

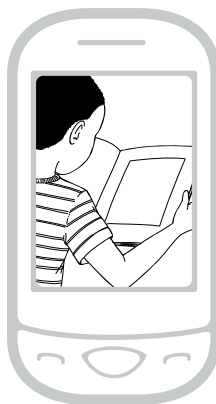
Miss Helen's Magical World

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Nadene Kriel*



Miss Helen's Magical World

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Miss Helen's Magical World

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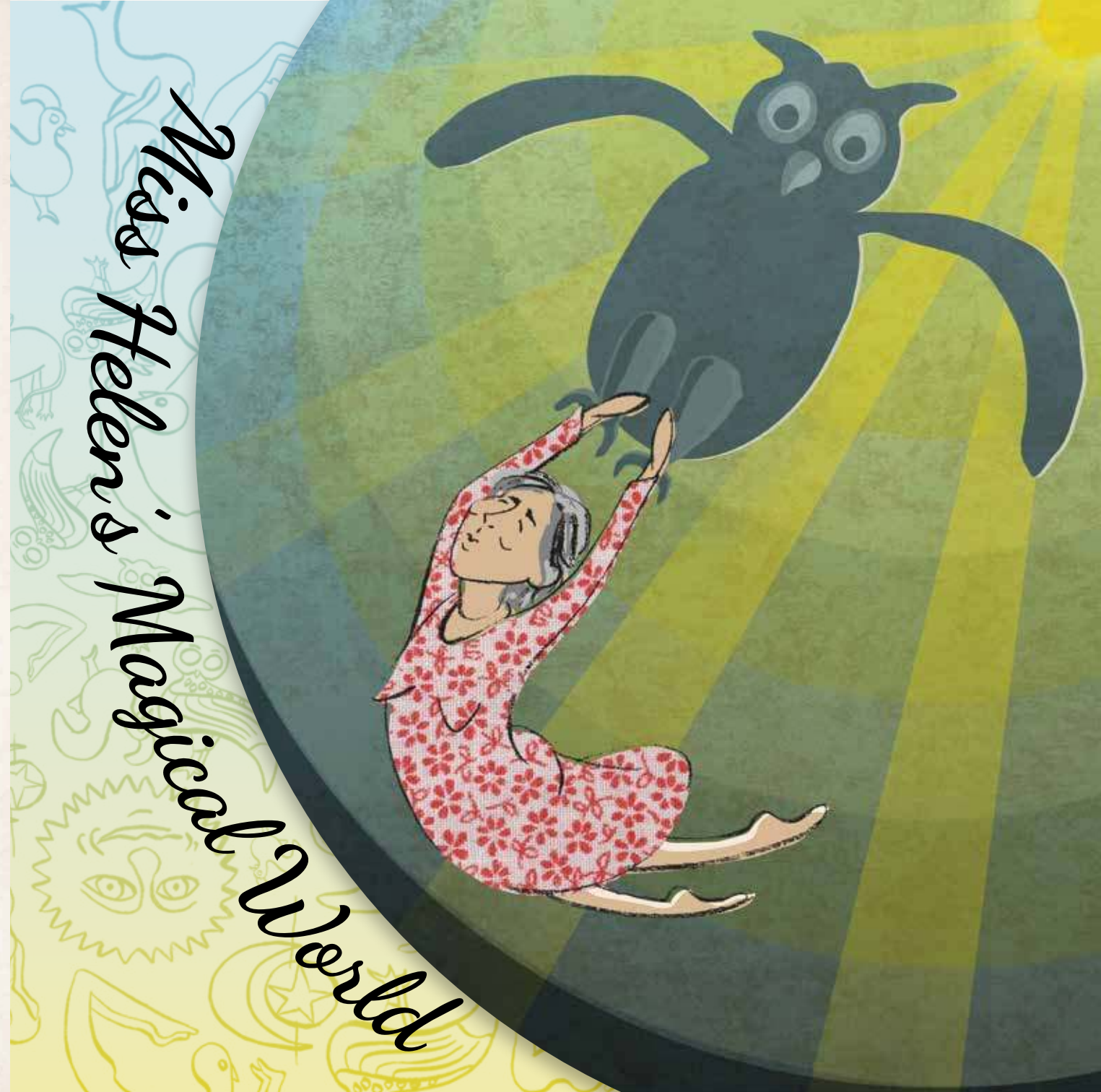
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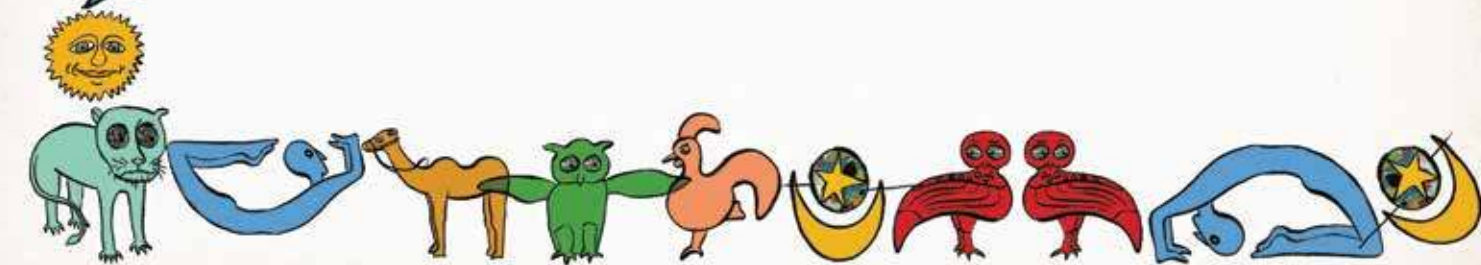
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Meet my friend Helen. She was born in a little Karoo town called Nieu Bethesda. There was not much going on in this town. But she made a whole world here. She even made me. And she named her house after me.

