

CHIMERA

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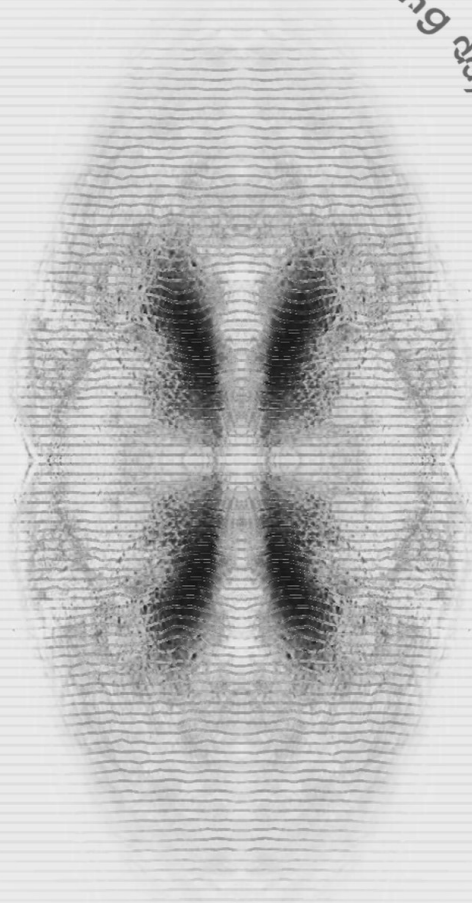
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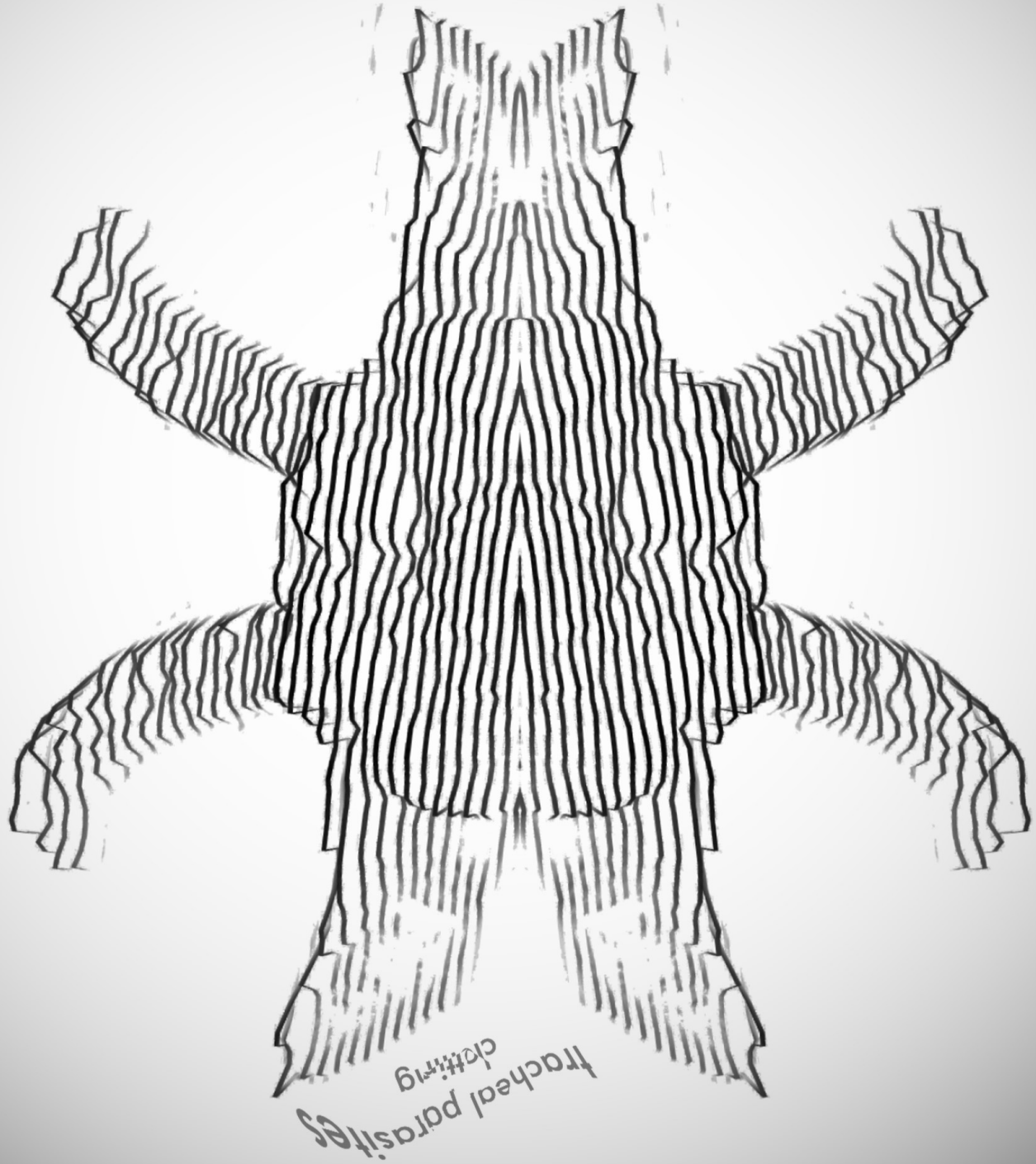
