



The Garden

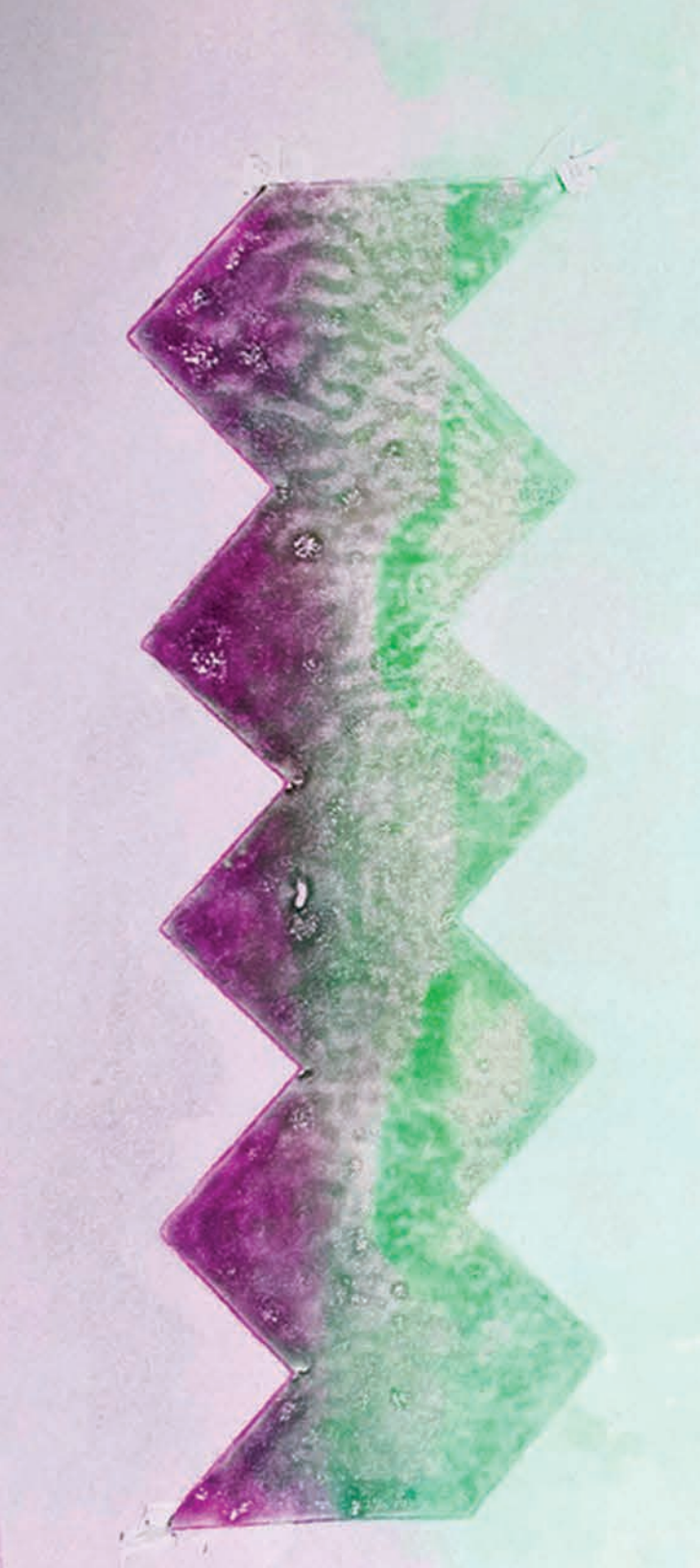
Anne
Sherwood
Pundyk

For Julia

The Garden

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Julia

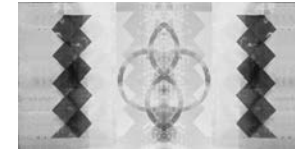
I stare down at a painting by my feet. It doesn't work. As I pour a new puddle of hot pink liquid over its surface the phone rings. "Julia has had a stroke," our mother exclaims. Driving to the hospital I trace the long thread connecting Julia and me. It begins with her, born first.

