

Try A Little Tenderness

A coloring book by Alexandria Smith

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Commissioned by The Union for Contemporary Art

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Front Cover: Alexandria Smith. *The Sweet Hereafter*, 2010. Oil on panel; 48 x 59 inches.
Back Cover: Alexandria Smith. *Sunday School*, detail, 2014. Oil on panel; 48 x 98 inches.

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Artist

Alexandria Smith

The multidisciplinary artist Alexandria Smith explores the transformative girlhood experiences that shape the women we become while illuminating the complexities of Black identity. Although her abstract tableaux have been interpreted as performances or aftermaths of violence, they actually represent bodies in flux: not-quite-adolescent girls beginning to develop senses of themselves as independent from the environments they inhabit. Collectively, they tell a mythical coming-of-age story that centers on the mental and emotional processes of self-discovery.

Common themes and influences in Smith's artwork include Black girlhood, Black life and cultural traditions, art history, religious stories, poetry and mythology, gospel hymns, and jazz, hip-hop, and R&B music. Smith's art is also inspired by different places that she and her family have called home: her birthplace in The Bronx, in New York City; the rural town of Council, North Carolina, where she spent her childhood summers; Westchester County, north of New York City, where she lived during her formative years; and the New York City borough of Brooklyn, where she resides part-time.

Commissioned by The Union for Contemporary Art, Smith created this limited-edition coloring book to coincide with her solo exhibition, *Try a Little Tenderness*. This book features selected images of Smith's artwork from the past six years and is both a recreational outlet and educational guide. The final pages feature questions and prompts geared toward middle- and high-school students. Educators or guardians can easily adapt this content to facilitate conversations to deepen youths' understanding of Smith's work. To see images of the original works, visit www.alexandriasmith.com.