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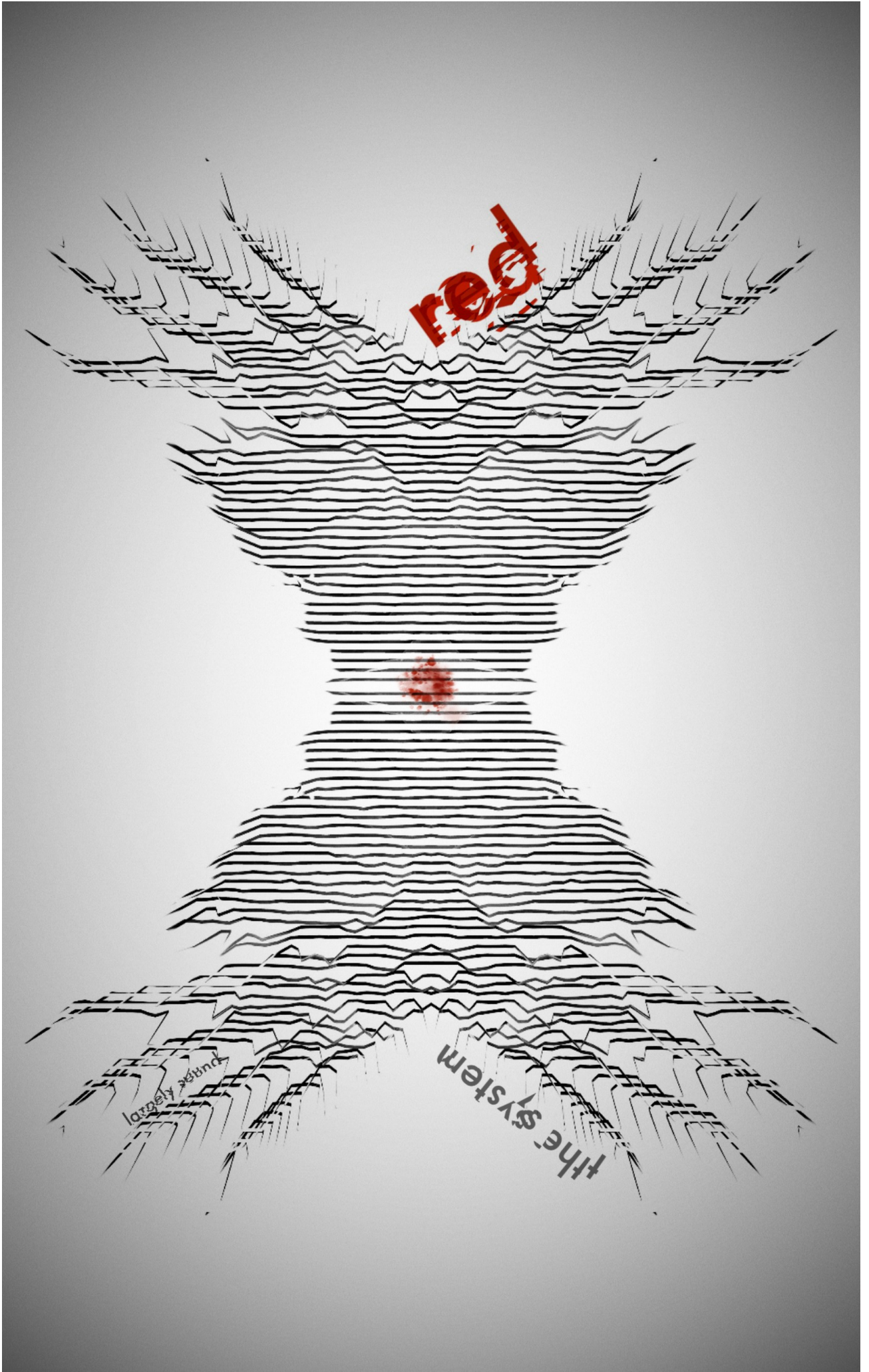
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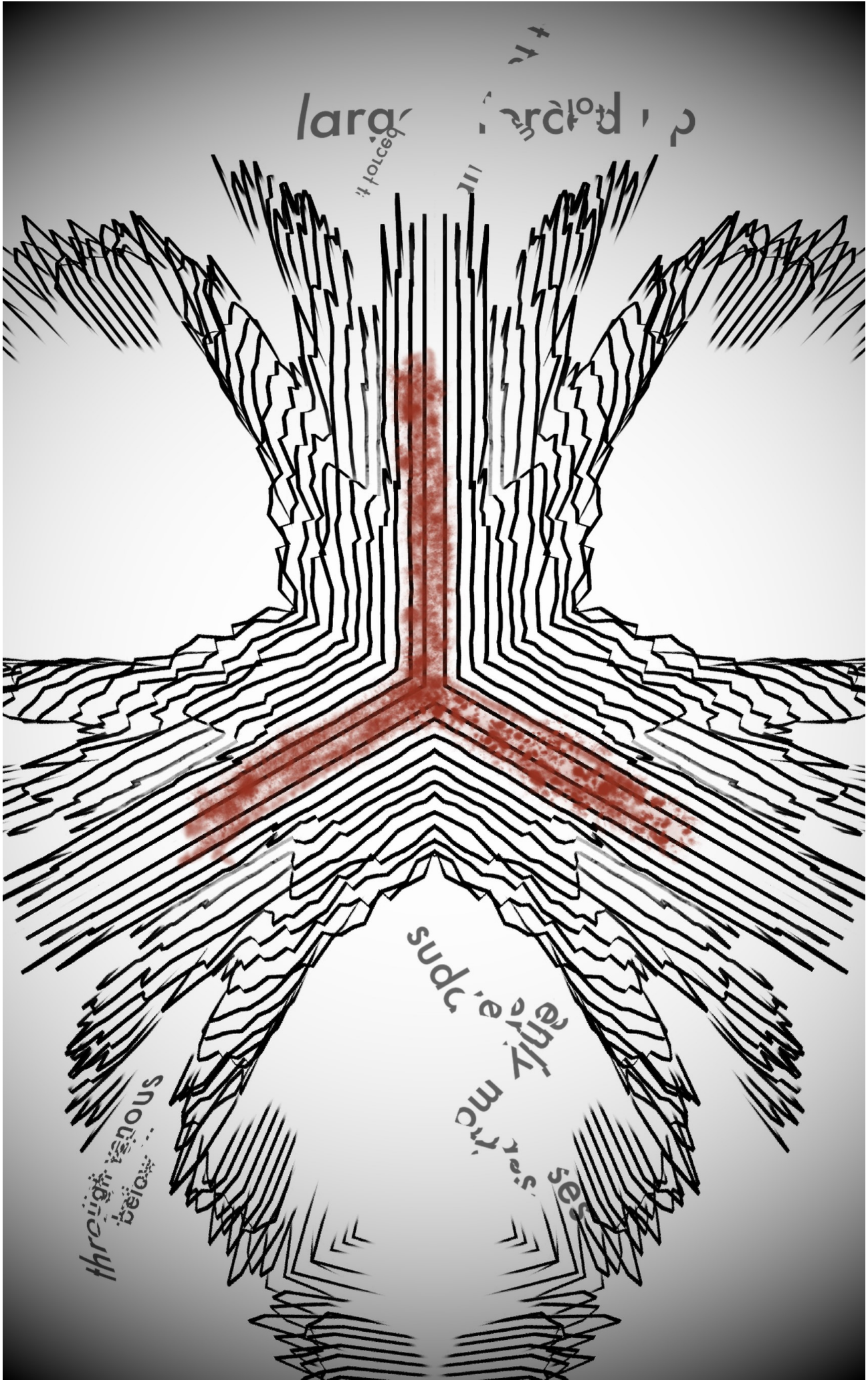


