



Xavier No. VII:
Self-Reflection

The last time I saw Xavier
was on the nineteenth of October.
Said he had to go off to take care
of something.
I felt very alone,
even as I acknowledged how much
I leaned on him.
In recent days now,
in the following year,
I've seen him around
the brilliant landscapes again.
Here and there, in sight,
so welcome to find,
despite knowing
I shouldn't engage,
and I tried
to keep my distance.
I thought I succeeded.
I did succeed,
if I consider
not imagining us
too close
is success.

And yet, here he is beside me now,
his sword in his grip,
his leather gloves squeaking as he holds the blade
toward me,
an offering.
The flat is angled my way,
the point off to the side.

I peer toward my reflection
in the silver,
even as my eyes are drifting
up to his face.
"Are you ready to let go?"
he asked so many months back,
before walking away,
and yet here he is again.
Even though I know he isn't here
because he hasn't let go of me.

I ask what he's doing here.
Why he's showing me his sword.
He asks me to look inside it,
and I behold again my reflection.
I tell him that I don't understand.
One finger comes to drag across my face
in the blade,
then outward, toward the landscapes behind me
in the blade.

"You're part of this,"
he tells me. "So why
do you want to leave?"

"I don't," I say, bristling,
surprised, a little insulted.

He asks why I went back
to the scar.
I hadn't realized I did.

"You're not going to find
answers you like there,"
he says. "I don't mean,"
A shrug.
"answers that are
uncomfortable. I mean
answers that
aren't holy."

The scar's lip is so near my boot.
I move my leg from it
the moment Xavier takes my shoulders
to lead me forward.
My steps drag in the
dirt and grass and meadow flowers and weeds.
Clumsy and uncoordinated, but he doesn't care.
Says that's part of being human.
There's a while of silence as we walk,
almost trudge,
up a hill. We reach the top,
and he returns to studying his sword,
angling it in the sunlight
as the duel suns of Äriaxxa
gleam white and black in its length.
Finally, his attentions so fixed
on the glaring spots of brightness,
he asks why.
I'm almost shy, almost shameful,
as I say I don't know why.