IT WAS CALLED 'THE OWL HOUSE'.

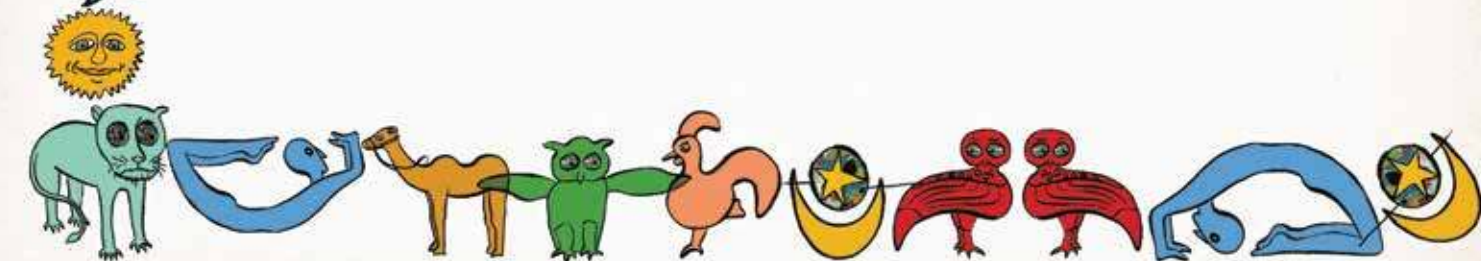


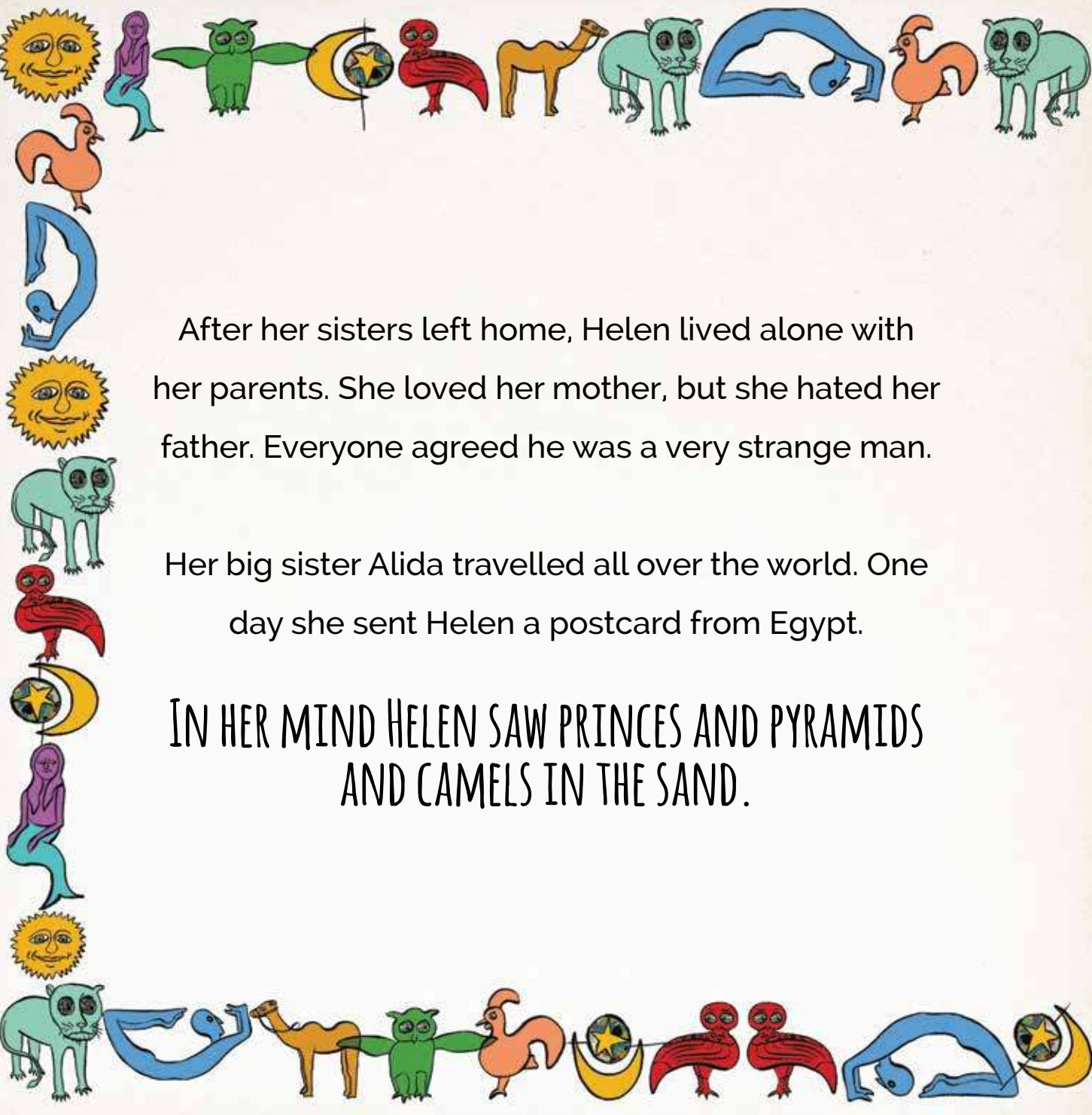


Most of Helen's nine brothers and sisters were grown up and gone by the time she arrived. But she still had her sisters Annie and Alida.

Helen didn't have many friends in the village, but she didn't mind.

FROM THE START, HELEN DID THINGS
DIFFERENTLY FROM MOST PEOPLE.