Table of Contents

Pages 1-2

Sunday School, 2014

Page 3

Fee Fi Foh, 2015

Page 4

**I can do it with my eyes
closed, 2010**

Page 5

Comin' in on waves, 2015

Page 6

Wayward Delight, 2011

Page 7

**We have never been modern,
2016**

Page 8

The Sweet Hereafter, 2010

Page 9

Dear Claudia, 2014

Page 10

**The Ecstasy or Colloquial
Transverberations, 2014**

Pages 11-12

Don't let me be lonely, 2015

Page 13

**When Chickens Come Home
To Roost, 2011**

Page 14

Good Neighbors, 2009

Page 15

Dissident Gardens, 2013

Page 16

The Rooting Place, 2015

Page 17

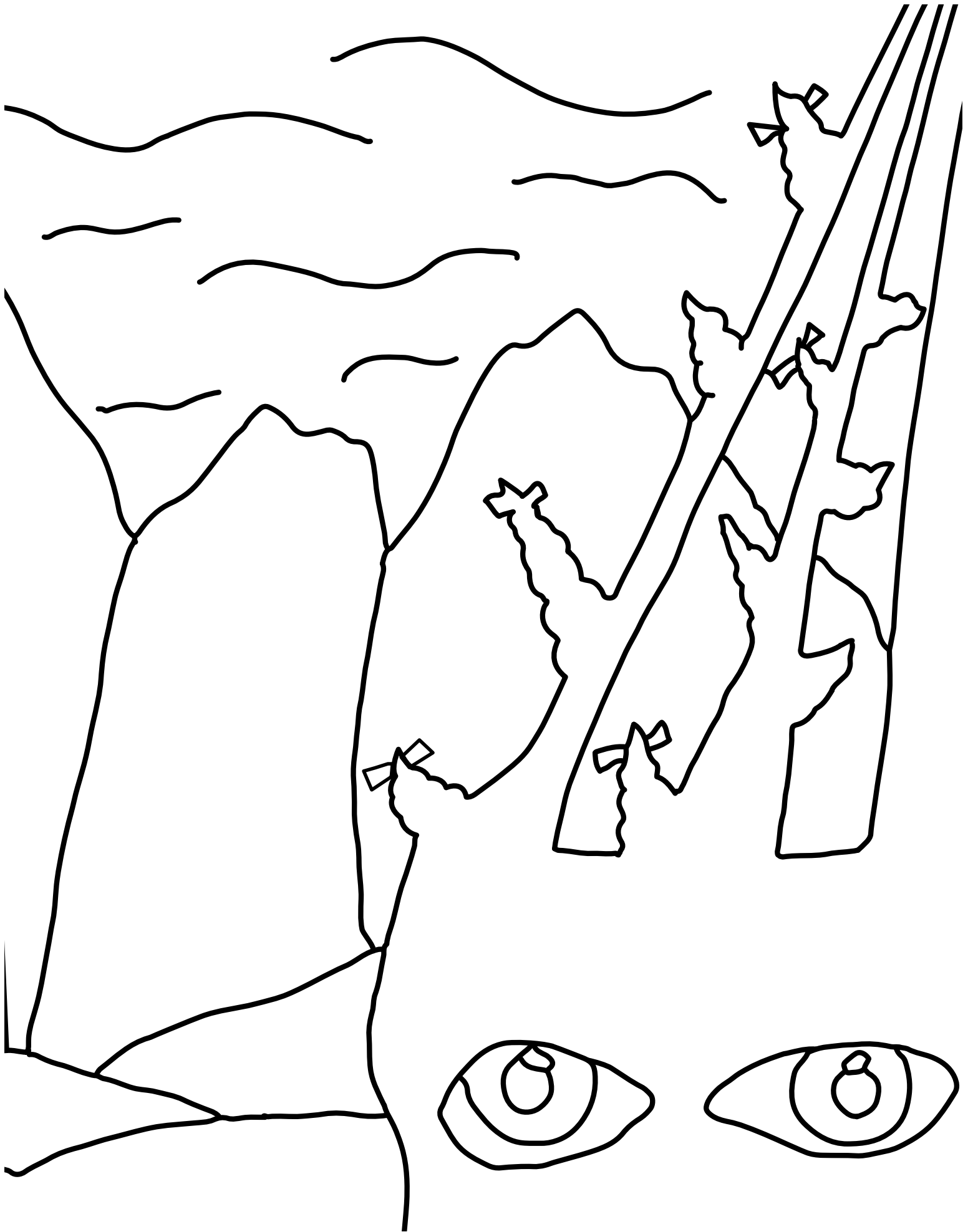
swing lo, swing hi, 2011

Page 18

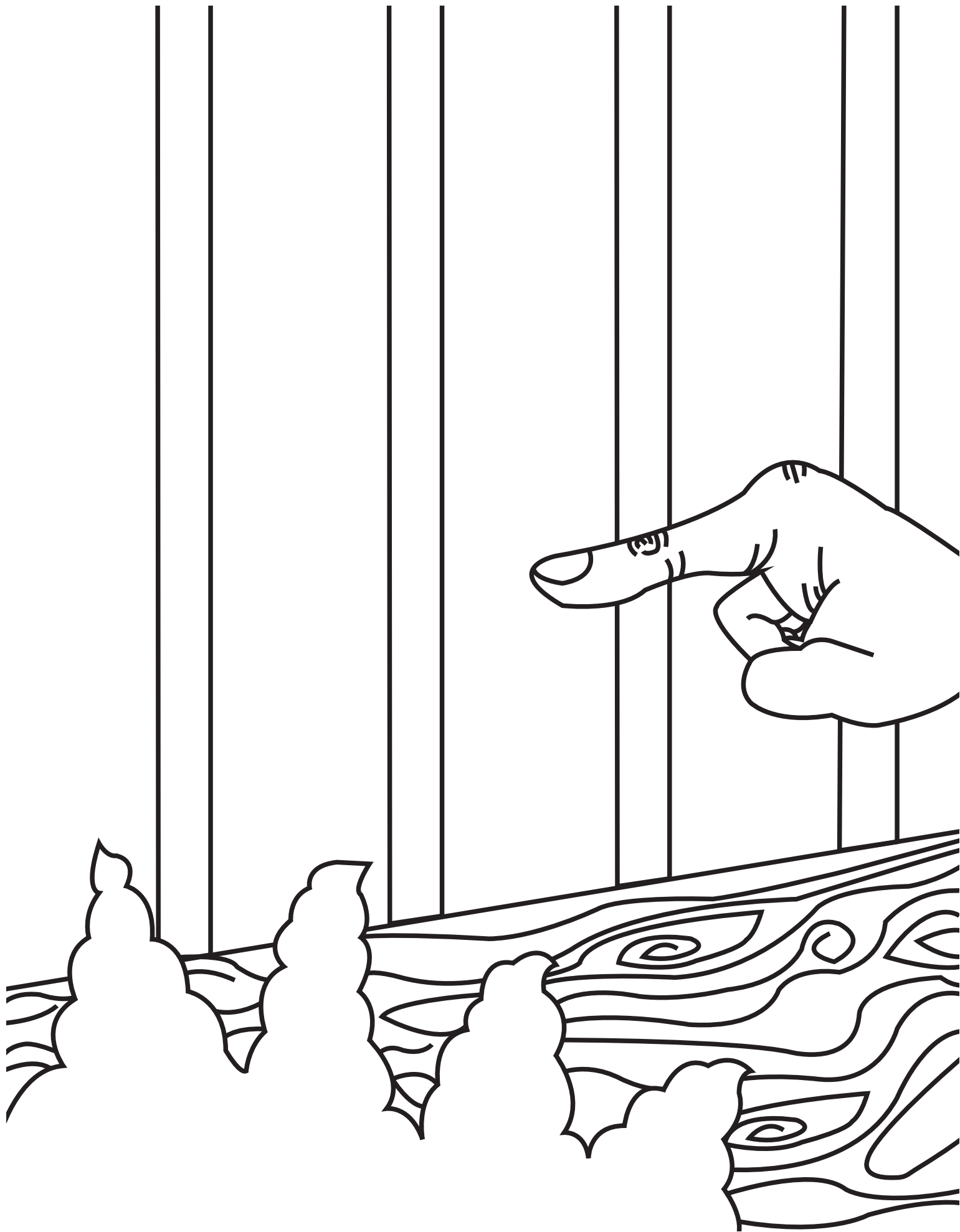
All the Feels, 2015



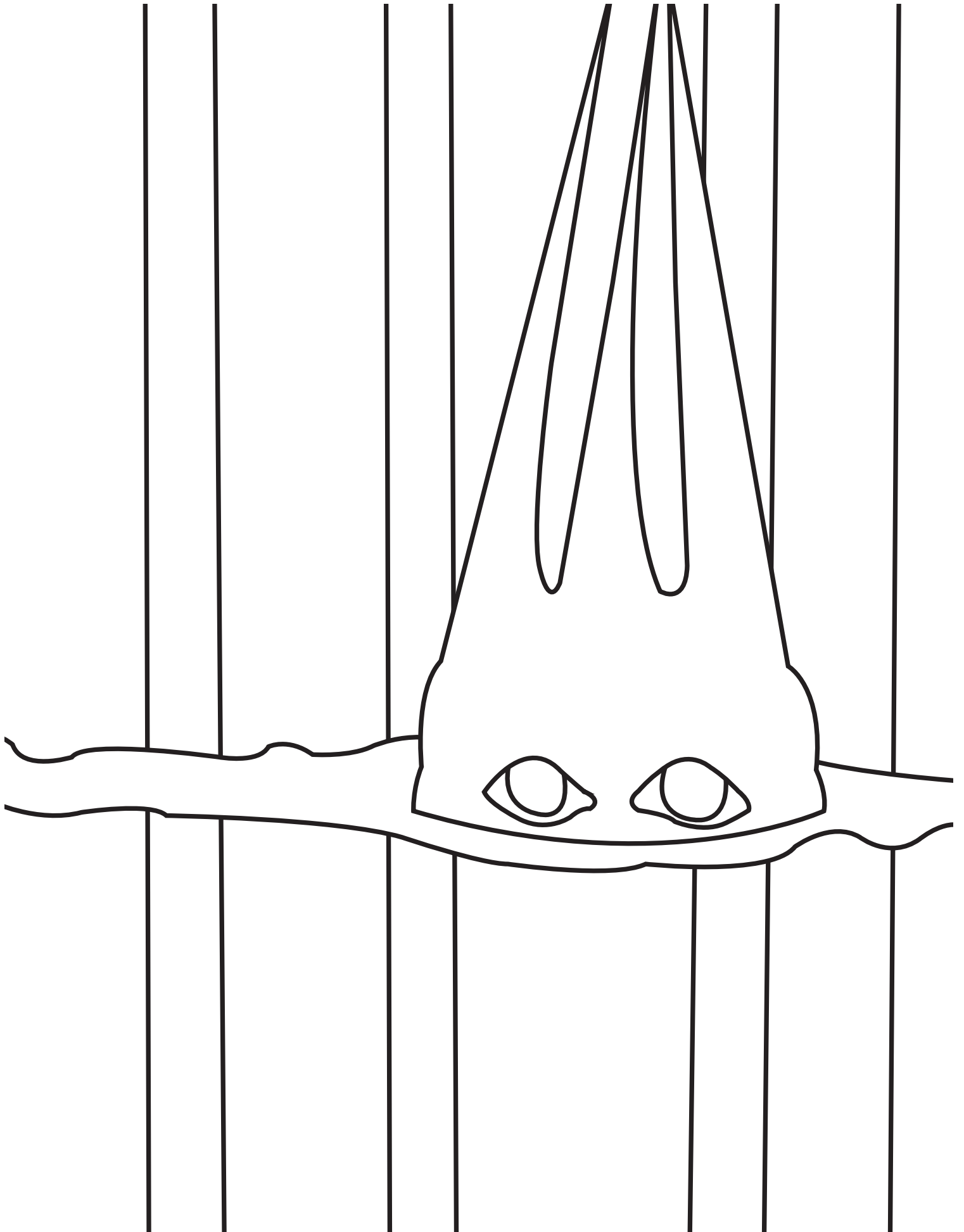


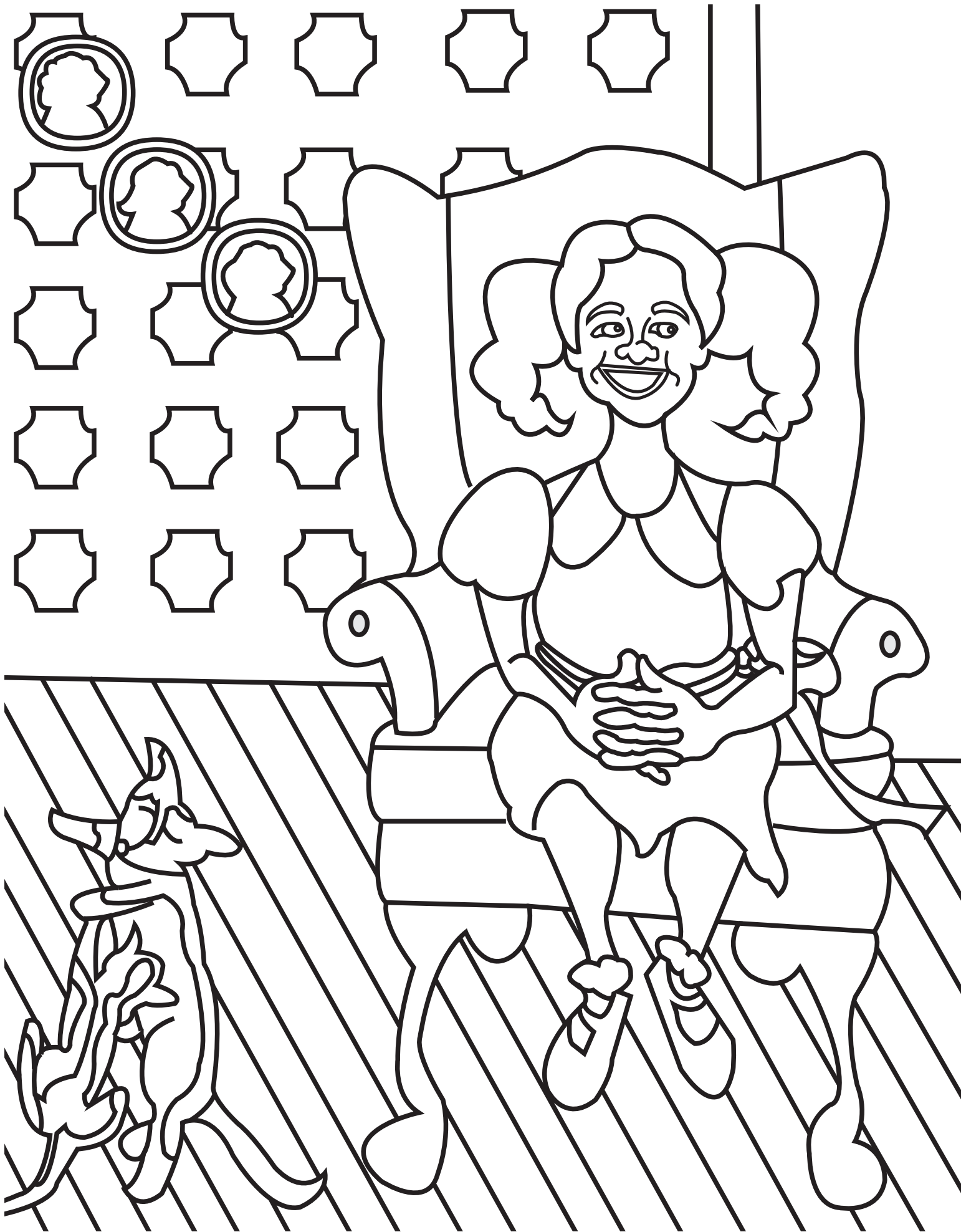




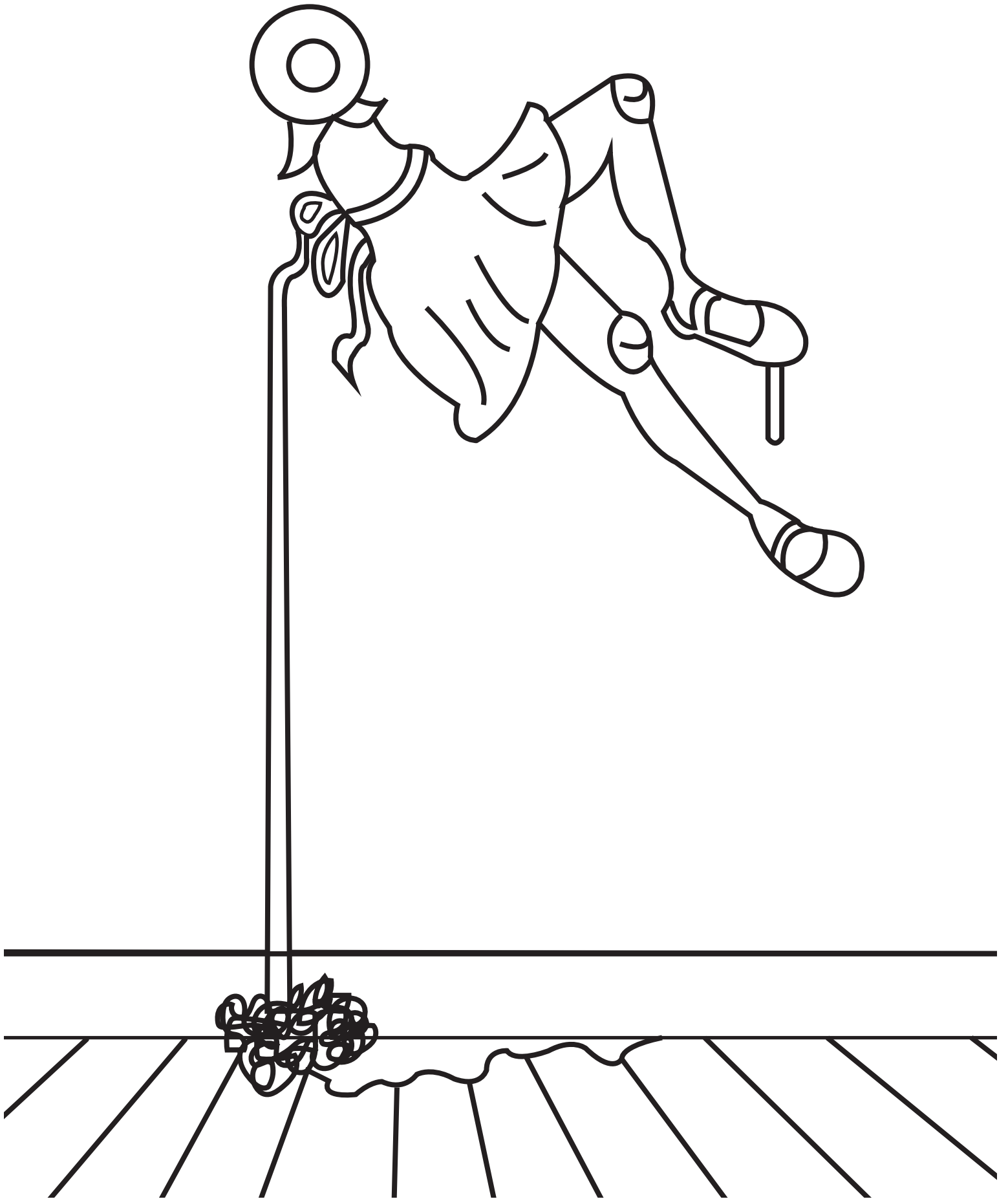


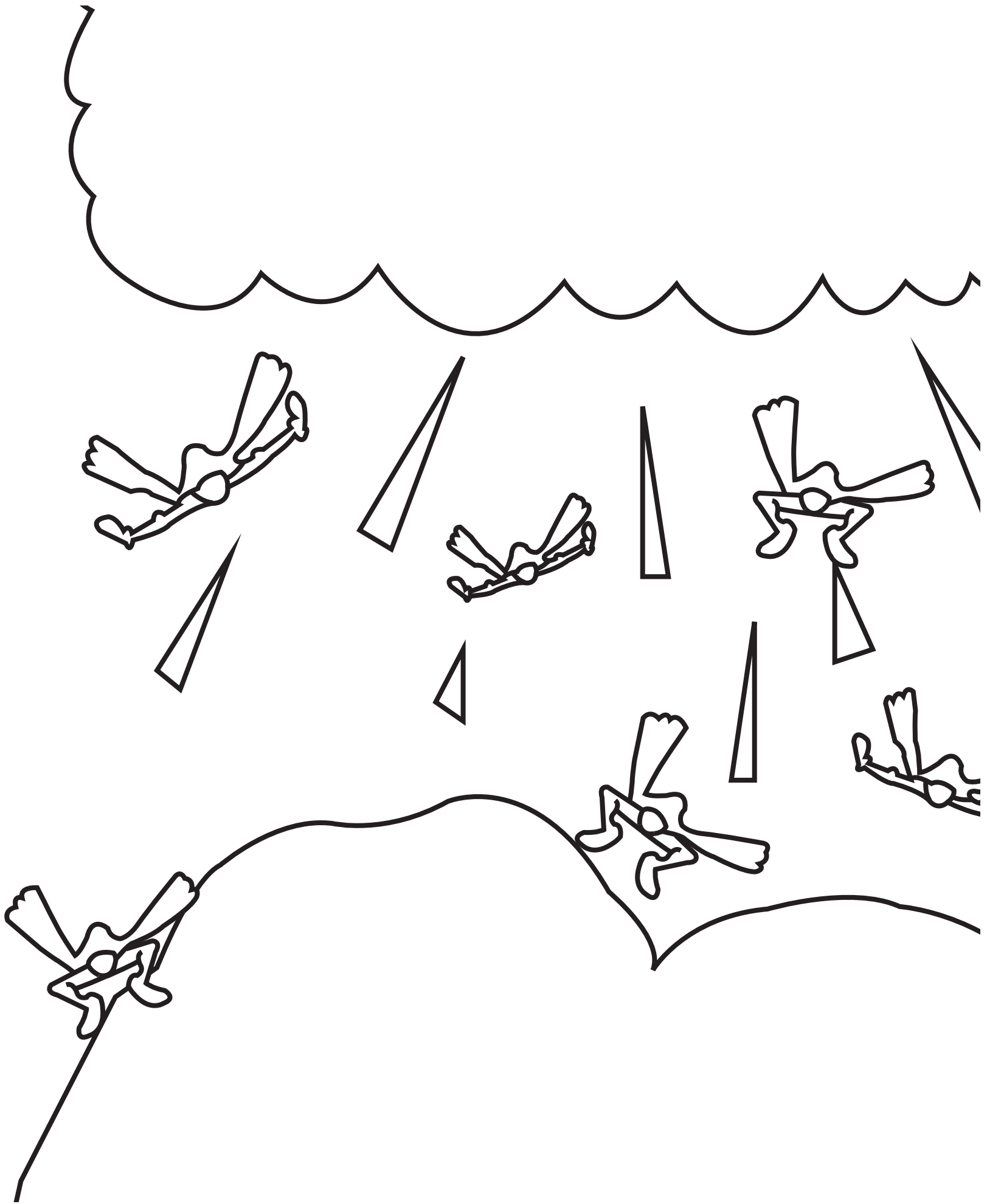




