

NEGATIVE SPACE: PORTFOLIO INVESTIGATION ON THE  
INTERSECTION OF SUPERHERO COMICS AND  
AMBIGUOUS LOSS

by

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A THESIS

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## **An Abstract of the Thesis of**

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Ambiguous Loss

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This thesis consists of an original comic accompanied by a critical introduction that contextualizes the trope of repeated superhero resurrections that the comic is made to be in conversation with. The critical introduction covers the factors that led to the emergence of this trope in the first place, how the trope has been acknowledged within superhero comics, and how it can be used to explore the real-world concept of ambiguous loss. The comic is an attempt to engage with this potential by telling a story exploring the impact of a superhero's repeated deaths and returns has had on the emotional states of the two people closest to her.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Part 1: Background and Context**

### **Introduction**

“The only people who stay dead in comics are Bucky, Jason Todd, and Uncle Ben” has long been a common refrain among comic book readers, and one that has become somewhat ironic in recent years given that two of the aforementioned characters are alive at time of writing. Driven both by the desire to maintain a profitable status quo for ongoing superhero comics and an emotional attachment to the characters featured within, creators within the American comic book industry rarely allow a character to stay dead permanently. While this is often framed as a negative trait of the genre, I argue that the trope makes superhero comics uniquely equipped to grapple with certain experiences of grief that fall outside of typical conceptualizations of grief, namely the phenomenon of ambiguous loss. This portfolio thesis is intended to expand on the acknowledged tropes related to superhero death and resurrection with references to the real-world psychological theory of ambiguous loss in order to create a meditation of grief.

### **Origins of Superhero Death and Resurrection**

Due to a combination of economic pressures and emotional attachments by both fans and creators, creators of ongoing superhero comics have difficulty permanently killing characters. Comics have potential for great art and meaning, but are still largely the products of a profit-driven industry and, for better or for worse, the pressures that drive the comic industry also imprint themselves on the comics that they produce. The specific set of economic pressures that made the permanent death of superheroes

undesirable can be traced back to the structure of the early American comic book market.

### **Economic Influences**

These early American comics were primarily sold through newsstands and comic racks at grocery stores or pharmacies, who were supplied by middleman distribution companies (Frank 154). The series would be made to continue indefinitely, so while their plots frequently involved cliffhangers to keep readers coming back, they largely avoided changing the status quo so much that a reader who had missed a few issues would be confused. A mantra among creators, typically attributed to either Stan Lee or Marv Wolfman, sums up this mindset succinctly: “Readers don’t want change. Readers only want the illusion of change”(“Blinded by the Hype”).

Because the status quo needed to be maintained, killing off a successful character was generally a bad idea. If a character or formula worked, the publisher would be less likely to want to change it and risk driving customers away, and while the threat of a popular character dying might sell issues in the short run, actually killing them would doom the series in the long run. Characters who “died” therefore needed to be either brought back from the dead or replaced in order to keep their series running. In some cases, being brought back from the dead entailed literal resurrection, but in other cases, it simply reframed or retconned the events that killed the character to reveal that they had in fact survived. Examples of this include the reversal of Jean Grey’s first death in the X-Men series (Stern). In cases where the character carrying a superhero name was to remain dead, the mantle of that superhero would be given to a new character to continue serving their role. This replacement could be seen as a kind of

narrative resurrection, with a superhero identity being able to live on through the new character who had taken it up.

One of the more infamous examples of this method, the death of Batman's sidekick Jason Todd, is an excellent demonstration of the degree to which the comic creators were afraid to kill off a character. As one of the more than half dozen separate characters to have served as Batman's sidekick, Jason Todd was neither the first nor the last Robin to be replaced, but what made his departure unusual was that whether or not this Robin would die wasn't decided by an author, an editor, or a company mandate, it was decided by a reader poll (Starlin). A number of things can be made of this, but this could be interpreted as DC testing the waters in regards to a character death by literally asking their readership if that was what they wanted. So concerned were they by the potential upset caused by a character death, even a largely disliked character who would be replaced in his superhero role, that they took the decision out of their own hands and put it in those of the readers.

All of these scenarios ultimately serve the same end, softening the narrative ramifications of death into something that doesn't excessively disrupt the comic's narrative formula. A storyline of mourning and emotional turmoil will sell issues, but once it ends and the fallen hero has been replaced, revived, or revealed to have been alive all along, the status quo can continue without the names on the cover changing.