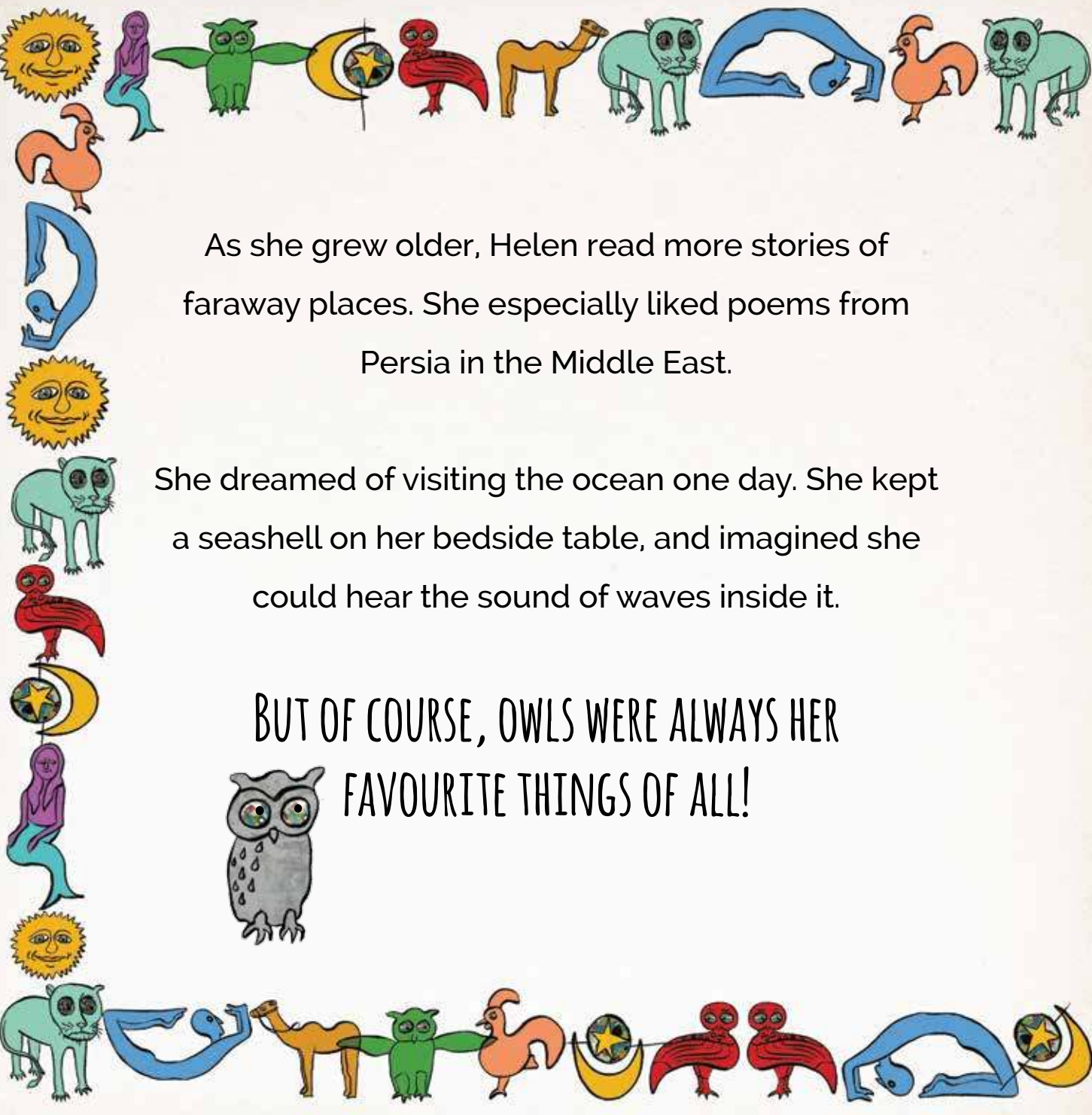


After her sisters left home, Helen lived alone with her parents. She loved her mother, but she hated her father. Everyone agreed he was a very strange man.

Her big sister Alida travelled all over the world. One day she sent Helen a postcard from Egypt.

IN HER MIND HELEN SAW PRINCES AND PYRAMIDS
AND CAMELS IN THE SAND.