"She is brain-dead," the emergency room doctor tells me that night. I can see she is not breathing on her own and a tangle of tubes enters her body. Her vital signs glow in blue on a monitor above her head. "You must be sisters," he adds before walking down the hall.

Julia is in a coma and while I hold her hand I tell her about where she is and what has happened. I will soon learn I cannot protect her, something she has always done for me. Old family betrayals and newer secrets are about to be revealed. They are all contained, it seems, in a nightmare I had over thirty years ago. I am writing this as a way to get Julia back. Despite surviving her brain injury—which was not expected that first night—I have lost her.

I didn't see that painting again for weeks. Not until well into October after my sister's surgery to repair the ruptured vessel in her brain and long, long after the fluorescent pool of paint had dried.





Bushwick

Julia has taken the train to Manhattan from her home on the Jersey Shore. Earlier in the summer she left me a voicemail, “Let’s read, ‘The Revolution Will Be Painted,’ or perhaps sing it like a song.” We rehearse our performance over the hum of the air-conditioning side-by-side on my couch. The parquet bulges up in a bathtub-sized blister at our feet; the week before, a water pipe had broken and flooded the floorboards.

We take the subway to our evening event in Bushwick. Entering the venue through an overgrown backyard, we linger near a large fire pit blazing high despite the thick August heat. Inside, the room gradually fills with women and a few men in their 20s and 30s. At the front of the space, Julia and I chant our manifesto together.

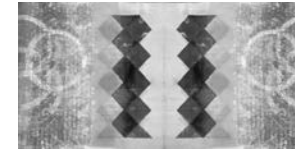




Midwesterners

The Mississippi River from above looks exactly like Mark Twain described it: wide, flat, meandering, and muddy. If you like patterns, you could say the behaviors of various family members are patterned on those of their parents and siblings. We are all part of a wide, flat, meandering, muddy, predestined river.





Little Turtles

She could be queen, for the time being, safe within her castle. The full heat of the mid-June morning was an hour away. Upstairs, seated at her desk, a calming breeze passed through the open windows, cooling her closed eyelids. She heard her husband's car rumble down the long, gravel drive on his way to work. Outside her room, the housekeeper tended to their girls: a new baby and a toddler.

Centered in front of her lay a large, thick, rectangular sheet of white paper. Looking down, she took careful inventory of her pens, nibs, freshly sharpened pencils, pointed sable brushes, and clean erasers. After nudging the small bottles of black ink into a row, she aligned the soft metal tubes of white gouache with the upper right hand corner of her table. Feeling the pull of the paper, she brushed her fingertips across its skin-like surface.

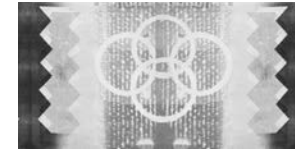
Before starting her illustrations she outlined three perfect squares in a straight line. Above the boxes she printed, "Peek, the Brownie." Below, them, in smaller block letters, she paired these captions with each of the openings:

"Peek saw a mother turtle lay her eggs. The turtle went away."

"Peek and the sun looked after the eggs. The mother turtle did not come back."

"One day the eggs hatched. Little turtles came out of the eggs. The turtles ran away."

