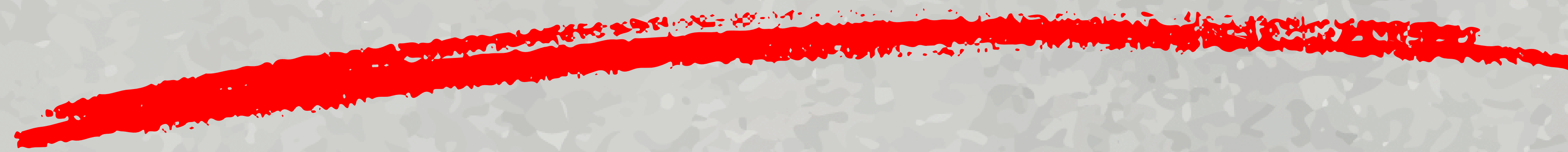


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LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

A QUARTERLY MAGAZINE  
PUBLISHED BY QUEER ETHIOPIA  
FOCUSING ON LBQ ISSUES


# QUEER ETHIOPIA

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**Queer Ethiopia is an alternative space created by a group of queer Ethiopian women. It is designed to be a space for a diverse group of Ethiopian women whose sexual and gender identities vary. It includes cis and trans women who may be lesbian, bisexual or asexual. This is a space where the experiences of queer people take center stage. We hope to include personal experiences from our daily lives as queer people, various stories, interviews, original artwork and poetry. We hope it will also serve as a place where Ethiopians in Ethiopia and the diaspora come as themselves to explore and create a community.**

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# EDITORIAL

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**I**n Ethiopia, over 80 languages dance upon our tongue, some with their own script, offering a vibrant tapestry woven through generations. The ancient Ge'ez is a testimony to our rich heritage, yet within this linguistic treasure, uplifting words for queer identities remain elusive. Language is a mirror, reflecting our struggles, joys and histories, but for many of us in the LGBTQ+ community, it also fails us. We grow up hearing labels that mark us as outsiders, words like "gibresodom," meaning "the work of Sodom," echoing in our homes, schools and everywhere else we go. It leads to a painful silence.

In a society that often denies our existence, the words we choose – or those chosen for us – shape our self-perception and thus our self-acceptance. English terms like "gay" or "lesbian" offer refuge yet feel foreign, divorcing us from our Ethiopian roots. This struggle leaves us fragmented, caught between two worlds, constantly searching for language that embraces all parts of our identity.

**Language holds power; it can uplift or diminish, connect or isolate. As we explore our identities, we invite reflection: How would you describe your essence using a beloved movie title? What three emojis capture your spirit? These playful inquiries can lead us to creativity, allowing us to engage with our truths and authenticity.**

**This 14th issue of Nisnis is a call to action: We want to create language that honors our stories and experiences as well one that uplifts and sustains us. We hope we can collectively develop new words to celebrate our queerness.**

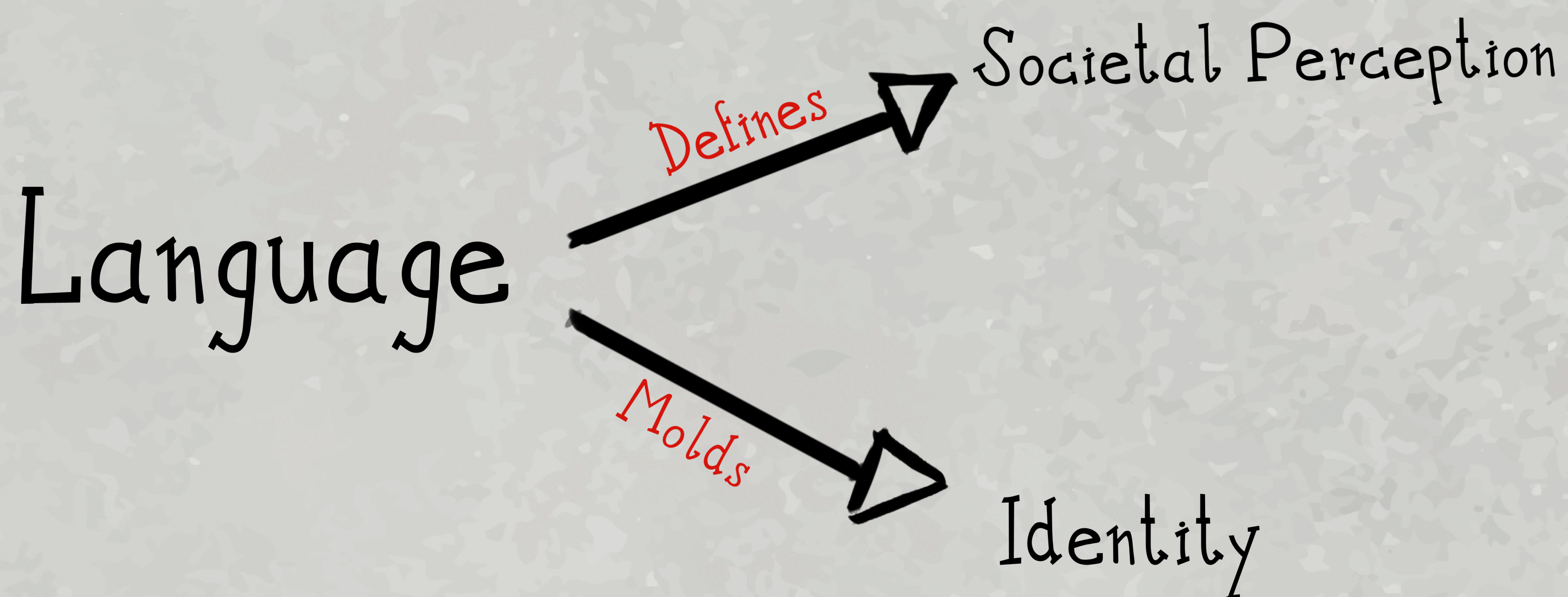


# Language in a homophobic society

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**F**or those of us who call or have called Ethiopia home, our introduction to ourselves often starts with the Ge'ez word gibresedom, which literally means "the work of Sodom" ..

This term stems straight from the biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah, where God rained sulfur and fire upon the sinners, destroying both cities and everyone in them.



Even Lot's wife was not spared for daring to look back. The word serves as a stark warning, a "gentle" reminder of sorts: we too could be turned into figurative salts if we associate with Sodom, whether that association is perceived or real. This is a hard lesson to ignore.

# Language in homophobic society



**L**anguage plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions, including how we relate to ourselves. Many queer people have a hard time accepting ourselves because we grow up hearing language that always already labels us as sinners. The negative framing is so pervasive that we often find ourselves unable to outrun it.