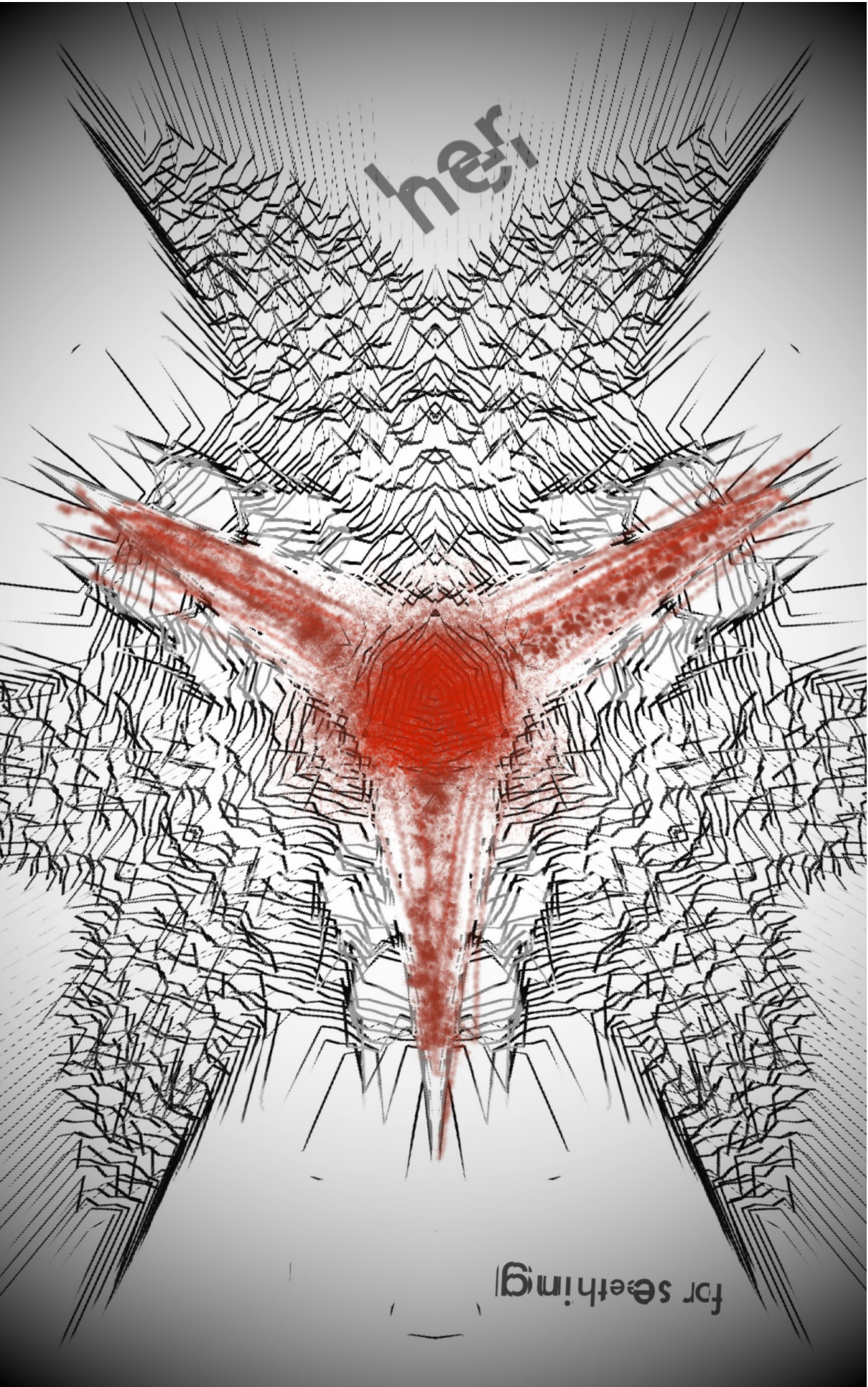


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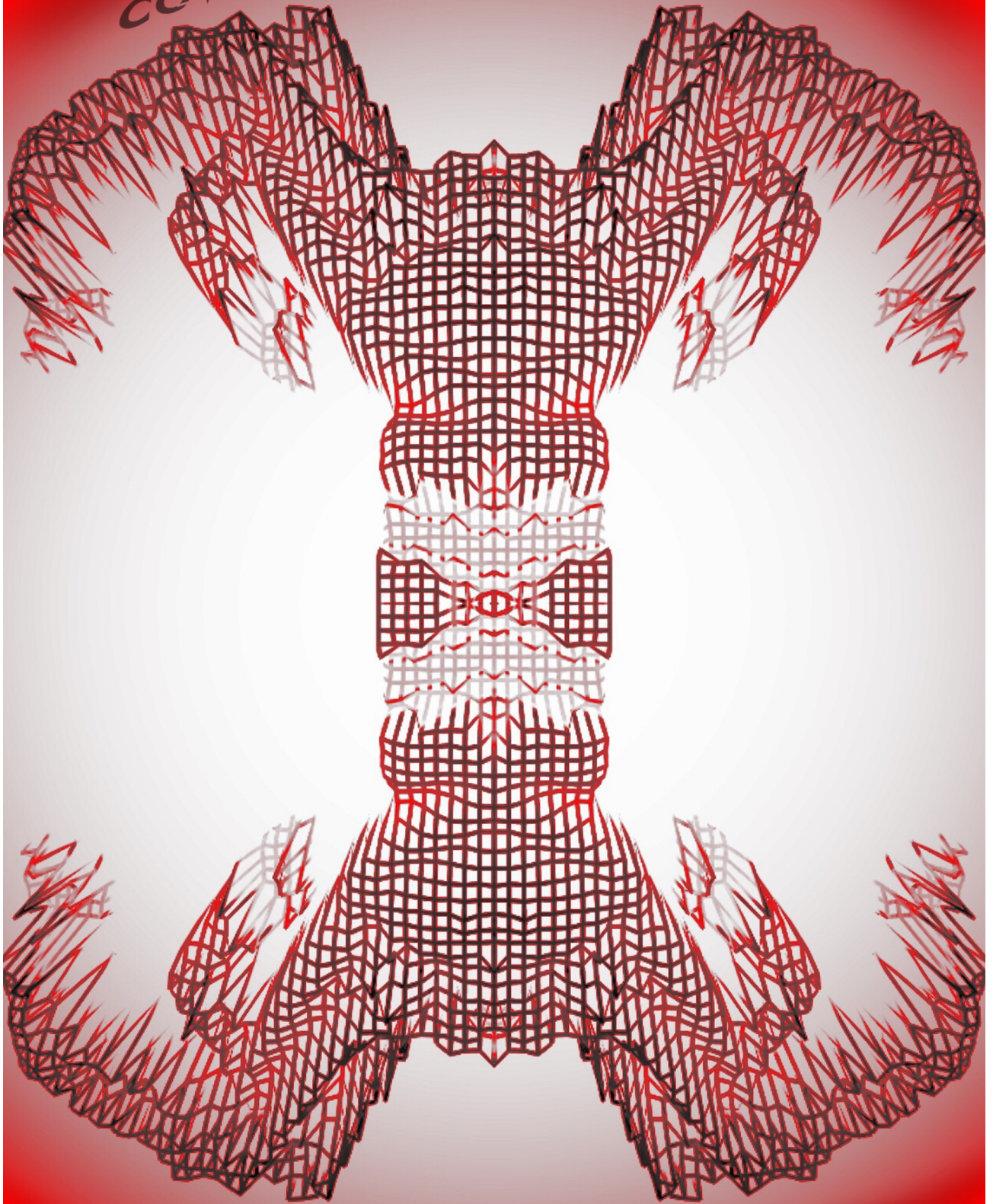