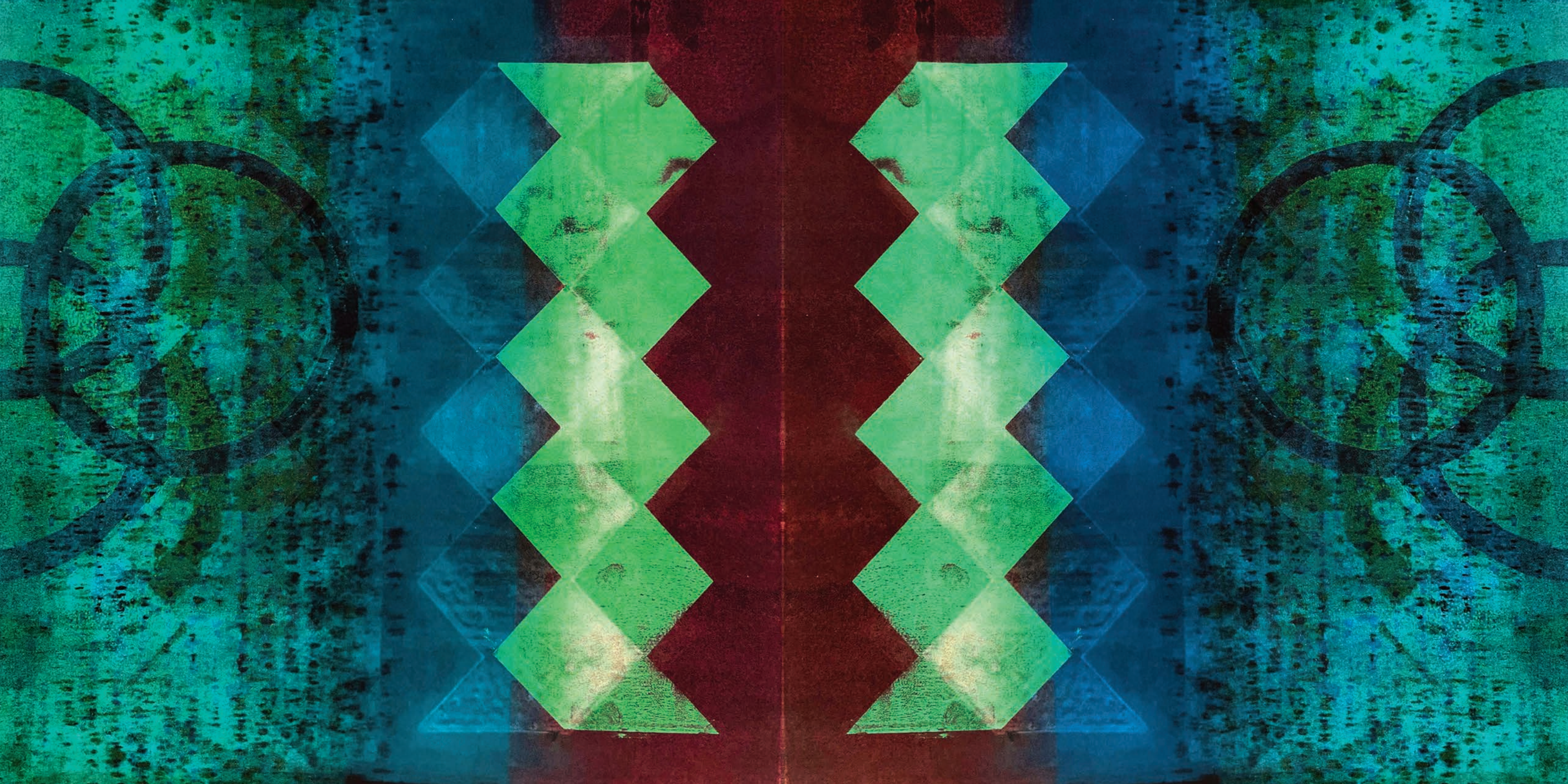


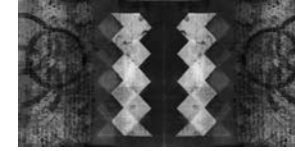


Adoption 1928

On the same mid-June morning, another young mother — or soon-to-be mother — considered her banishment. Nothing here was hers. The cotton dress she wore belonged to someone else. Sitting alone on a small iron-framed bed, miles from home, she tried to focus on reading her borrowed magazine.

The scraping sounds carried across the broad lawn and through the open window muting the peeps and trills of the songbirds. The crew raked the new gravel in rhythmic pulls, braking intermittently to bark and brag before resuming their work. She wanted many things to happen. The crushed rock spreading up the nearby train tracks was some kind of forward movement, just not hers.