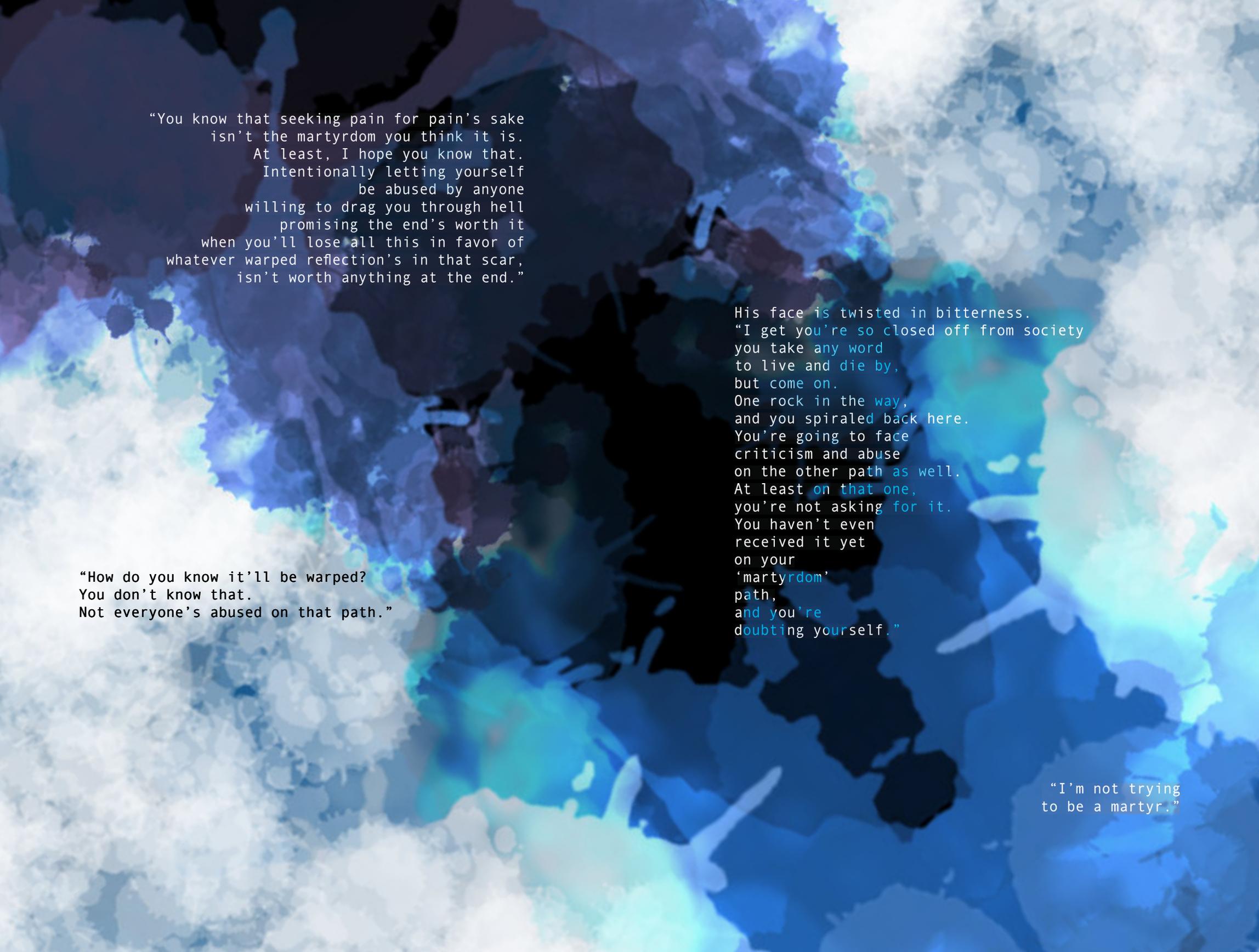
“It’s just,” I say,
“I don’t know how to share you.
I know the destination,
but I don’t know the path,
and everyone speaks so much of
tough paths and pain
as the only route that’s good,
but why does this path seem so vile?”
He tilts the sword to the ground, then his head,
as he listens.
“But that path promises I’ll finally be found.”

“I know my hidden motives for both paths,
and neither are well.
I feel like I’m going to go wrong
no matter what I pick,
so I ought to pick the one that hurts more
because
that’s what saints do,
and I’ll be able to share you easier at the end.”

“Sharing me easier at the end...
means the path is deceptive,”
he says after the quiet of thought.
Contemplative hesitation.
“It’s harder to share me
when the path doesn’t promise that, yes?”

“But that path is easy. It uses all my skills.
But no one tells me if I’m good enough
in that path. I’ve chosen that for myself.”

“I didn’t know you were lost,”
he bitinglly jokes.



“You know that seeking pain for pain’s sake
isn’t the martyrdom you think it is.
At least, I hope you know that.
Intentionally letting yourself
be abused by anyone
willing to drag you through hell
promising the end’s worth it
when you’ll lose all this in favor of
whatever warped reflection’s in that scar,
isn’t worth anything at the end.”

His face is twisted in bitterness.
“I get you’re so closed off from society
you take any word
to live and die by,
but come on.
One rock in the way,
and you spiraled back here.
You’re going to face
criticism and abuse
on the other path as well.
At least on that one,
you’re not asking for it.
You haven’t even
received it yet
on your
‘martyrdom’
path,
and you’re
doubting yourself.”

“How do you know it’ll be warped?
You don’t know that.
Not everyone’s abused on that path.”

“I’m not trying
to be a martyr.”



“Yes, you are.
Your saints didn’t seek out abuse.
They found it by being themselves.
Doing God’s will.
What are you doing here?”
Again, he lifts his sword and angles it
as a mirror toward my face.
“You’re being you. This world is you.
You’re not going to let them beat you down.
You do that, your world is silver again.”

