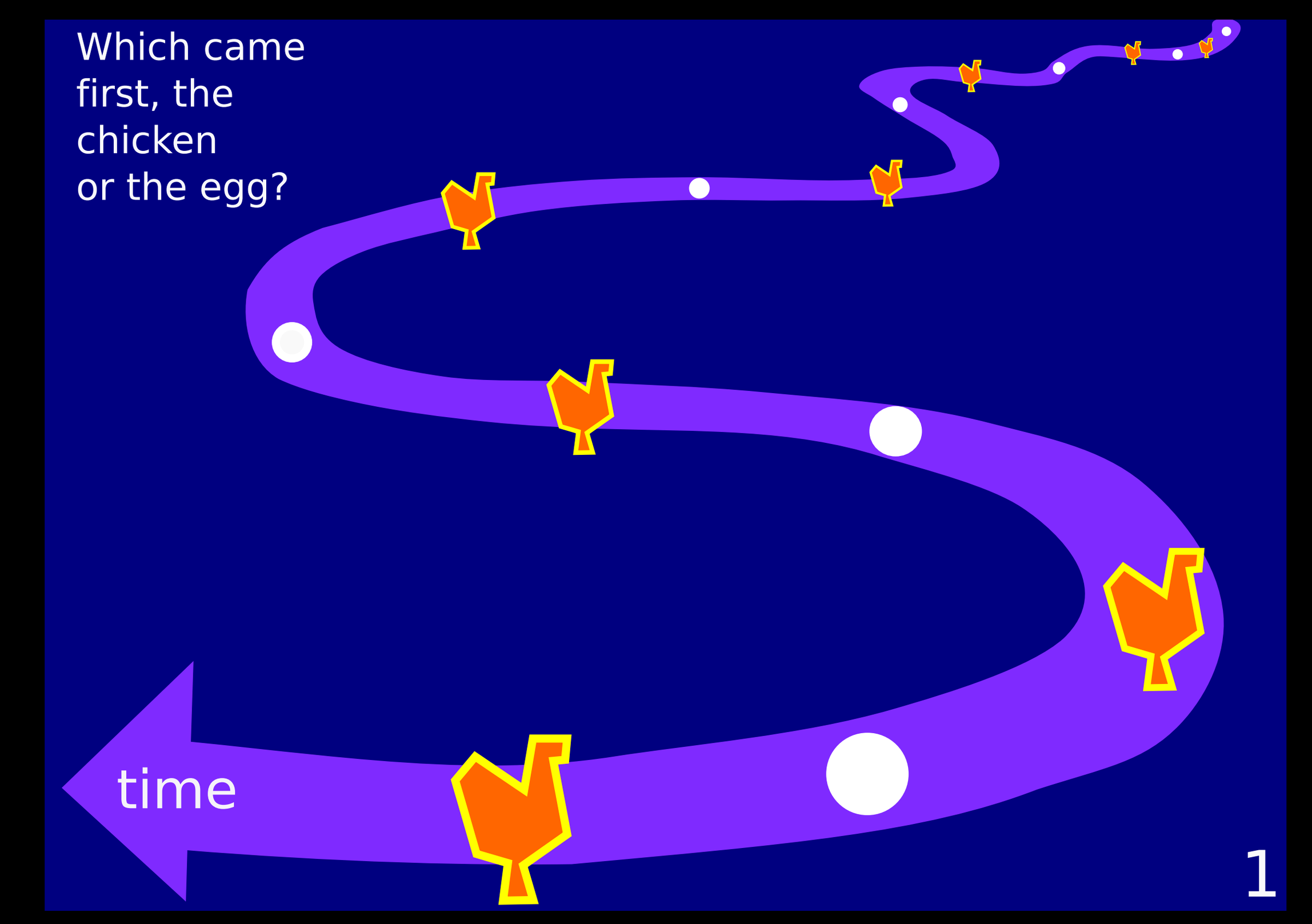
The Bird Cycle

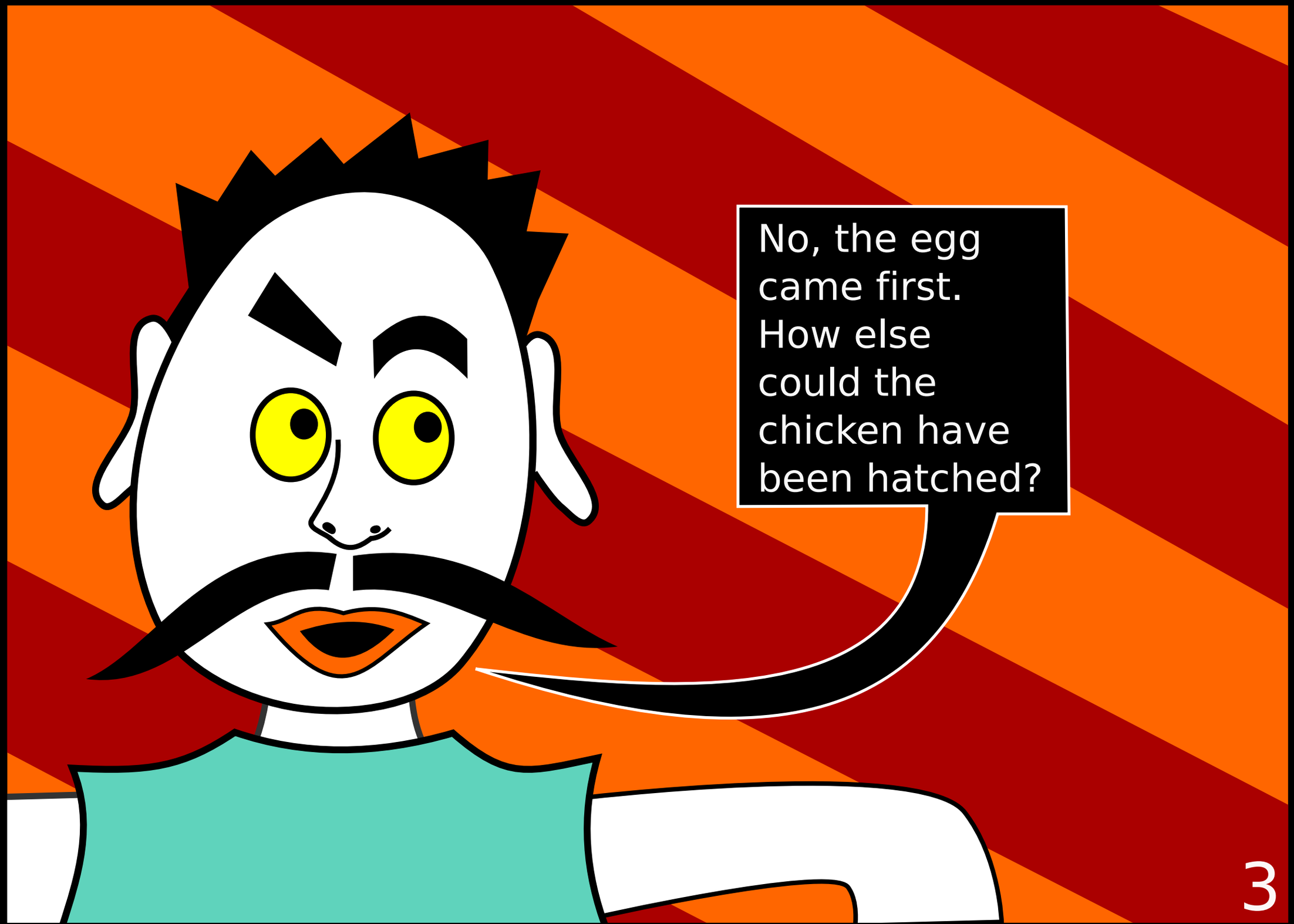
Richard Evan Schwartz

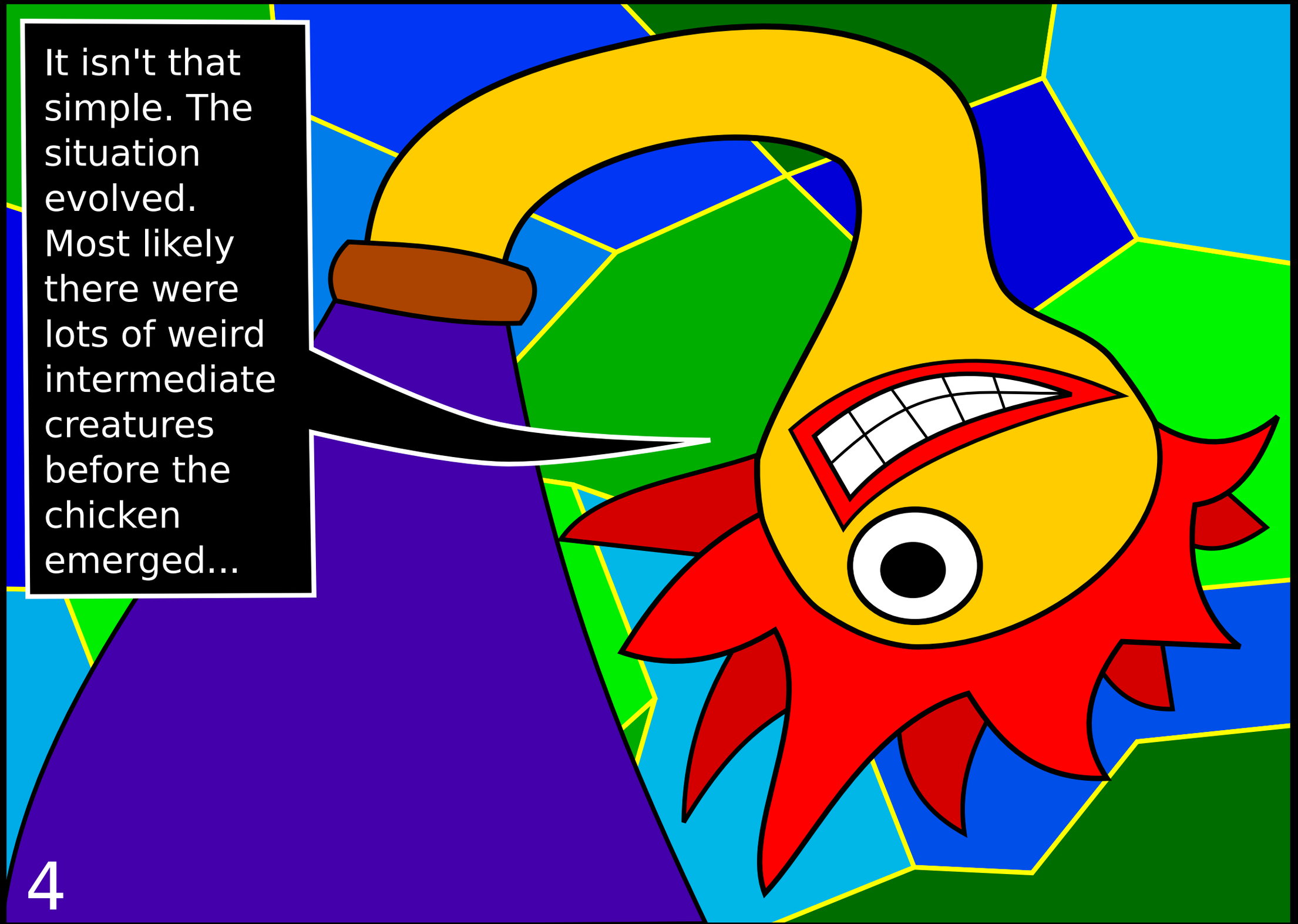
Chapter 1

The chicken and the egg


Which came first, the chicken or the egg?
time


2
Obviously the chicken came first. How else could the egg have been laid?

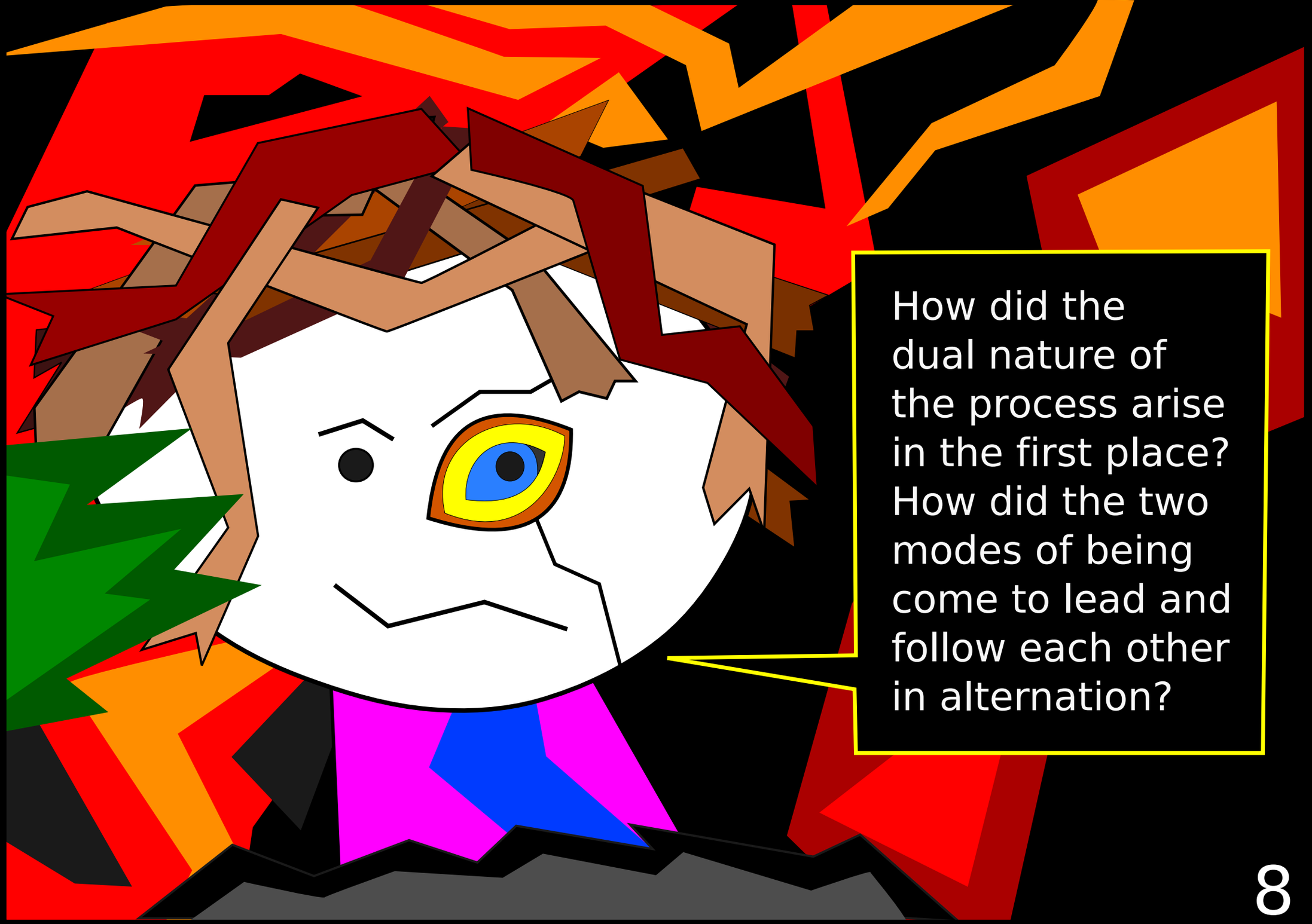

No, the egg came first. How else could the chicken have been hatched?


It isn't that simple. The situation evolved. Most likely there were lots of weird intermediate creatures before the chicken emerged...
4


proto-chickens, if you will. So, imagine a long line of proto-chickens laying their eggs and then finally the chicken emerges. Therefore the chicken came first.

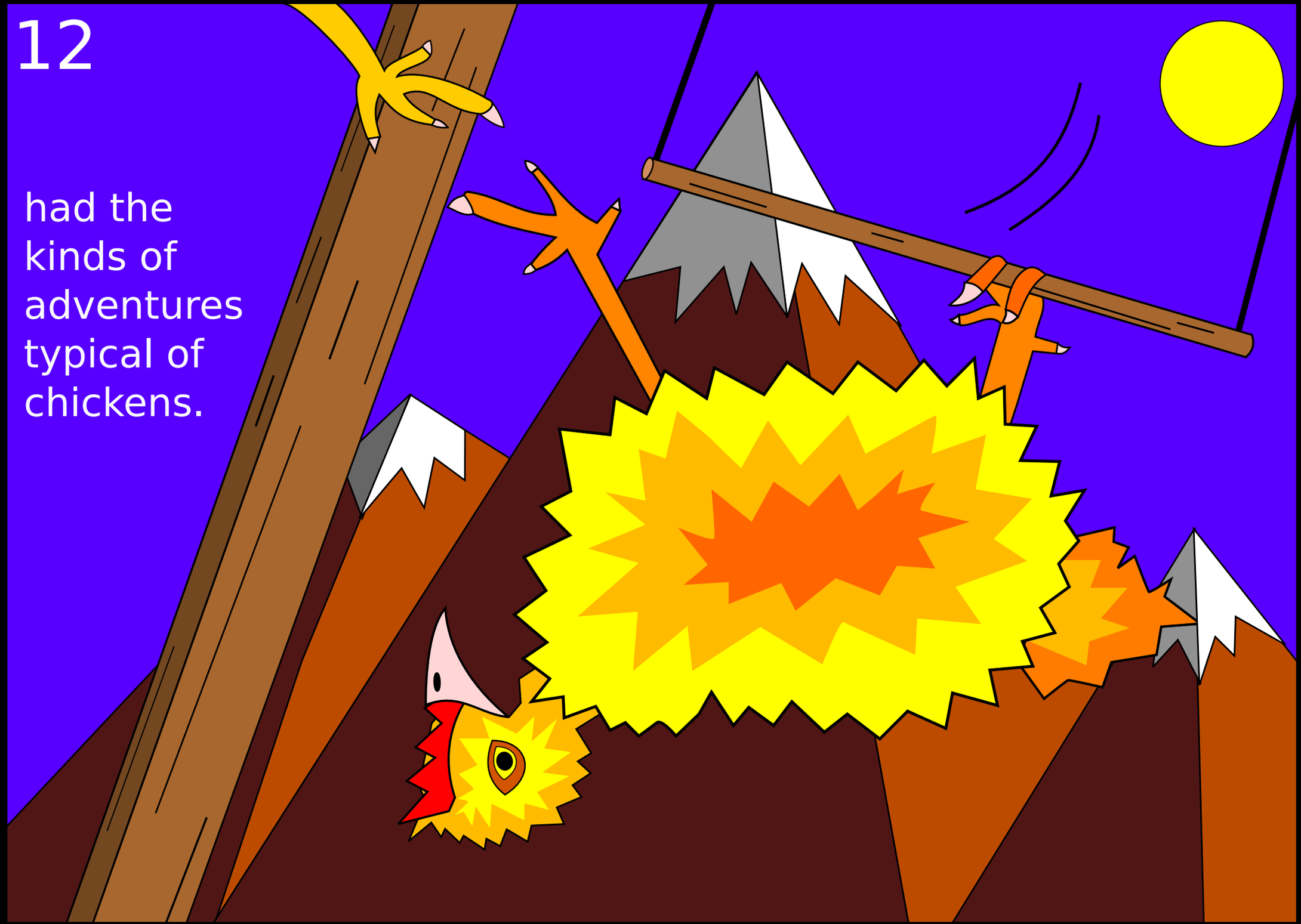

Not so fast, my friend. Who are we to speculate on the nature of that final mutation? Maybe it had to do specifically with egg formation. Perhaps the last proto-chicken laid a perfect chicken egg. In that case, the egg would have come first.