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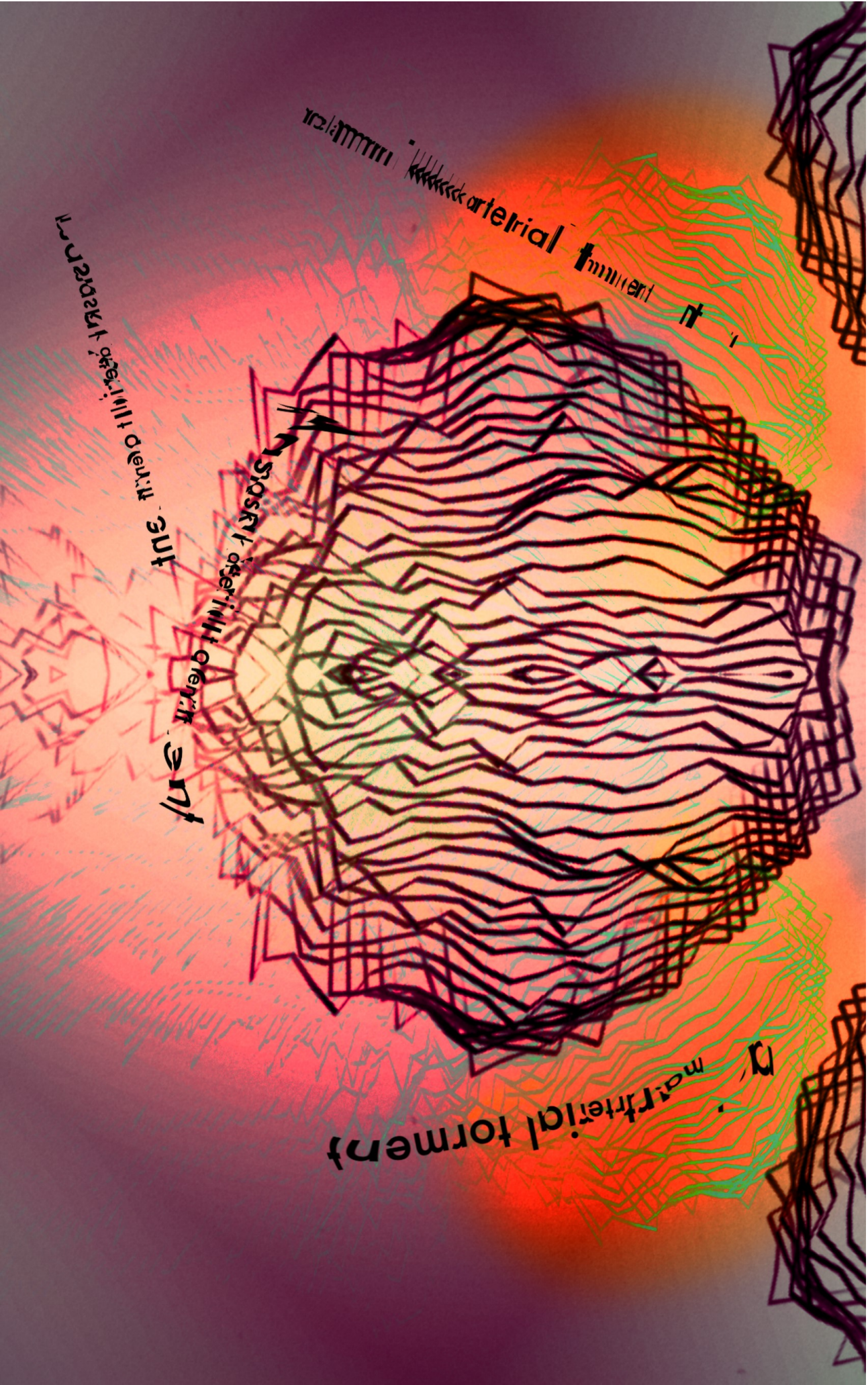
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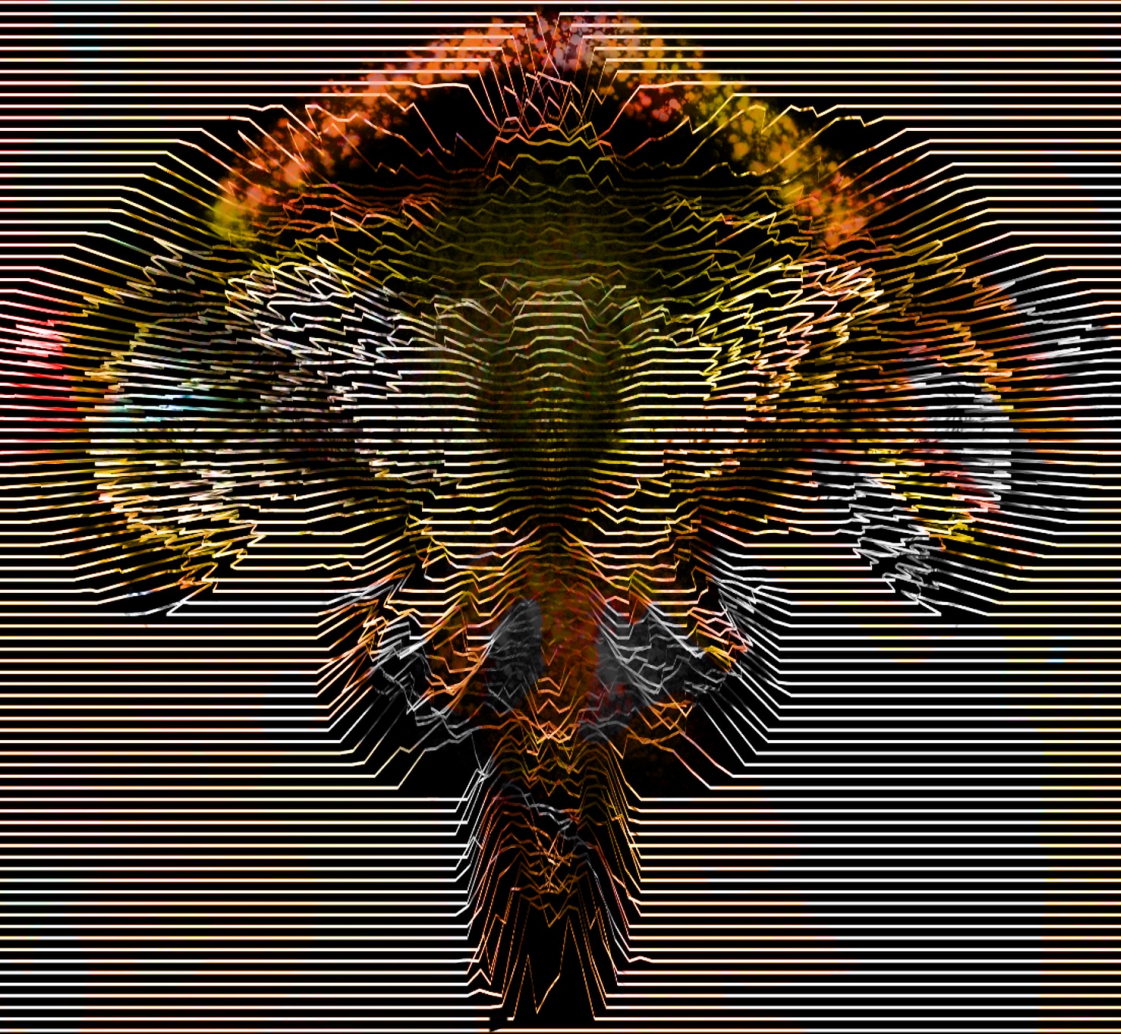
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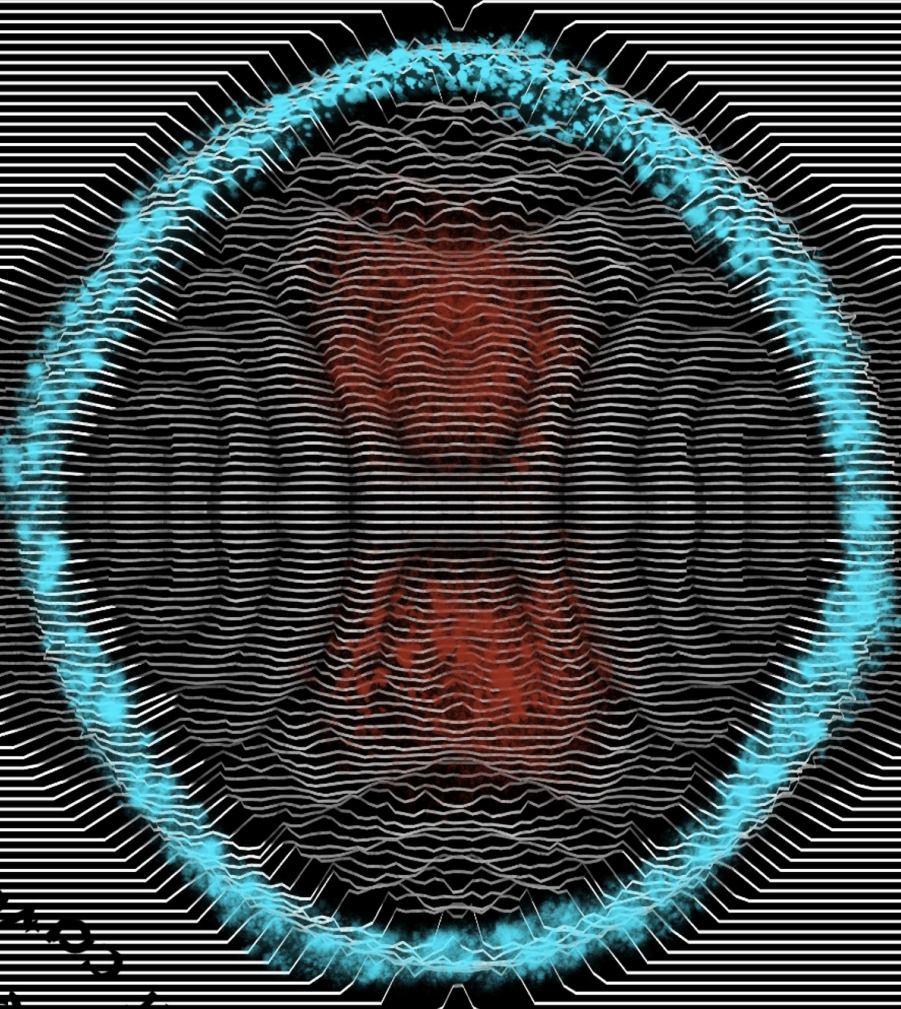