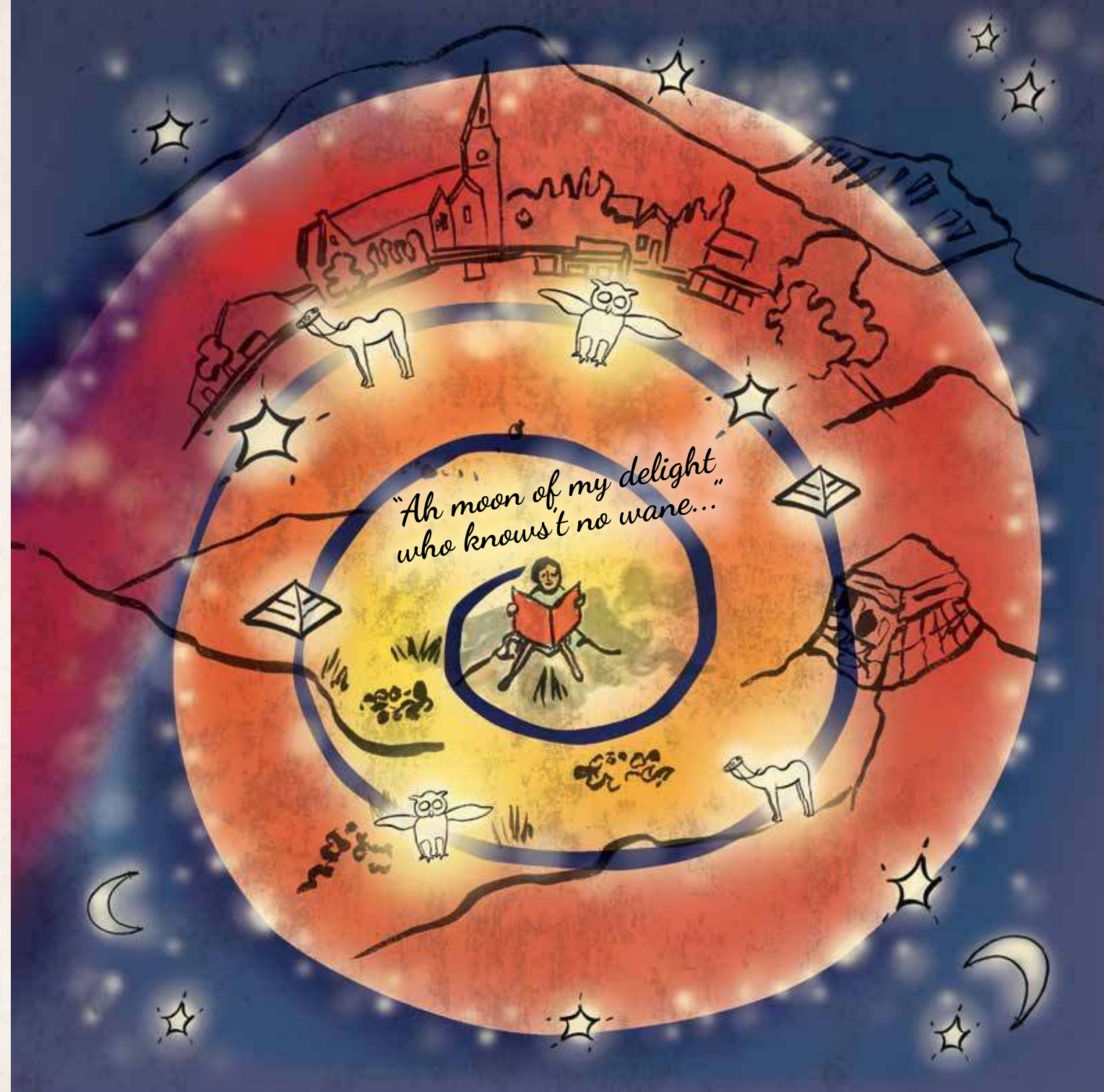


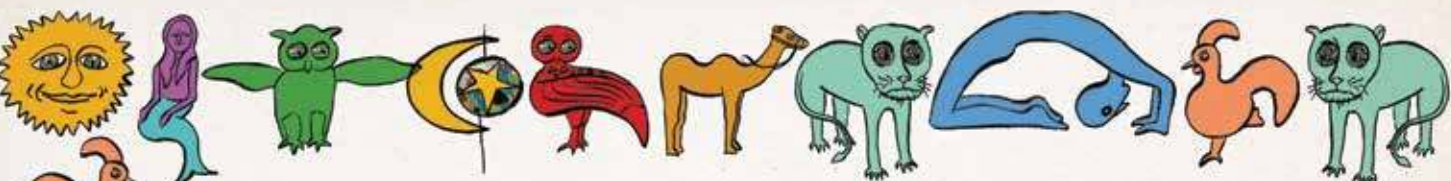


As she grew older, Helen read more stories of faraway places. She especially liked poems from Persia in the Middle East.

She dreamed of visiting the ocean one day. She kept a seashell on her bedside table, and imagined she could hear the sound of waves inside it.