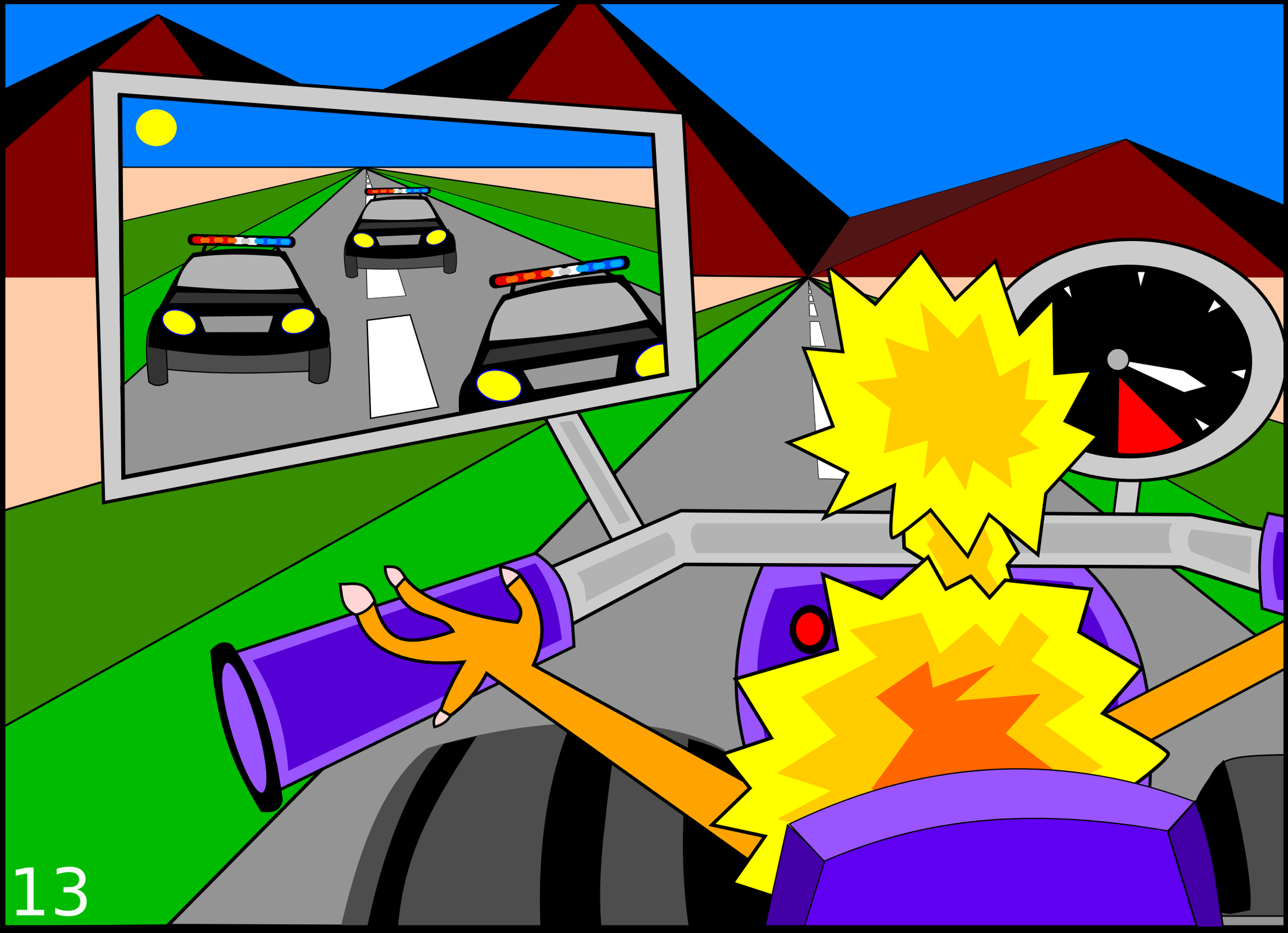

Also, time does not run forever back into the past. This long line of supposed proto-chickens did not always exist. Instead of asking which came first, chicken or egg, we should ask...


How did the dual nature of the process arise in the first place? How did the two modes of being come to lead and follow each other in alternation?


10
Listen: In this little universe the situation is simpler. At one point in time, there is an egg...

at another point,
a chicken.
The chicken
hatched from the
egg and then...

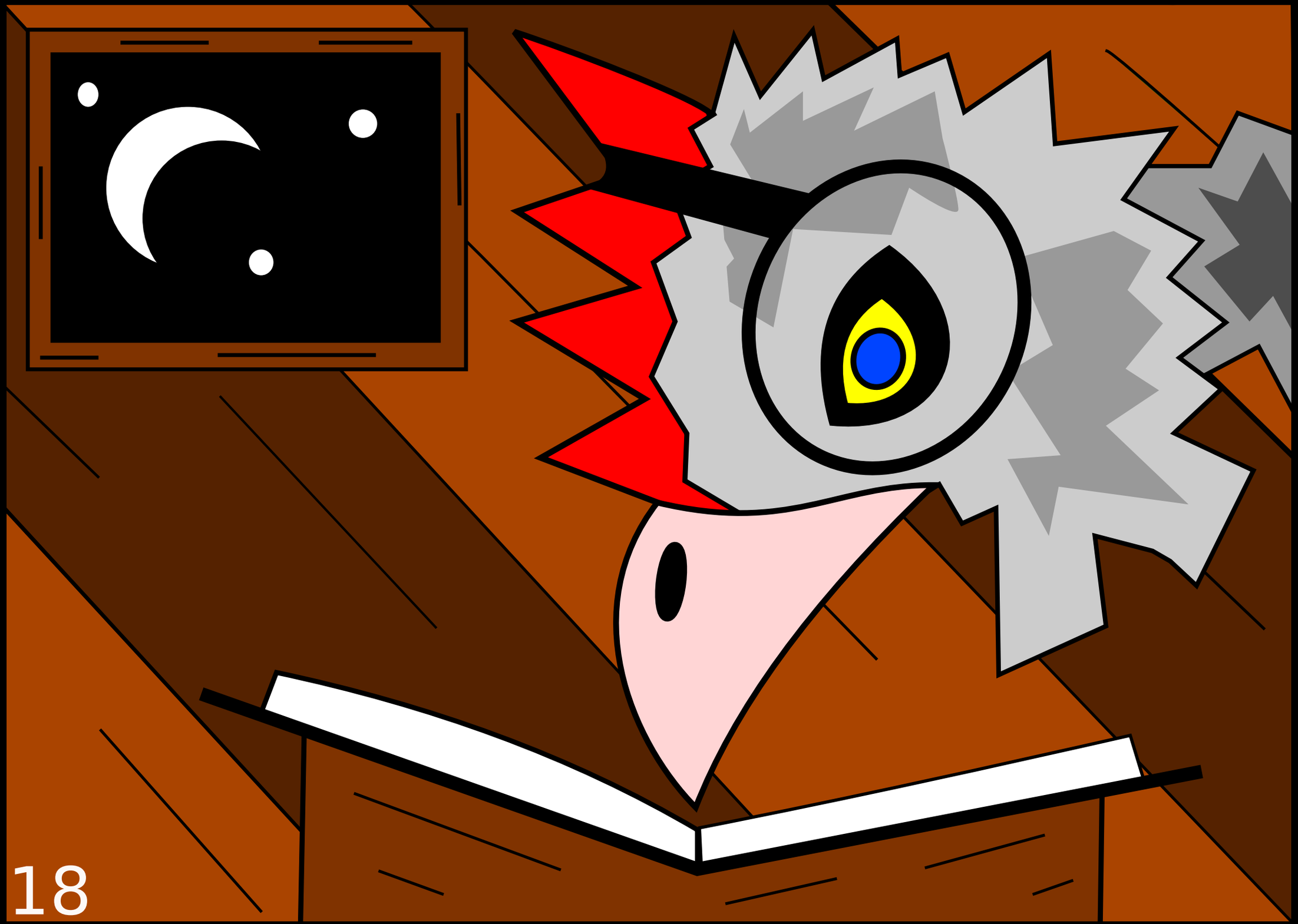

12
had the
kinds of
adventures
typical of
chickens.

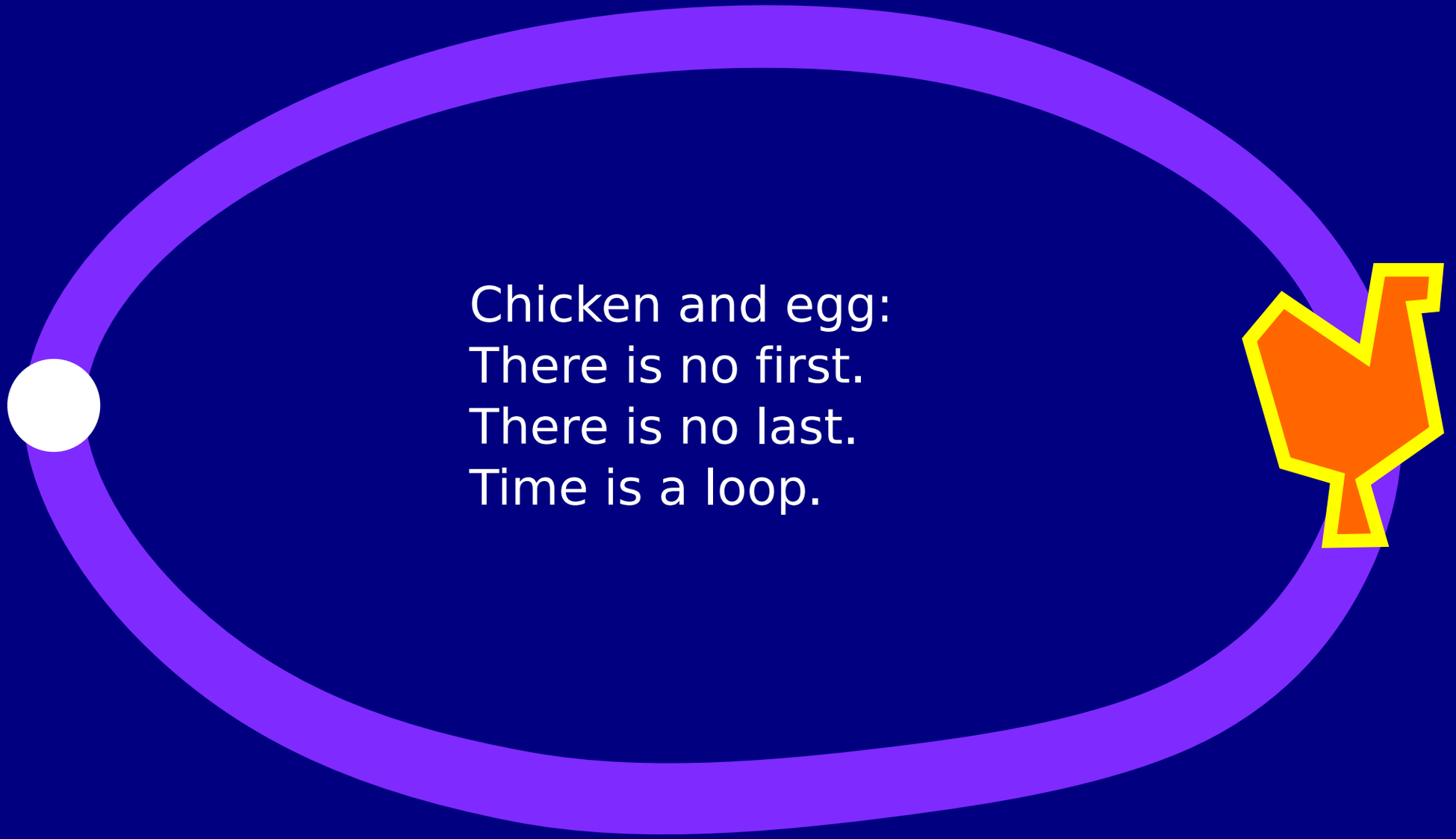

13


In time, the chicken laid the egg, the same egg from which it would later hatch.


Then it drifted off and
forgot about the egg.
16


The chicken spent its
final years leading
a life of quiet
contemplation.

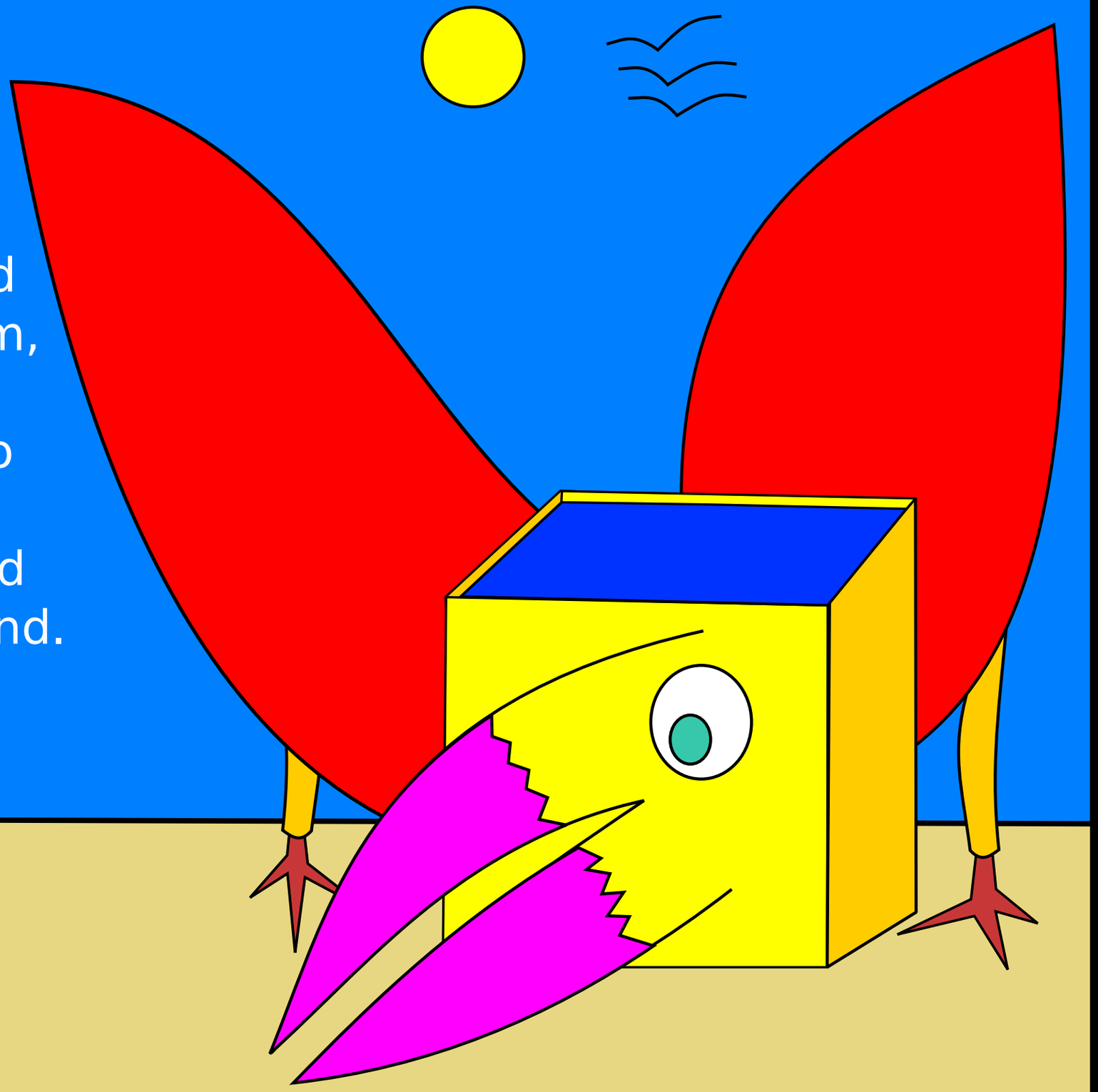



Chicken and egg:
There is no first.
There is no last.
Time is a loop.