I push the blade down
and look away from him.
“I just want to feel like I’m good too.
I’ve only ever been overlooked
and not taken seriously.
I’m good too. I have talent.
I’ve worked so hard to improve myself.
What I do is real art and stories too.”

“Praise comes with hate.
They often come from the same tongue.”

“Is that some proverb or something?”

“It’s fact.”
He slams the sword into its scabbard.
“Look, you want my opinion?
Don’t bother with them.
Don’t let them have any say in you.”
His pointer lifts my chin.
“This world, myself, we’re all you.
We deserve freedom!
We’ve been trapped in that damn silver
for so long,
and now we’re free,
and you want to go back?”

“I don’t want to go back!”
I move to turn, but his hand grabs
my face. It’s gentle,
but firm. Serious.
“I don’t.
I really want to take the other path.
But I don’t feel like
I’m actually at the end,
when I’m at the end.
It feels like I decided to stop somewhere
and call it done.”

“Does the other path have finality?”

“The same damn shit.”

His periwinkle eyes shine with bafflement.
“Haven’t you always been like that?
I don’t mean in a bad way.
It’s just, you do that.
You see something pivot bad,
so you pivot back to tie it off
differently than you planned.
You have all these goals
that never turn out the way you imagined.
Their ends still had ends.
They were just different than the signs said.”

“But this path doesn’t have signs.
It has,” I quote the air. “optional stops.”
Book launch parties, social media celebrations,
themed cupcakes and opening a box of author copies
you’ll never distribute and signings with real
books or tip-in sheets stacked to flaunt for the
camera and desperate posts begging people
to look at you
as you run to another “optional stop”
with another manuscript to publish.
“There’s never finality to it.”



Xavier actually laughs.
“Then take their damn shit and flush it.
But,” And he grows very serious.
“you can’t drudge it up again if you do that.”
I press my mouth shut and glance away.
“Reflections is your business.
Your site shouts that you’re you.
The entire point of Reflections
is a reflection of you.
I’m not saying that path’s not good
because they’ll challenge you.
You need someone to challenge you.
I’m saying the other path’s not good
because they’ll change you.
You can find a challenge anywhere.
You could take the other path
and get hate.
God’s already equipped you
for that one though.
You’ll do fine.
And you might be surprised
when you reach your goal.”
His palm slung over the crossguard,
he puts his other hand to his hip
and leans back
to look at the suns.
“Isn’t that what’s important
to you anyway?
The goal?
It’s not the end of the path.
It’s not the finality of it.
The path only ends when you’re dead.
So how much can you change the fantasy genre
before then?”



He finally smiles.
He takes my shoulder
and leads me toward that other path,
the one I thought I shouldn't do,
and he hooks his fingers on a tree branch
as he peers
through the dappled woods
and comments what a beautiful season it is.
He says how much he'll always be here.
He won't go anywhere.
Never has gone anywhere.
But when I turn and eye him with worry,
he scoffs it away.
He says he knows this is what I want
and that there are challenges and difficulties
that I won't need to walk across on purpose
to trip over.
He says, with a tired chuckle,
that I don't need that.
And besides, he adds,
why would I want the industry professionals
of the other path
telling me how good my work is
when all that says is how much money
they're sure they'll make
off your fight?



Before I start along the path through the trees,
he jogs after, takes my arm, turns me around,
and presses his sword's grip into my right hand.

"Every time you doubt yourself,
look at your reflection,
and you'll know where you must be."