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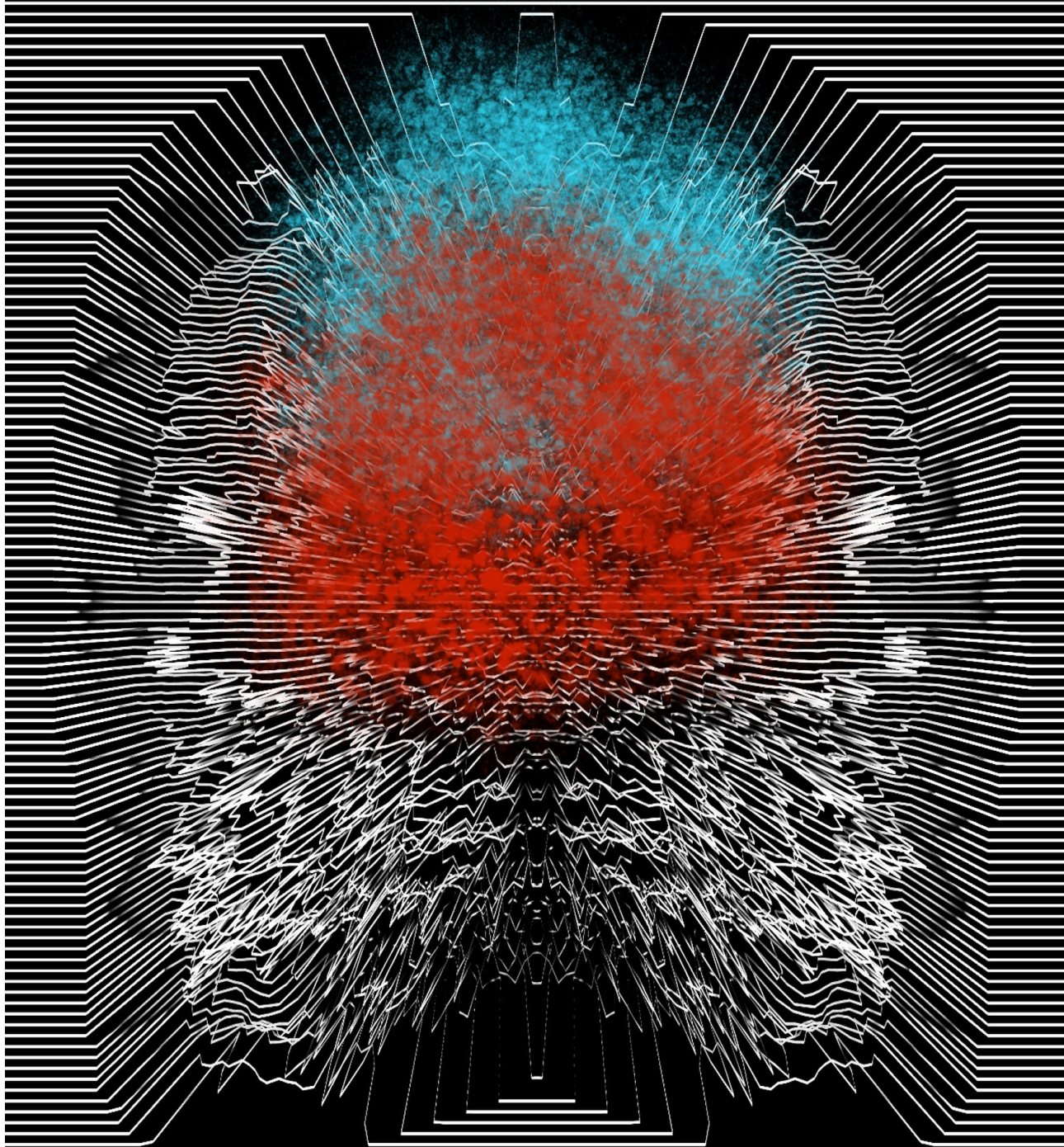
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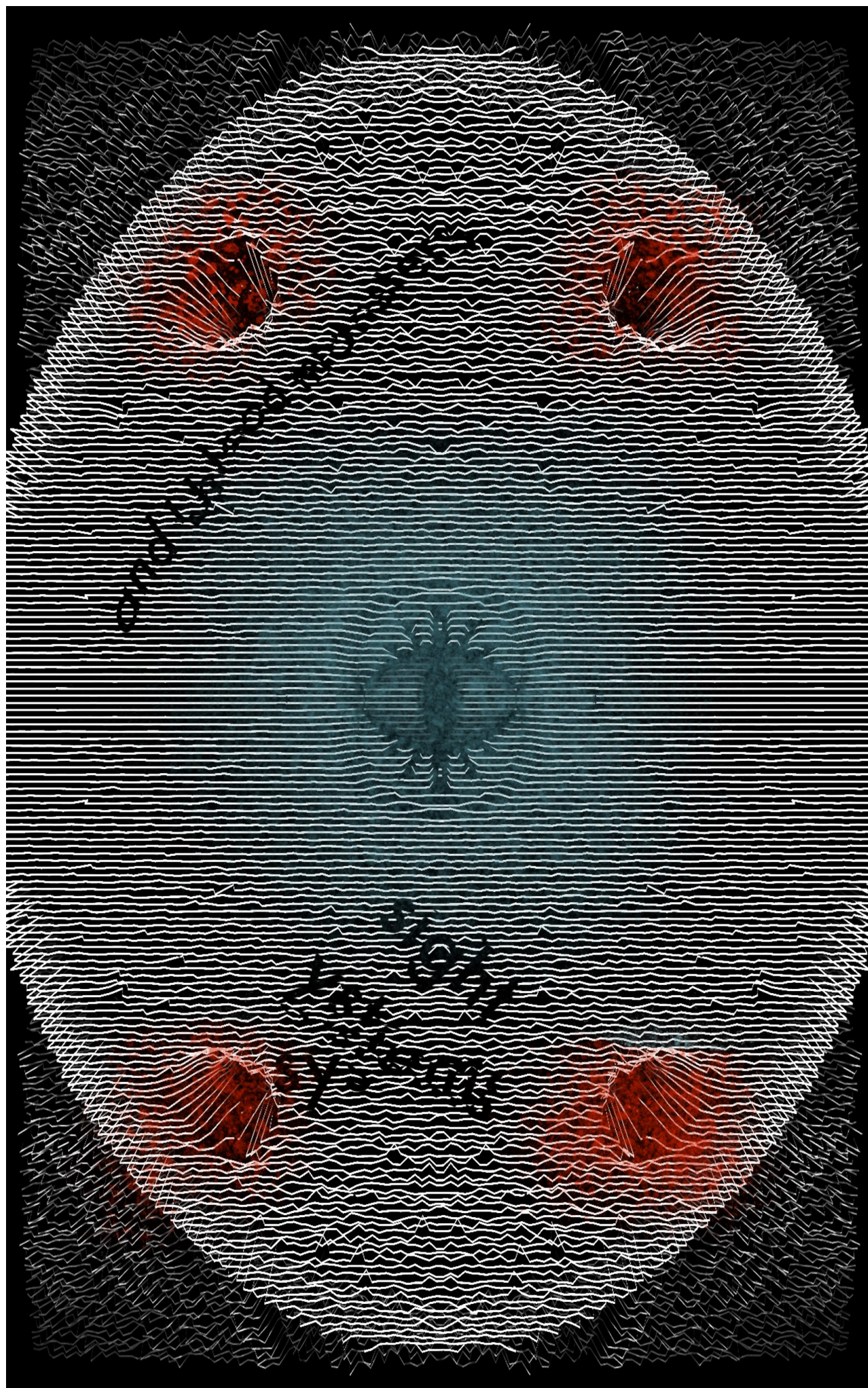