The only local term available to describe our identities is "gibresodom," and we hear it everywhere: in our homes, churches, schools, hospitals, on social media, and even among friends. Many a queer has left a place of worship because a priest, a pastor or an imam had all of a sudden decided to resort to talking about the gibresedomawi who is ruining Ethiopia through sheer presence. Language can indeed be used as a weapon: to shame us, to exclude us, and to silence us

# Language in homophobic society

**T**o avoid the stigma with “gibresodom,” many of us resort to English words that connote acceptance and a positive sense of self. Enter words such as “gay” , “lesbian” , and queer. While these and other similar words offer a sense of positivity, we also end up contributing to a sense of othering ourselves – separating our sexual identity from our Ethiopian identity. Non-Ethiopian words are often perceived as failing to lend us a measure of authenticity and thus deepen our internal conflict.



# Language in homophobic society



**W**e toil in search of a way to marry our Ethiopian selves with our queerness. Language is one thing that shapes all of this. We are not named in our rich local languages, making it easier for society to either label us as sinners or as influenced by Western ideas.

How do we bridge this divide? An essential step is creating our own words and insisting on being called by our name. It

is the power of language, its ability for transformation and collective healing, from within.

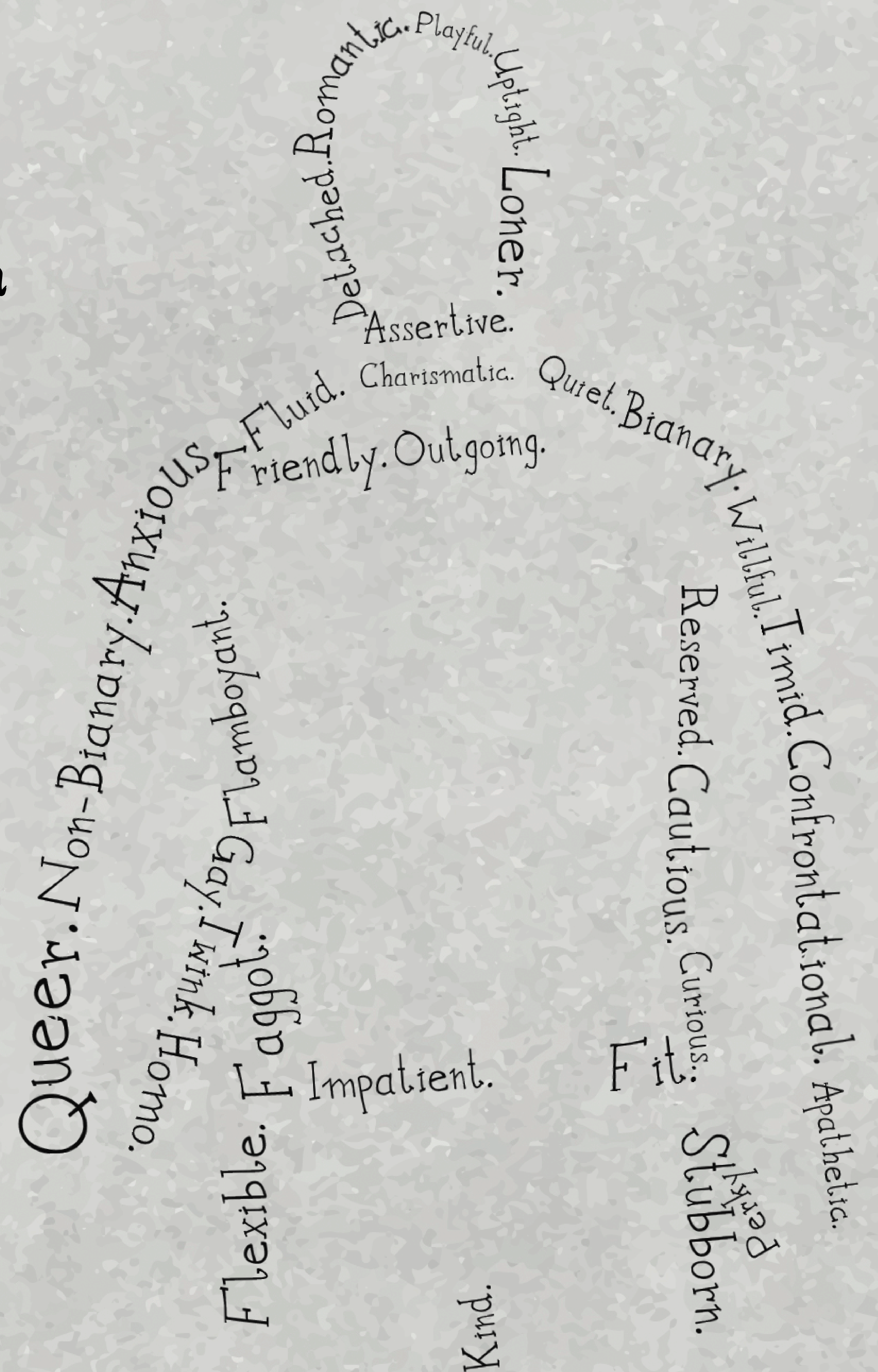
We need to feel at home in our bodies. And when the language that we currently have fails us, it is up to us to create words that bring us back home.

-Bisrat

# Language in homophobic society

**L**anguage can be more than a communication key. There are stereotypes based on which language you speak. Here in Ethiopia, for example, if you speak English more and are part of the LGBTQ+ community, people will just assume your sexuality is just a trend you are following a Western culture.

Language itself has its own form of identity, and people might also degrade your identity or hold it in contempt based on the language you speak. Even in the dating scene in the community, these stereotypes exist.



# Anecdotes and misunderstandings

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**So, I was catching up with my friend who I came out to as queer a while back. She's still warming up to the idea, but she knows it's not exactly a phase! Anyway, during our chat, she casually said, "So, you still haven't gotten a boyfriend, right? You should really think about getting married and having kids..." which is very awkward coming from her. I couldn't help but respond, "Uh, you do know I'm happily in a relationship, right? Spoiler alert: I'm the boyfriend!" Talk about a plot twist! It definitely made things a bit more... awkward but it's worth it. Honestly, some people just don't get it, but hey, I'm here to stay and live my best life!**

**- JJ**

# Anecdotes and misunderstandings



**I was telling one of my lesbian friends who knew me as a lesbian, that I was now dating a man. And then she thought I was joking at first. And it was a very interesting explanation process. Because I kind of helped her realize her identity too. Because she thought she was a lesbian. A lot of people would come to talk to me about it. They would be like, “Oh, I know I’m bi again. I think I’m a lesbian now.” And I would show them the light. Lots of conversations like that.**

**– Sara**

# HUMOR AND IDENTITY

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I definitely use humor more in terms of sarcasm and to sort of drive home the point of how ludicrous the way some people talk about it is. And sometimes to just create comparisons between things that people do believe in or the way people view stuff and how it relates when it comes to sexuality or identity that sometimes seems so foreign to them because it's not phrased in the way that they would. So I think it's nice to put humor in that way because it can be more engaging with it, so not pushing their very defensive side.