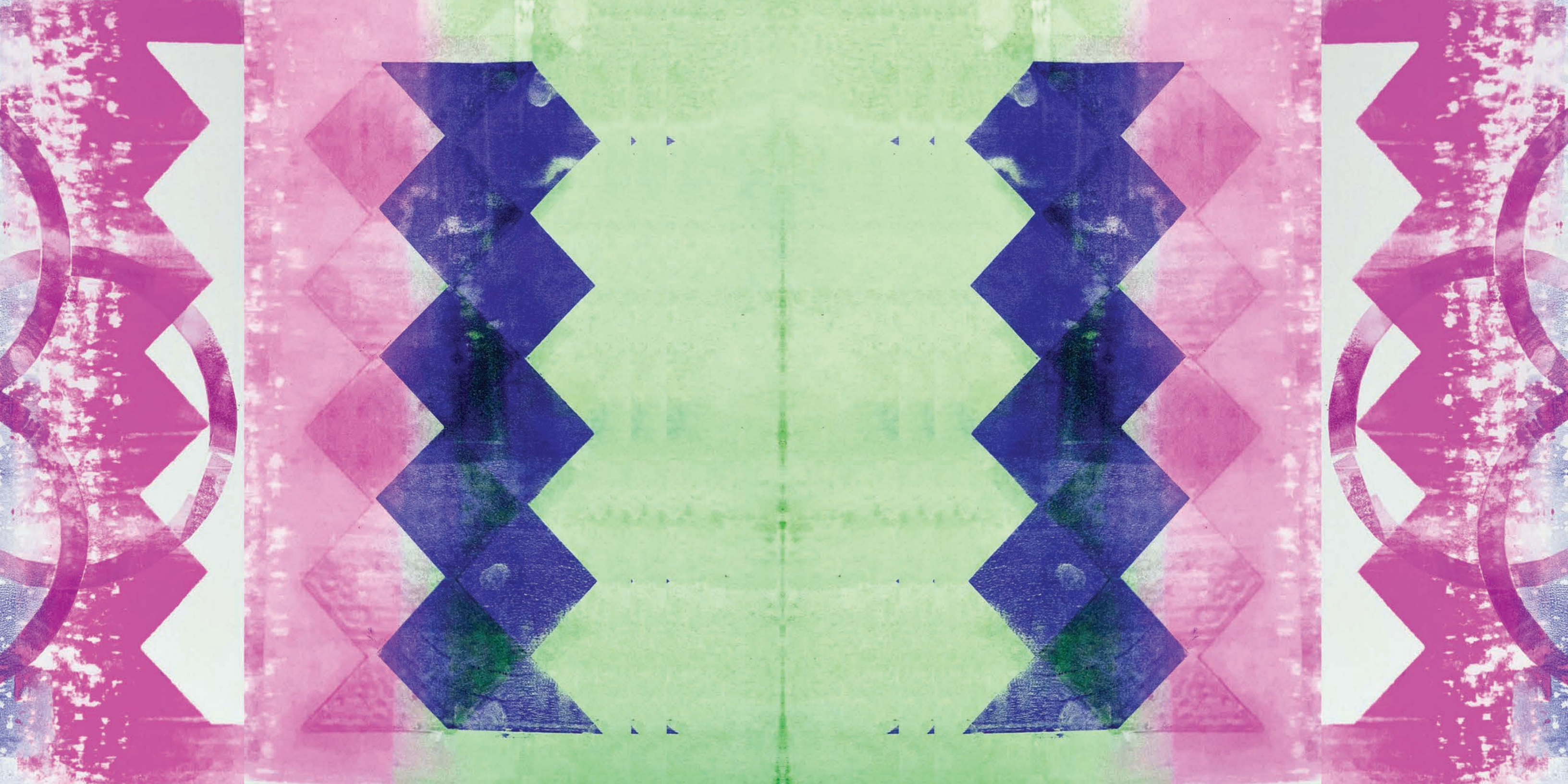


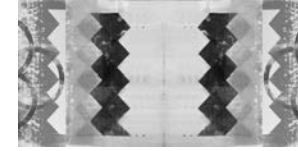
House in the Woods

The little girl and her mother lived in a small white house in the middle of the forest. The mother tended their garden everyday and the little girl made things. An earthquake struck. People from the nearby town urged the child and her mother to leave their house. The mother became fearful and eventually they decided to leave.

They wandered from forest to forest and town to town trying to find another place to live. No place was as good as their first little white house. The mother still gardened and the girl still worked on her creations, but their new homes were successively smaller, darker, and more cramped than before.

The girl tried to talk with her mother about how they were living, but her mother didn't know how so eventually they stopped trying.