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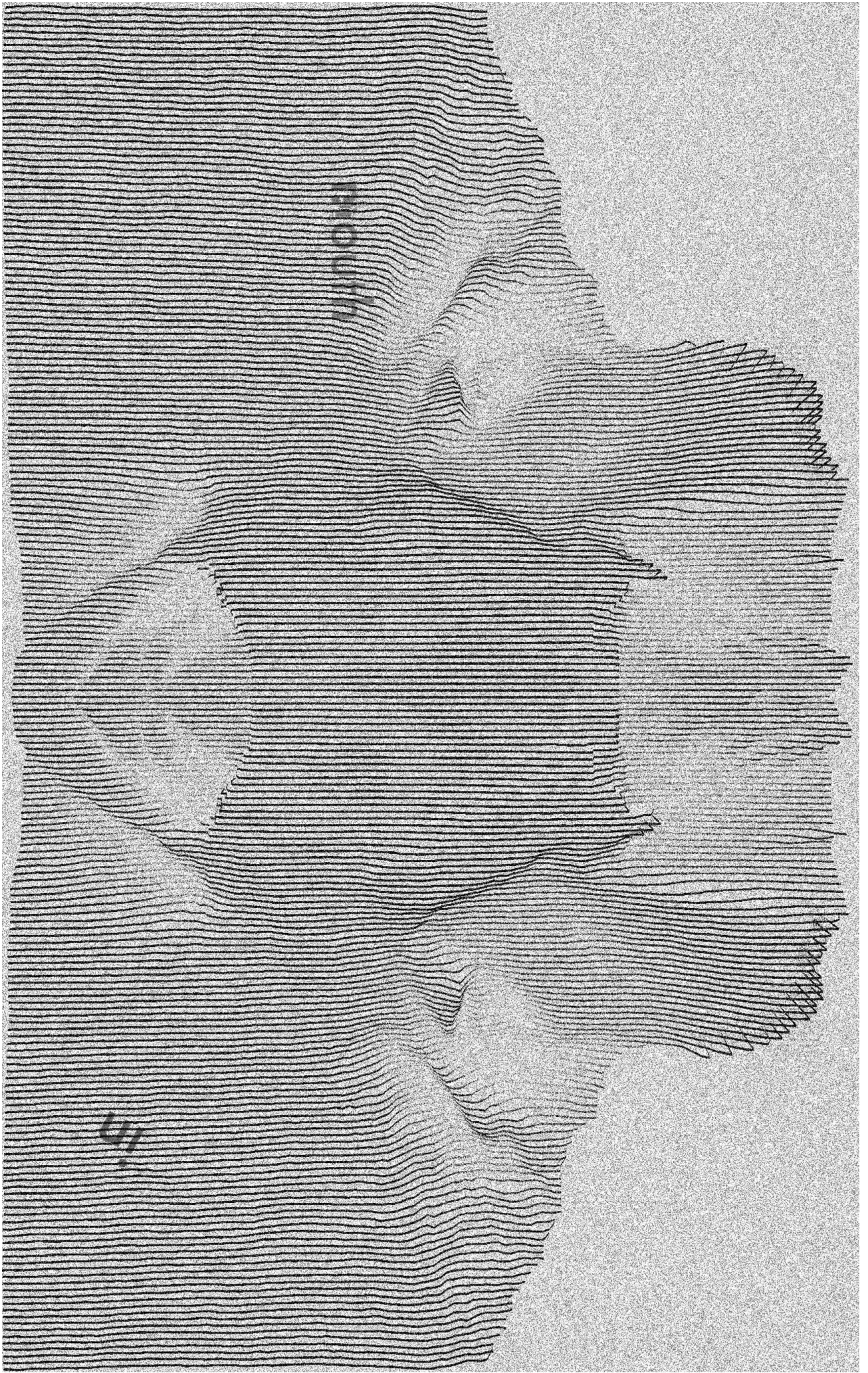