-Berhan

Ha  
Ha Ha  
Ha Ha  
Ha Ha

# HUMOR AND IDENTITY

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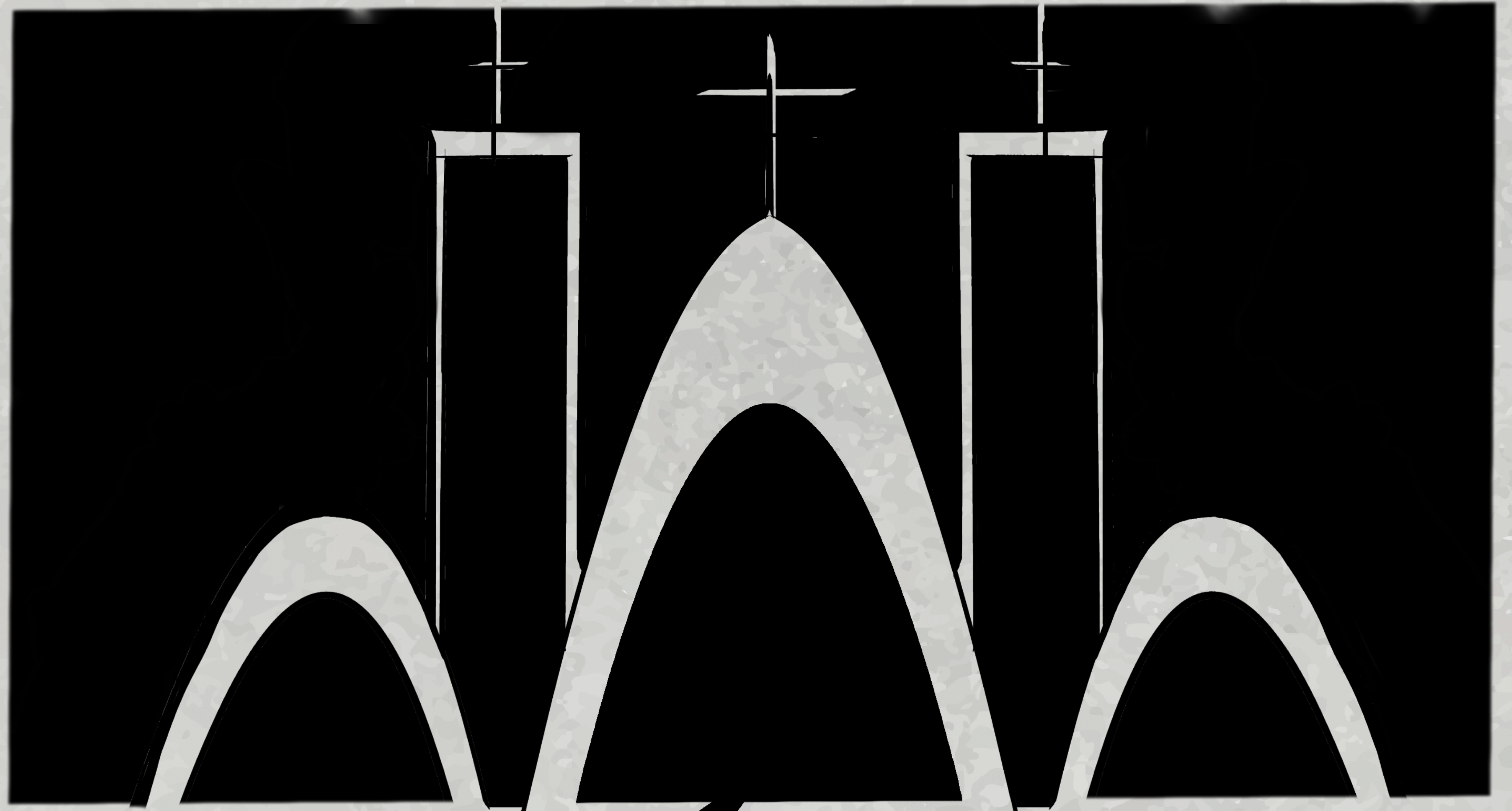
**I use it differently with queer friends and straight friends, I think. With straight friends, I'm less comfortable with it because I feel like it kind of gives them a pass to say stuff that's a little too much. With queer friends, it's a lot more open. But I feel like I can't talk about serious things without making jokes about them, identity-wise. Like, I can't just straight up be like, "Oh, I feel this way and this way and this way." I'll be like, "Oh, haha, I'm in my confused era."**

**-Sara**

# MUSIC

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If your love life had a theme song



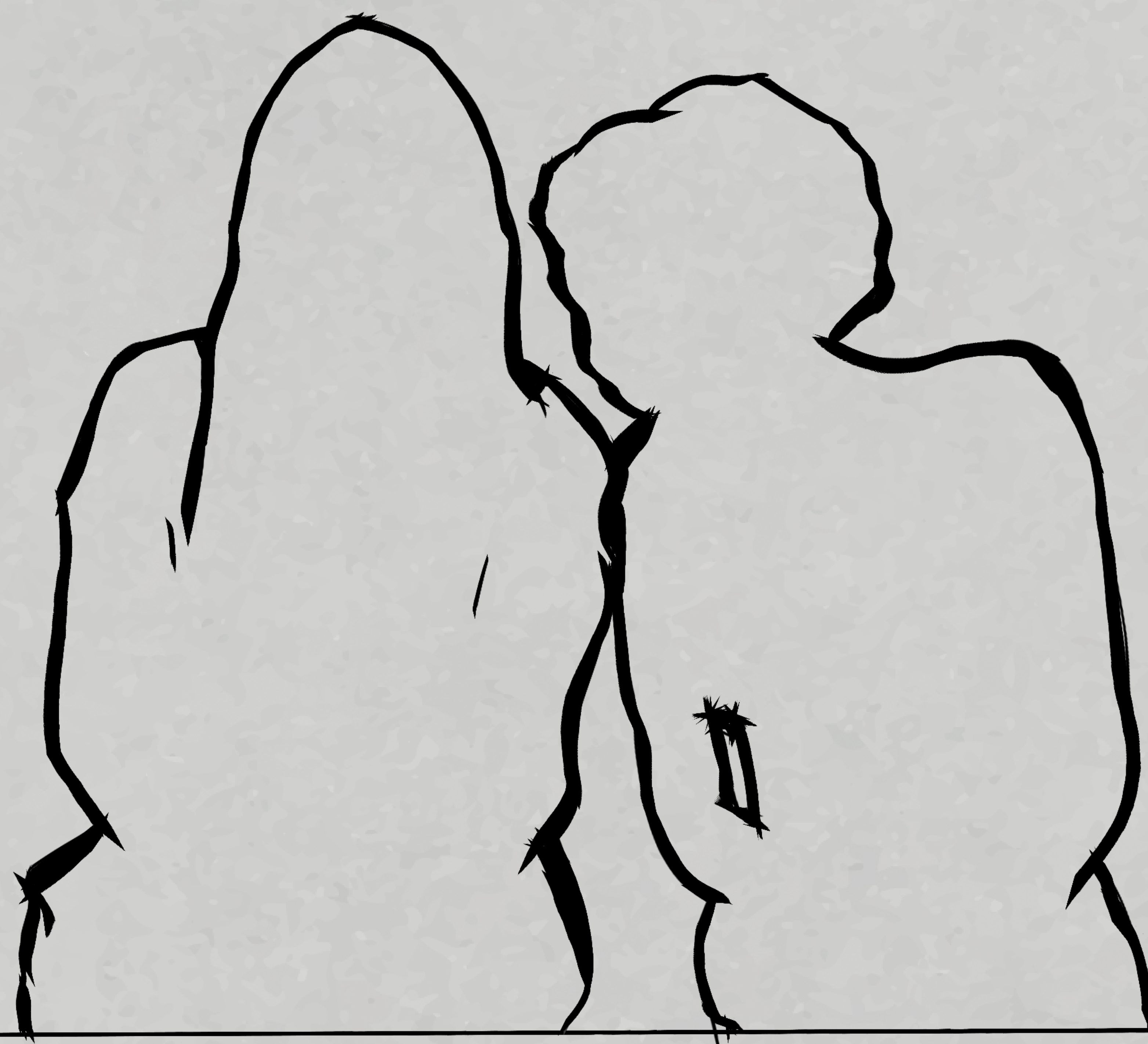
"If my life had a theme song it would definitely be Take Me to Church by Hozier." - C.