Queen Anne's Lace

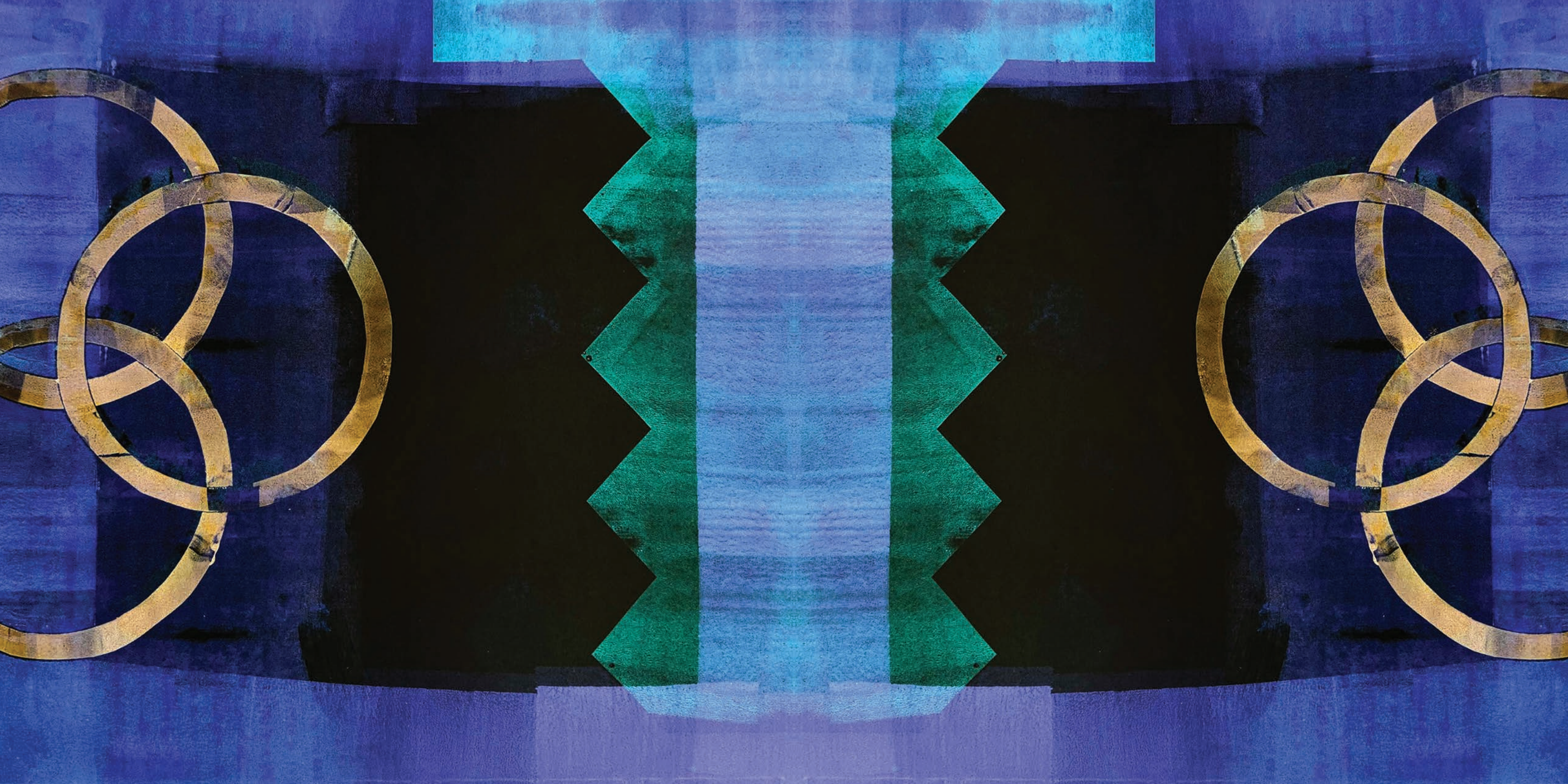
The tall solitary woman slowly walked down the sloping cut lawn and up the other side. The late morning sun warmed the air, dispersing the fog. She was called to make a study of the grasses and flowers in the meadow just beyond the lawn. They represented innocence and nature untouched. It was her meadow, but she had never entered it before. It was her wild untouchable land. Fearful that her old foe — crabgrass — was taking over, she was on the alert.