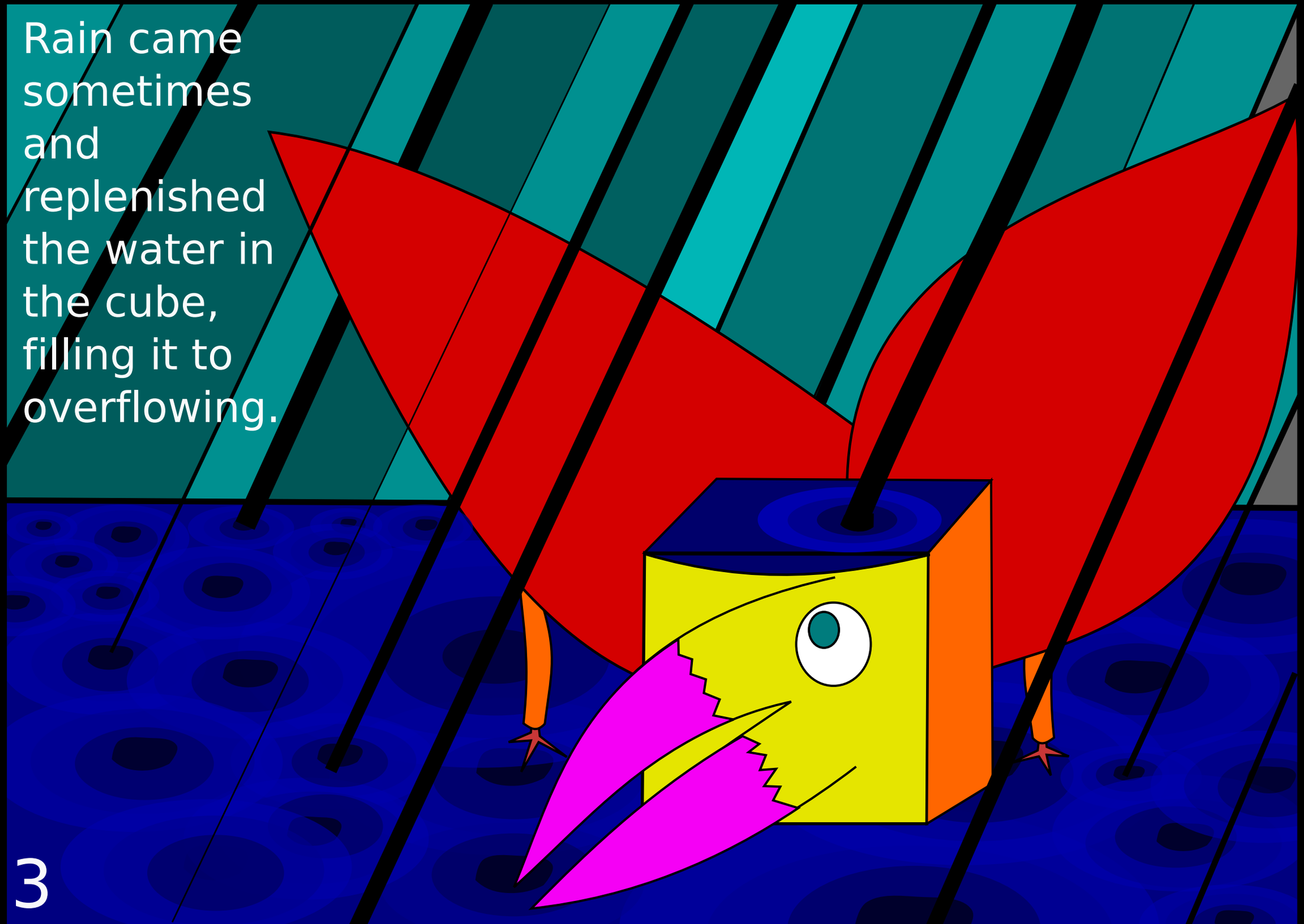
Chapter 2

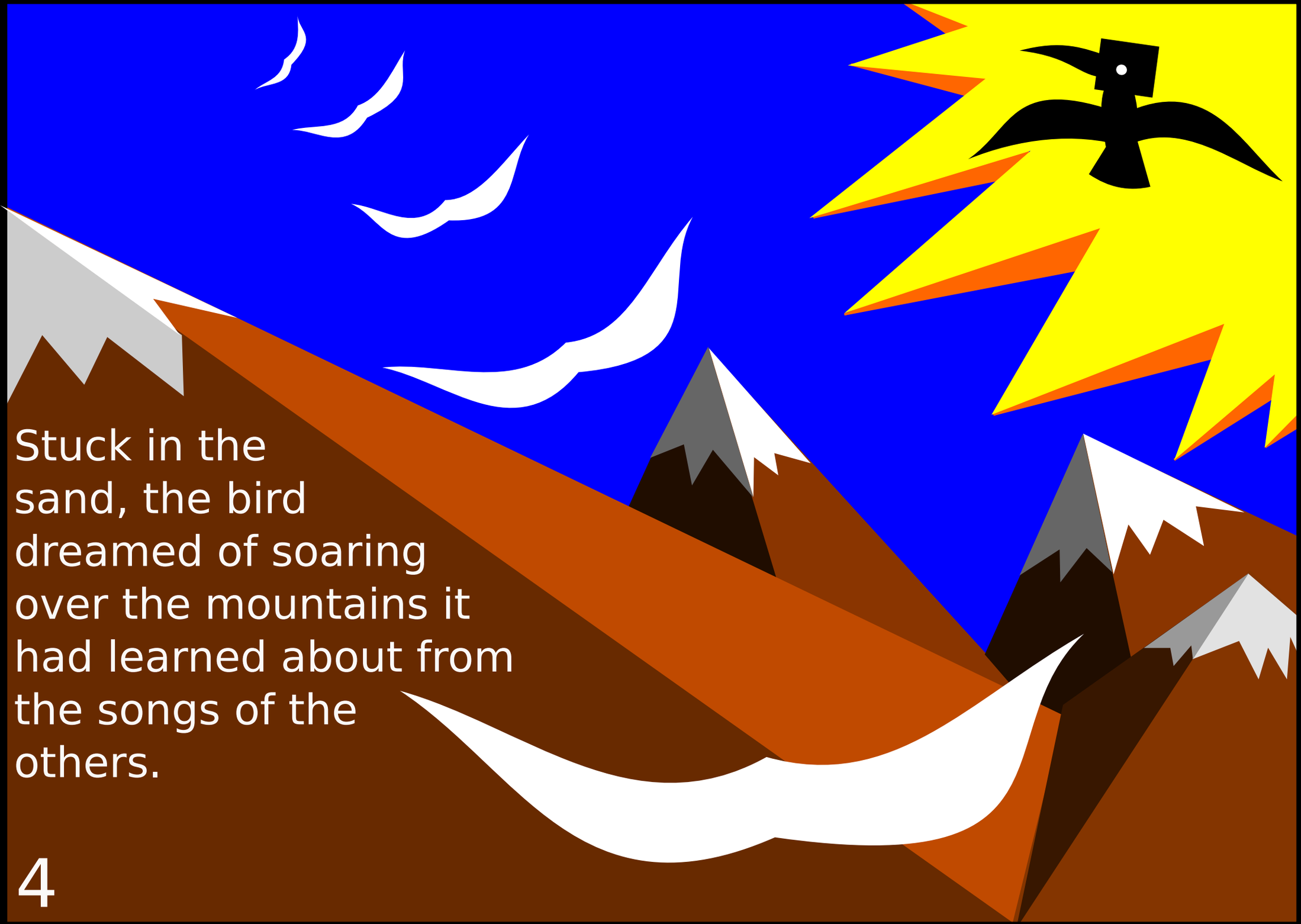
The bird
with the
cubical head

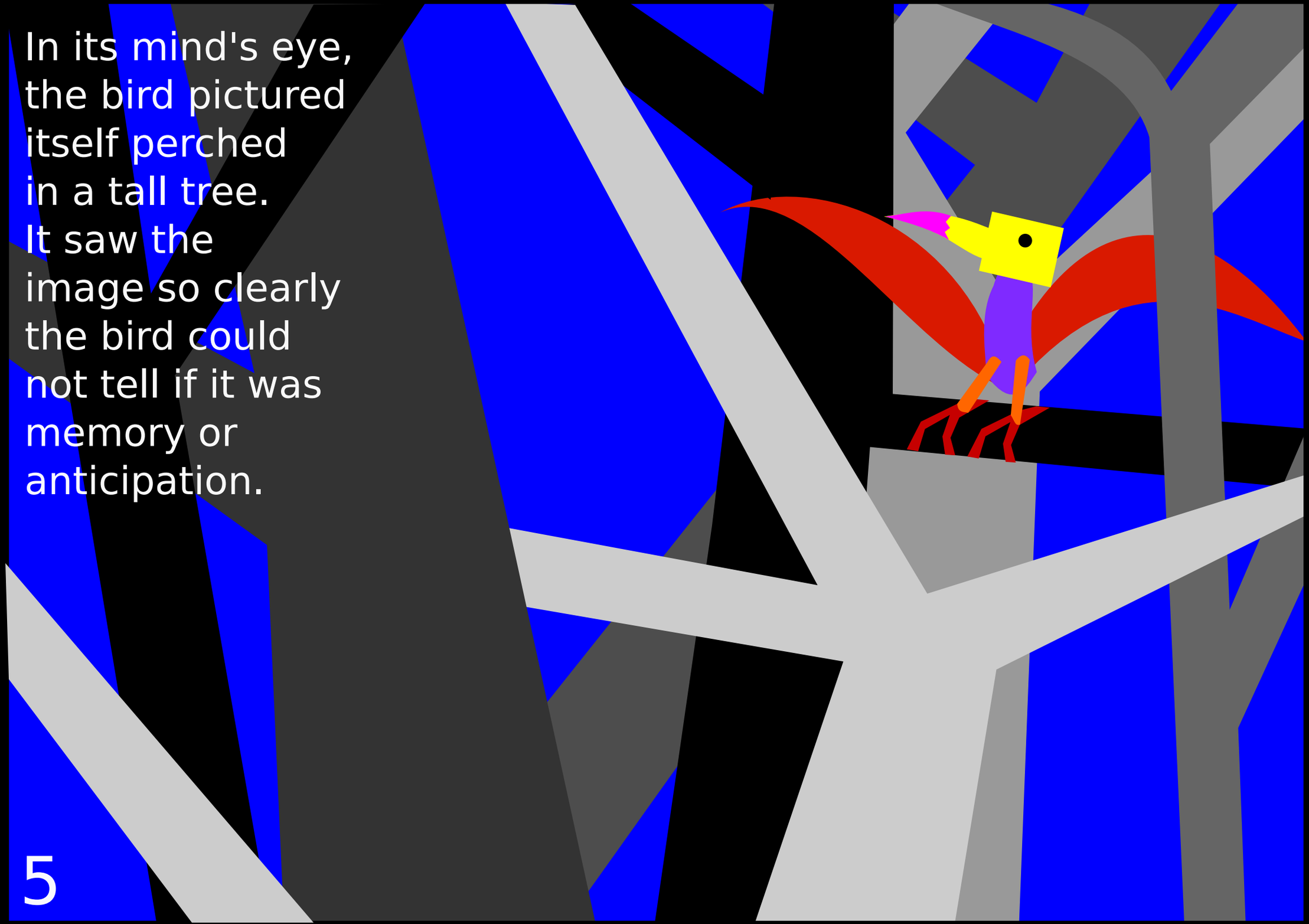
There was a bird who had a cubical head. The bird could not fly because water filled the cube to the brim, weighing it down. All the bird could do was squat on the ground with its head pressed into the sand.

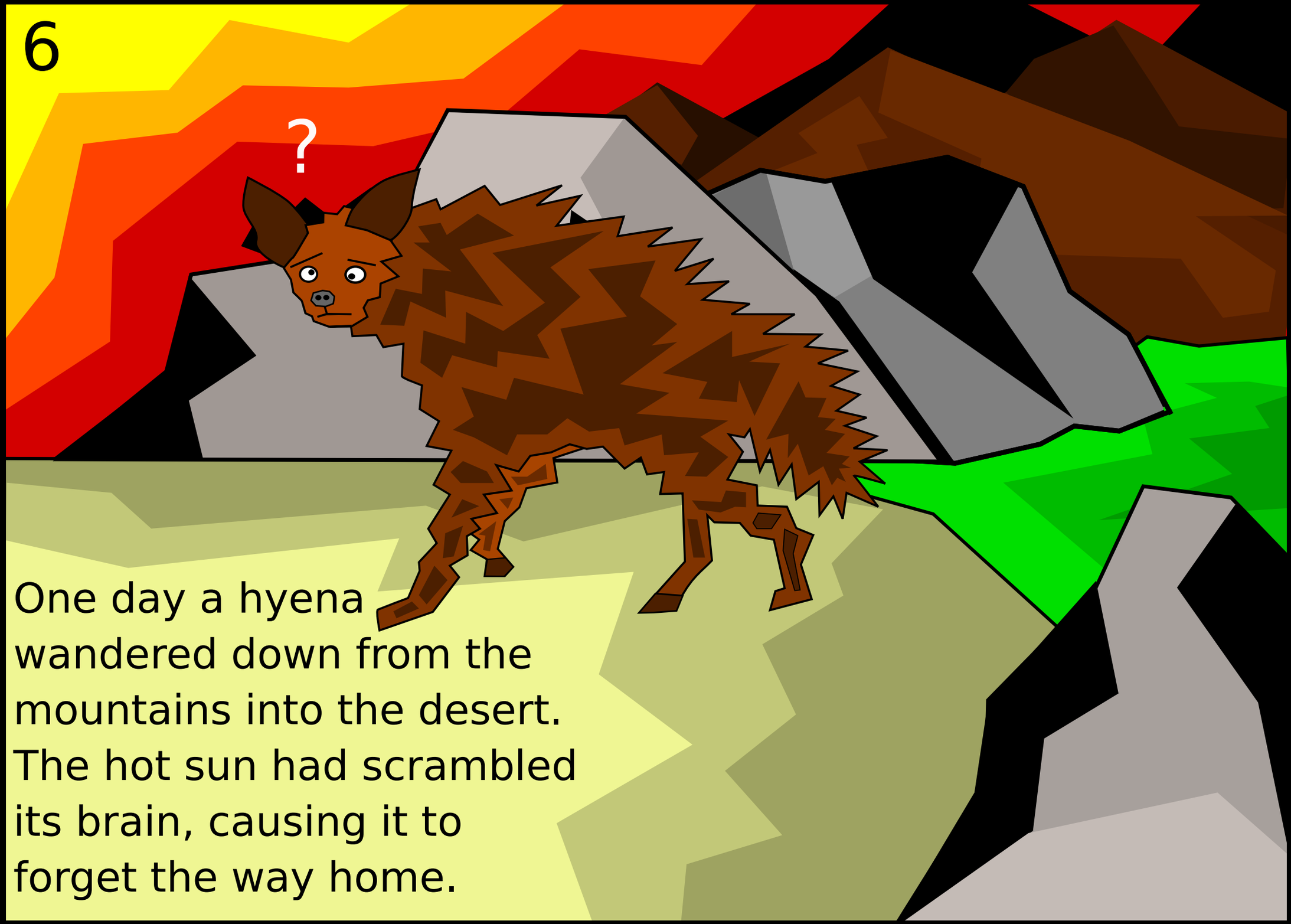


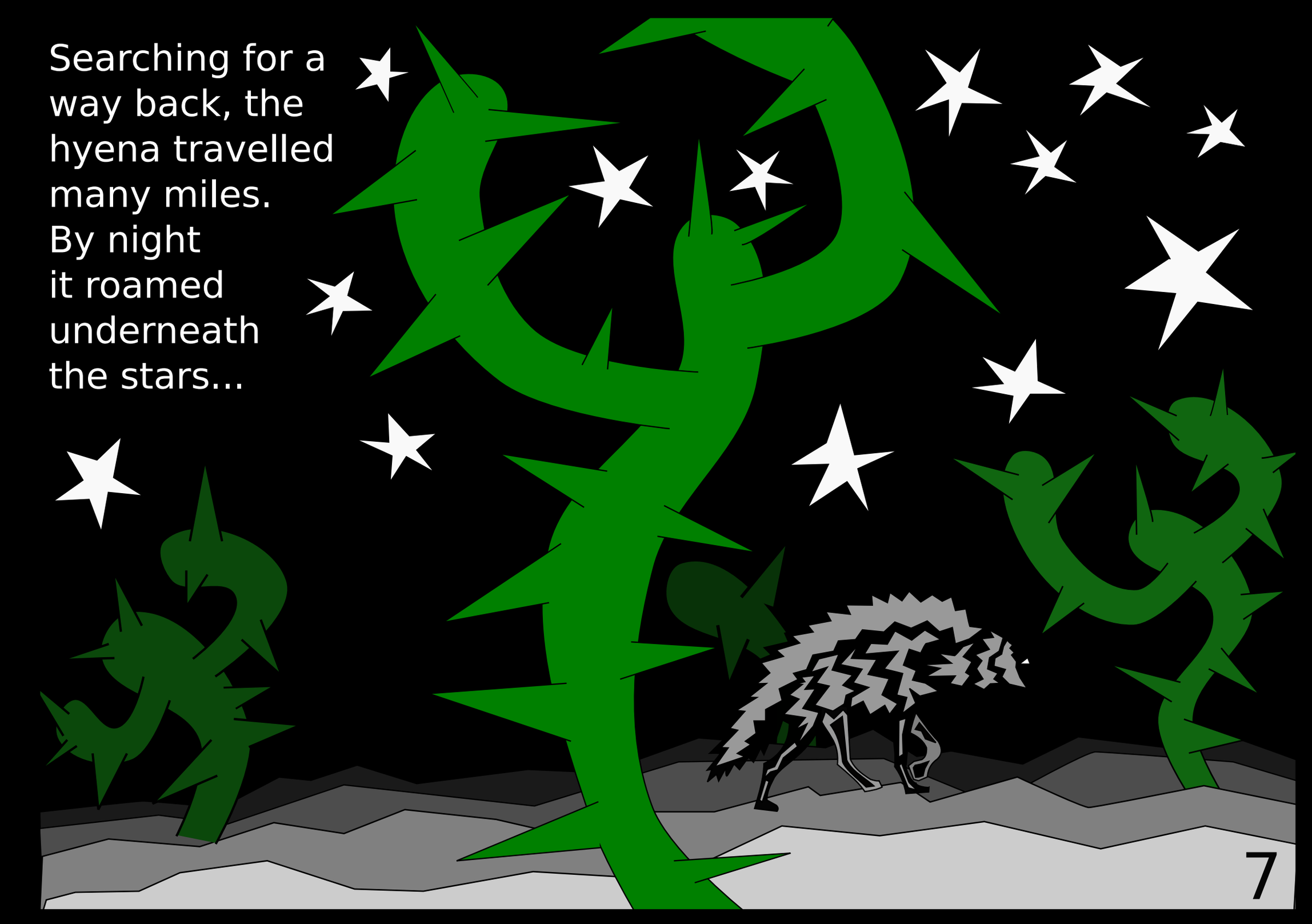
Smaller birds stopped by from time to time. They drank from the cube and told the planted bird about goings on in the sky. Birds smaller still bathed in the water, singing songs of their flights.


Rain came sometimes and replenished the water in the cube, filling it to overflowing.
3


Stuck in the
sand, the bird
dreamed of soaring
over the mountains it
had learned about from
the songs of the
others.
4


In its mind's eye,
the bird pictured
itself perched
in a tall tree.
It saw the
image so clearly
the bird could
not tell if it was
memory or
anticipation.
5

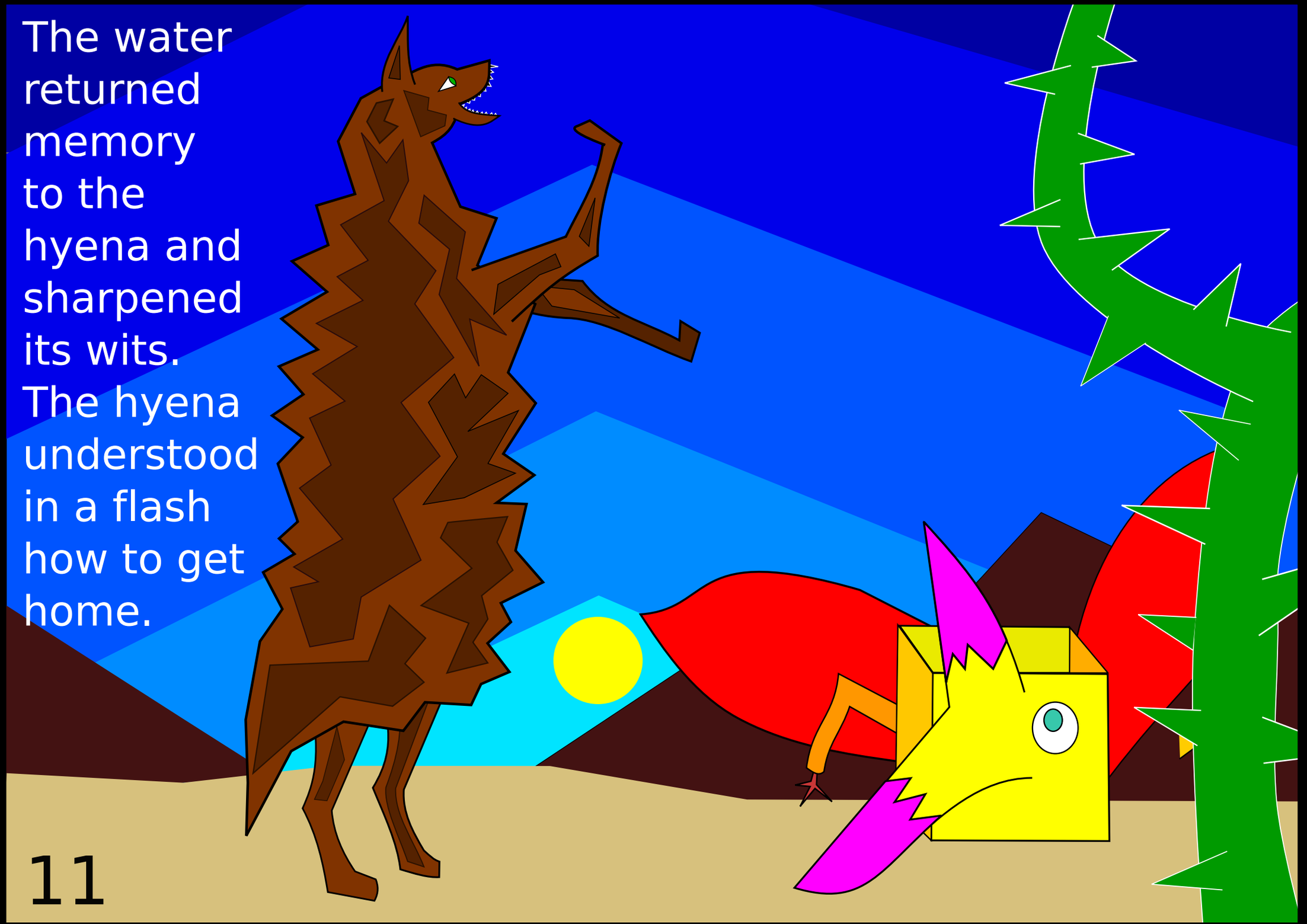

6
?
One day a hyena wandered down from the mountains into the desert. The hot sun had scrambled its brain, causing it to forget the way home.

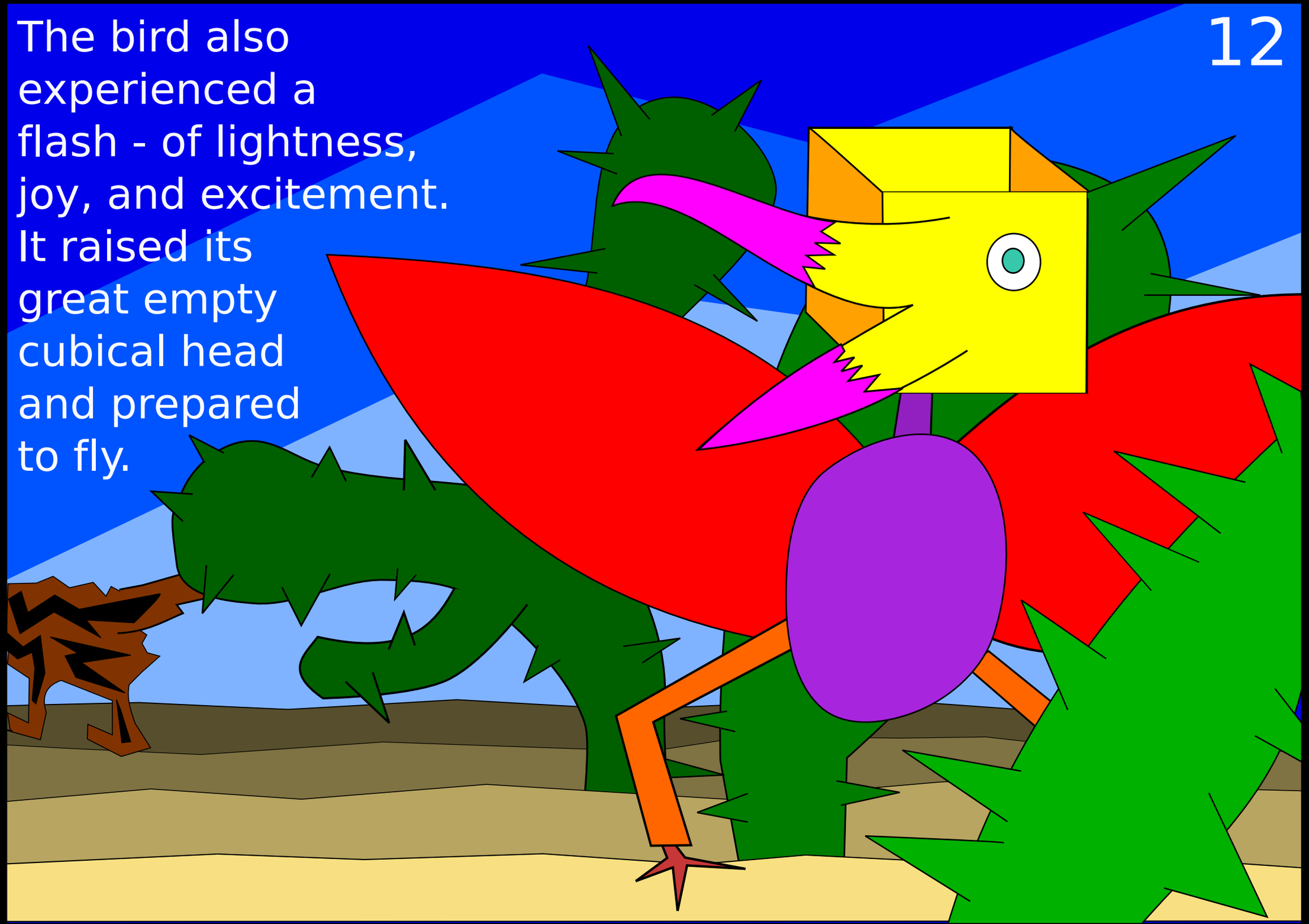

Searching for a way back, the hyena travelled many miles. By night it roamed underneath the stars...
7


8
and by day it slept
in the shadows
of rocks or cacti.


The repetitive nature
of the desert made the
hyena fear that it
was walking in circles.