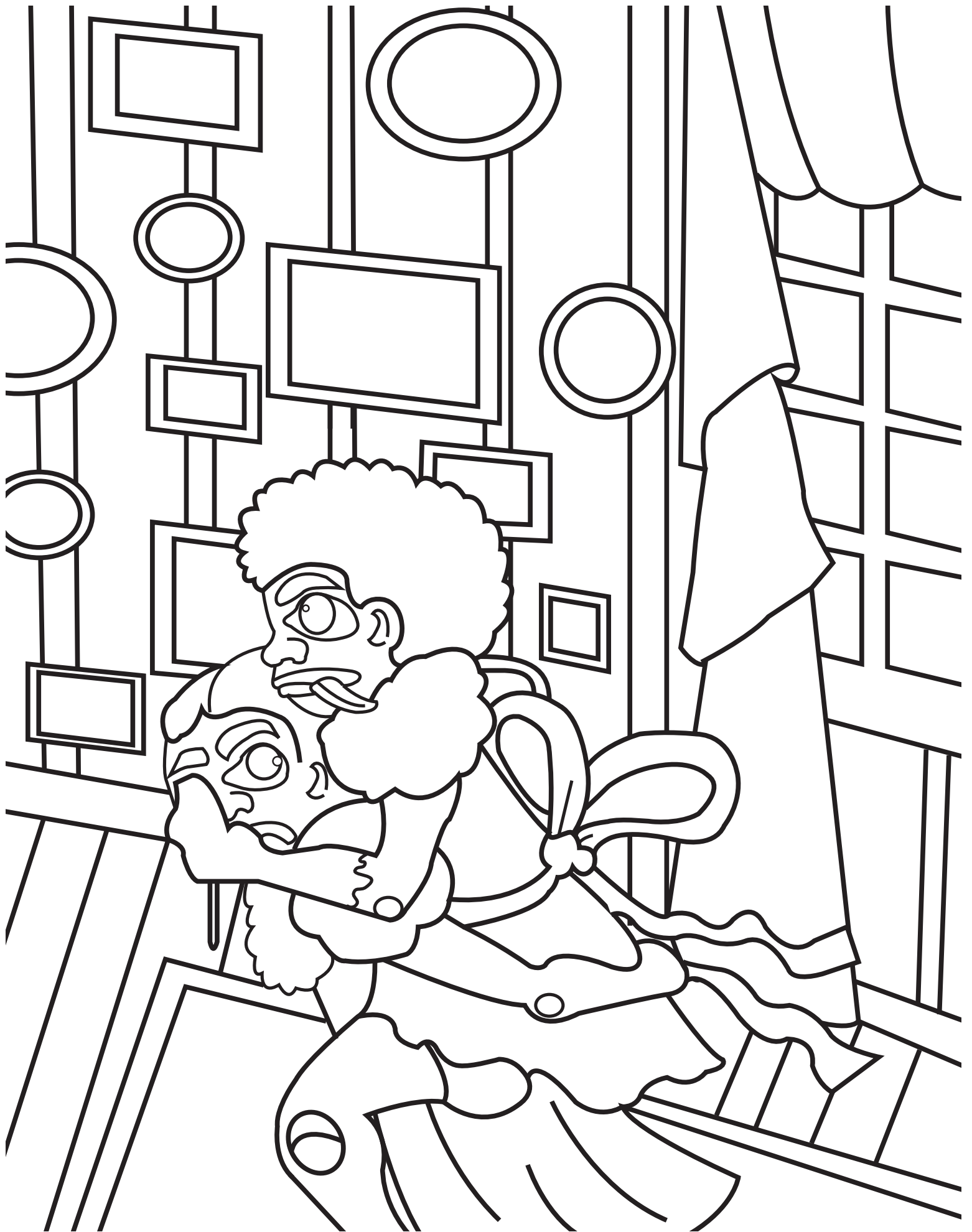


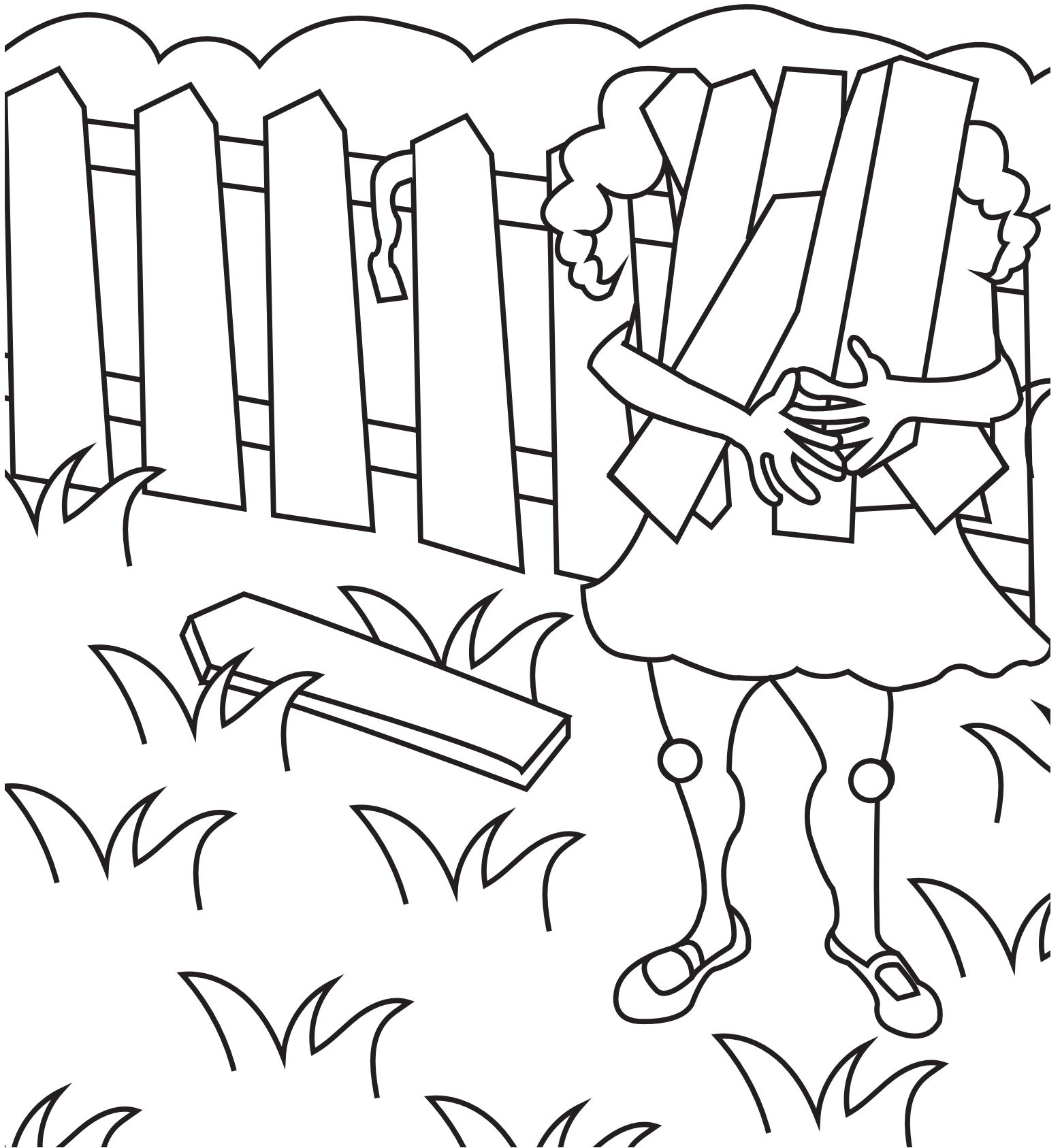


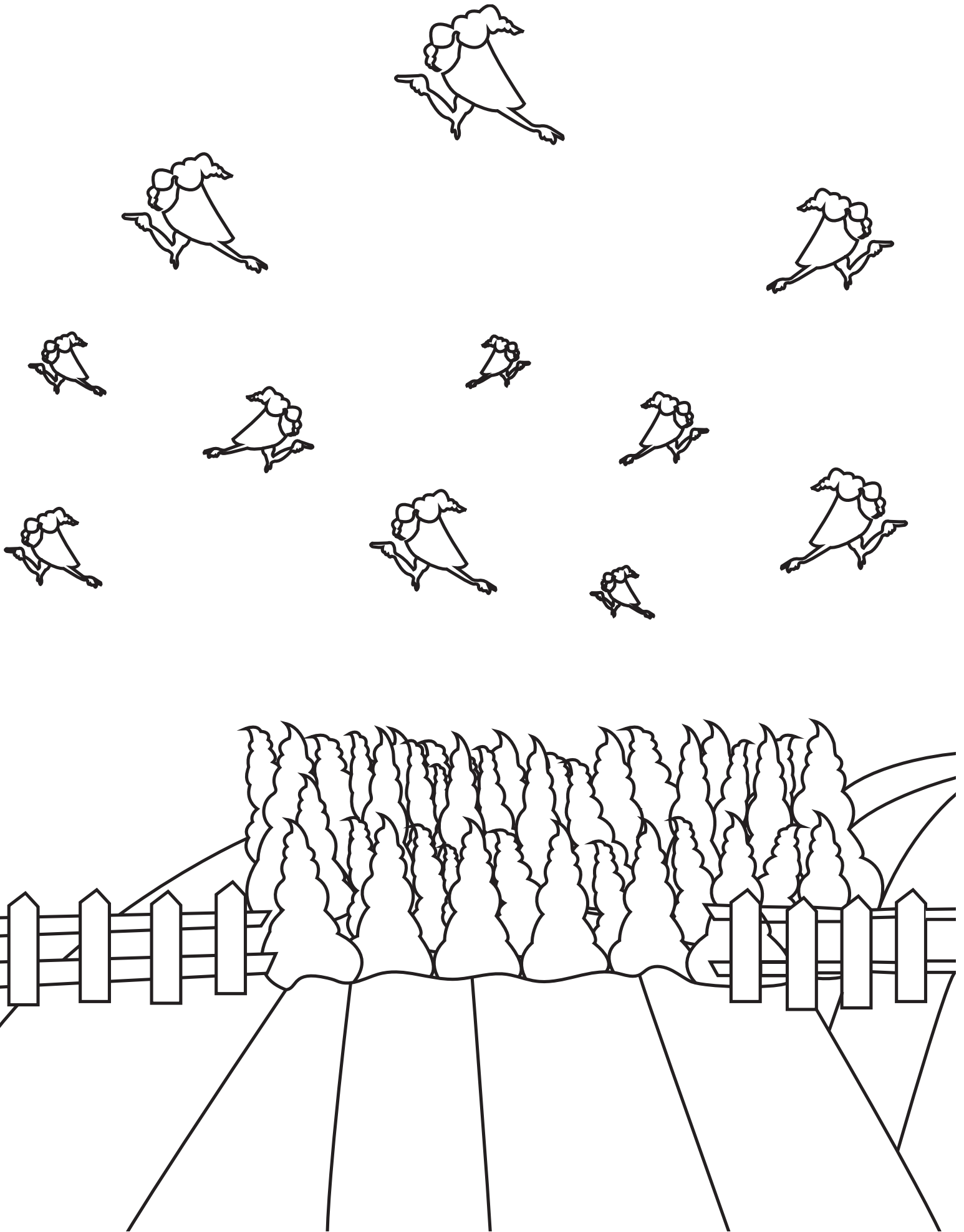


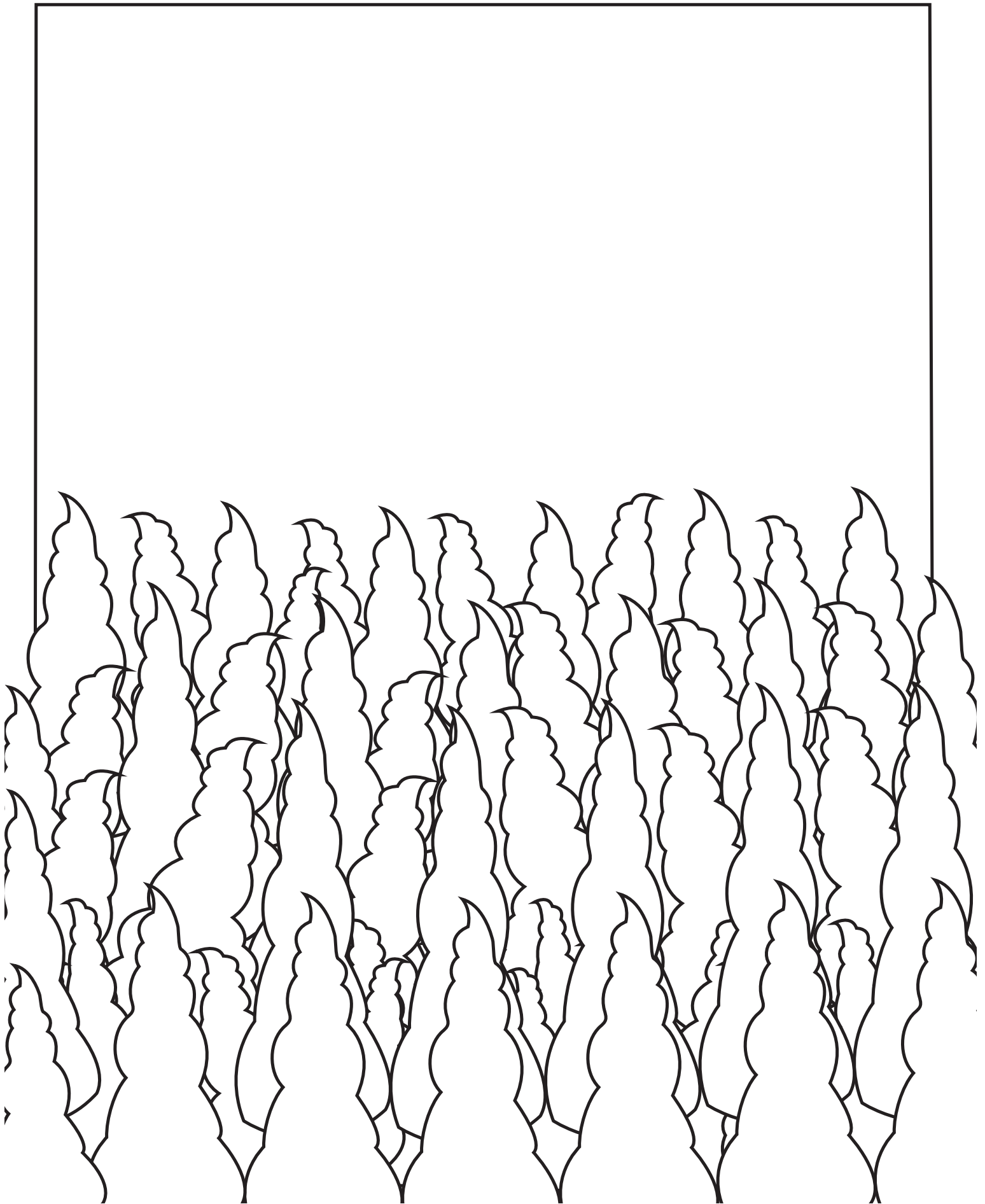


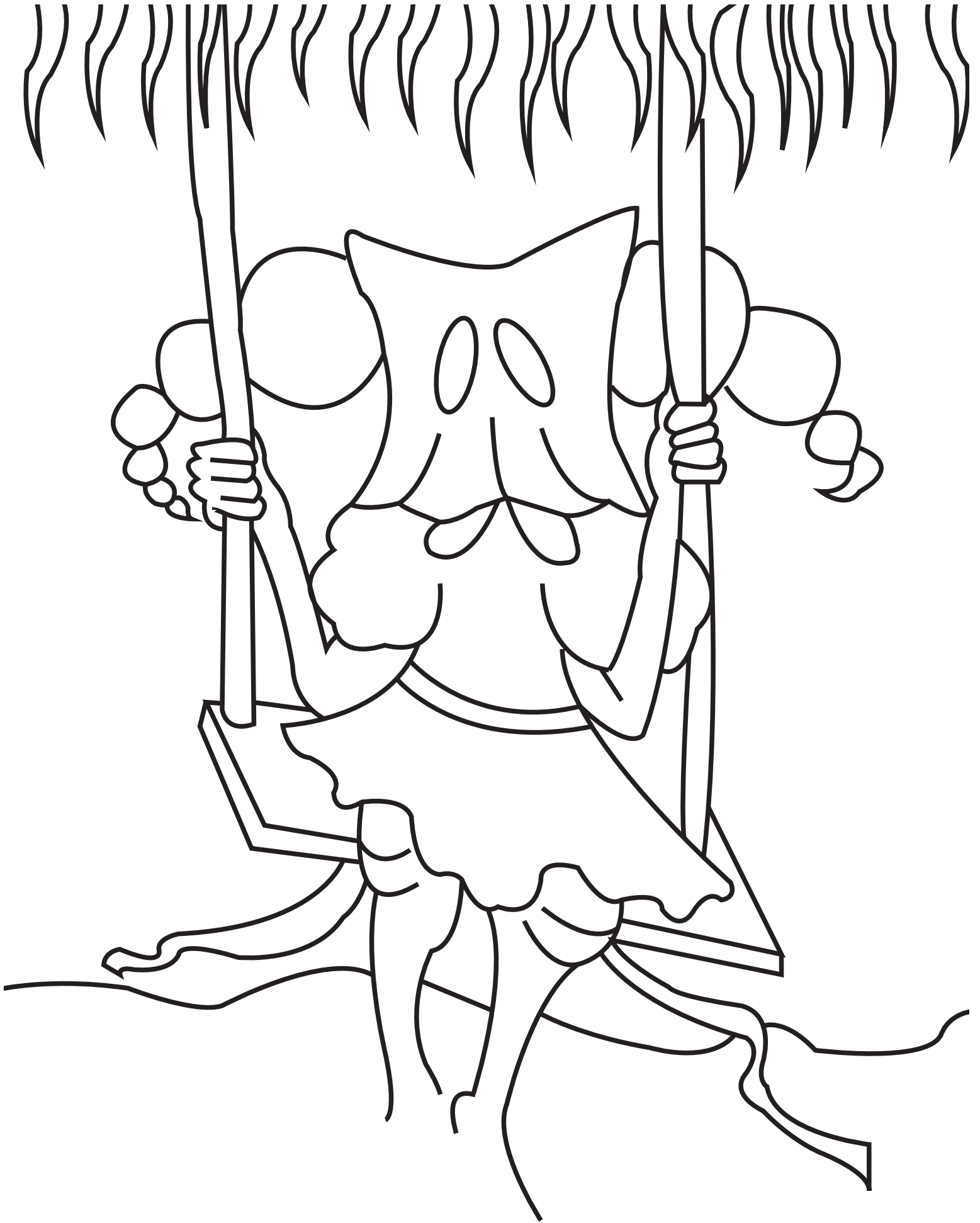


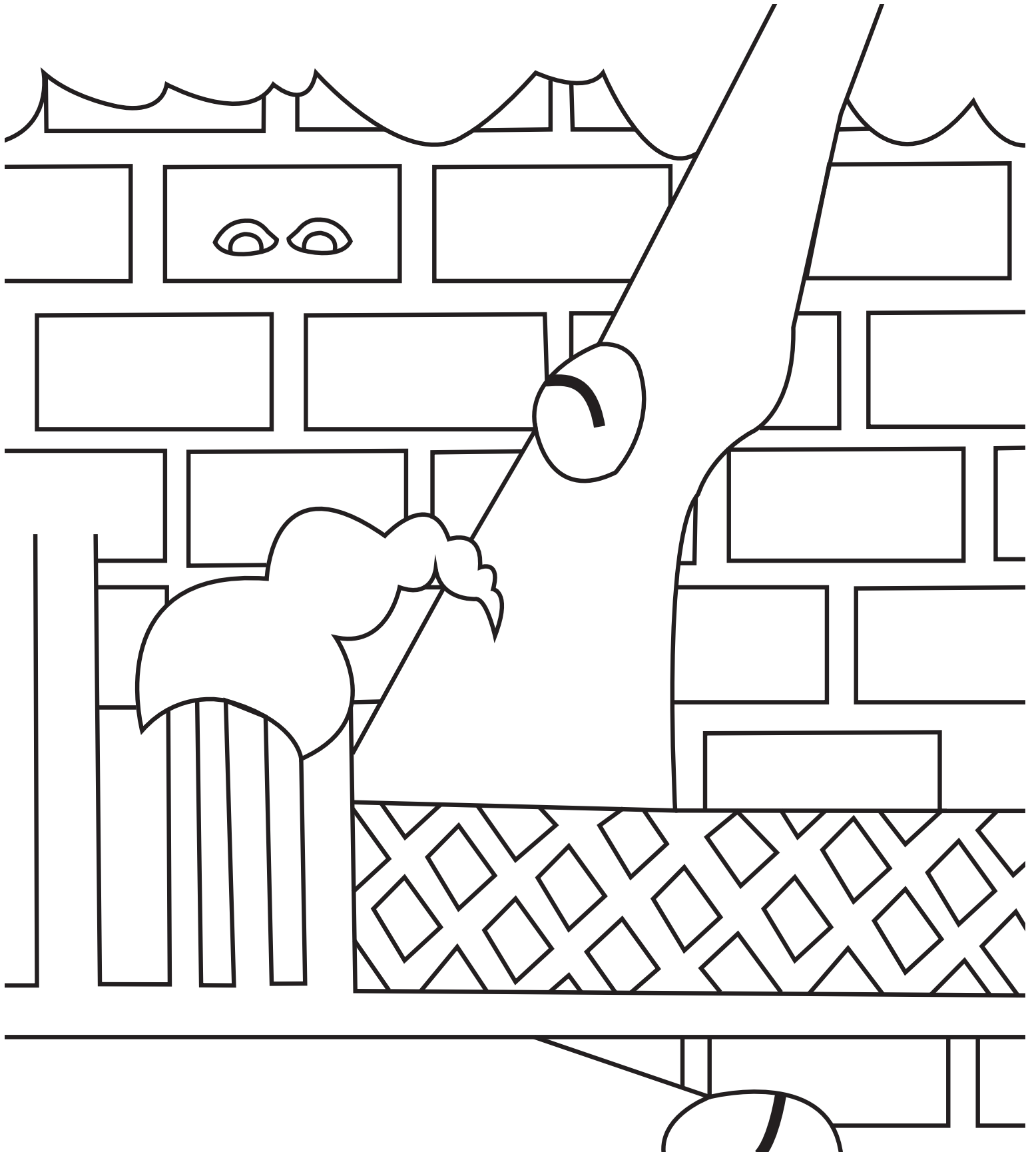












Symbols + Place

Smith's affectionate memories of childhood visits to rural North Carolina can be perceived in the images throughout her work, from animals and garden crops on her grandmother's farm, to the sweeping countryside and cotton fields of the South, to childhood games and cookouts, to church outings and community gatherings. Look closely at her work for symbols that tell us about the people and neighborhoods in her life. Look for hills, mountains, homes, fences, windows, interior decorations, picture frames, pigtails, ribbons, gloves, spirit figures or conjurers, hands, eyes, birds, and cats. What do you think these symbols mean? What symbols would you use to represent your neighborhood?