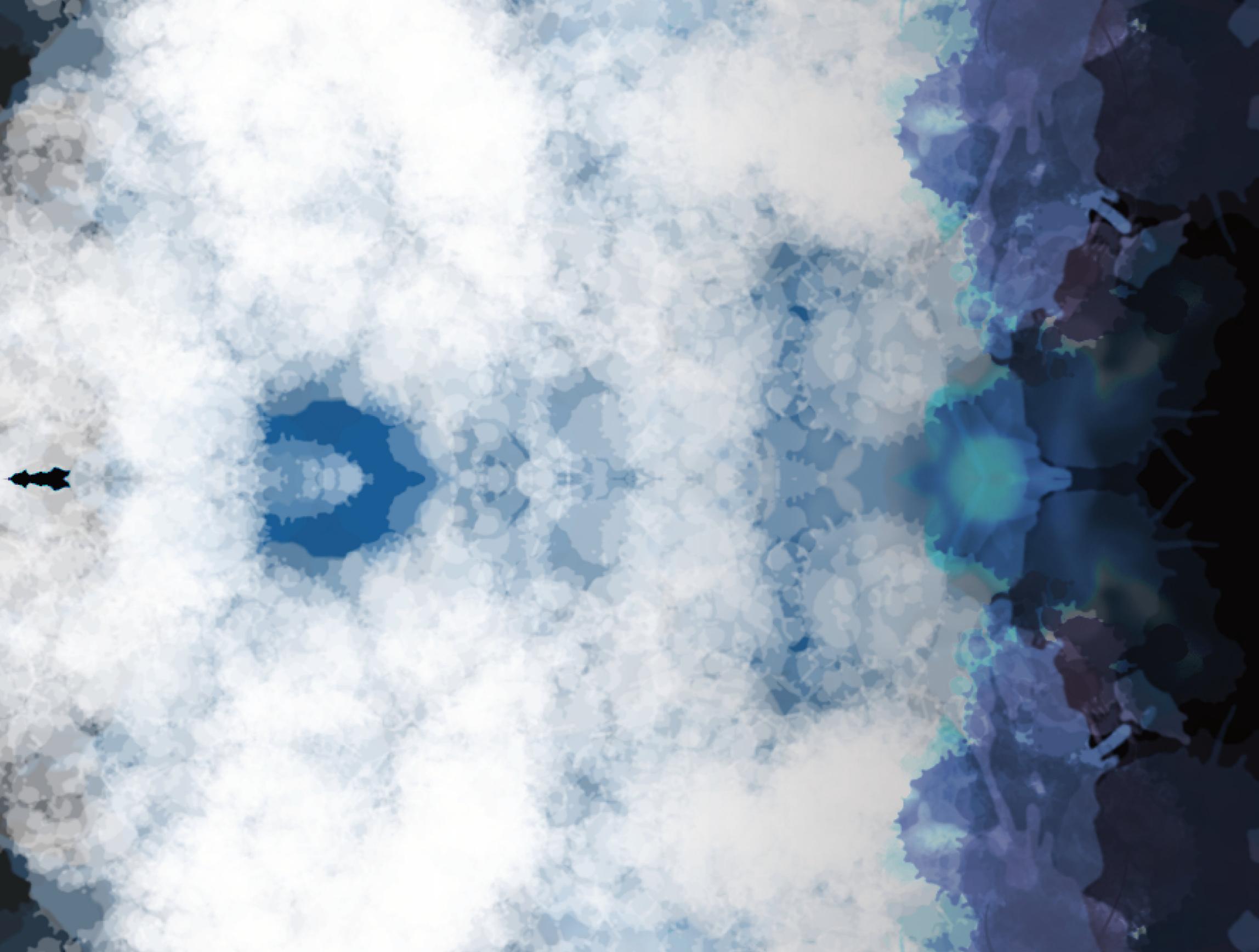
"The Bible says we have to forsake ourselves
for God," I echo.