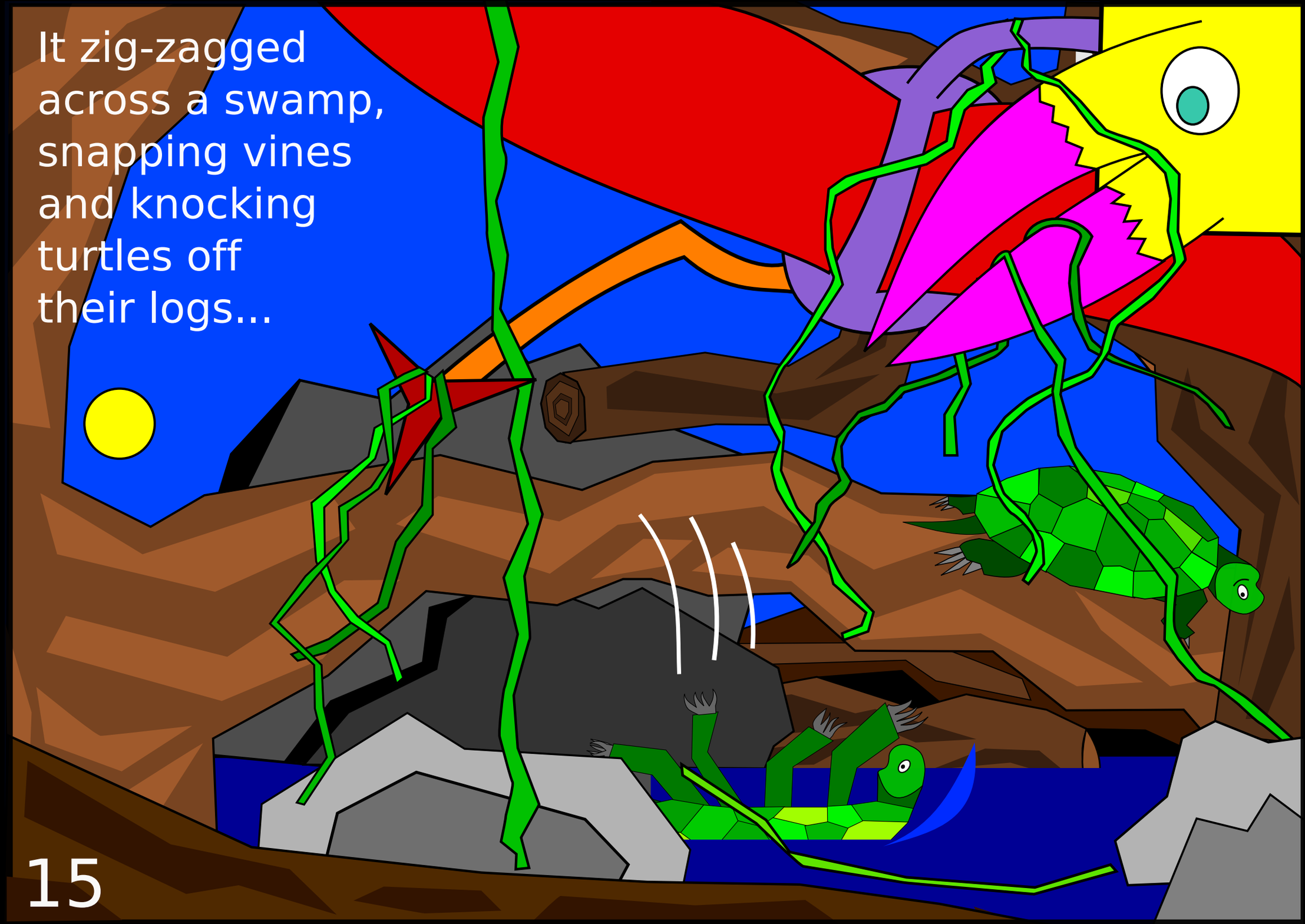

The hyena's wanderings brought it, finally, to the bird with the cubical head. Exhausted and parched, the hyena drank the water from the bird's head as the sun rose over the mountains.
10

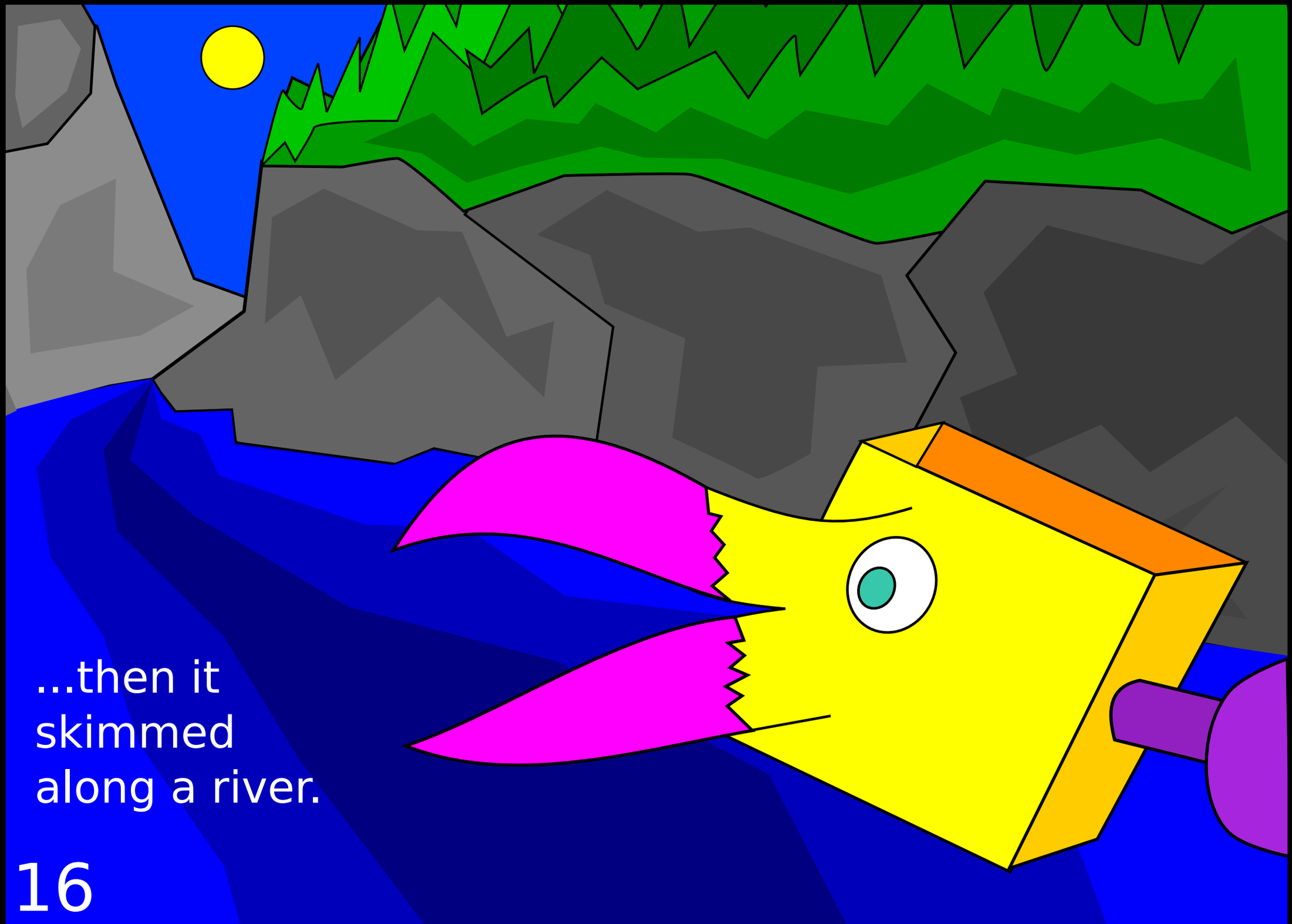

The water returned memory to the hyena and sharpened its wits. The hyena understood in a flash how to get home.
11

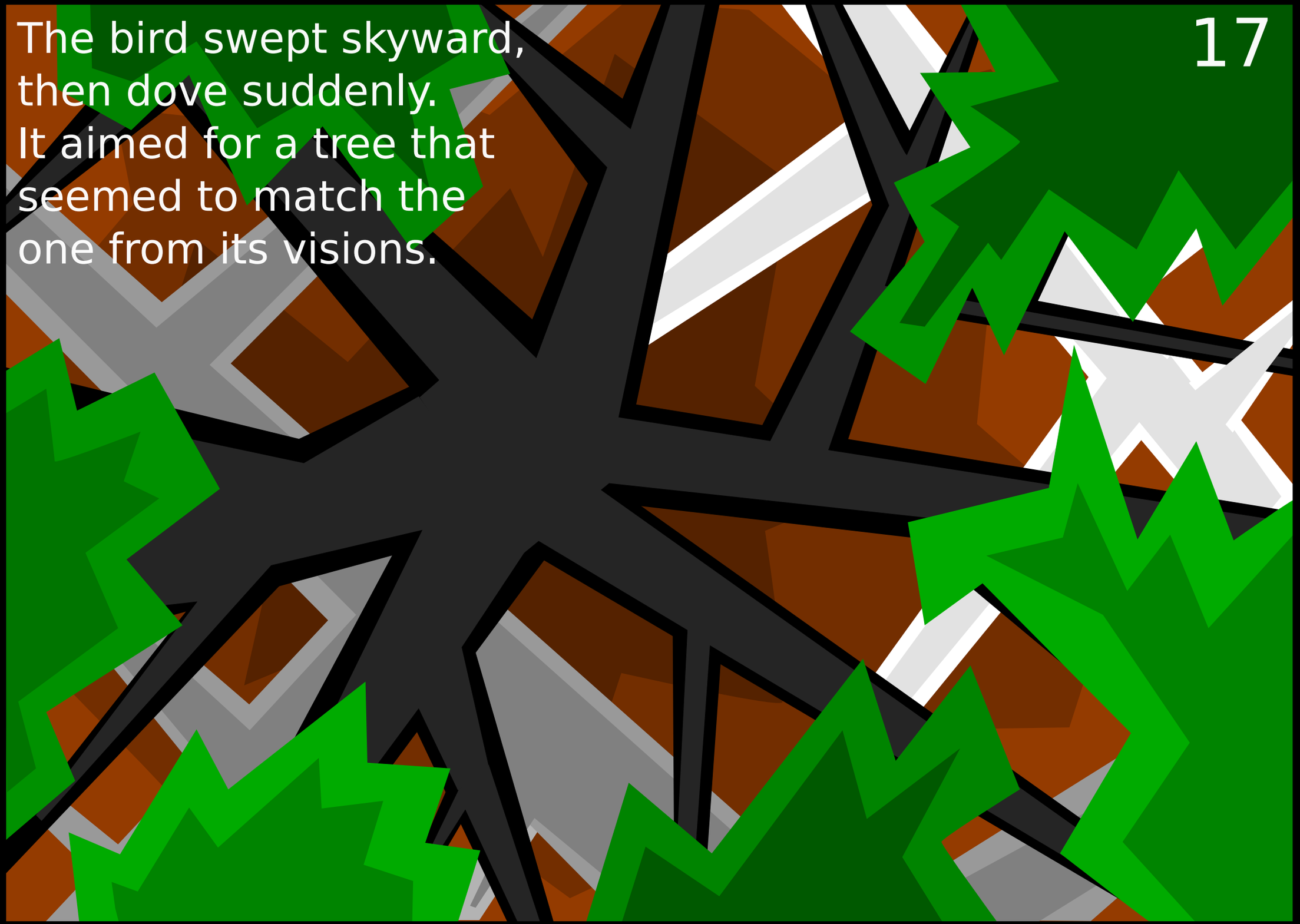

The bird also experienced a flash - of lightness, joy, and excitement. It raised its great empty cubical head and prepared to fly.
12


It flew high
above the desert
in a crazy spiral
pattern, scaring
and scattering
other birds as
it went up.
13


It flew to the mountains, then plummeted down and set off a stampede of cows.
14

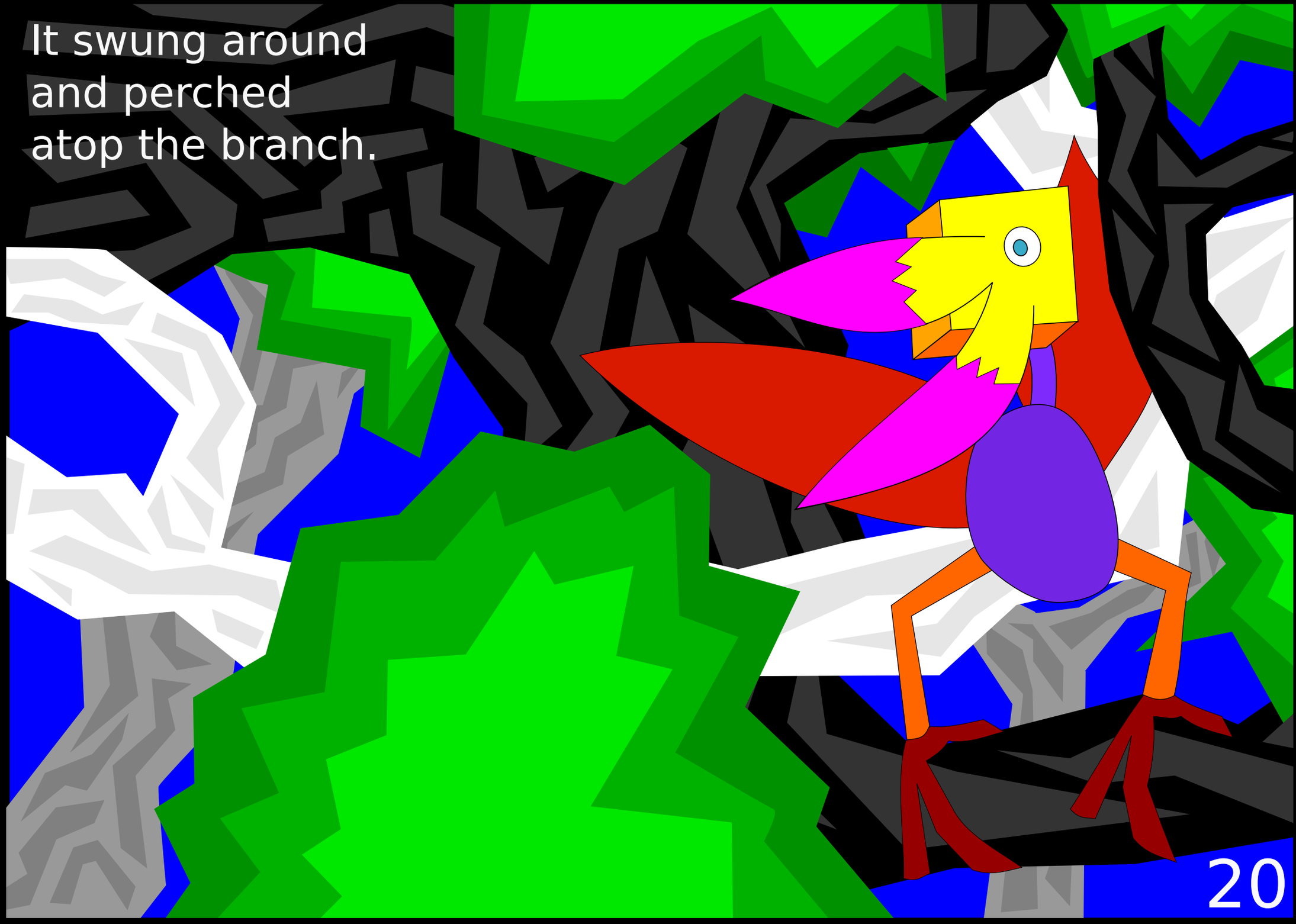

It zig-zagged
across a swamp,
snapping vines
and knocking
turtles off
their logs...
15


...then it
skimmed
along a river.


The bird swept skyward,
then dove suddenly.
It aimed for a tree that
seemed to match the
one from its visions.
17

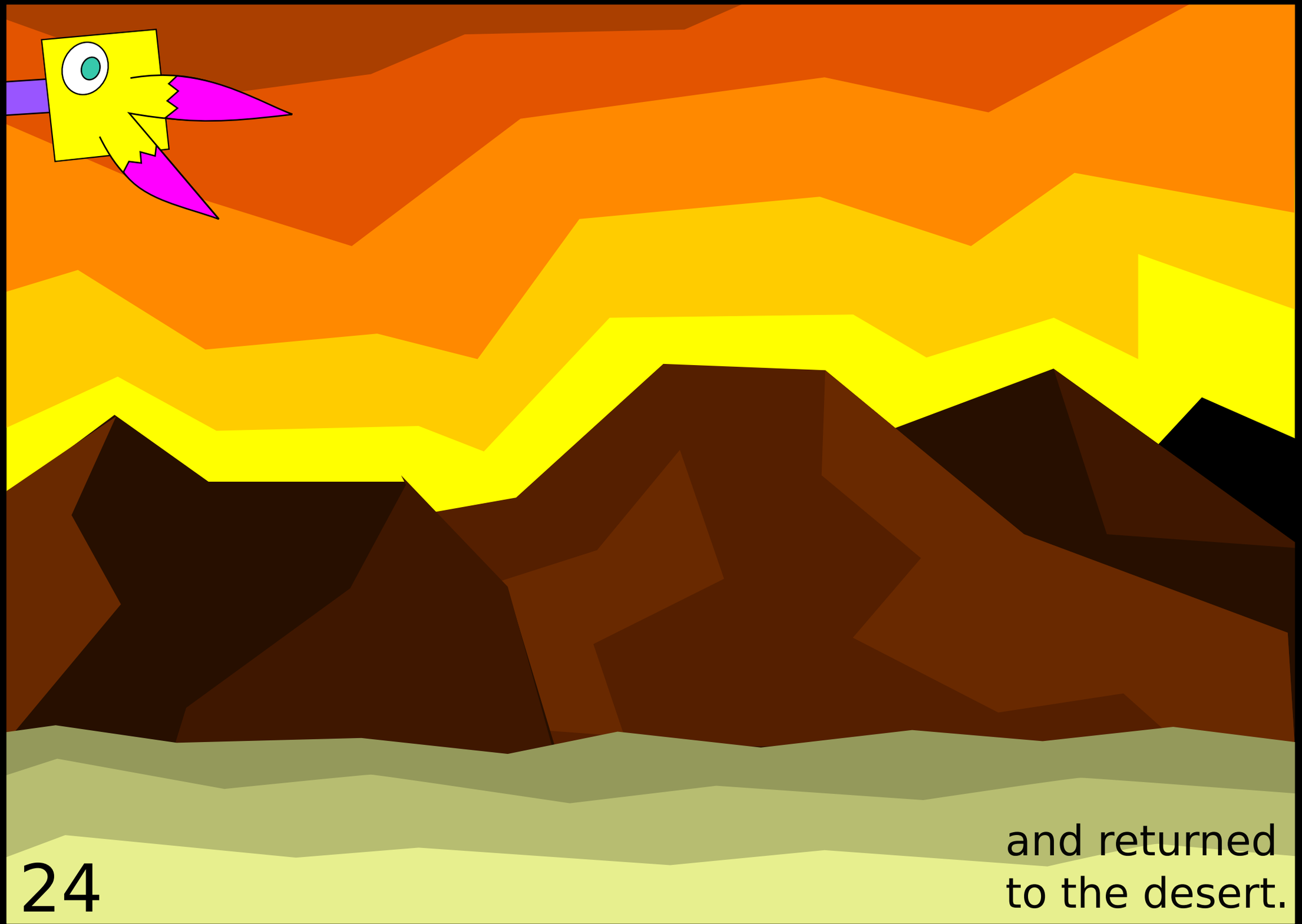

It tore
through
the upper
branches,
stripping off
leaves,
upending nests,
and splintering
birdhouses.