Storytelling + Collage

Smith uses many different techniques and materials in her collages, including wallpaper, wrapping paper, painted paper, and glitter. Her materials can help us understand her message, and her use of color can evoke particular moods. What is going on in the collage titled *Don't let me be lonely*? What is the first thing that catches your eye, and why? How do Smith's materials, shapes, and colors help us understand what's happening? Is the character sitting in the chair in a rural town or in a city like Omaha? What do you think happened before she sat down? Describe the setting.

Titles + Poems

Many of Smith's artwork titles are borrowed from song lyrics and literature, including poems and fables. The title of her painting *Good Neighbors* is borrowed from the 1914 poem "Mending Wall" by the American poet Robert Frost. Read the poem (printed below) aloud. Does hearing the poem change the way you think about the painting? Can you identify a connection between the words and the painting?

*Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
The work of hunters is another thing:
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
"Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
Oh, just another kind of out-door game,
One on a side. It comes to little more:
There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across*

*And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbors."
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
"Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down." I could say "Elves" to him,
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
He said it for himself. I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."*

About the Artist

Alexandria Smith (b. 1981) earned a BFA in illustration at Syracuse University, an MA in art education at New York University, and an MFA in painting and drawing at Parsons The New School for Design. She is the recipient of numerous residencies and awards, including a 2016 Pollock-Krasner grant, and the 2015–16 Virginia A. Myers Fellowship in Printmaking at the University of Iowa. She is currently an assistant professor of studio art at Wellesley College in Massachusetts. Smith has participated in numerous solo and group exhibitions at such venues as Scaramouche Gallery (New York, NY), Harvey B. Gantt Center (Charlotte, NC) The Schomburg Center for Research (New York, NY), and Yale University (New Haven, CT). In 2016, the online news website The Root named Smith one of “10 Female Artists of Color on the Rise.”