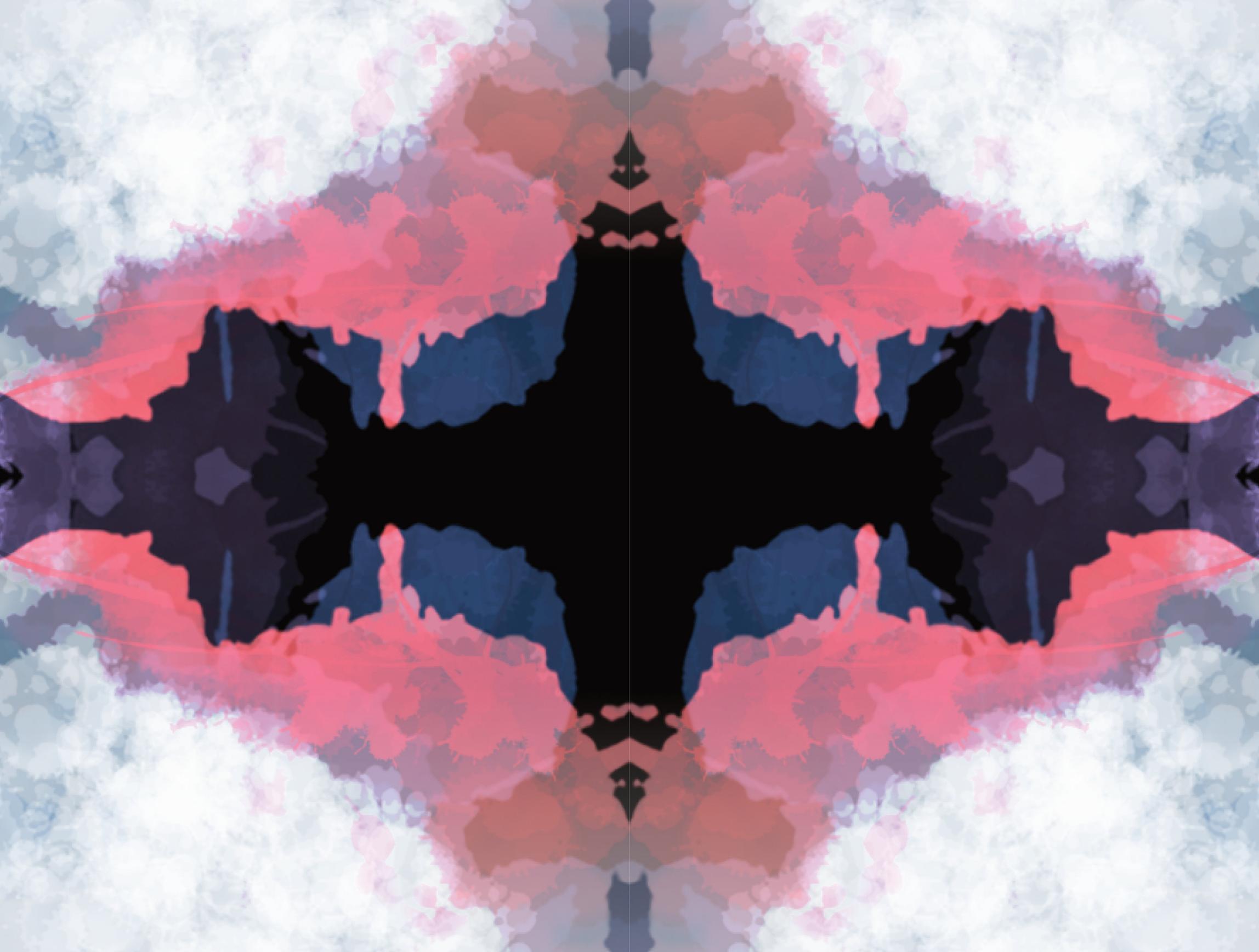
"Forsake yourself, sure,
but for God. Not for those people.
Whatever God wants in this path,
I know you'll do it.
You really care about that.
Remember your goal,
and when you reach the end of the path,
you'll be glad
and won't have any regrets.
So walk the best you can."