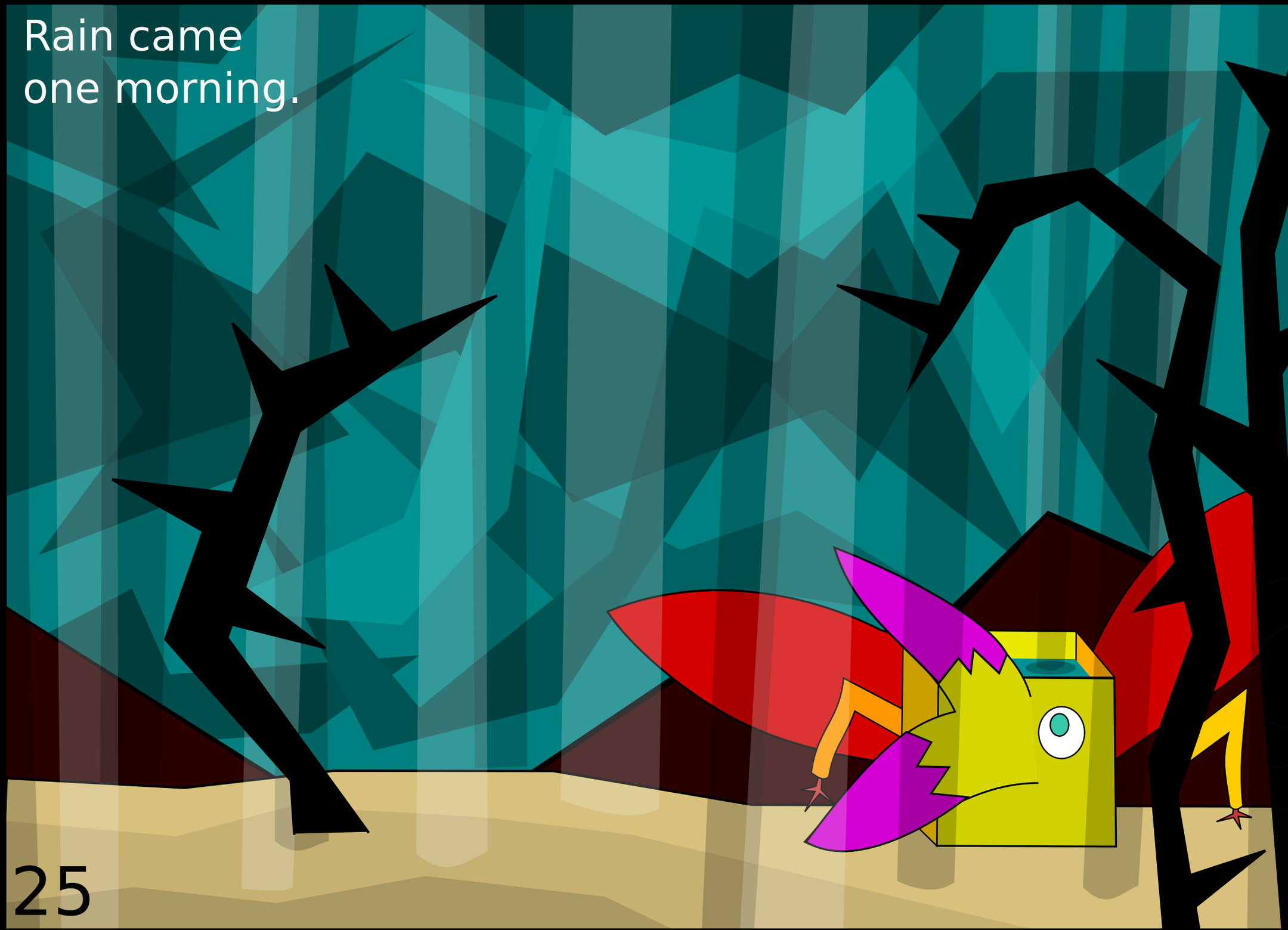

It whipped past
a branch that it
recognized, then
clasped it.
19


It swung around
and perched
atop the branch.
20

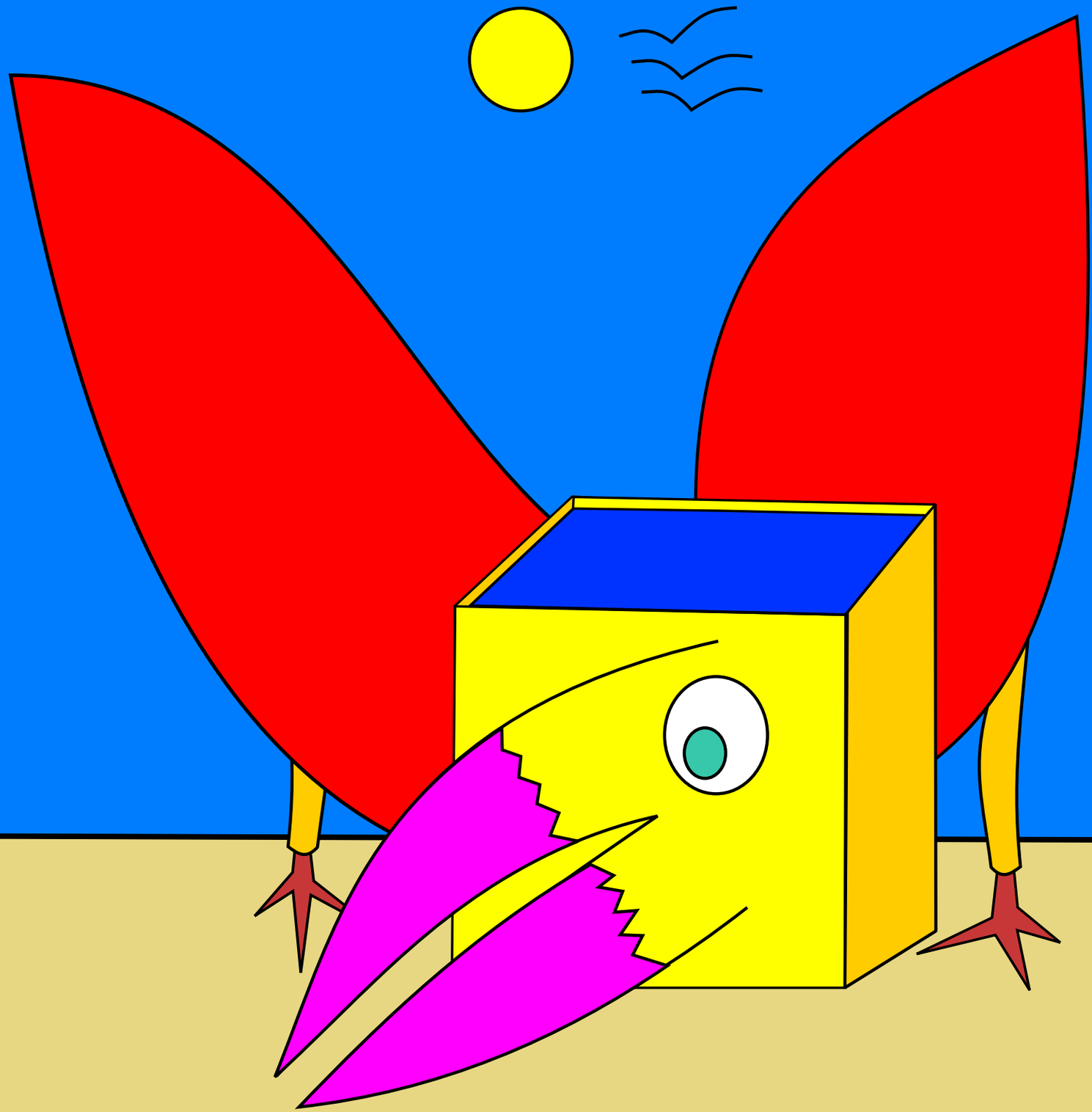

21
And there
it rested.


Eventually the
bird flew away...
23


24
and returned
to the desert.

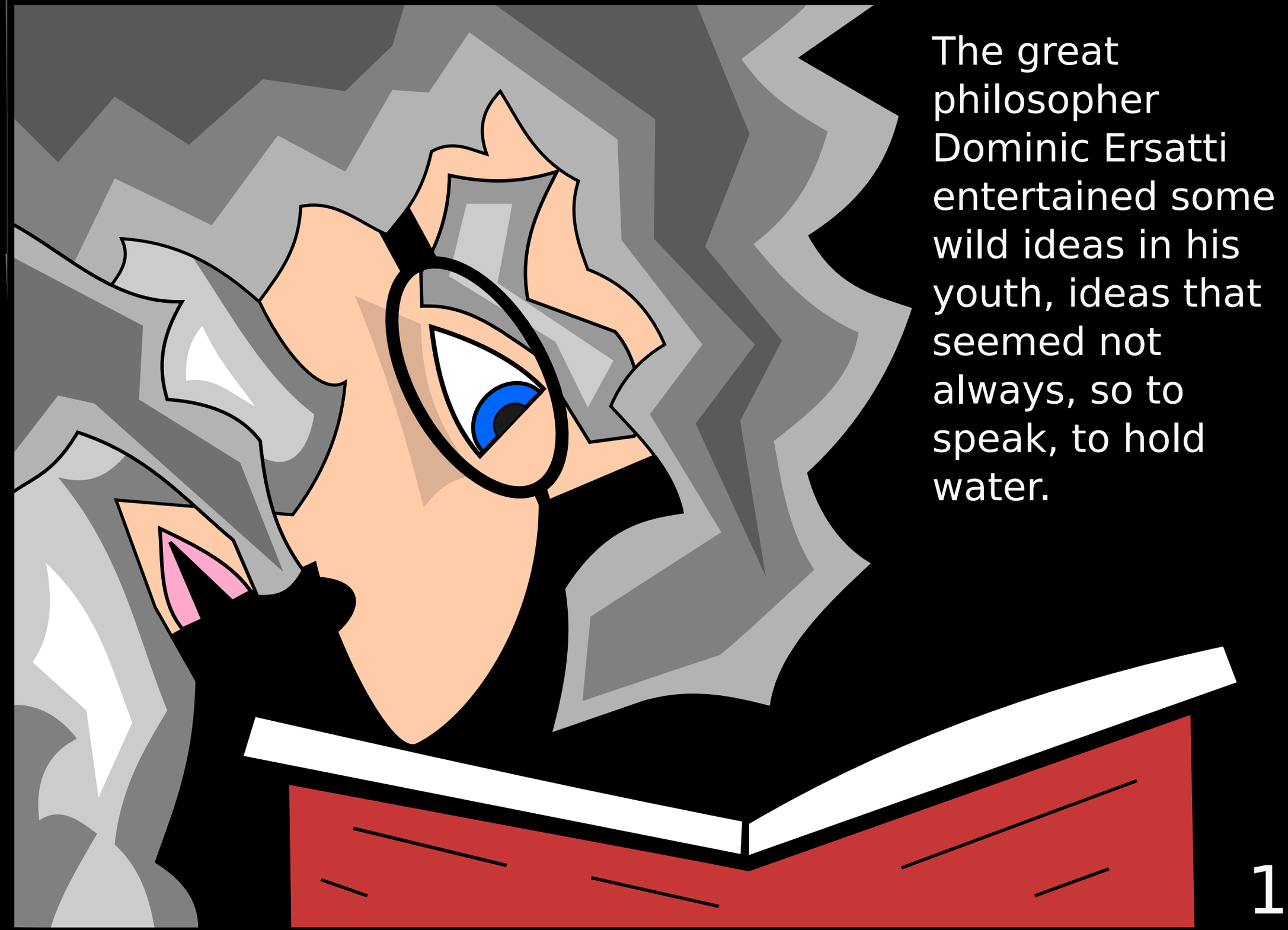

Rain came
one morning.
25

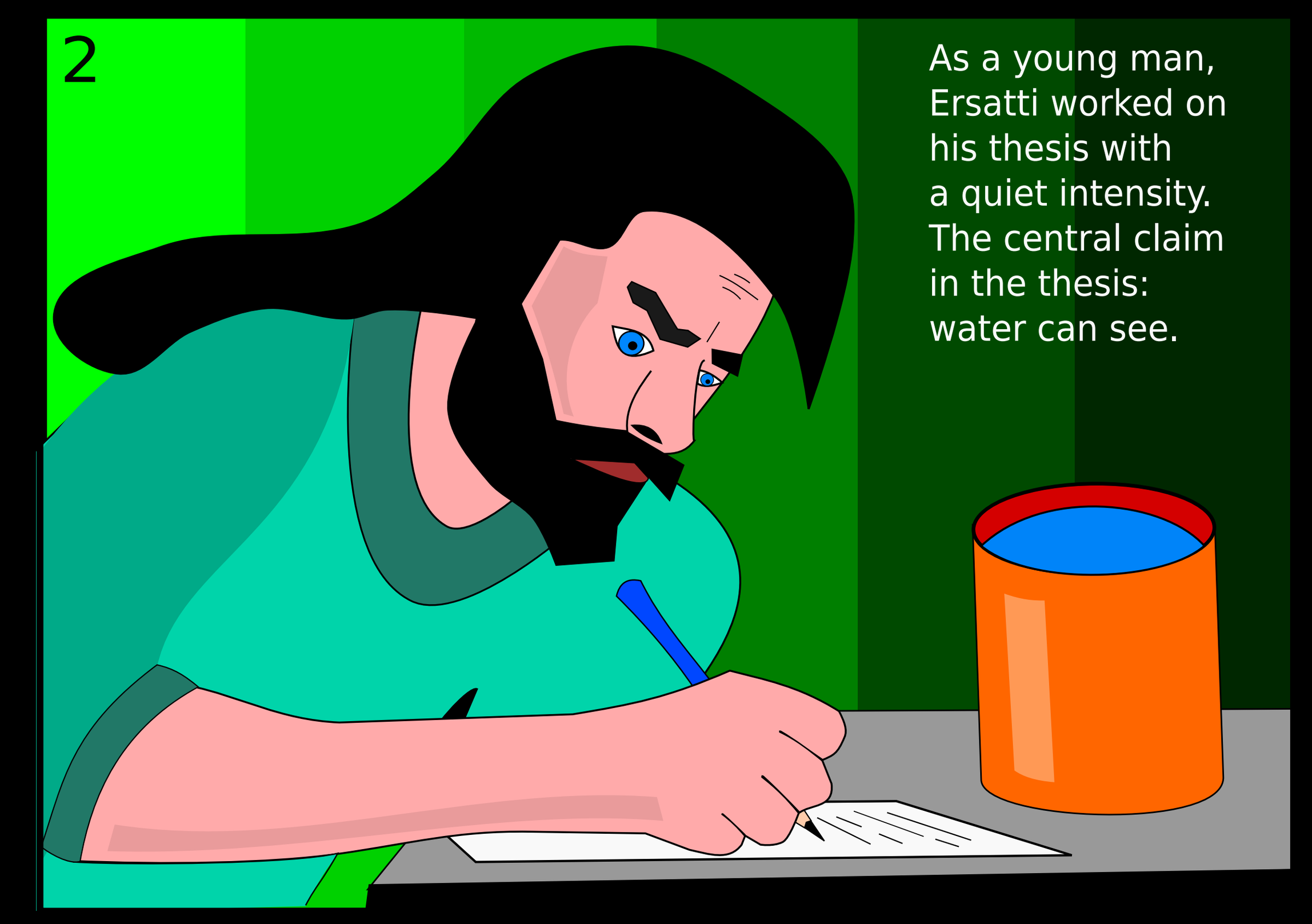
After the cool water filled its head the bird remembered, and then forgot again, that this had happened to it many times in the past.



Chapter 3

Water can see

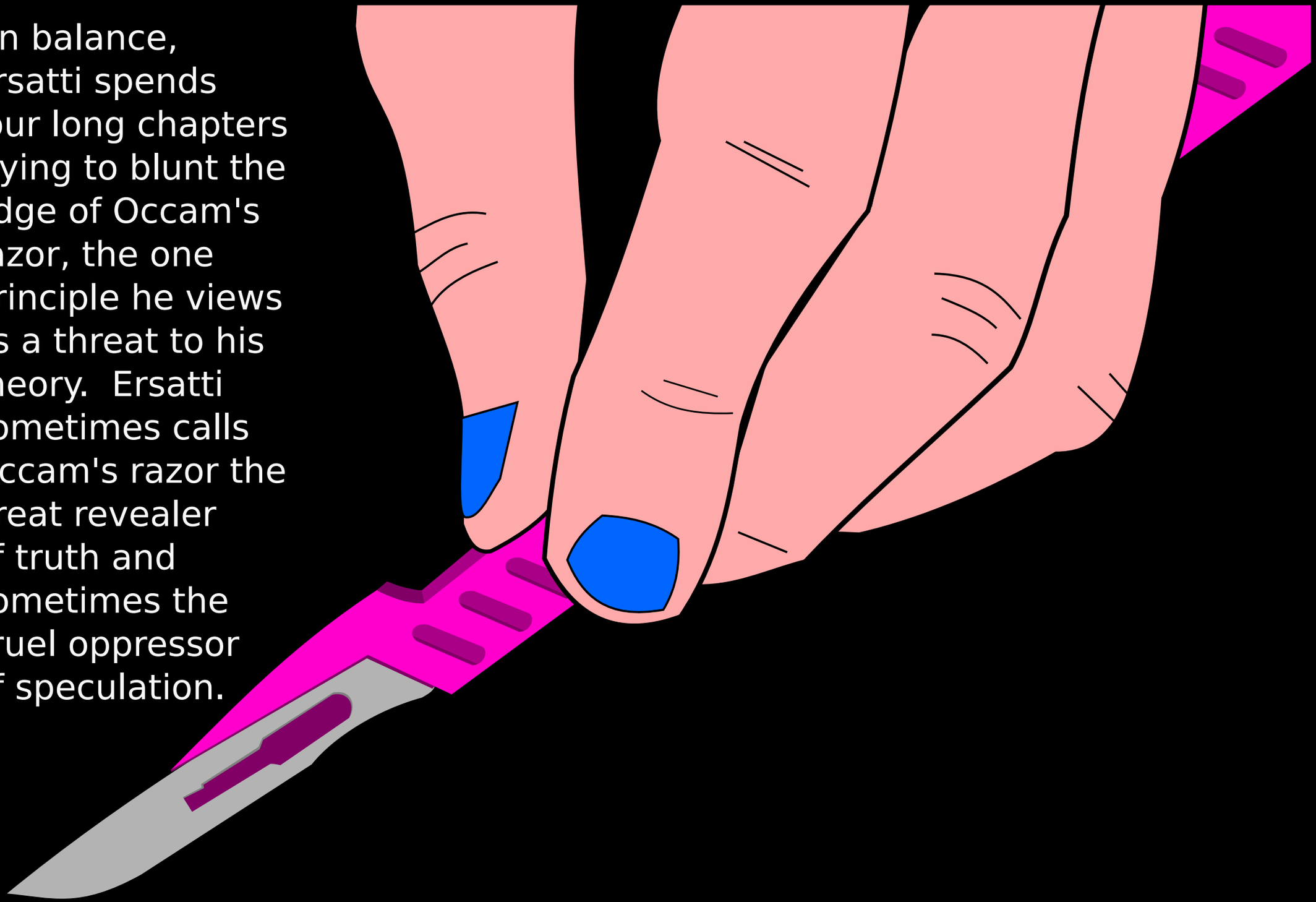

The great philosopher Dominic Ersatti entertained some wild ideas in his youth, ideas that seemed not always, so to speak, to hold water.
1


2
As a young man, Ersatti worked on his thesis with a quiet intensity. The central claim in the thesis: water can see.

The thesis attracted a lot of attention, all negative. Critics pointed out that water has no cornea, no retina, no visual cortex. What is the mechanism by which water can see? It is simply an inorganic chemical compound.

These scientific objections did not interest Ersatti. He dismisses them in several paragraphs near the beginning of his thesis. "People really don't know how the mind works and nobody has satisfactorily explained why structures like retinas, neurons, etc., are necessary for vision," he writes, "Let us not allow the orthodoxy of science to slow us down."

On balance, Ersatti spends four long chapters trying to blunt the edge of Occam's razor, the one principle he views as a threat to his theory. Ersatti sometimes calls Occam's razor the great revealer of truth and sometimes the cruel oppressor of speculation.