of  
Take Me to Church

Music

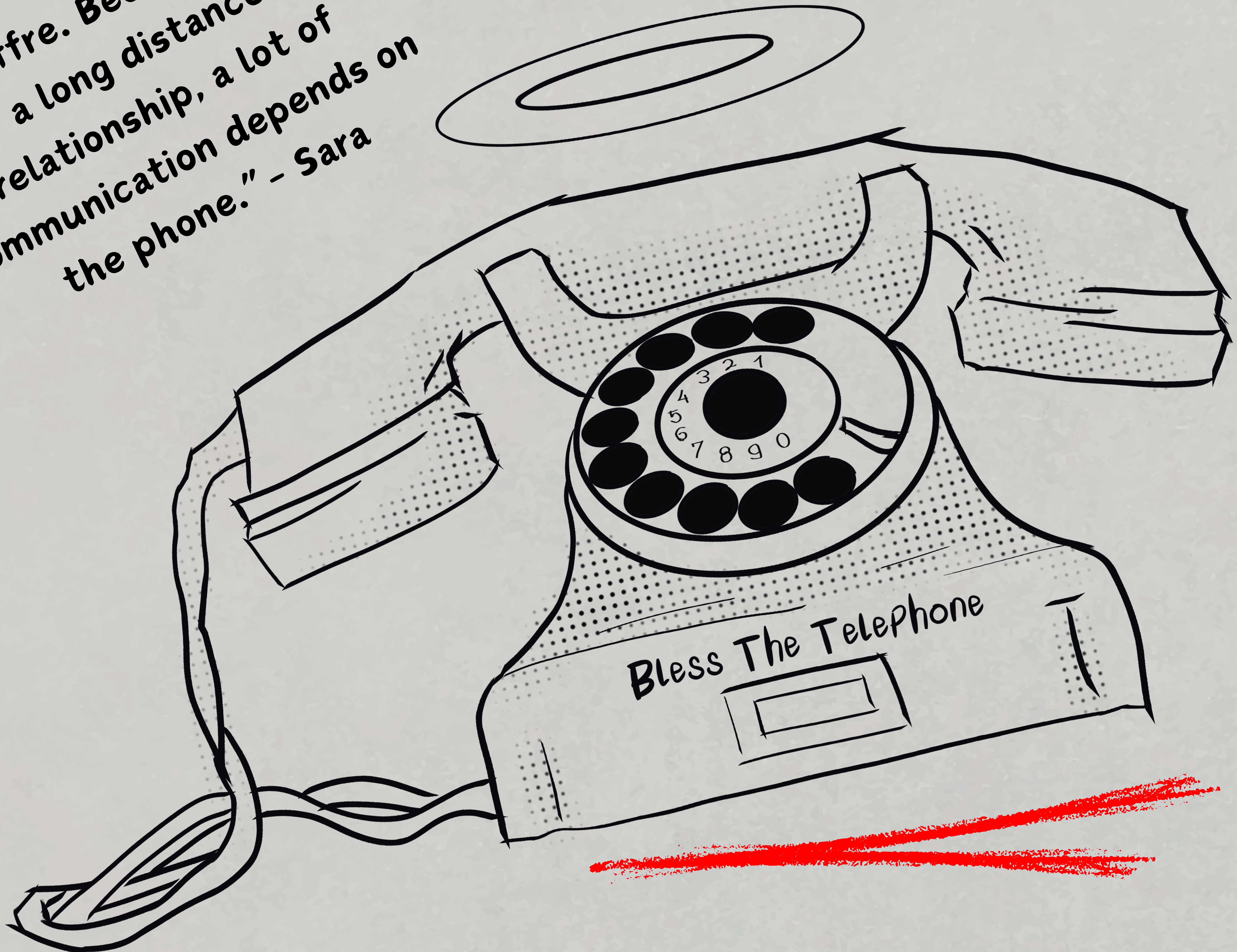
Micheal Bolton  
Lean On Me

– *nan*



# Music

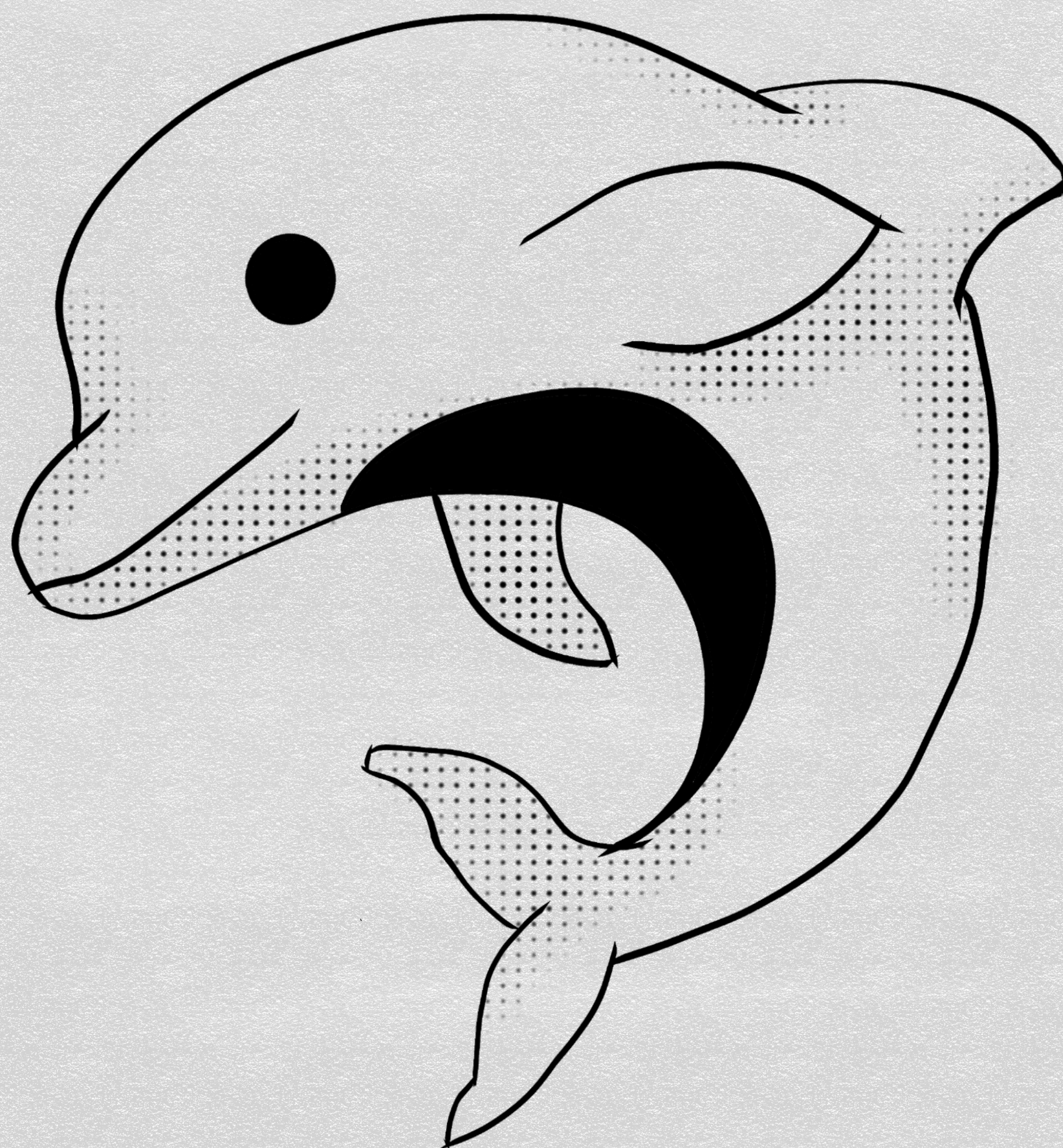
**"Bless the Telephone by  
Labi Siffre. Because I am in  
a long distance  
relationship, a lot of  
communication depends on  