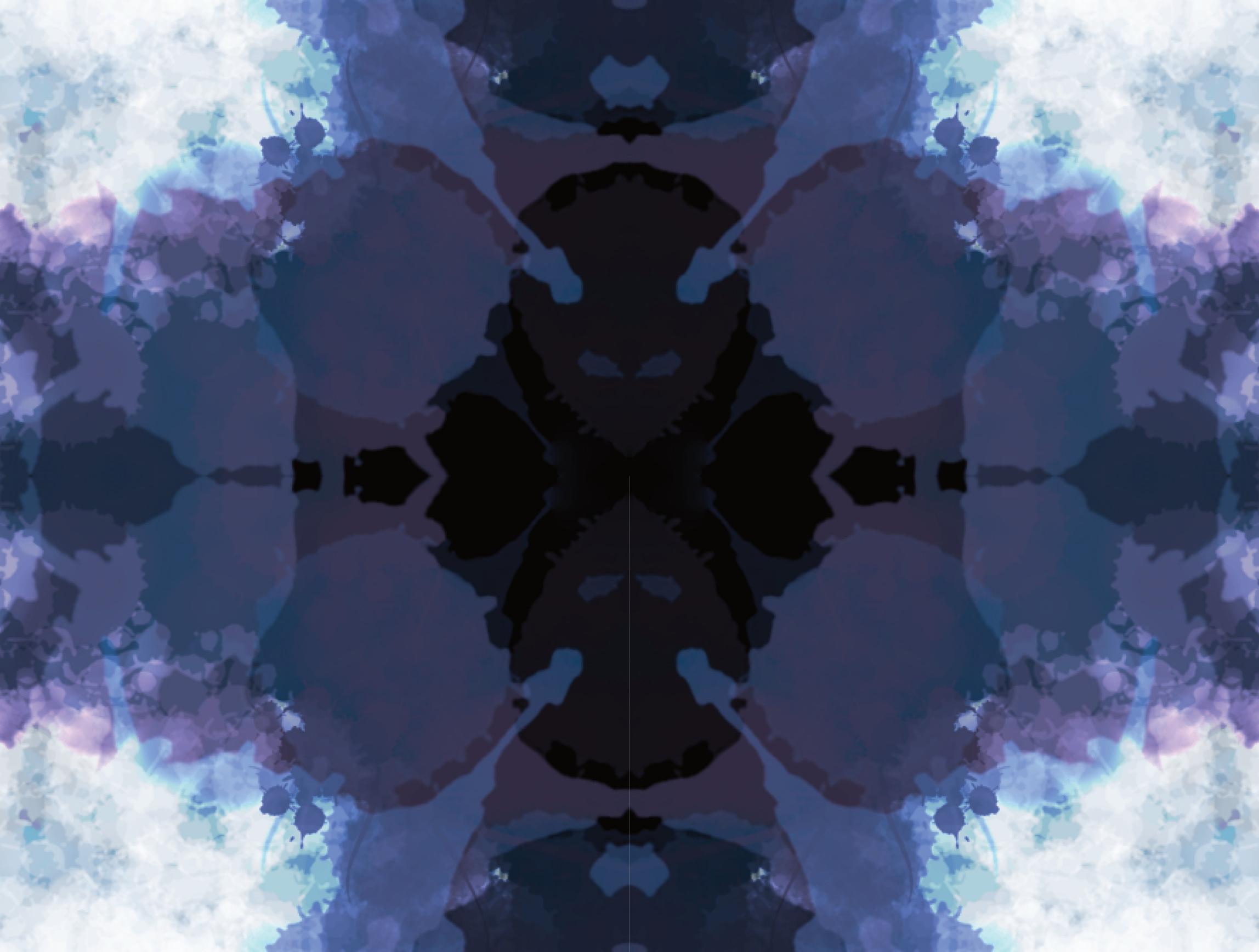
Gently, he pushes me onward.
His hand, over mine, clasping the sword,
trails away as he flicks a wave with his other
and grins.



“See you later.”













The full picture
isn't mirrored at all.



"Xavier, wait."

He turns. Blinks my way in surprise,
a little amusement,
as though he expected that.

"You said, 'You see something pivot bad,
so you pivot back to tie it off differently
than you planned.

You have all these goals that never turn out
the way you imagined.

Their ends still had ends.

They were just different than the signs said.'
Well,"

I point the sword toward the path before me.
It really isn't one path.

