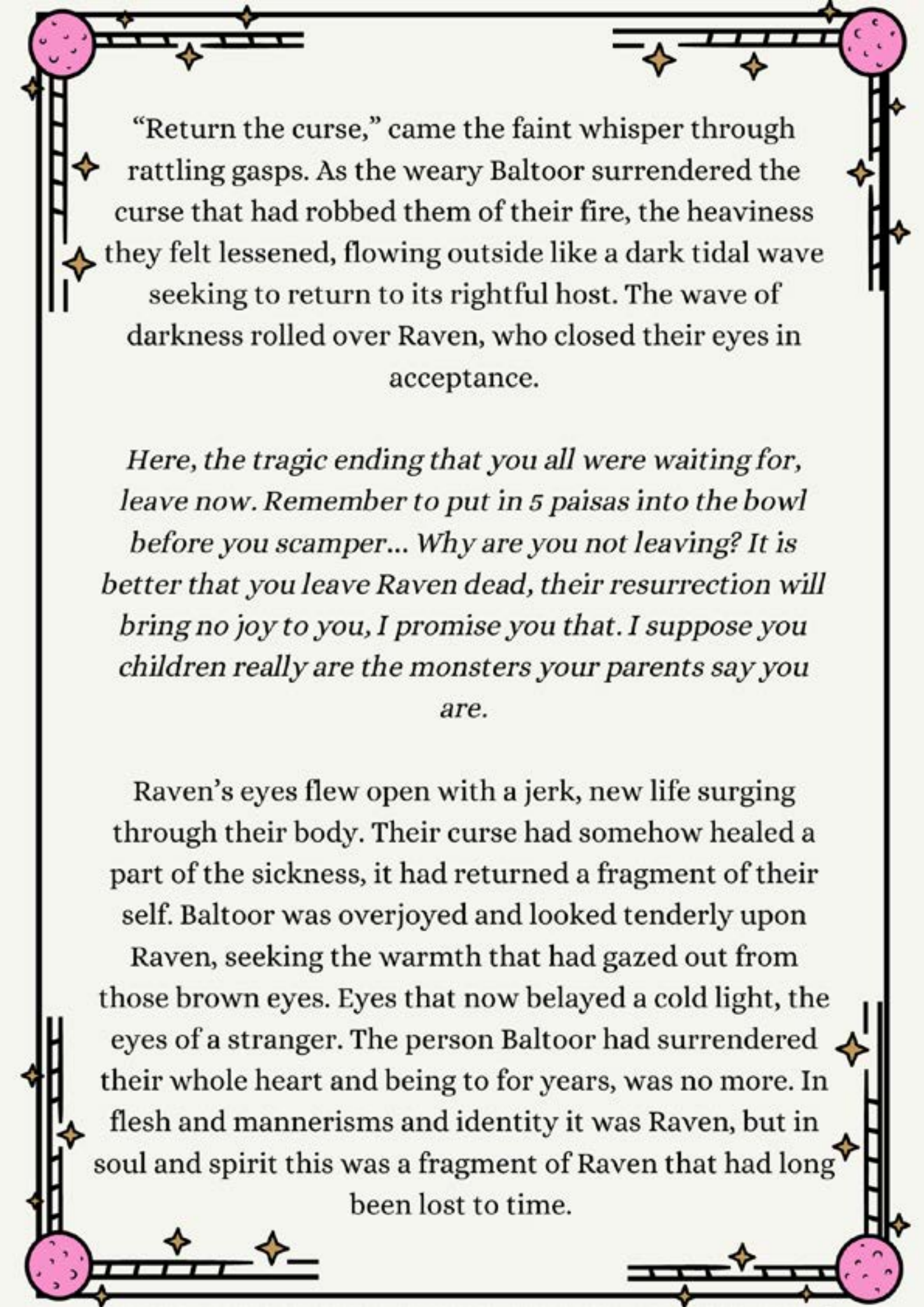
Forgive me my dear children, the tears you see are all this old storyteller can lay claim to now. That and the memories that govern these tears. For you see, in the story of Baltoor and Raven there is a lesson to be found. The lesson is by no means universal, it is only for those who will listen with their heart.