the phone." - Sara**



# If you were an emoji...



I'm in a space in my life where I'm feeling light, experimental, playful, and just open, I feel like. And also kind of mystical [...]

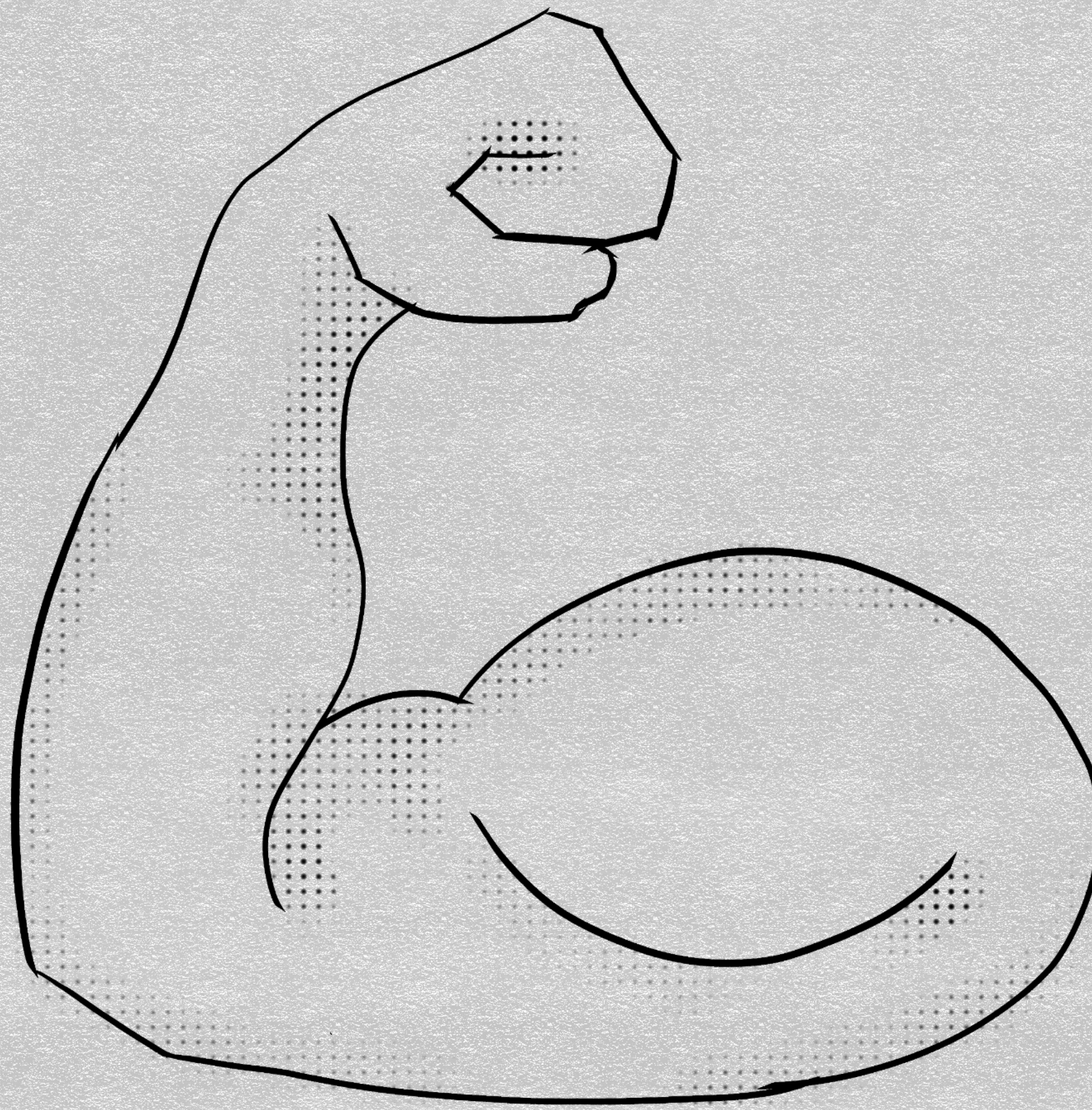
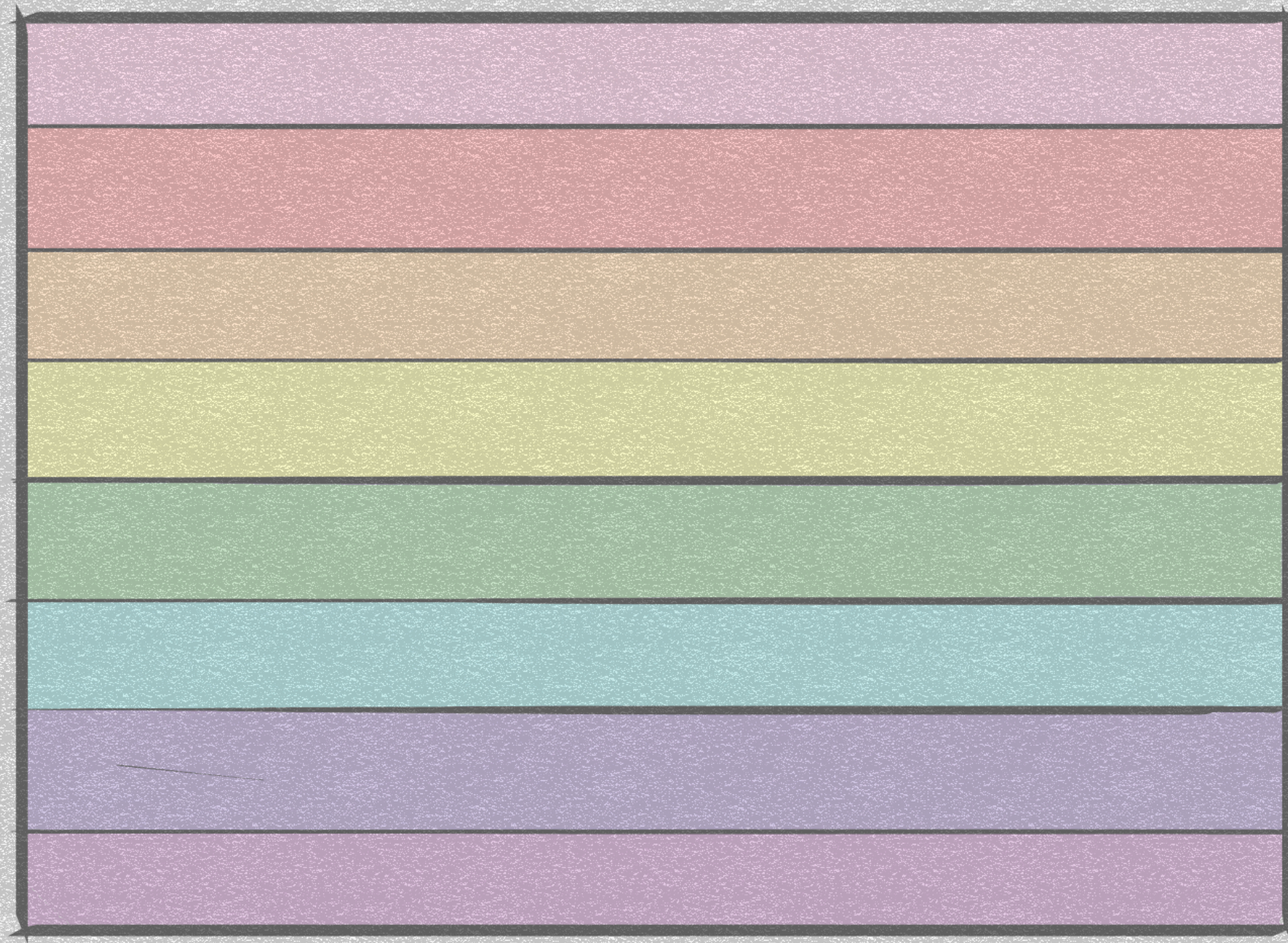