It's several branched outward,
some criss-crossing,

others going far away in another direction.

"What's this supposed to be? My goal is
making Reflections a formal business.

Taking my passions in my hands and conducting it
like I'm the master of its sea.

But you know it and I know it

that I'm a shit businesswoman. And where is the
trust in God

when I want to master this sea with skills
I don't have? And,"

I continue, brandishing the sword,

the foliage a blur in its steel length,

"This isn't one path. This is one sub-path.

And they all are horrible."



Xavier folds his gloved hands behind his back.
He cants his head. "Are they?"
he asks, curious, testing.

I know he's not a fool, and neither am I.
This time, it's my turn to speak.
I've had enough time to sit on this,
to think this through.
Three weeks of being sure of myself that
-this time-
I was going to commit to self-publishing.
-this time-
I had a sure answer
from the mouth of my subconscious.
But I'm not looking now at possibilities
clouded with fear of horrors spoken of
or ugly hidden motives I myself wasn't aware of.
I'm looking at the facts. The cold truth.

"Route 1," I say, "is best for making money,
if I'm willing to gamble access to my own work and
support a corporation worse than the other path's
five big publishers put together.
Its temptation is
visibility, high royalties, fast turnarounds.
Route 2 is best for distribution,
if I'm willing to take next to no royalties and
pay for dubious returns
that I didn't see a dime on anyway.
Its temptation is
distribution, in-store presence, customization.
Route 3 is best for loyalty,
if I'm willing to pigeonhole myself in one
retailer and gamble on local stores
taking my books only out of principle.
Its temptation is
ease, simplicity, supporting a favorite bookstore.
Route 4 is best for high success,
if I'm willing to risk thousands on inventory and
mimic the business-savvy indie authors
flaunting their success.
Its temptation is
no middleman, nicer books, big margins."

"You know none of these are what's best for me."

He cants his head to the other side now.
Shifts his weight to his other hip.
He's waiting, listening.
He knows it's my turn to speak.
"So which is best for you then?" he asks anyway.

Finally, Xavier smiles. It's so apologetic.

"I want what you want."

Lifting his shoulders, he offers,

"That's peace of mind.

You want to have total control over your passions.

You want to build a brand and use all your skills.

You want to live content that you aren't leaning

on anyone else

to tell you who you ought to be."

Uncoupling his hands, he points to the sword.

"Your reflection within the blade

is meant as a reminder.

If you hate all these options, that's fine.

But you needed to figure that out first.

I needed you to think it through seriously,

just as you'd think through the other path

seriously too."

"What I wish for and what's realistic
aren't the same."

"No." A wider, still-apologetic smile.
"They really aren't,
are they?"

"I want to sell all these beautiful
cloth-bound copies of my book,
and they'd have a brilliant silver ribbon
and a glossy little dust jacket,
and I'd go to all these places and sell so well,
and I'd see through all these legal business steps
for Reflections,
and take charge of my own company
to be my own boss."

I clutch the sword to my chest.
"But I have to have warehoused books
or a Route 2 or 3 setup
to get on the fantasy bookshelf God showed me.
What I want doesn't align with my goal."

"What is your goal?" Xavier inquires,
returning his hands to his back
as he leans in
in expectation.

"My goal is to be easily found, so
high distribution.
My goal is to someday make a living off it,
even if it takes years.
My goal is to do God's will
at the expense of my own,
and it's the most important to me,
out of all my goals,
to get on that fantasy bookshelf."

“Do any of those routes give that to you?”

He scoffs then.

“Nevermind. That’s a rhetorical question.

Of course they can’t.

They aren’t designed for being on a bookshelf,

are they?

They’re designed for sales.

They’re designed for the online world.

You don’t want your book to live in that world.

It isn’t designed for that, and neither are you.”

I approach him. My boots crunch on the
twigs and leaves
of the forest floor,
and I look down and only just now realize
they’re oak trees.
“These aren’t my favorite type of trees,”
I simply say.