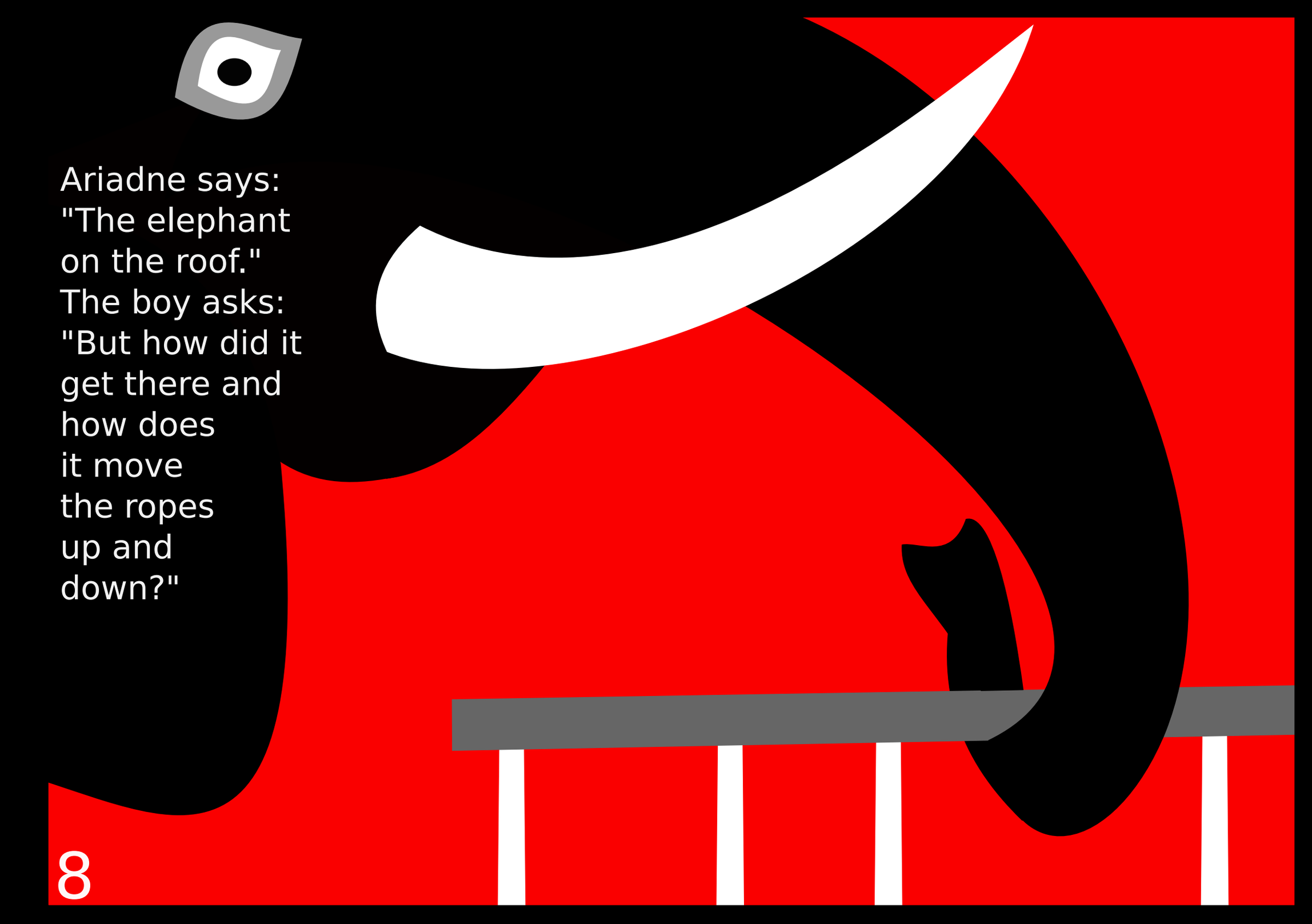


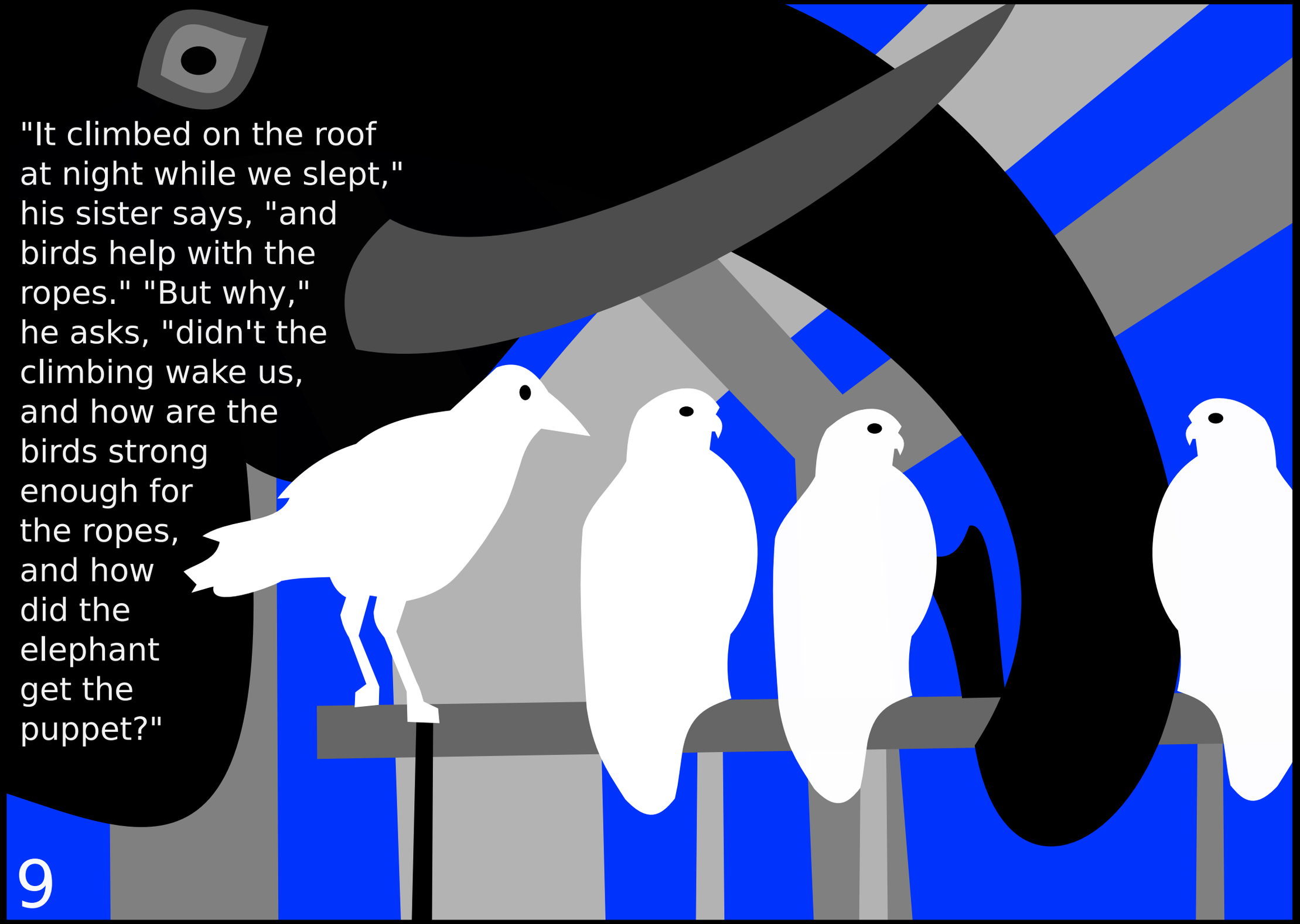
6

By way of explanation, Ersatti recounts a scene from his childhood. He is five years old. He sees an unfamiliar woman talking to his mother through the partially opened front door.

7

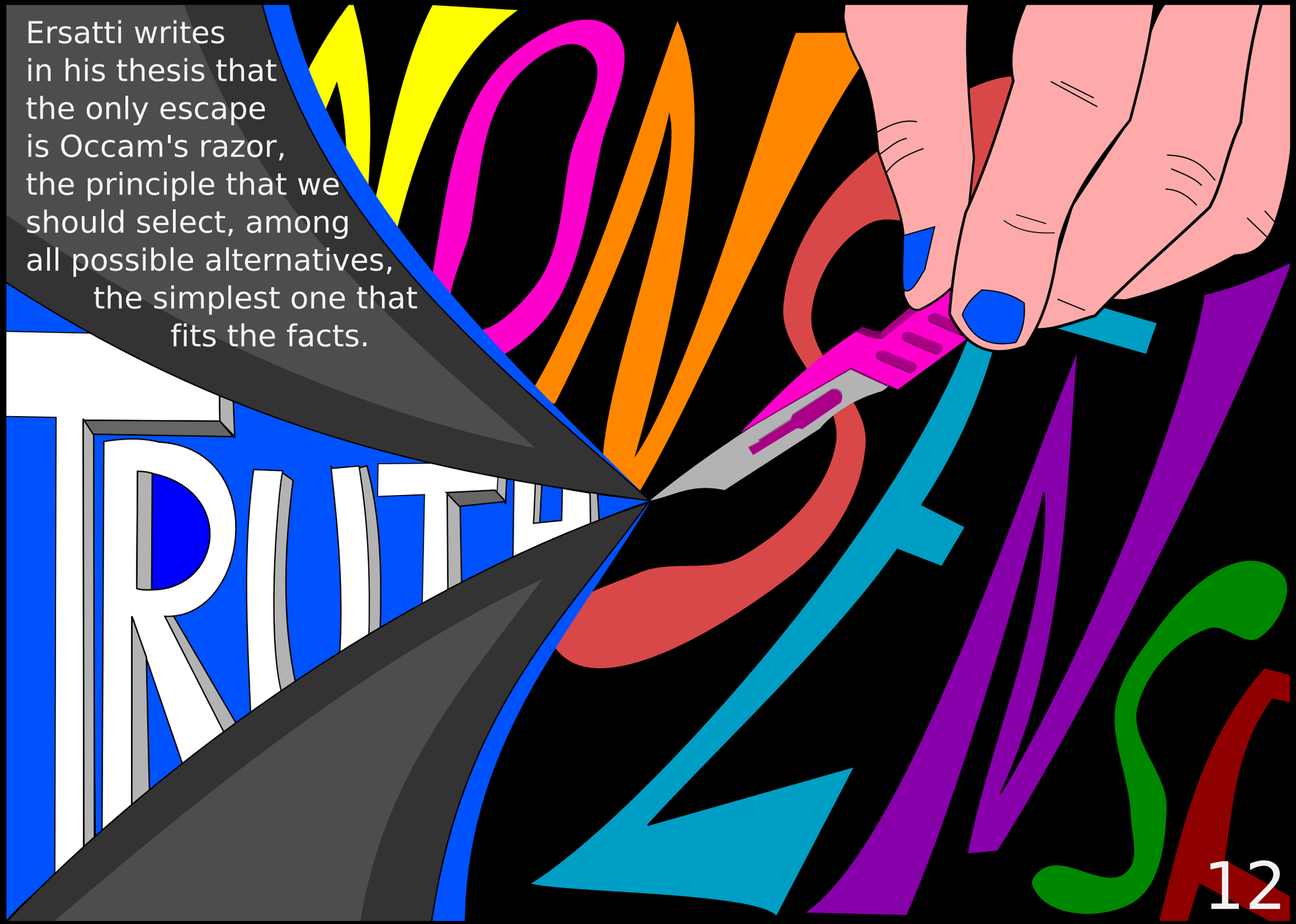
Ersatti's sister Ariadne is nine. She whispers to him: "That is not a real person. It is a puppet on ropes. If you could see through things you would know too." He asks: "But who is holding the ropes?"


Ariadne says:
"The elephant
on the roof."
The boy asks:
"But how did it
get there and
how does
it move
the ropes
up and
down?"
8

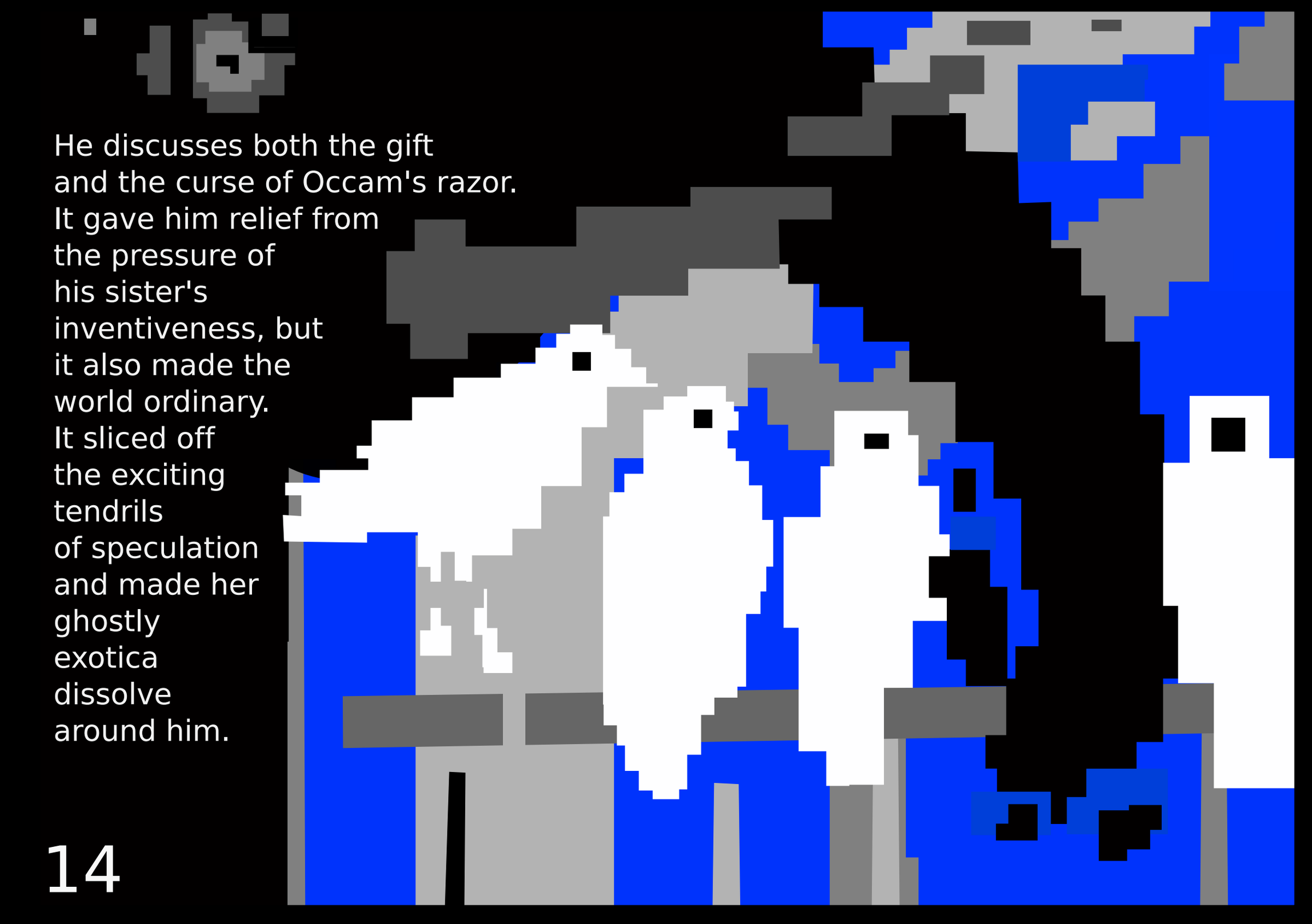

"It climbed on the roof at night while we slept," his sister says, "and birds help with the ropes." "But why," he asks, "didn't the climbing wake us, and how are the birds strong enough for the ropes, and how did the elephant get the puppet?"
9

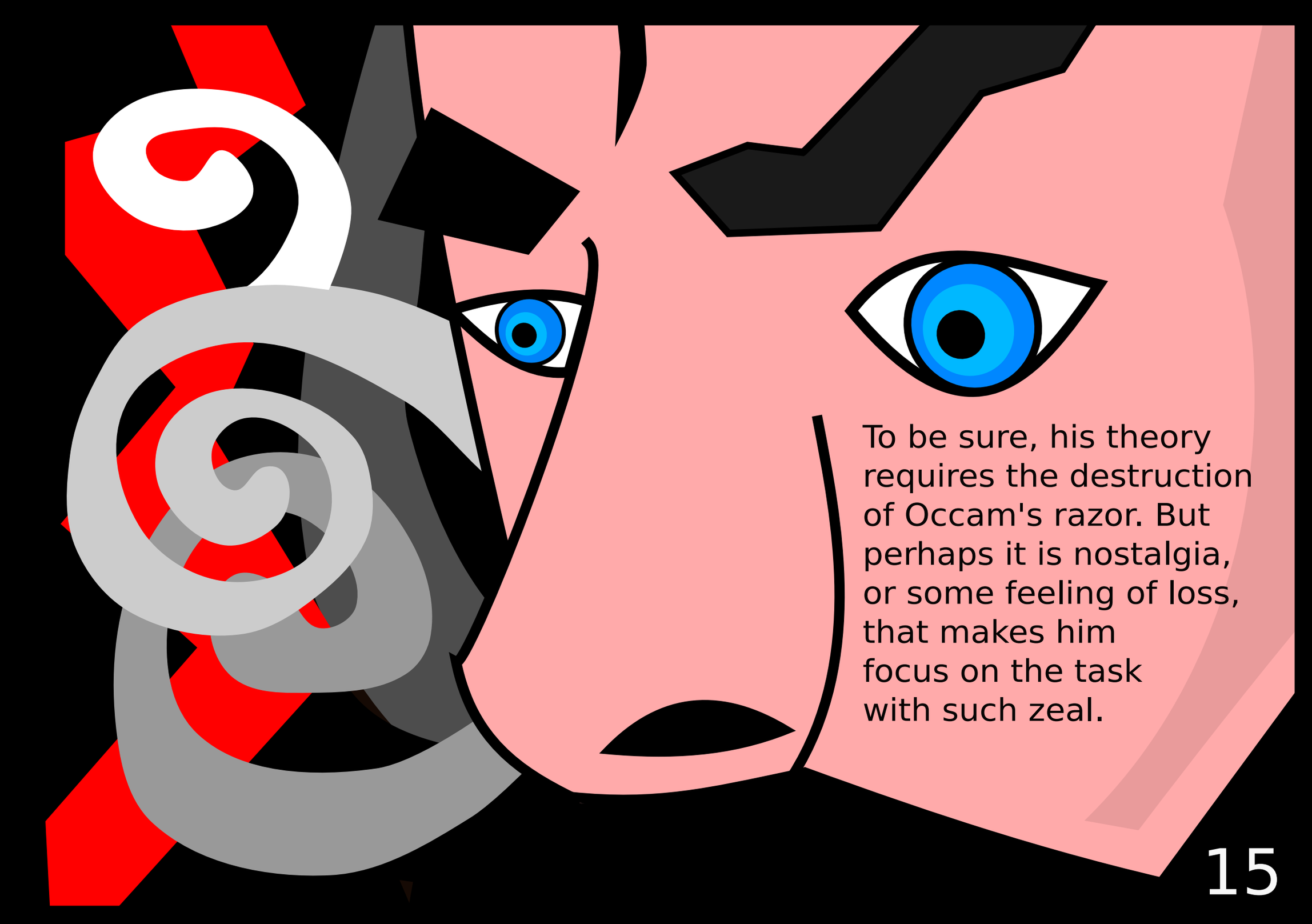
Brilliant Ariadne, she has answers to every question. "The elephant has special shoes which make his footsteps silent. The birds are motorized, reinforced with steel..." And so on.


She leads him through
branching tendrils of
nonsense: endless,
maddening, hypnotic.
There is only one escape,
but Dominic cannot find it...

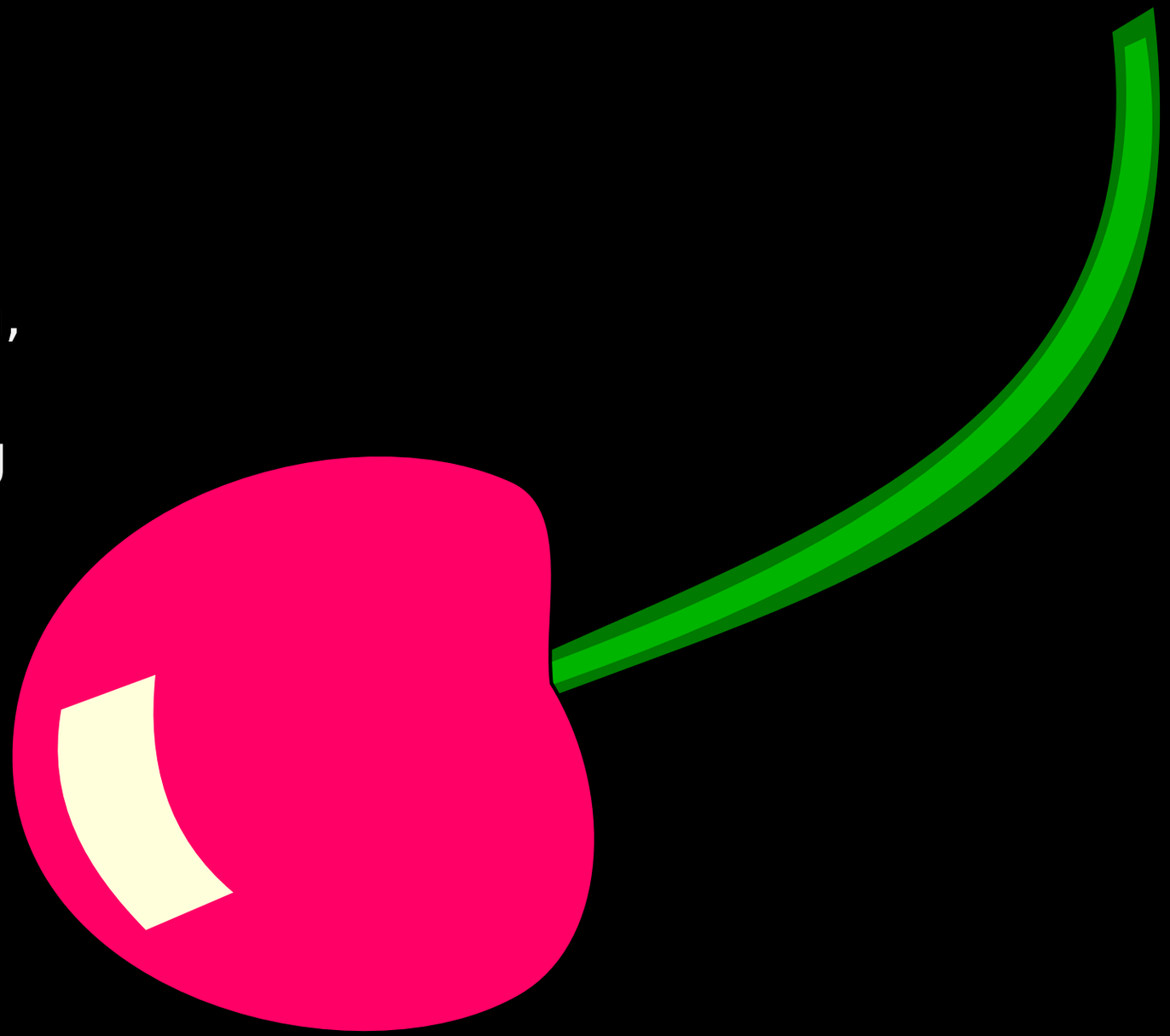

Ersatti writes
in his thesis that
the only escape
is Occam's razor,
the principle that we
should select, among
all possible alternatives,
the simplest one that
fits the facts.
TRUTH
WONDERING