BUT OF COURSE, OWLS WERE ALWAYS HER FAVOURITE THINGS OF ALL!





Helen loved books and stories so much that she decided to become a teacher. She was very good at it too. But then she met Johannes Pienaar. He was also a teacher, and a writer and actor.

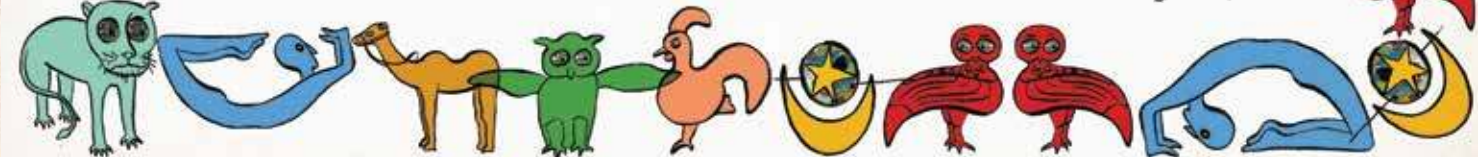
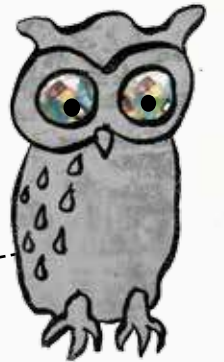
HE CONVINCED HER TO RUN AWAY WITH HIM.