I'm trying to tap back into my very free self. Water is where I feel at peace. I'm trying to get to a place of peace.



I feel like I'm at a very critical place in my life. So this version of me is replicated through a lot of the confusion and maybe it's time to sort of figure that out, but I don't know where I'm at. I know I'm going somewhere and that's kind of where the confusion comes in.

# If you were an emoji...



I think these are the emojis that best describe my strengths.

I'm an Aquarius.

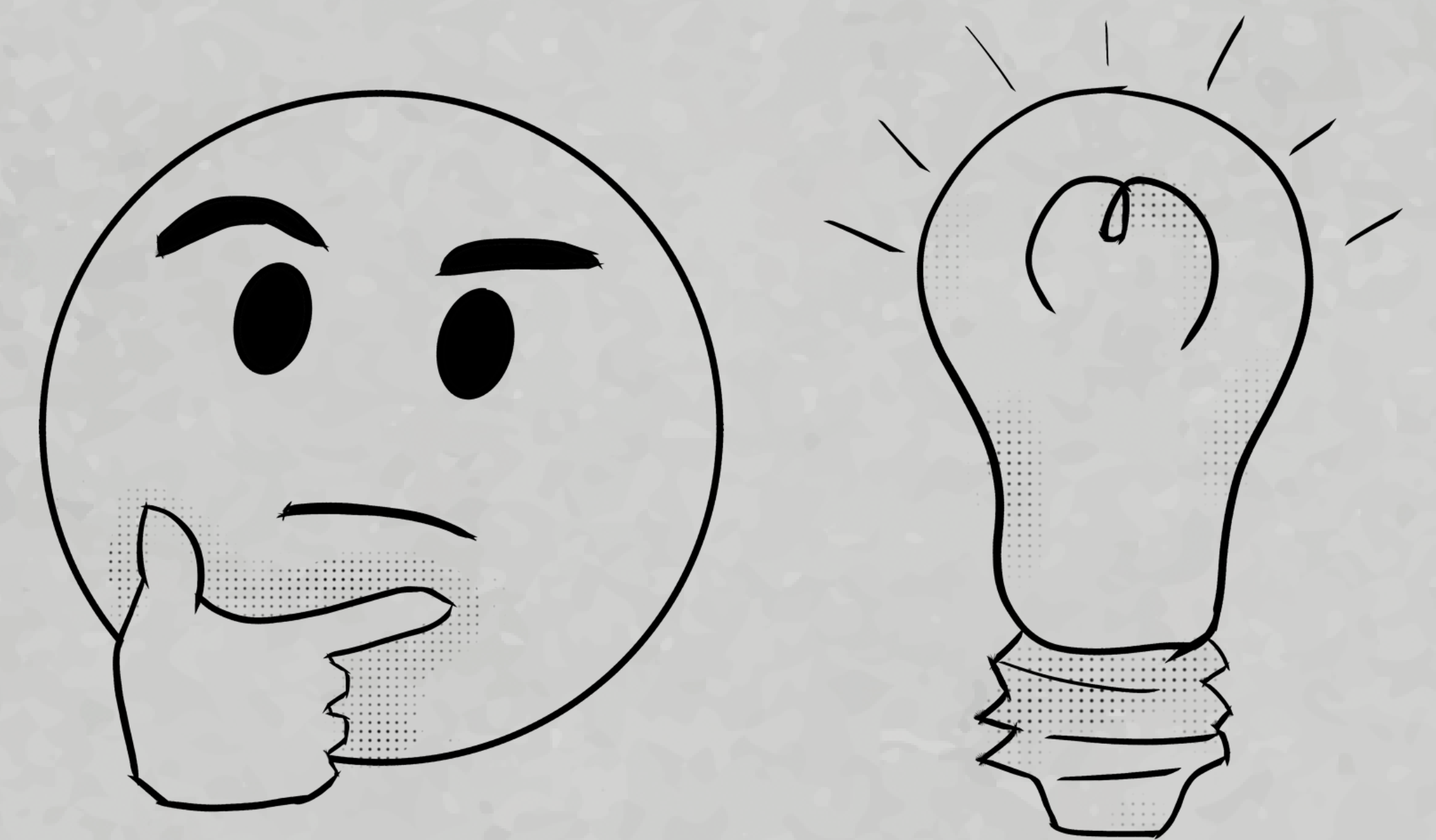
# If you were an emoji...