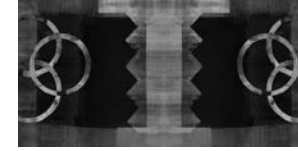
As she perused the ground, the variety of leaves and blades began to multiply. Blue bachelor buttons, small soft pussy willows, tall red-brown grasses, Queen Anne's Lace, and a bramble rose bush all appeared. Robins and red-winged blackbirds dove and dipped overhead, landing on the branches of the low Russian olive volunteers. The detail drew her further in like a story unfolding, offering more the longer she gazed.

It was hers.

Recalling this exploration of the meadow later that evening, she thought of her youngest sister with whom she had no real relationship. She regretted that her sister's illness during adolescence created a divide that could not be crossed.

She felt superior to most people — her sisters, her mother, and other artists both men and women. There were only a few artists and writers who really interested her. Was this helpful? Where are generosity and patience, both with others and with herself? When did she learn this?





O Nameless Moon

“Ooooooh! What fun!” My mother trills through the small speaker of my cell phone. The sound enters my heart. I am her second daughter, now with two grown children. I hear her approval. My arms and legs are small and smooth, electric with energy. My chest is flat. We are united. She is happy.

“I am so glad you are having a fun visit with Phoebe and Evan.” The flow swells, then quickly cools. The bones in my hand begin to show as a cloud darkens the room. My skeletal form bends like a pile of sticks casting a long shadow on the rocky surface of a nameless Saturn moon. She hurries off the phone. She wants only this short contact.

The vibrations of her voice move out on a trajectory into space with no intended destination.