“What do you mean you think you’re sick?” asked an indignant Baltoor. “Look I know what it sounds like but there’s something wrong with me and I can’t figure out what. It’s the reason why I wasn’t able to meet you the last few nights,” replied Raven. “Okay but what does that mean, is it the curse getting worse?” asked the increasingly worried Baltoor. “No, I don’t think it’s the curse, I can still feel the curse acting on me. But this is more like a pit, like I’m in this endless tunnel where I can’t feel anything and I’m drowning in how dark it is. It’s taking everything I have to stay afloat in this,” said Raven. “That makes no sense at all, maybe you just need to rest for a while, I’ll take your curse for you so that you can recover quickly.” Baltoor had fired off a quick series of instructions, taking charge as they often did, seeking to protect Raven even through their feeble protests of having Baltoor shoulder two curses simultaneously.



Raven did not get better. Every passing day drained a little more life out of their eyes, confining them to their bed most days, leaving only enough strength to eat a meal every few days. The healers tried many medicines and salves to bring some warmth into Raven's diminutive figure and yet nothing would work. As the sickness ate away at Raven's vitality, Baltoor was left to wage war against the harsh conditions of Dastuz and the two curses they now carried. The warmth of the glow that they had felt retreated into their memories, replaced with a constant bitter cold, howling with the ferocity of the wind against the peaks of Dastuz. Three years into the sickness, Raven's heart began to slow down to a near stop.

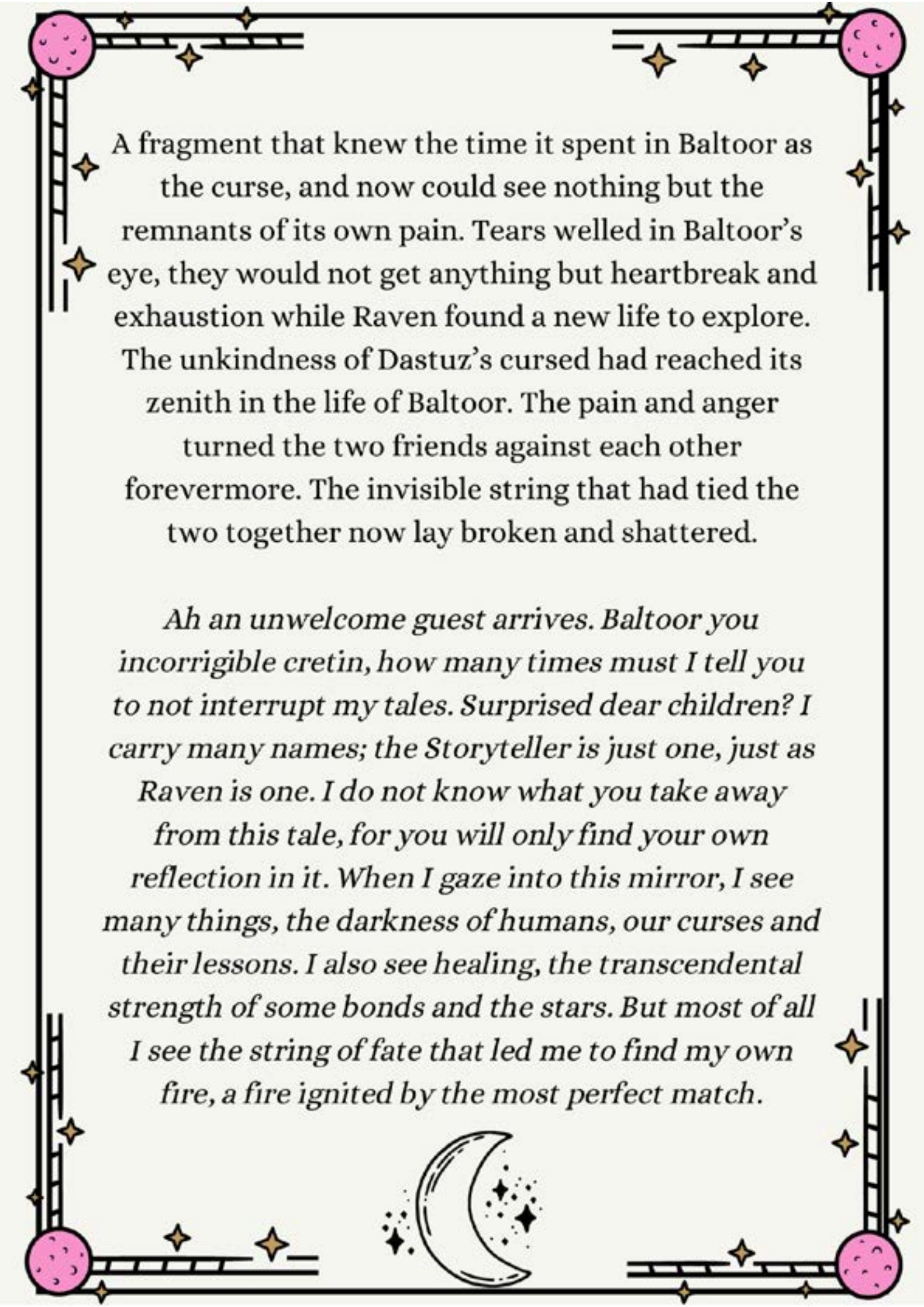
"NO NO NO NO," wailed Baltoor. The heart-wrenching cries that emanated from them silenced the wind and calmed the ocean, both forces of nature offering their respects to a broken heart. Baltoor dragged the broken body of Raven to their cove in hopes that perhaps somehow, someday Raven would return. And as the gasping sobs of Baltoor echoed in the silence, the clouds parted once more to let the Moon gaze upon the children who had found her once before. And as Raven lay there bathed in the luminescent light, they took Baltoor's hand and pulled them close.