Because my identity is loving and PlayFul.



Not only does it have loving and PlayFul side but it is also Fun, welcoming and big energy side.



Open-minded and curious For new things.

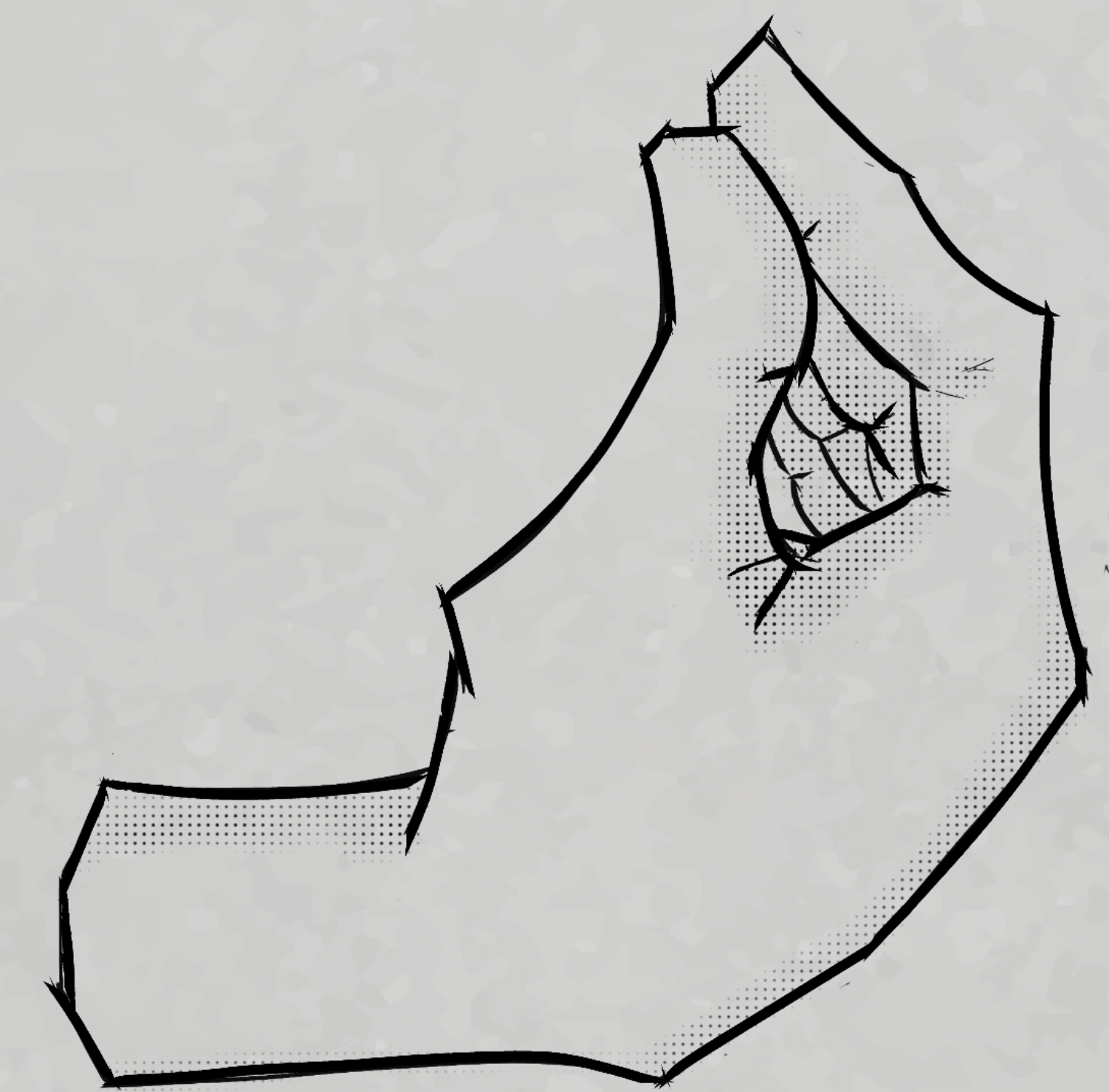
# If you were an emoji...



The First one is all about the Fabulous Ladies.



The second? Well, it's a little clue to the fact that I'm not just a fan, I'm definitely "into" them!