He and Ariadne were inseparable companions during childhood.
In some sense he enjoyed their battles of the imagination - in spite of their lopsided nature. He claims that he eventually discovered the idea behind Occam's razor on his own, as a defense against his sister's relentlessly creative nature.
13

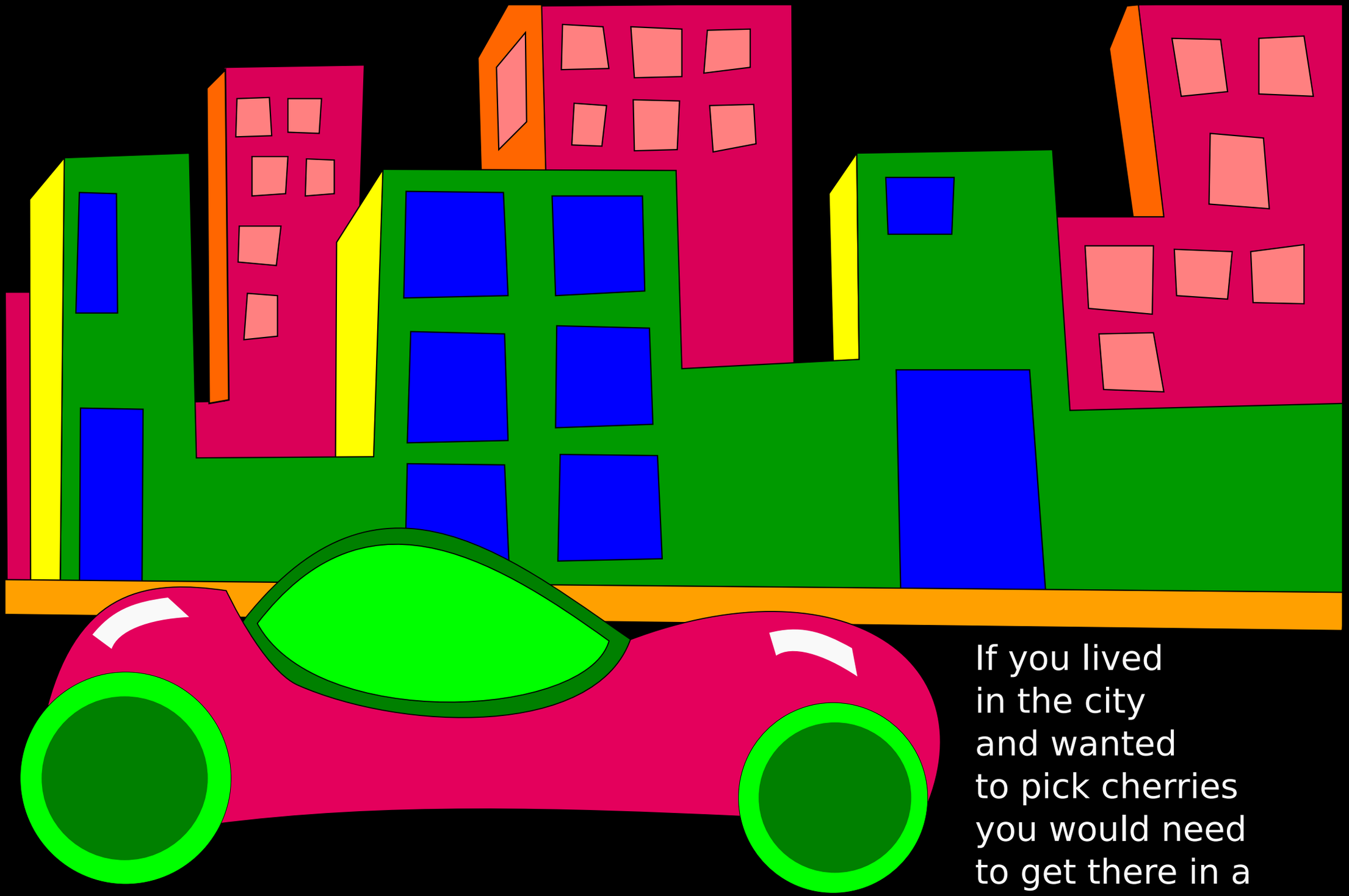

He discusses both the gift
and the curse of Occam's razor.
It gave him relief from
the pressure of
his sister's
inventiveness, but
it also made the
world ordinary.
It sliced off
the exciting
tendrils
of speculation
and made her
ghostly
exotica
dissolve
around him.


To be sure, his theory requires the destruction of Occam's razor. But perhaps it is nostalgia, or some feeling of loss, that makes him focus on the task with such zeal.

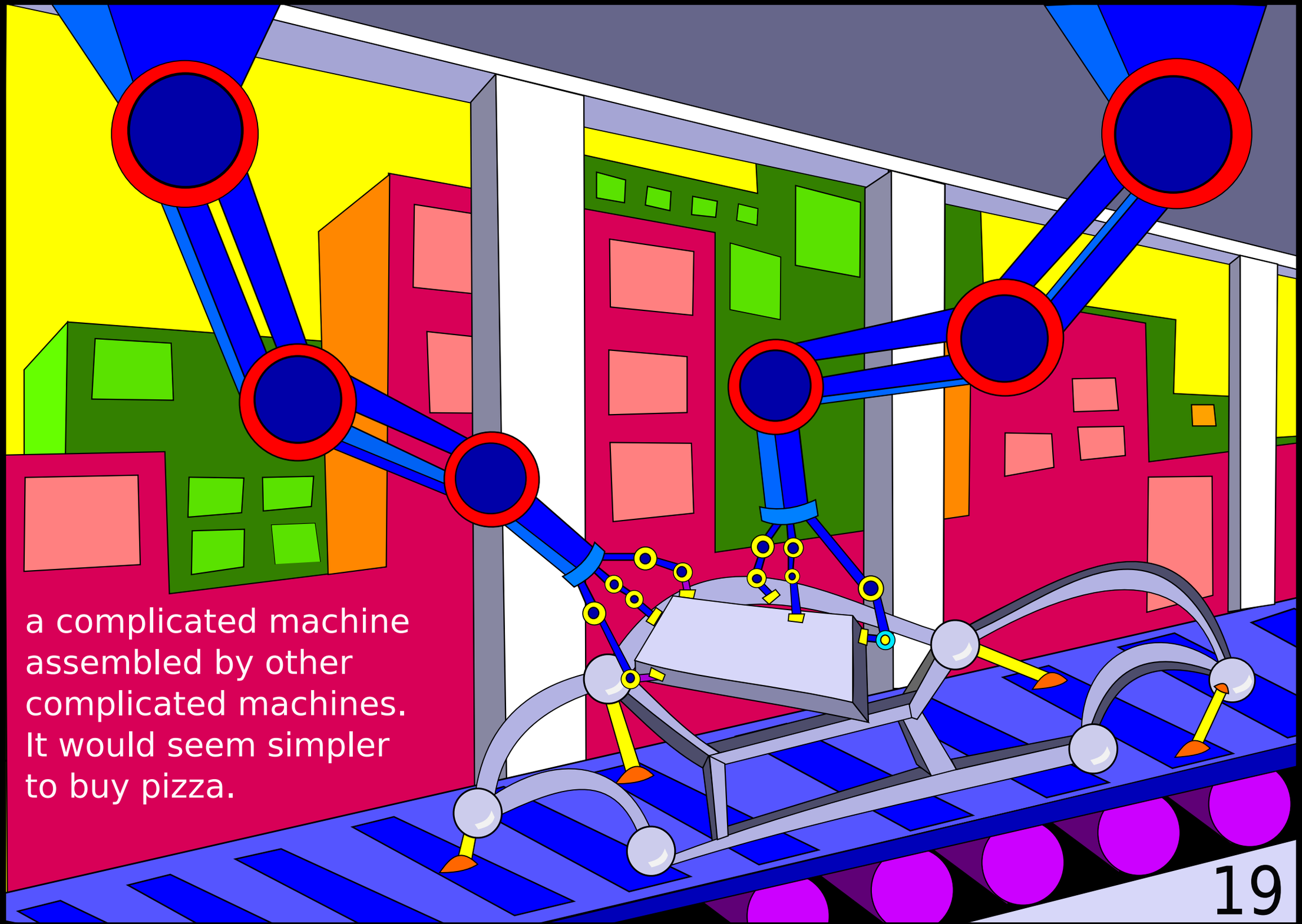
Occam's razor, Ersatti writes, selects the simplest alternative. But what, he asks, does "simple" mean? He invites us to consider the question, "What is the simplest way to get something to eat?" Picking a cherry is a simple option...




...but only if you are
near a cherry tree.



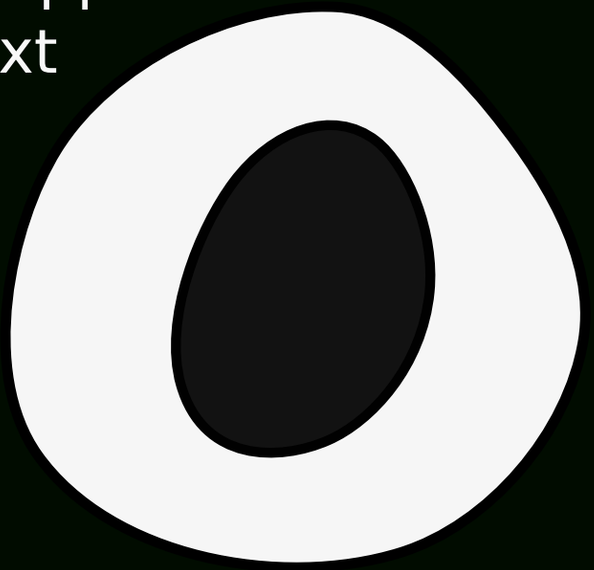
If you lived
in the city
and wanted
to pick cherries
you would need
to get there in a
motorized vehicle...

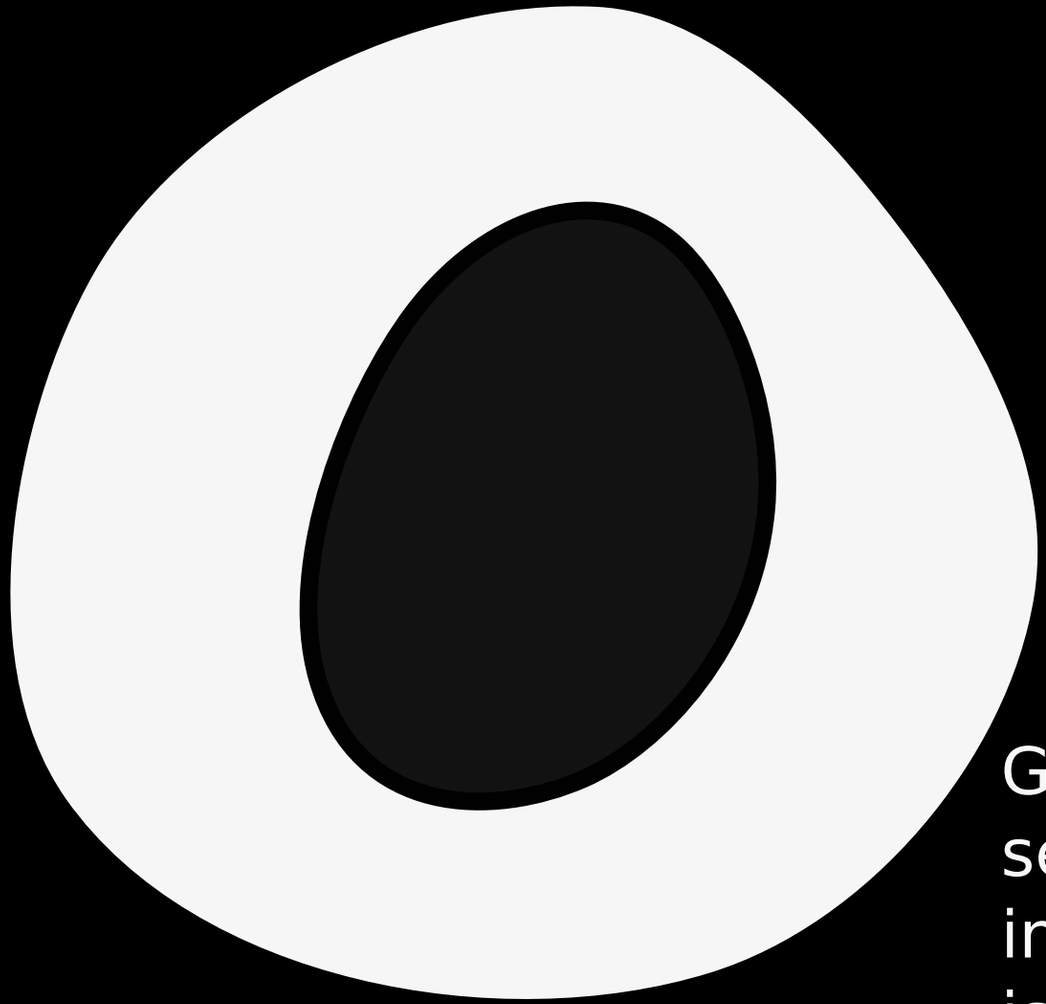

a complicated machine
assembled by other
complicated machines.
It would seem simpler
to buy pizza.

But pizza is assembled in a complicated way from its ingredients and then distributed in restaurants, the products of elaborate economic systems.


Context
is everything.

The universe revolves around the Earth, worms come from sticks, time is absolute - Ersatti points out how all these human mistakes came from an appeal to "simplicity". Without context the word is undefined, and usually in cases where Occam's razor might be applied the context is part of what must be decided upon.

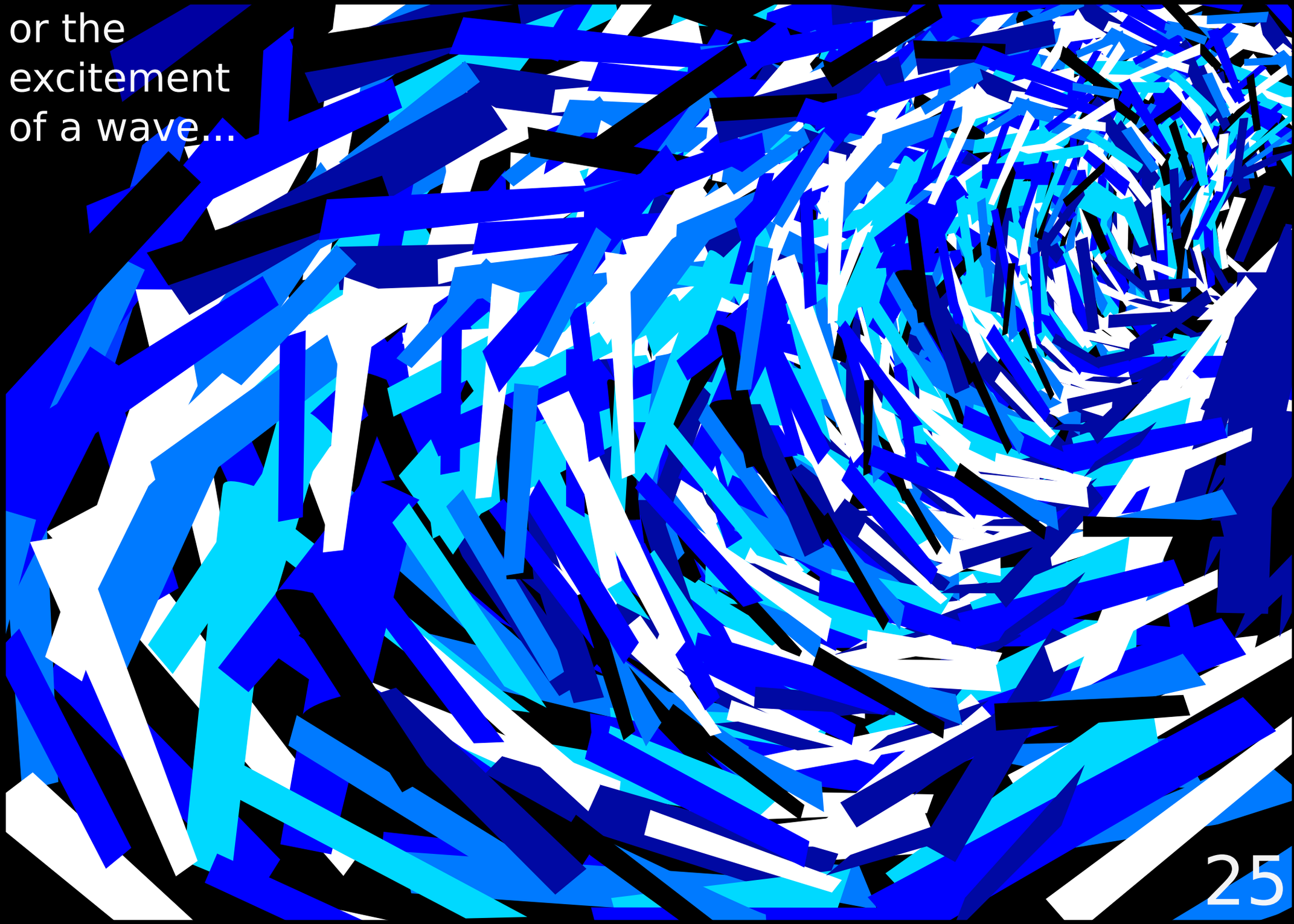


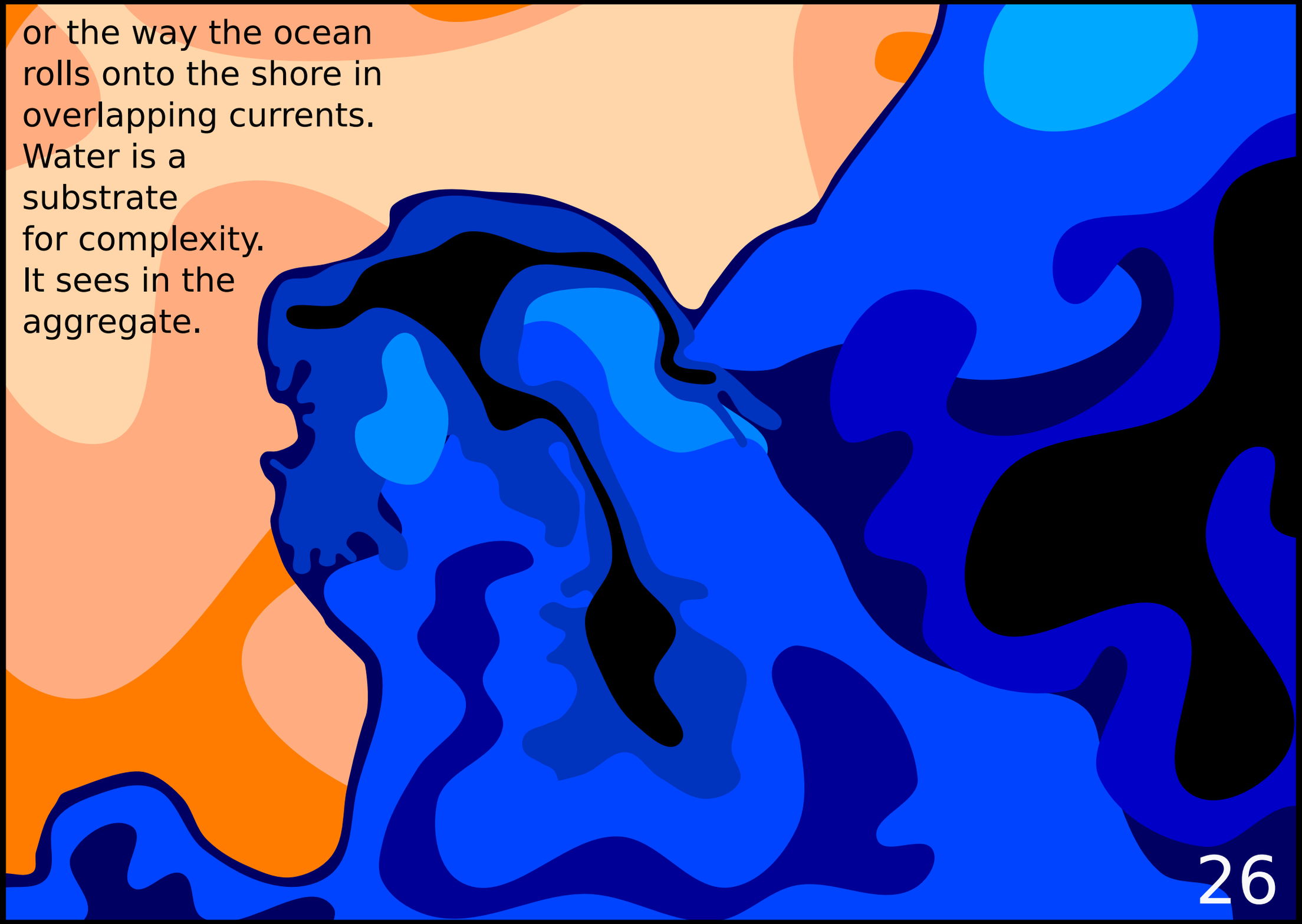


Given that the main selection criterion in Occam's razor is without definition, Ersatti argues, the principle itself is meaningless.