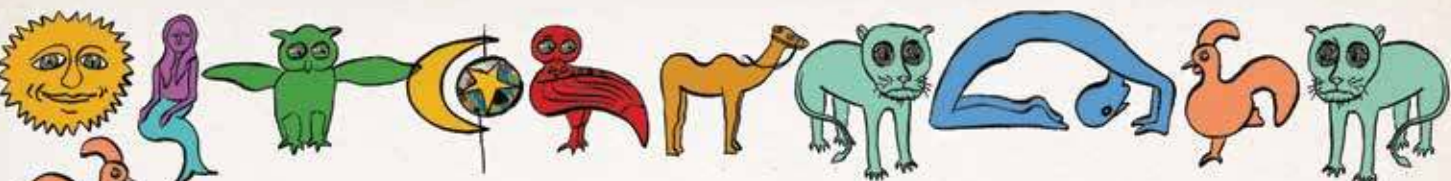





Helen and Johannes got married. They travelled to many different towns, teaching and performing plays. Helen thought she might start a family like her sisters had done. But it was not to be. She and her husband were always fighting.

WHEN HELEN'S MOTHER BECAME VERY SICK, SHE DECIDED IT WAS TIME TO GO BACK HOME.





Helen was not happy. Her mother was so sick, and
her father was so grumpy. She kept to herself. People
thought she was strange.



The night her mother died, Helen kept a candle
burning beside her bed all night.

With the help of that little light, Helen didn't feel so
afraid of the dark.



AND REMEMBER, WE OWLS WERE THERE TOO.
WE WATCHED OVER HER, CALLING WOO-WOOH!





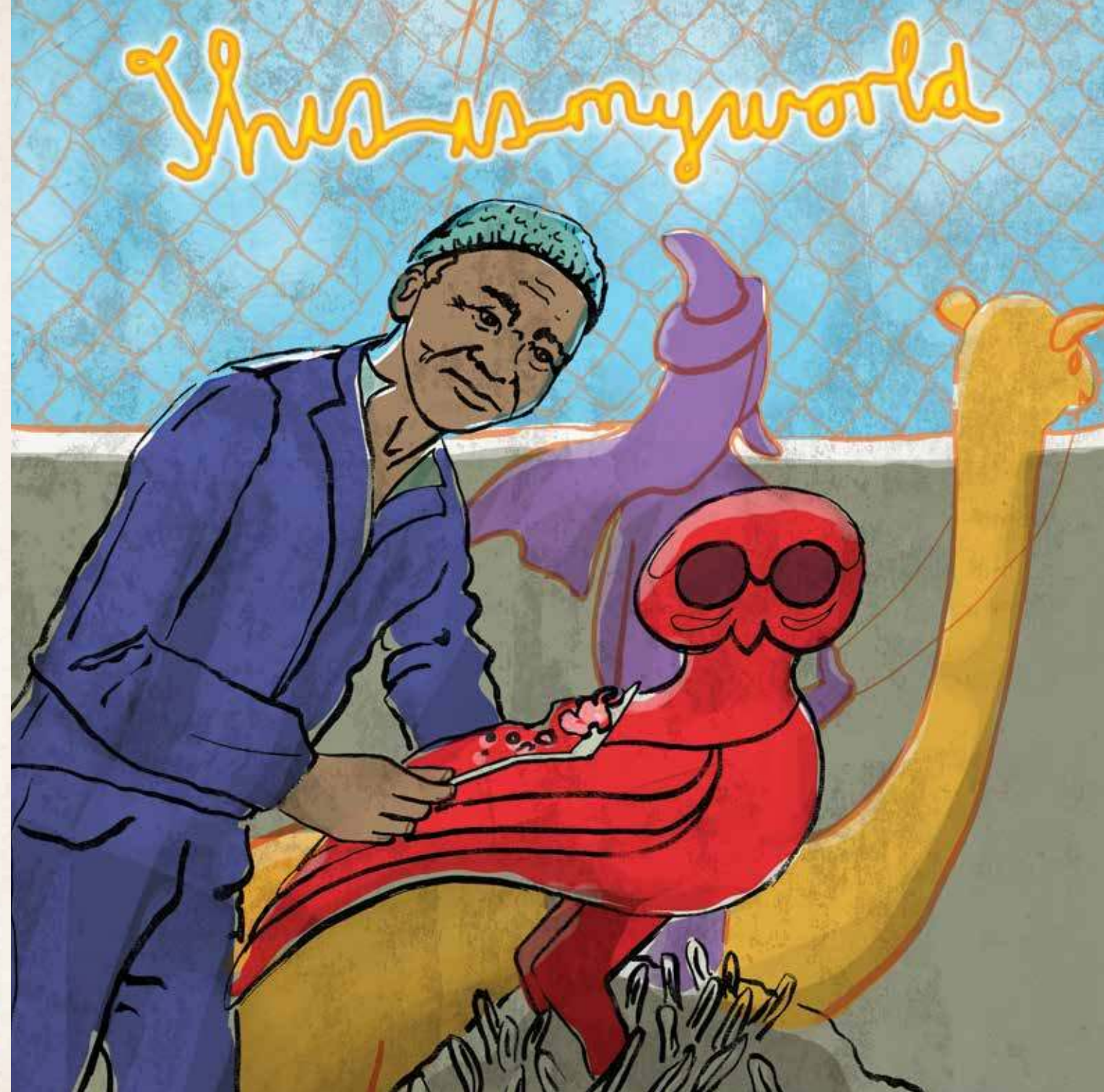
Helen decided she wanted brightness in her life. She began by changing the space around her.