“Return the curse,” came the faint whisper through rattling gasps. As the weary Baltoor surrendered the curse that had robbed them of their fire, the heaviness they felt lessened, flowing outside like a dark tidal wave seeking to return to its rightful host. The wave of darkness rolled over Raven, who closed their eyes in acceptance.


Here, the tragic ending that you all were waiting for, leave now. Remember to put in 5 paisas into the bowl before you scamper... Why are you not leaving? It is better that you leave Raven dead, their resurrection will bring no joy to you, I promise you that. I suppose you children really are the monsters your parents say you are.

Raven’s eyes flew open with a jerk, new life surging through their body. Their curse had somehow healed a part of the sickness, it had returned a fragment of their self. Baltoor was overjoyed and looked tenderly upon Raven, seeking the warmth that had gazed out from those brown eyes. Eyes that now belayed a cold light, the eyes of a stranger. The person Baltoor had surrendered their whole heart and being to for years, was no more. In flesh and mannerisms and identity it was Raven, but in soul and spirit this was a fragment of Raven that had long been lost to time.



A fragment that knew the time it spent in Baltoor as the curse, and now could see nothing but the remnants of its own pain. Tears welled in Baltoor's eye, they would not get anything but heartbreak and exhaustion while Raven found a new life to explore. The unkindness of Dastuz's cursed had reached its zenith in the life of Baltoor. The pain and anger turned the two friends against each other forevermore. The invisible string that had tied the two together now lay broken and shattered.

Ah an unwelcome guest arrives. Baltoor you incorrigible cretin, how many times must I tell you to not interrupt my tales. Surprised dear children? I carry many names; the Storyteller is just one, just as Raven is one. I do not know what you take away from this tale, for you will only find your own reflection in it. When I gaze into this mirror, I see many things, the darkness of humans, our curses and their lessons. I also see healing, the transcendental strength of some bonds and the stars. But most of all I see the string of fate that led me to find my own fire, a fire ignited by the most perfect match.