Water can see!
Ersatti says: Ponder
its intricate motion,
the joyous flashing
of light in a whirlpool...

or the
excitement
of a wave...




or the way the ocean
rolls onto the shore in
overlapping currents.
Water is a
substrate
for complexity.
It sees in the
aggregate.


Birds
fly
over
a desert
oasis and
look down
at the
water...


The water
looks up and
sees the birds...


29
one way...


30
or another.


Rain plummets down onto a mountain pasture. Each raindrop sees a bit of color. The drops touch and merge.
31


They experience the augmentation of vision that comes when water joins water, the return of memory.
32


33
Ariadne told him once:
"I get my thoughts
from rain."

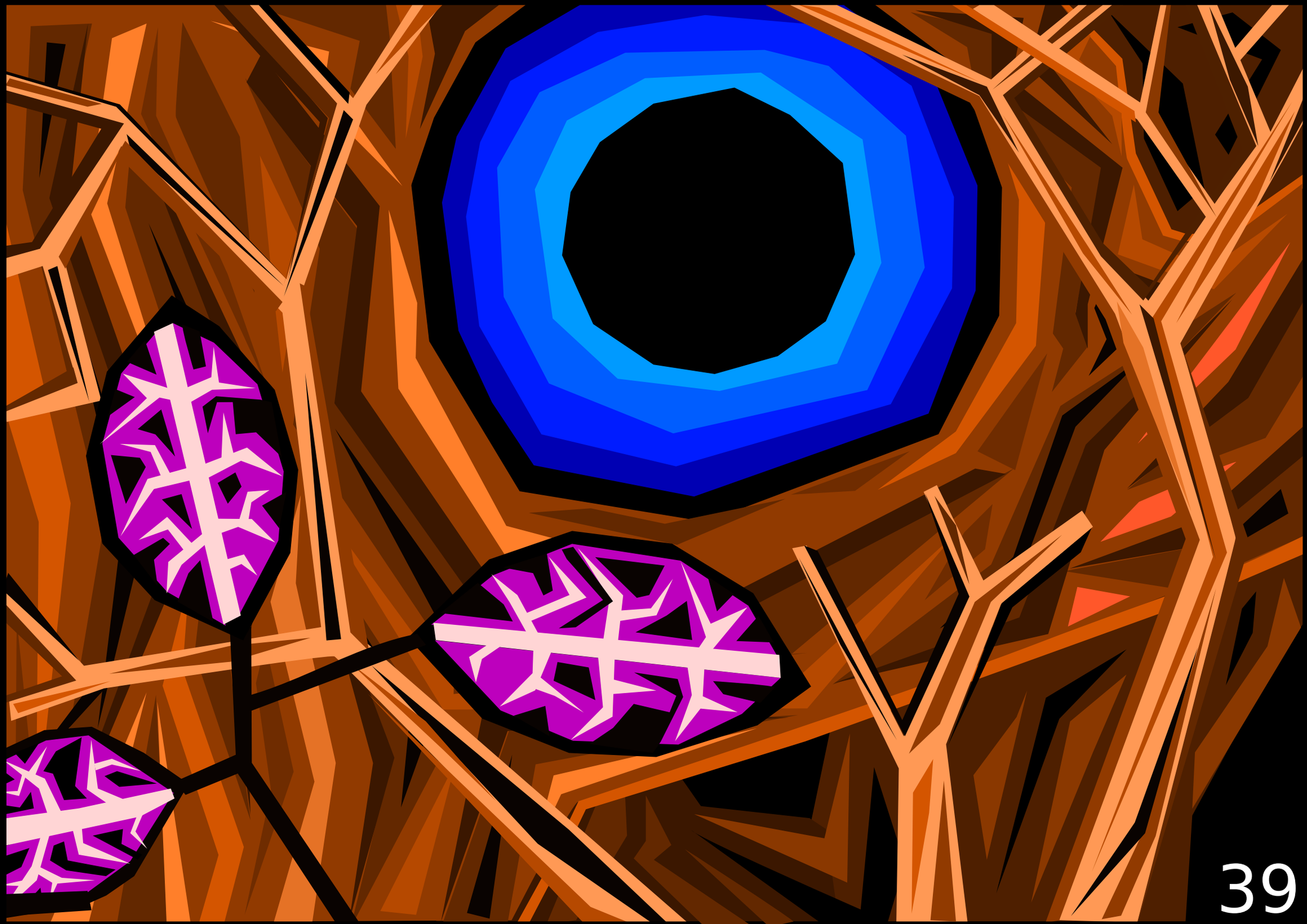
It was when she
was visiting her brother
at the university. She had
flown across the ocean to see him.

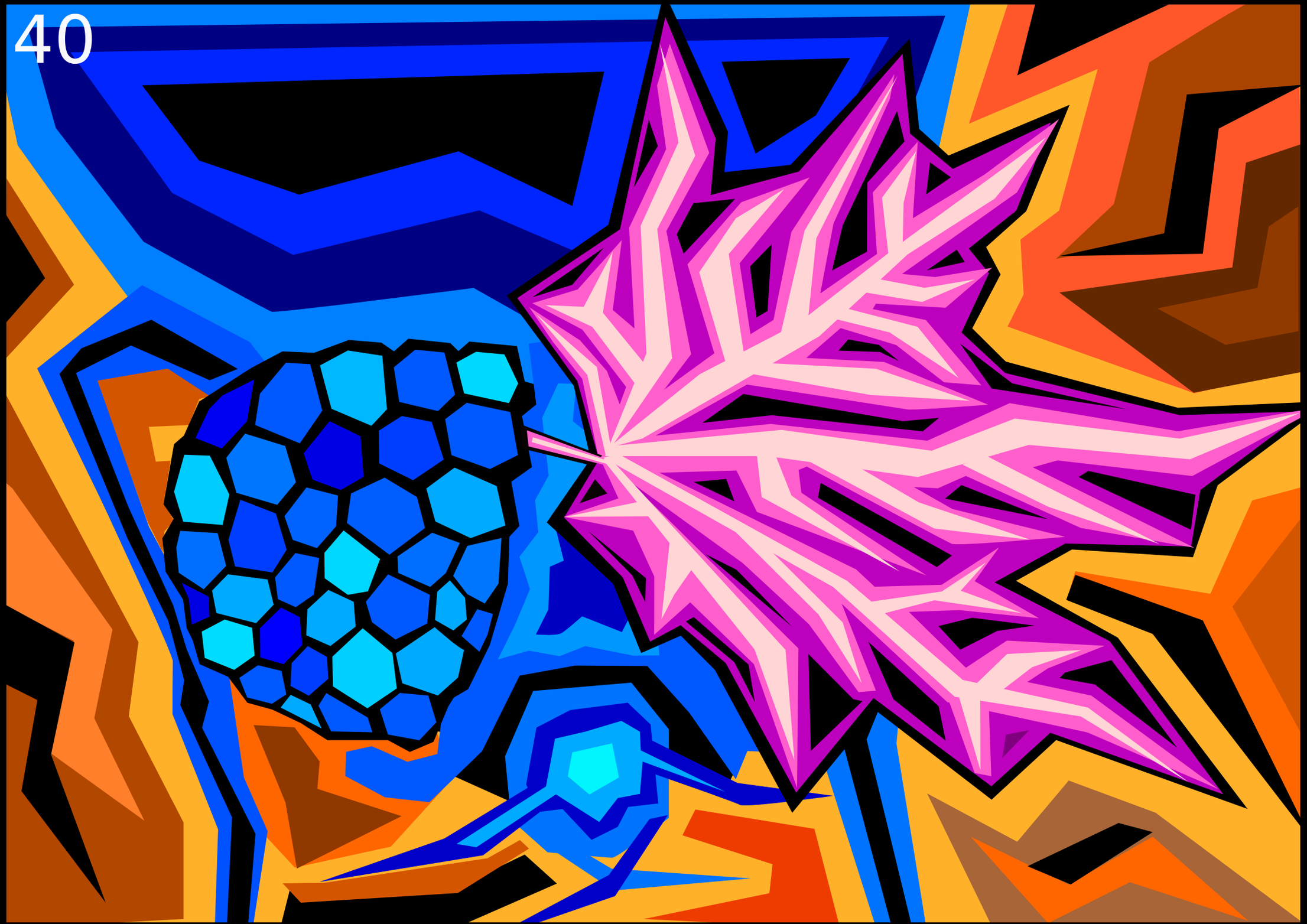

35
Water stagnates in swamps,
watching turtles crawl over logs.


36
It flows in rivers, scanning trees along the riverbanks. Its vision sweeps skyward, amplified into superhuman acuity.

It dives off cliffs,
plunges into lakes
and oceans,...

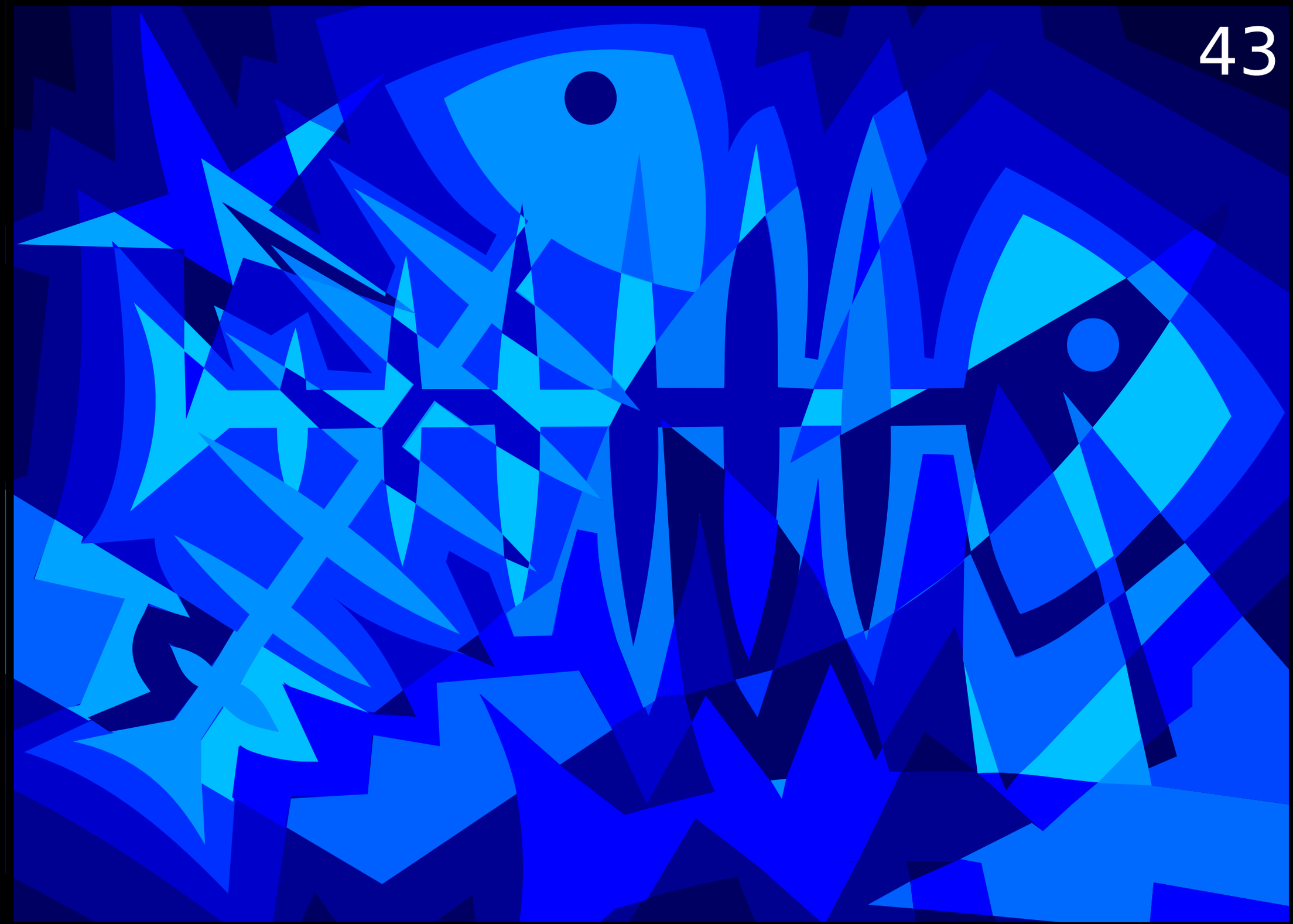

experiences the
shock of broadened
visual power that
comes when
water clasps
water on a
grand scale.

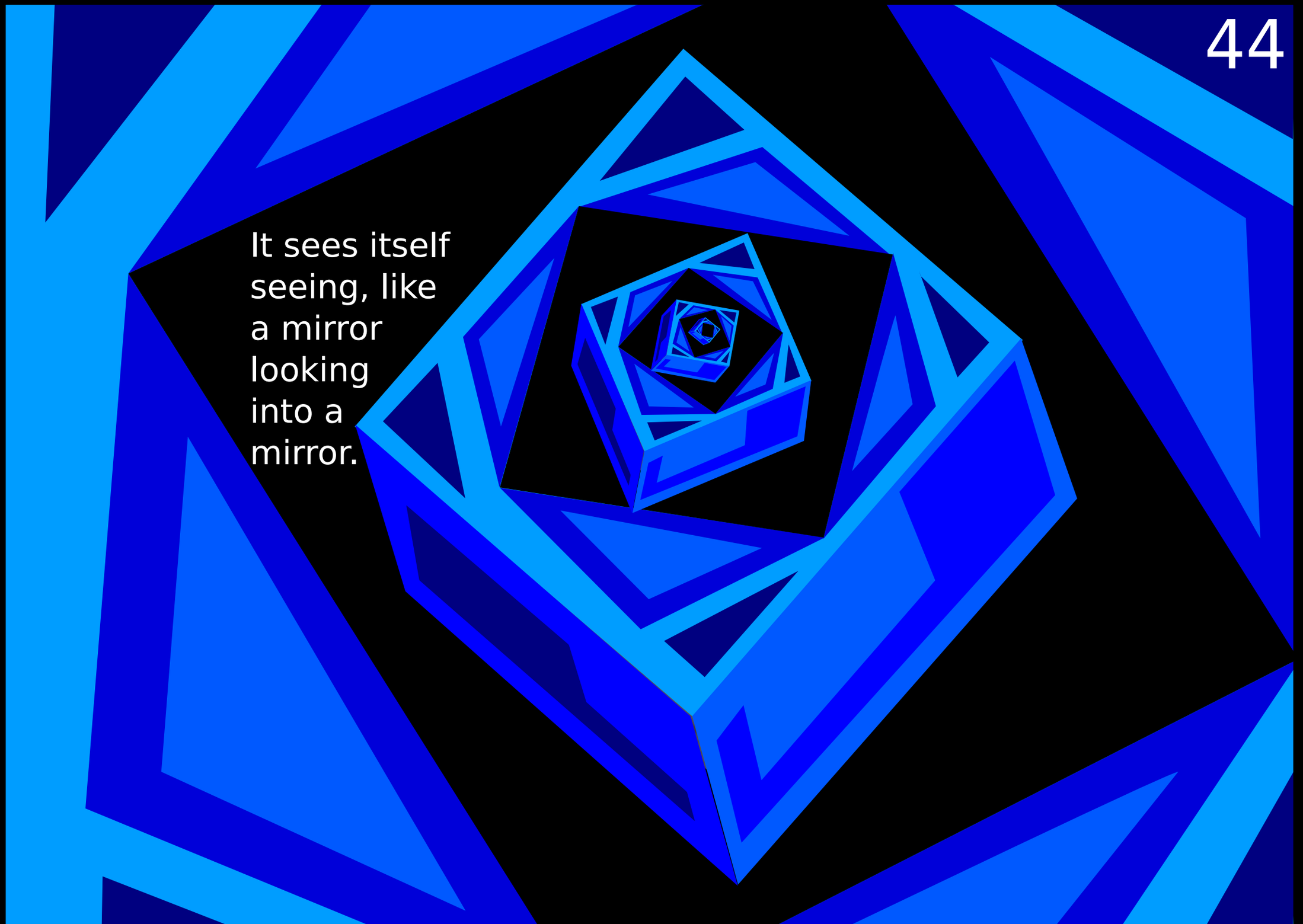



40


It rests in the
great oceans
at the zenith of
its perception.

It sees
through
things.


TEXT
HERE


It sees itself
seeing, like
a mirror
looking
into a
mirror.

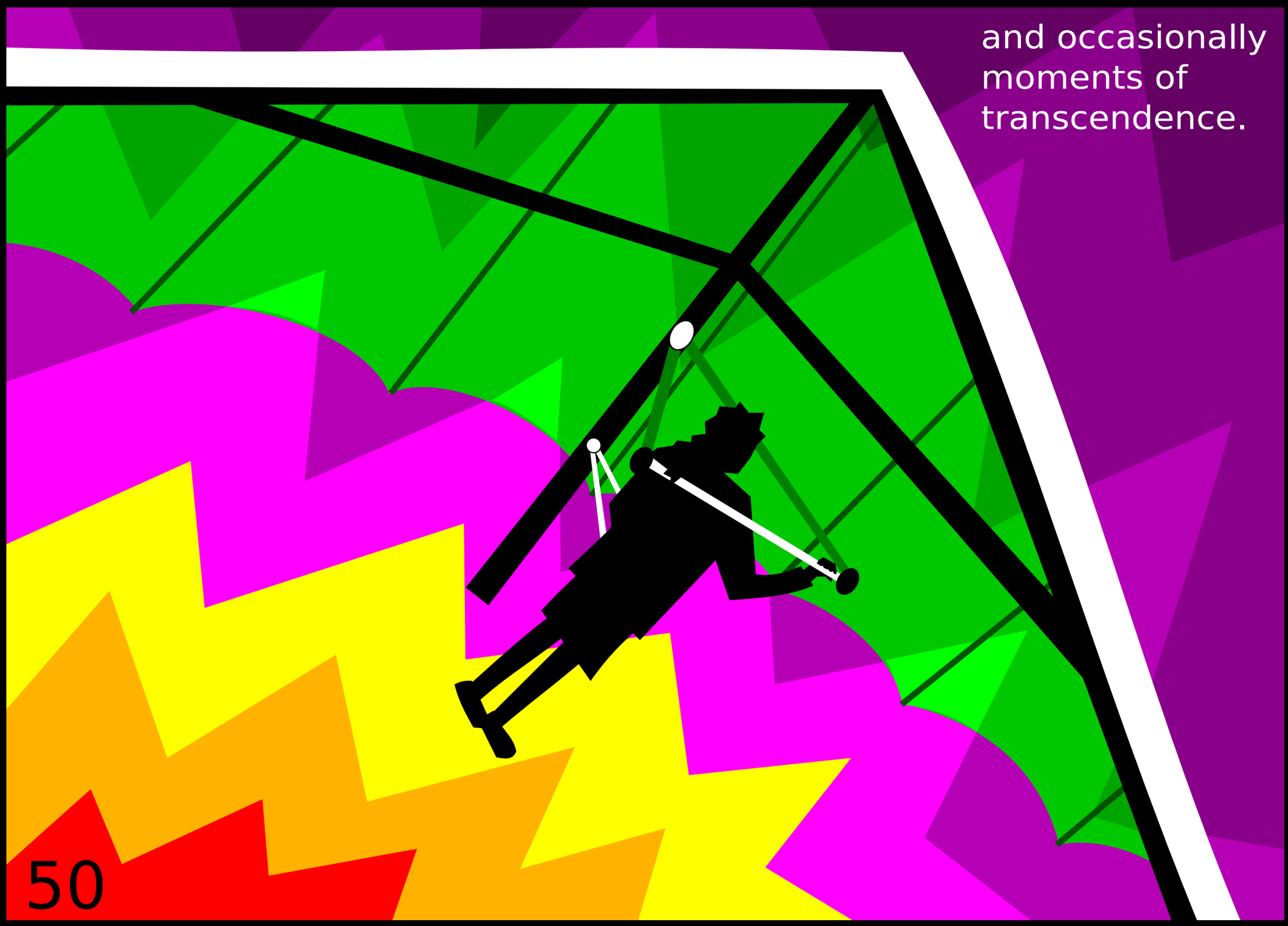
For all the noise made over Ersatti's thesis, perhaps the most salient criticism comes from Ersatti himself. Later in life he remarked that he spent hundreds of pages describing the perceptual powers of water, but he never explained their purpose or value.

He never claimed, for instance, that water can get excited about what it sees, or even interested in it. He never claimed that water could share its incredible experience with anything besides water. "In the end," he said...


47
"my thesis was about loneliness."


As for Ersatti himself, he had adventures typical of great philosophers.


Amidst the cycle
of years he sometimes
experienced great joy...


and occasionally
moments of
transcendence.
50


The End.