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Chimera:

1

a: capitalized : a fire-breathing she-monster in Greek mythology having a lion's head, a goat's body, and a serpent's tail

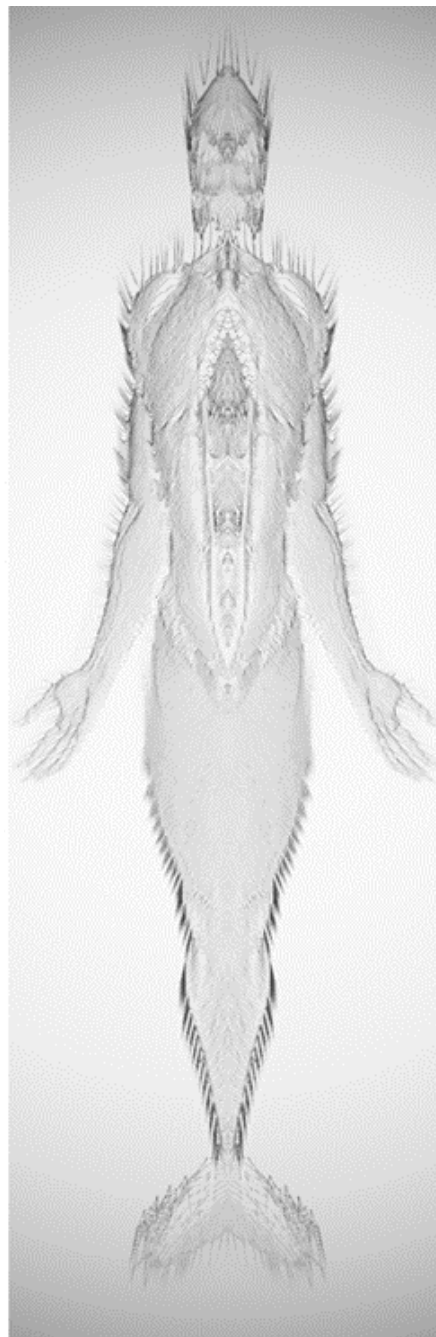
b: an imaginary monster compounded of incongruous parts

2: an illusion or fabrication of the mind, especially an unrealizable dream

3: an individual, organ, or part consisting of tissues of diverse genetic constitution

(Merriam-Webster dictionary)

Chimera originated in a happy accident. I had been experimenting on my iPad with various grotesque forms for a sequence of visual poems called "Monster", combining radically transformed images of snakes, bats, human skulls and the like, and had started to incorporate an element of symmetry. Playing around with anatomical diagrams, I unintentionally created this merman-like figure:

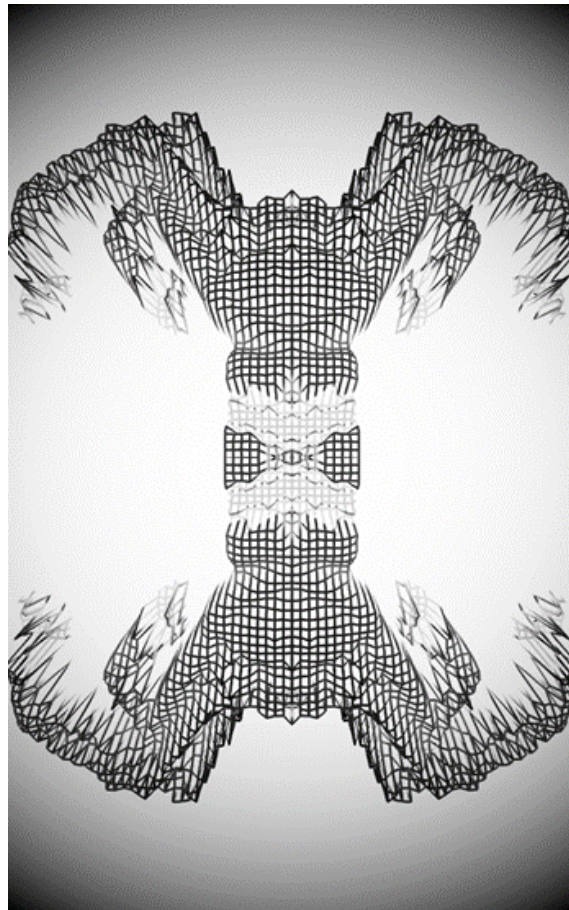


Having recently constructed a short sequence of symmetrical visual poems entitled "Genesis" for the Penteract Press anthology *Reflections*, it felt right to continue to experiment with the potential of symmetry and mirroring. "Genesis" reimagined the first book of the Bible with a scientific twist, envisaging God not as a supernatural entity, but as the code that makes life on our planet: DNA. In one of the poems ("God"), the words "deoxyribonucleic acid" appear, in a broken, symmetrical figuration, resembling the language of some alien civilisation:



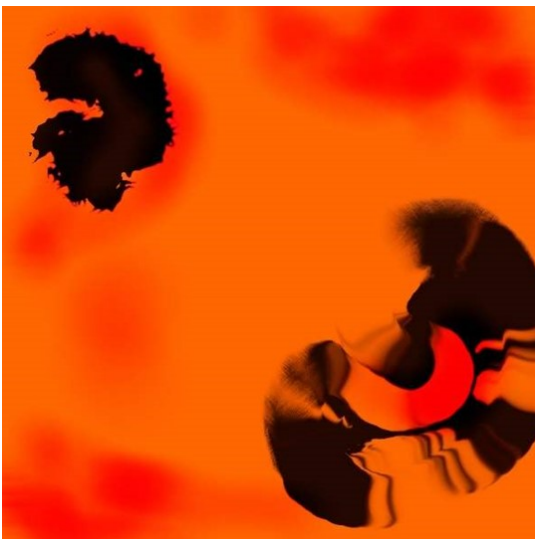
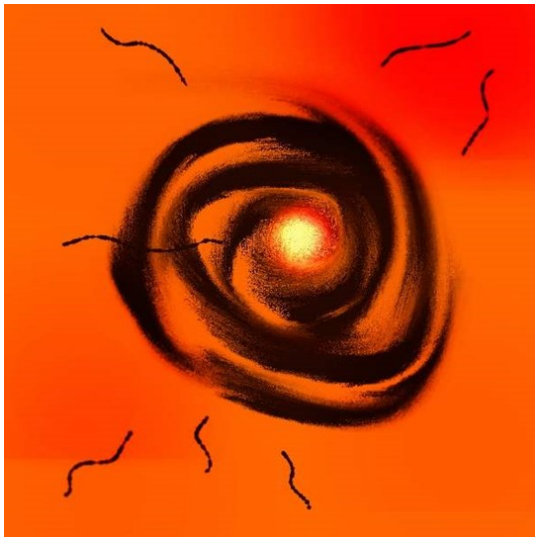
So, with DNA and biology on my mind (as well as monsters and impossible animals), I explored symmetry further, with no particular aim, save that of making something interesting that might become the starting-point for a visual poem.

Working quickly and experimentally, I made several images, none of them any good, until this one presented itself:



This clawed entity struck an immediate chord with me, reminding me of the computer-generated biomorphs used by Richard Dawkins to illustrate evolution in *The Blind Watchmaker*. As Dawkins acknowledges in the book, the term “biomorph” was coined by biologist Desmond Morris, whose surrealistic paintings abound with shapes suggestive of animal and vegetable life. Dawkins’s biomorphs are simpler, more diagrammatic than Morris’s, neatly illustrating cumulative selection, the process by which

small mutations accumulate over time into significant changes in the body and behaviour of an organism. Inspired by this idea, I decided to make more biomorphic shapes, which I could then put into a sequence depicting an evolutionary journey from something small, simple, embryonic, to larger, more complex, monstrous forms. I had made something along similar lines years before, a computer art series called "Microcosmos", in which organic shapes and swirling galaxies float about in an orange vacuum. Here are some examples:



This time, however, as well as emphasising evolutionary processes more overtly than in "Microcosmos", I wanted to add a textual element. Given that I had accidentally made an imaginary, somewhat threatening organism, it seemed fitting to combine text from some Wikipedia entries on zoology with an excerpt from Bram Stoker's *The Lair of the White Worm*, a novel that revels in the horrors of abnormal biology. In the spirit of evolution's random mutations, I used an online cut-up machine to generate from these sources reams of garbled, ungrammatical and occasionally poetic text, from which I selected phrases and clauses that, through juxtapositions of words that do not usually belong together, emitted the greatest spark (what André Breton referred to as "la lumière de l'image", "the light of the image"). As I worked on the pictorial elements of each visual poem, I added the text, but not without having fragmented and distorted it in some way, often to the point of illegibility; the words became subject to the same violent transformations as the pictures, and I rarely allowed them to settle into anything stable. I wanted to suggest nascent language, words crawling from the primal ooze, sometimes growing teeth or wings, sometimes flailing and failing. It was a humbling process: many of my best lines (or, more accurately, many of the best lines I selected) were deformed beyond recognition. But the process was more important than any individual poem, so I had to let it happen. For example, "widening flesh materials" was deformed in various ways, including this:



Having made a large quantity of poems in this way, I eliminated the weak ones (survival of the fittest!) and put the remaining eighteen into a sequence suggestive of evolution. I called the sequence *Chimera*, to reflect the mixed DNA of the textual elements (zoological and fictional), the generally monstrous character of the poems, and the futility at the heart of the project; every mutation was transitory, superseded by the next, in a potentially endless story of chaos and volatility, without resolution or catharsis.

Further mutations were to come; when Anthony Etherin accepted *Chimera* for publication with Penteract Press, he suggested I add more poems, and invited me to include colour. Up to that point, I had stuck with monochrome (as I had recently with some other sequences of visual poems, including "Monster"), but the opportunity to enhance *Chimera* with colour excited me. I ended up with fifteen new poems (mostly constituting missing links in the original series of eighteen), and another strand of DNA, in the form of colour, which emerges from the grey in the 11th poem, and undergoes its own evolutionary narrative.

The addition of new material also led me to reconsider the stopping-point of the sequence. Originally, a monochrome version of what is now the 29th poem was the last in the series. The poem is a distorted self portrait: the monstrous face and mouth of the human being, hurling words like weapons. I had in mind the notion that our species is nature's ultimate chimera, an ape whose intellect (far exceeding the mental capabilities essential for survival) had turned it into a destructive work of its own imagination. I also wanted to mock myself; our age of Instagram narcissism brings out the iconoclast in me, to such

an extent that I would smash *all* images, including my own. However, the opportunity to add poems to *Chimera* returned me to the original idea, slender as it was, that drove the poems: symmetry. It occurred to me that the augmentation of colour and complexity that characterises the general direction of the poems should, in the final stages of the sequence, be stripped back again, so that we end up in roughly the same place we started, a vast white page punctured by a speck of incipient language. The final poems now tell a slightly different story from the original version, something quieter, less climactic, but perhaps more interesting.

The end of *Chimera* was not the end of the story. When invited by Leigh Wright to contribute some material to Canadian journal Wyrld Daze, I still had a head full of biomorphs. Three of them (reproduced below) became visual poems, incorporating Ted Hughes's sinewy translation of the opening lines of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*:

Now I am ready to tell how bodies are changed
Into different bodies

These words, adapted from one language, one cultural ecosystem, into another, summarise *Chimera* quite neatly.

now I am ready to tell

how bodies are
changed

into different
bodies





trembling with
selves

lost souls

kissed salt skins

Some of the visual poems in this book first appeared in Burning House Press, talking about strawberries all of the time and Wyrld Daze. Reproduced here with thanks.

Special thanks to Anthony Etherin for the encouragement and support.

James Knight is an experimental poet and digital artist. His books include Void Voices (Hesterglock Press) and Self Portrait by Night (Sampson Low). His visual poems have been published in several places, including the Penteract Press anthology Reflections and Temporary Spaces (Pamenar Press).

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