She needed helpers. Three men from the village, Jonas Adams, Piet van der Merwe, and Koos Malgas, made the things she imagined out of wire and cement.

She filled her back garden with interesting creatures. There were sphinxes and camels, mermaids and cats. And lots and lots of owls! She called it her camel yard.

On the fence she made a wire sign.

IT SAID:
'This is my world.'





During the day Helen made sculptures. At night, she practised catching light.

She collected glasses and mirrors, candles and lamps. Anything that would shine.

She put lanterns in every room. Mirrors caught and reflected the light. She covered the walls in glittering glass so that they could shine too.

After Helen's father died, she had the house to herself. Each night she slept in a different room.

SHE WOULD ALWAYS CHOOSE THE ONE WITH THE BEST VIEW OF THE MOON AND THE STARS.





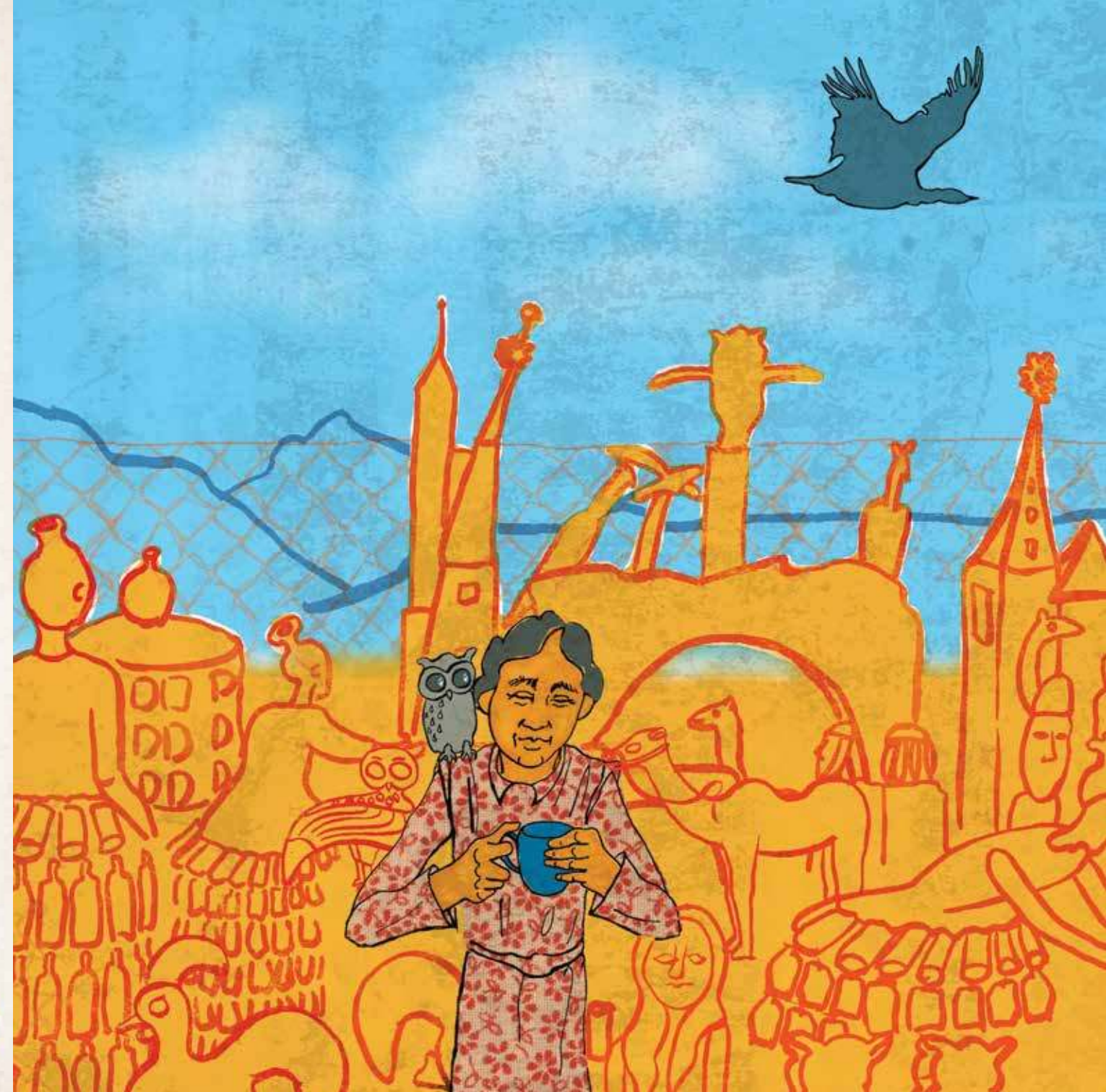
The people of Nieu Bethesda would walk past
Helen's garden and marvel at the creatures in it.