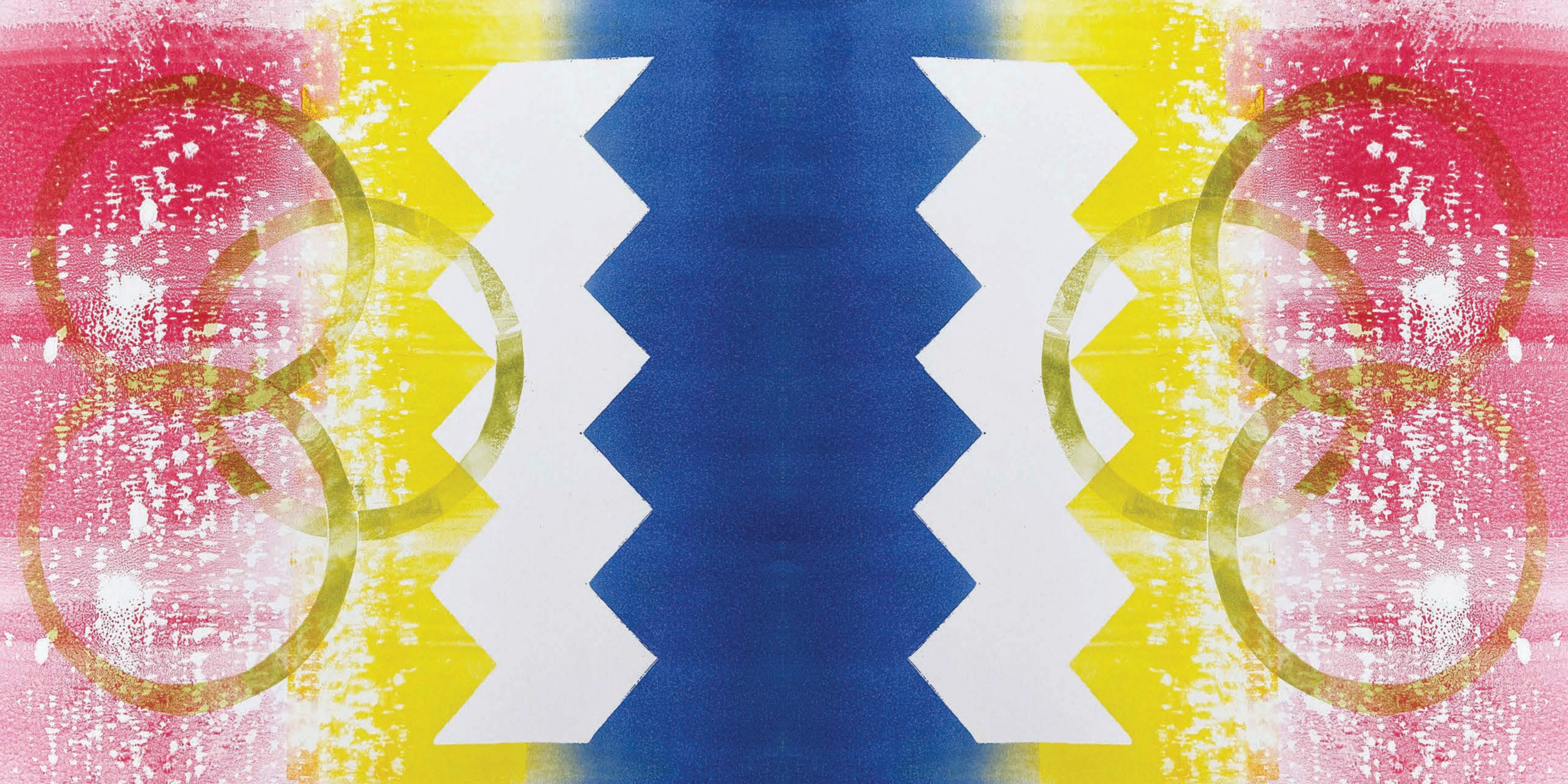


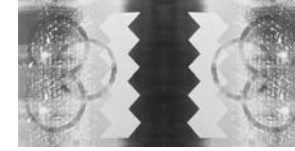


Zombie Daughter

Before picking up her pen to write, Anne reflected on her perplexed reaction, decades ago to an Irish play (by John Millington Synge?) An aged mother and her grown daughter shared a small house by the sea. Anne recalled they were bound by blood and dissatisfaction with their unfulfilled lives. At the center of this immobilizing bond was a knotted net of blame and regret each cast over the other. “Why did they stay together?” Her younger zombie self had pondered. “How absurd that they remained in their self-made bondage.”