Kalm Bano, Shayar Nahi

by Ali Aftab Ghias

قلم بنو، شاعر نہیں
قلم بنو، شاعر نہیں

منافق کی صورت والے تُو خدا تو نہیں
گواہ کی صورت والے تُو قلم ہی سہی

مومن کی شکل میں کہیں تُو کافر تو نہیں؟
وقت کی زنجیر میں تُو قلم ہی سہی

بسے ہو تم اُس شیش کے محل میں
بنایا ہے جس نے ہزاروں کو فقیروں میں

اُن غریبوں کی تو جگہ ہے خدا کے دل میں
اب تم کس تاج کو بیچو گے ثواب کمانے؟

جب اوقاتِ انسان زیادتی کے قصے ہیں
سیاست کے مقام جہاں زہر کے کنویں ہیں

بچّوں کے آنسو تک دولت ہیں یہاں ہے
یہاں عذاب کا منزل ہی شاید داستان ہے

پوچھو ذرا اِن کلام کے حقدار کون ہیں
پوچھو ذرا اِس درد کے قصوروار کون ہیں

جواب چاہتے ہو تو دیکھو کسی آئینے میں جا کے
اندھے ہو تم اِن قصوں کے مطلب سے

مگر پہلی قیامت تو نہیں ہے یہ
تاریخِ انسان میں نُور ہے ایک





پر سانس، ہر روح، ہر جان میں ہے
اُس خدا کی رحمت، جس کا کلام ہے یہ

شاعر نا بنو، تیری کوئی اوقات نہیں
خدا کو مانو، تو قلم ہی سہی۔
آگ -

Kalm bano, shayar nahi
Kalm bano, shayar nahi

Munafiq ki surat waaley, tu khuda toh nahi
Gawah ki surat waaley, tu kalm hi sahi

Momin ki shakal mein, kahin tu kafir toh nahi
Waqt ki zanjeer mein, tu kalm hi sahi

Basey ho tum us sheesh ke mehal mein
Banaya hai jis ne huzaaron ko faqeeron mein

Un ghareebon ki jaga hai khuda ke dil mein
Ab tum kis taaj ko baicho gai sawaab kamane

Jab aukat e insaan ziadti ke kissey hain
Siasat ke makam jahan zeher ke koein hain

Bachon ke ansoo tak daulat hain yehan pe
Yehan azab ka manzil hi shayad dastaan hai

Poocho zara in kalam ke haqdaar kon hain
Poocho zara is dard ke kasoorwar kon hain

Jawab chahtey ho toh dekho kisi ainey mein ja ke
Andhey ho tum in kisson ke matlab se

Magar pehli qayamat toh nahi hai ye
Tareekh e insaan mein nur hai eik

Har saans, har rooh, har jaan mein hai
Us khuda ki rehmat, jis ka kalam hai ye

Shayar na bano, teri koi aukat nahi
Khuda ko maano, tu kalm hi sahi

~ Aag



To the Colors by Anonymous

It would be easier
if there were
words
for it
that feeling like
running towards a
fountain of water with
grass stained knees,
emptied lungs and,
a fist full of sun.

and all for what?
to drink from an age old
rustic fountain

my body bent in order to dig deep, to be drenched in
water that has been sitting
In the bottom of a well.

It would be easier
if there were
words

for it

words for when

the women's lingerie section

in my mom's Macy's magazine made more sense to me
the small space between the bed and wall

behind a curtain

the faint itch of shame

before I knew there was a word for it I wish there was a
word for it when her hand is on the small of my back

when she asks "would you ever tell them?"

the night sky not big enough for the answers I wish I had

WRITING PROMPT

ARTS & DEMOCRACY

Arts & Democracy helps build a movement of work that cross-fertilizes arts and culture, participatory democracy and social justice. We do this through cultural organizing, capacity building, artist residencies, and by shaping policy and creating spaces for reflection and connection. We engage artists, activists, youth, community members and policymakers to create connective tissue and a generative environment needed for transformative collaborations to succeed. Our work in Kensington, Brooklyn, invests in addressing our community's needs while celebrating the diverse languages, arts, cultures and histories that make our neighborhood so rich. We follow the leadership of immigrant communities and work in solidarity with them to advance justice and equity for all. We celebrate immigrant culture because we know that when we are inclusive, united, and creative, we are strong. <http://www.artsanddemocracy.org> @artsanddemocracy

Roohi Choudhry [bio]

<http://www.brooklynstani.com>

Bishakh Som, cover artist. <http://www.bishakh.com> Zine layout by Emily Ahn Levy

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arts & democracy presents: a quest for home

UPSIDE down edition

Writing the familiar into strange

Join us for a 6 week virtual creative writing workshop, led by Roohi Choudhry, about unearthing strange stories inside familiar rooms. Using fun prompts and readings on fantasy and magical realism, we'll journey into the deeps of your imagination and bring your ideas to life. We'll also put together a digital zine of our work and launch it online!

• • •

When: 6 weekly sessions, time and dates TBA

Who: South Asians ages 18-29

Where: Zoom

How: Email artsndemocracy@gmail.com for more information on how to join!