The Wanda D. Ewing Commission

Smith is the recipient of The Union’s first annual Wanda D. Ewing Commission, which supports the production and presentation of new work by a woman artist of the African diaspora. Wanda Denise Ewing (1970–2013), the late Omahan artist for whom The Union’s gallery is named, was influenced by folk-art aesthetics, craft traditions, and the limited depictions of Black women in Western art history and popular culture. Through her art, she celebrated Black bodies and explored the complex interplay of race, gender, and sexuality. The commission was established to carry forth Ewing’s legacy and to create a vital cultural opportunity for Greater Omaha, where narratives of Black female experience are too often absent from the arts discourse.

About The Union

The Union for Contemporary Art is committed to strengthening the creative culture of Greater Omaha by providing direct support to local artists and increasing the visibility of contemporary art forms in our community of north Omaha. In every endeavor, we strive to inspire positive social change. Founded on the belief that the arts can be a vehicle for social justice and civic engagement, The Union utilizes the arts to connect our diverse communities in innovative and meaningful ways.

“Mending Wall” from *The Poetry of Robert Frost* by Robert Frost, edited by Edward Connery Lathem. Copyright 1916, 1923, 1928, 1930, 1934, 1939, 1947, 1949, © 1969 by Holt Rinehart and Winston, Inc. Copyright 1936, 1942, 1944, 1945, 1947, 1948, 1951, 1953, 1954, © 1956, 1958, 1959, 1961, 1962 by Robert Frost. Copyright © 1962, 1967, 1970 by Leslie Frost Ballantine.



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