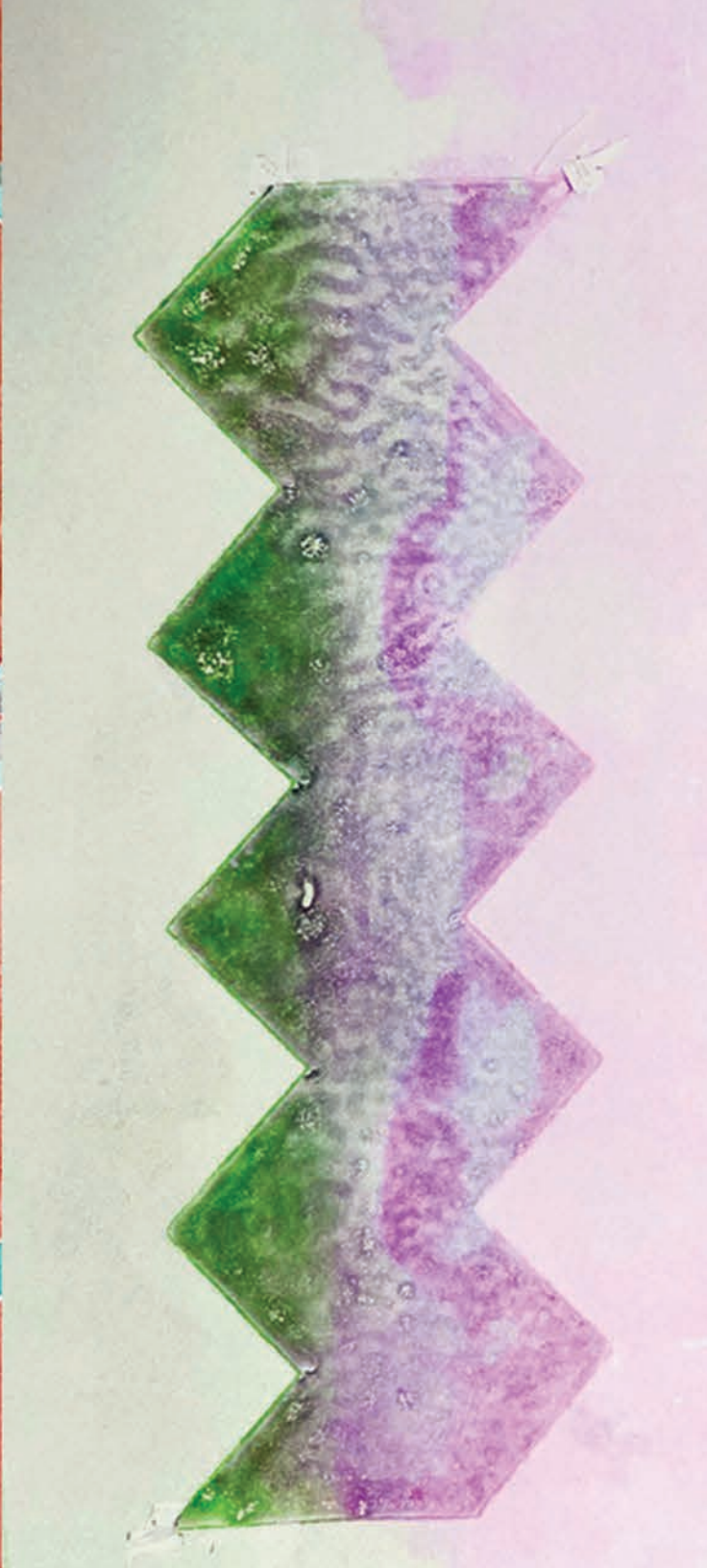
Reassessing her memory and finding new empathy for the characters, a scene in the movie *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* came to mind. One young, insecure patient in the psychiatric hospital named Billy Bibbit has a forbidden date inside the ward with Candy, a local prostitute. Nurse Ratched discovers him with the girl. The nurse threatens to tell Billy's mother about their rendezvous. His mother, she portends, will certainly be very disappointed in him. Billy retreats and is later found dead, having slashed his own throat.





Account

It took her 3 days to roll the 8 large stained and stitched paintings onto 2 tubes. 9 feet long by 10 inches in diameter. The first day she separated them into 2 groups of 4 placing each one face down. She put the 2 thickest, most textured paintings on the bottom of each stack. She examined every painting front and back reminiscing about her decisions how and when to apply the layers of colors, how and where to stitch and hem the canvas panels and where to place the crisp, colored pencil lines. The second day she started to roll them around the tubes. (It's slightly maddening because you want them to roll smoothly.) On the third day, she finished carefully rolling the paintings so they were tight and firm. She wrapped them on the outside with clear plastic sheets secured with tape.





The Garden

Her 7th grade art teacher asked each of her students to draw a picture of a place where they were happiest. So, she outlined the cross-section of a tree house way up high above the ground. Inside the elevated structure she sketched her own body curled up on an upholstered couch tucked in under a blanket. “I’ll stay here forever,” she thought. She drew a piece of paper nailed to the outside of the door at the top of the ladder leading down to the grass. “STAY AWAY,” it said in big, block, handwritten letters.

She had one caveat. She would come down if the tree holding the house grew in the middle of a conversation garden. What is a conversation garden? She thought of it like this: the conversation garden would be several acres of mostly untouched meadow, designed with cultivated islands for people to gather at different points on a winding path through the wild grasses and flowers.

For those strolling or seated in the garden, ideas in the form of seeds would pop into their brains and then slide to their tongues. Everyone in the garden would watch the idea-seeds take flight from the tips of their tongues out into the air. The newborn ideas would hover there, slowly fluttering in space. People could reflect on the ideas and, if they wanted to, they could comment when they were ready. Others would listen without interrupting. The idea-seeds would land and take root, growing into beautiful intertwining stems and leaves, bearing flowers and fruits of strange and wonderful shapes and colors.

The Garden

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—Anne Sherwood Pundyk

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