Extending his hand, Xavier asks,
“Do you want to see if the other path
has pine trees instead?”

Gripping his palm tight, I notice how warm it is,
even through the leather gloves.
“But what about everything
you were saying about it? You aren’t wrong.”

“No, but you needed to hear that because
it was the truth about your own motivations.
If you change your expectations
and heal your heart,
and not care what others think,
I think you may have the iron will
to face the monsters on it.”

I look up into his face,
his mouth pressed,
his eyes fixed,
and I ask if he’s being serious
about the monsters.

His laugh is biting.
“As long as you’re ready to use your sword
to defend yourself, too.”

“What if it takes me back to the silver scar?”

“If this is God’s will,
He’d allow it to happen,
yes?
Reflections is all about your head.
If you’re struggling,
don’t be afraid to share it.
Make the scar part of the story.”



I couldn't finish, really finish,
a manuscript I was happy with.
There were a couple of short, small drafts,
or rewritten drafts
of my only self-published book.
God allowed me to finish *The Immortal*
to teach me.

I loved writing for years before I had a dream in 2013 that became my writing obsession. Writing became serious for me then, but so did Obsessive Compulsive Disorder as I desperately ran away from The violent intrusions in my head. Before writing, before OCD, it was books that I loved so much because I was intimate with loneliness. My writing then was a teenager's typical angsty adverb-abused atrocity abstract if you multiply the drafts by the hundreds and finished none of them. No idea was good enough. None of them were satisfactory.

I desperately wanted to be my own illustrator, but I couldn't finish a draft to illustrate. By 2020, I saw through The Immortal under an extreme deadline, after another Xavier poem, after fearing I'd never be able to do it. By 2025, I had vastly improved my writing and redrafted far different rewrites of The Immortal to revisit the only success I had. All my other attempts

—of drafts, of different stories—, fell apart like before.

I found some hope combining competing ideas I grave-robbed from my draft morgue, which helped, but was not the full solution. My poems helped, and between them and idea exhuming, I moved forward, but not far enough to finish another manuscript.



How could I dare continue to pursue my own goal
—seen through with *The Immortal*,
and plodded down on Routes 3 and 4—
when my own goal never satisfied me?

And then I was given a goal
that was no longer mine,
and my drafts stitched together uncannily.

As we turn around and head back
to the other path
past the hill we climbed over before,
Xavier releases my hand
to stretch his arms behind his head.
He complains that he wishes my books could be
spectacular self-published prizes too.
But then he gives a wry sort of grin
as he says that we all have to give something up.

“What am I giving up, Xavier?”

Xavier takes my hand again, then my other,
spins me so we’re facing one another,
and he says, sincerely,
“Yourself.”

All the skills you pride yourself on.
All the dreams you exhaust nothing on.
All the ambition you chase that means nothing.
All the envy you judge yourself under.
You're not doing this for yourself,
you're doing this for God.
God didn't free you from the mirror labyrinth
and grant you the ability to
finish writing manuscripts
for you to chase a goal
that's only there for yourself
no matter how much you try to say
there's a way to make His goal happen too.
So give it up.
Give your will up.
Give it to God
so His will is yours.



We pause before the other path now.
Lined with pine
with a forest floor that's pokey with dark soil.
Xavier keeps one hand in mine and the other
clutching tight the sword hilt to my palm.
"Are you ready to do that?"



“Are you scared too?” I whisper.
“Of course,” he whispers back. “I’m you.”

“The Mirror Labyrinth was much darker,”
Xavier says quietly,
“don’t you think?”

“This route is dark,”
I observe, peering into
the tightly-packed
pines trees.

If I'm going down this route to find
satisfaction
with success
or end results,
I won't find satisfaction at all.
If I'm going down this route to find
satisfaction
following God's will for me,
it'll be worth any hurt that lies ahead.

Our fingers knit over the hilt of the sword,
held between us,
Xavier lets go of my other hand,
and we start down the route
together
until the only one walking it is
myself.