Some of the village children brought her glass bottles
for her sculptures and called her 'Miss Helen'. She
always thanked them with sweets.

Others were not so friendly. They called her names
and threw stones on her roof.

Miss Helen spent all her money on glass and
cement. She lived on bread and black tea.

IN HER DIARY SHE WROTE:
"IN MY LONELINESS I AM HAPPY."

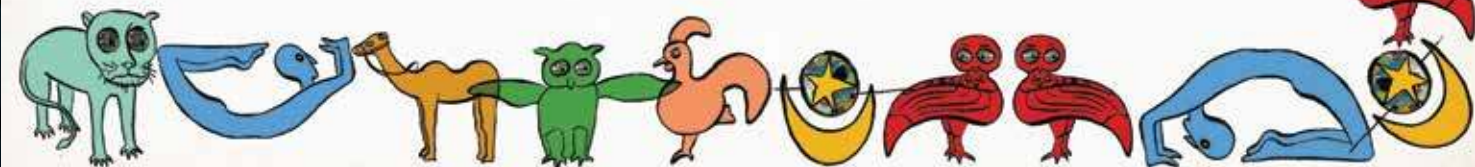




THE GARDEN GREW AND GREW, UNTIL THERE WAS
HARDLY SPACE LEFT FOR ANY MORE CREATURES.

Miss Helen was tired now. Her hands were stiff and
sore. Her eyes were going blind from working with
tiny bits of glass.

She wasn't afraid of being alone. But she was still
afraid of the dark. And her world was getting darker
and darker. She knew that soon she wouldn't be able
to see anything at all.





But when she closed her eyes for the last time,
Miss Helen didn't see darkness. She saw the sun
and the moon and the stars. She saw wise men and
mermaids, camels and cats, acrobats and owls with
big brown glittering glass eyes.



AND WE STILL STAND HERE TODAY, JUST THE WAY SHE
LEFT US, IN THE GARDEN SHE MADE, LOOKING EAST.







Helen Martins was an artist who made her imaginary world real. A lonely woman living in a small town, she travelled to faraway places in her mind. She turned her home and garden into a magical creative space. Now, Miss Helen's 'Owl House' in Nieu Bethesda is a National Monument. Many people travel to her former home every year to sit in her Camel Yard among the pilgrims and mermaids, and walk through the glittering glass halls.

THIS IS THE STORY OF HELEN MARTINS' BATTLE AGAINST
DARKNESS, TOLD BY ONE OF THE CREATURES SHE LOVED BEST,
THE WISE OLD OWL.



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