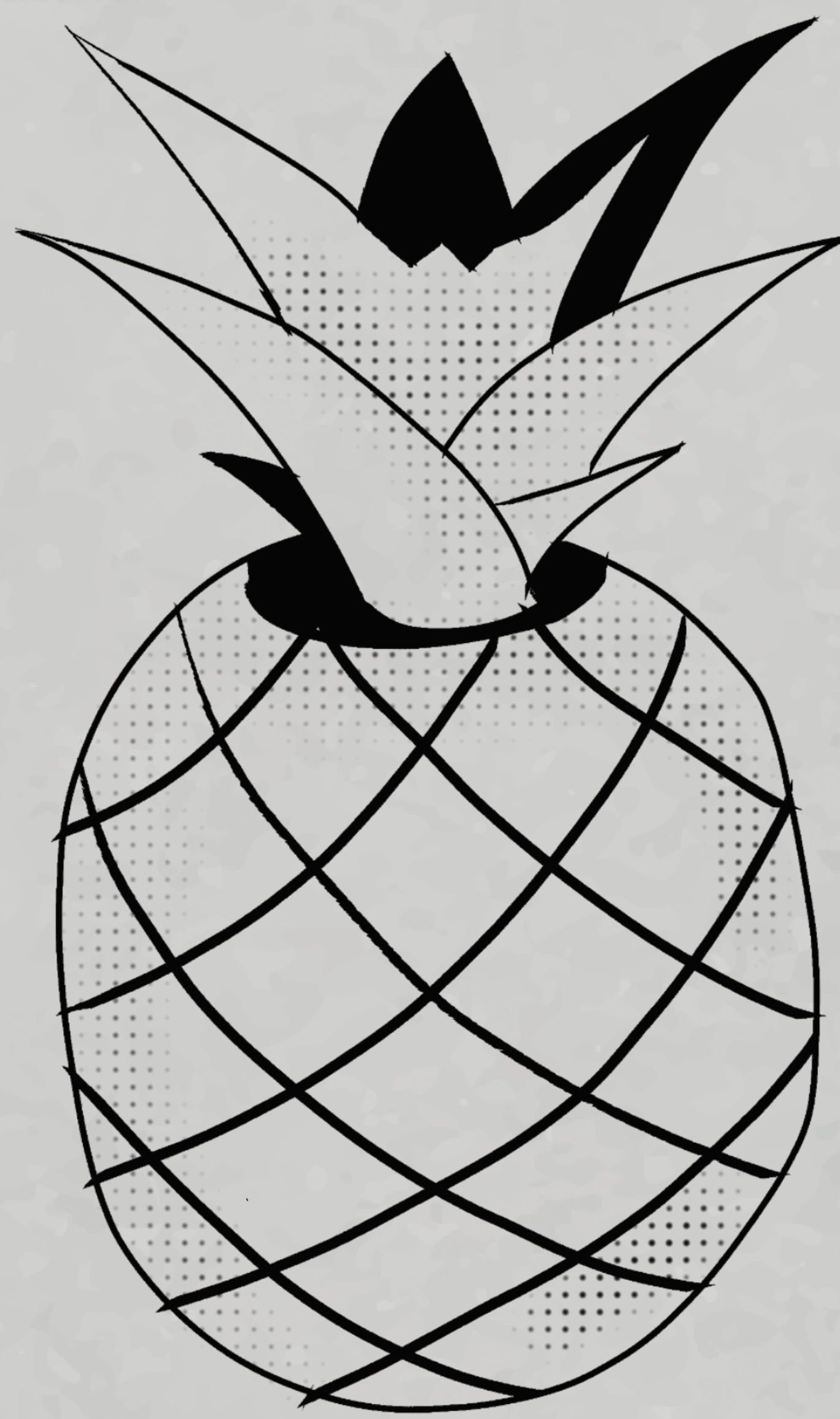


And the third emoji is my way of saying my WLW identity is not just awesome, it's "Italian awesome!" You know, like Pasta with extra sauce Full of Flavor and a little spicy!

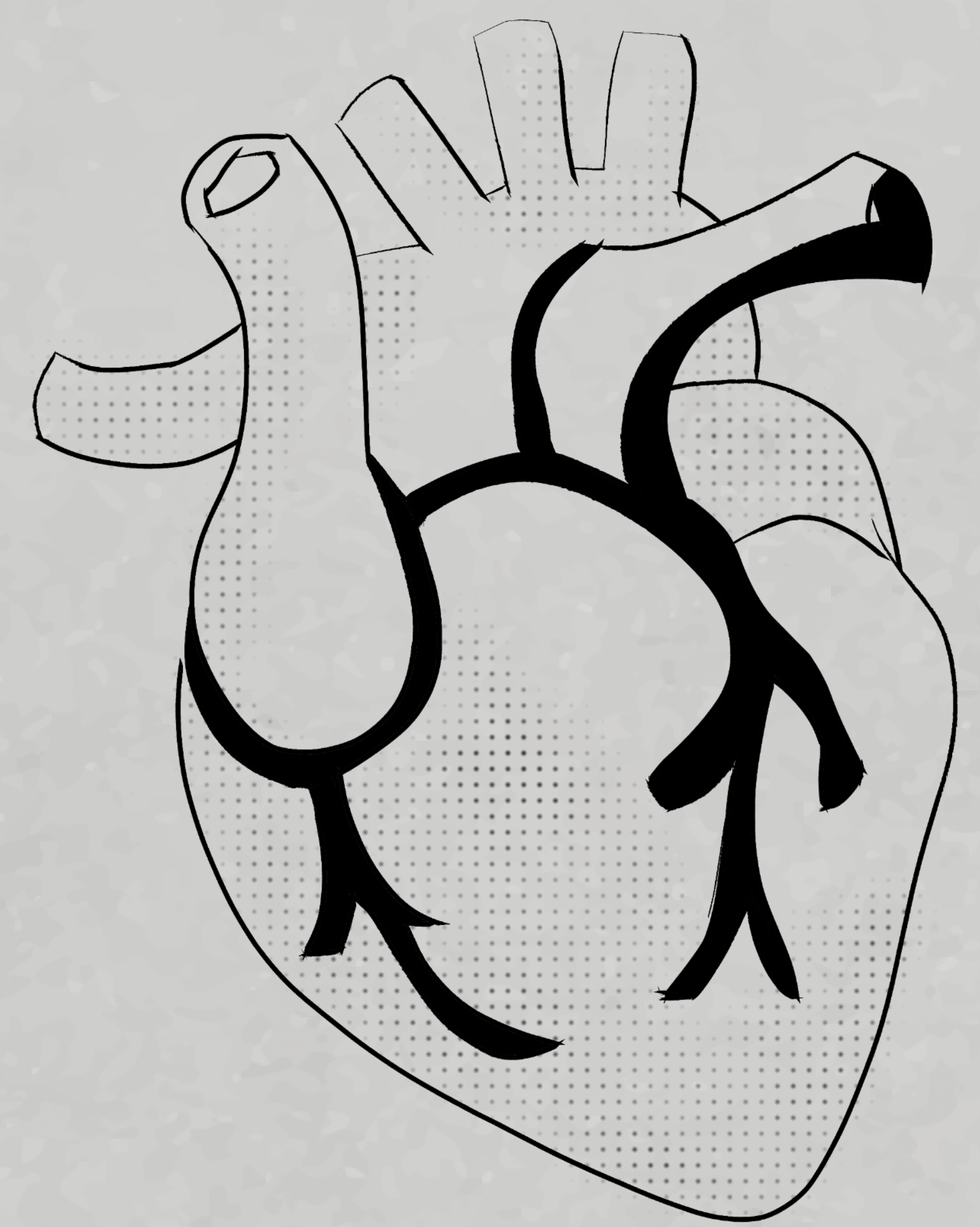
# If you were an emoji...



I would pick the confused emoji, first and foremost.



Pineapples, just because I feel like it has that vibe because I feel like it's a happy looking fruit and it has the same energy.



The heart, the anatomical heart because I feel like that's what's important, I don't like thinking about it too much, or intellectualizing it.

## Words Inherited

TWINK

FAGGOT

ZEGA

## Invented by us

Set wedaj

(ሱት ወዳጅ)

Wondawi (ወንዳዊ)

G-woch (ጂዎች)

Hule fekir (ሁለፍቅር)

Fate (ፋጤ)

Zega (ዜጋ)

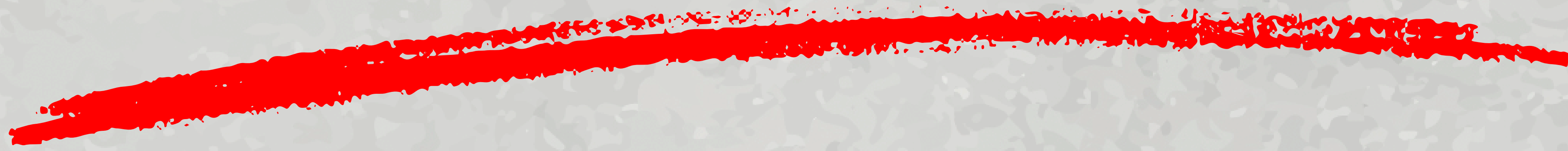
Setawi (ሱታዊ)



**I really hate the word bushti mainly because  
people use it to shame others and it really makes  
me sick.**

**— Lem**

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Language and Identity