The effects of these economic pressures on a comic series are demonstrated very well by how comics change when this particular economic pressure is lessened or removed. One such example comes in the form of the transition of comic sales from predominantly newsstands and comic racks to specialty comic book stores in the late



1960s to early 70s (Gearino 4). The aforementioned original distribution system, while largely functional for a casual reader, was less than ideal for more dedicated comic fans because it made acquiring specific issues, especially older ones, difficult or impossible. Comic book stores, many of them run by comic fans who were dissatisfied with the current distribution system, emerged to cater to this more dedicated reader base. Unlike the unpredictable offerings of the newsstands, they would order specific numbers of specific titles and stock older issues. This allowed customers to closely follow a series, including catching up on issues they had missed. The setup of these stores and the buying habits of their patrons made self-contained limited comic runs more viable. Unlike the television show-style of storytelling necessitated by the newsstand selling model, where readers might skip around or completely miss issues, because comic book store patrons were much more likely to buy a series completely and in order, they would be able to follow storylines that required them to have read all of the previous issues to understand the plot of the most recent one. They also proved to be receptive to shorter series with a set start and end point and therefore a clearer narrative arc (Clarke 201). With no need to maintain a permanent status quo and the increased assurance that readers would return for each issue, these limited run comics had the narrative freedom to shake up the conditions of their worlds.

### **Case Study: *Watchmen***

Of the numerous and varied series to emerge out of this new ecosystem, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen* provides an excellent example of the increased freedom to disrupt the status quo within a story. As a grim deconstruction of the superhero genre, *Watchmen* was clearly inspired by and referential to numerous

preexisting comics and superheroes, but the plot, characters and universe that its story takes place in are all self-contained. There is no overarching continuity for the narrative to disturb and no need for concern over if the events will allow for further stories within its universe. Moore and Gibbons make their intentions to tell a story where changes to the status quo stick clear at the start of the comic, which opens with the unceremonious death of a former costumed vigilante. Contrary to the conventions established up to this point, the dead vigilante stays dead, appearing only in flashbacks for the rest of the story. This sense of permanence of events and finality of death is reflected in the conclusion, where, after the various twists and turns of the story, its ending leaves both a main character and a significant portion of the supporting cast dead in the wake of a global political upheaval.

### **Emotional Influences**

As valuable a case study as *Watchmen* is in investigating the role of economics in the unwillingness of superhero comics to permanently kill their major characters, it cannot encompass the entirety of the issue because these economic issues are not the sole culprits. Influenced as they are by the monetary demands of the industry that produces them, superhero comics can't be boiled down to merely a cynical product of what should sell. Like any other form of art and storytelling, the emotional attachments of their creators bleed into the pieces themselves. It is this attachment that will also contribute to comic creators being unwilling to permanently kill superheroes, even in situations where the economic pressures are not present.

A related and somewhat older phenomenon to permanent death being more viable in limited run comics, the emergence of alternate universe stories offer an equally

important opportunity to explore this additional dimension. Removed from the official continuity, these non-canon stories allowed changes that would be completely off the table in the canon storylines, offering a similar freedom as limited runs. Some took advantage of this freedom in a similar way to their limited run cousins, exploring “real” death in long-running universes that couldn’t afford to kill off characters in their main continuities. Marvel’s “What If ..?” series of comics were particularly interested in this concept, exploring alternate outcomes for events in the canon continuities, such as *What If ... the Invisible Girl Had Died?*, depicting a somber alternate timeline where the Fantastic Four failed to save the life of one of their members. However, not even these side stories were free of impermanent deaths, indicating how a motive existed beyond the desire for a sustainably lucrative series.

### **Case Study: *Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?***

A particularly notable example of this on the DC side is *Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?*, a comic that on paper should be the perfect vehicle to tell a story about Superman dying. The comic is a so-called “imaginary story” that is considered non-canon, in addition to being published shortly before a planned series reboot, making even a change to the official continuity impermanent. On top of this, one of its main creators, writer Alan Moore, was responsible for numerous works on the more grim and macabre side of the spectrum, including the aforementioned *Watchmen* series. The comic starts out giving every indication that it will kill Superman. His death is the premise of the story’s framing device, told as an interview by Lois Lane (now Lois Elliot) regarding her experiences leading up to the presumed death of Superman, given many years after the fact. As the story continues in flashback, it mercilessly

slaughters recurring characters, heroic and villainous alike, culminating in a climactic confrontation that leads to the heroic but still brutally unambiguous deaths of some of Superman's closest friends and allies. As the flashback comes to a close, the story seems poised to deliver on the death of Superman it had been alluding to from the start. However, at the last minute, the story flinches and Superman doesn't die. The reader is assured that, like many presumably dead superheroes before him, he managed to survive the event that seemed to have killed him.

Superman's survival in this story despite a lack of the aforementioned economic pressures can be explained by emotional and cultural attachment. Unlike his counterparts in limited run series who were created specifically for their series, as was the case in *Watchmen*, Superman was already a well-established fixture of the comics world. Because Superman comics had been published fairly regularly since his debut in *Action Comics* in 1938, at the time that *Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?* was written, both readers and creators of comics would have grown up with Superman. Moore himself was among these people, having been introduced to American comics through a number of DC and Marvel titles, Superman being one of them. Professor José Alaniz of the University of Washington-Seattle identifies "superhero iconography as shorthand not only for American popular culture, but for American values" (4), and as a superhero explicitly tied to "truth, justice and the American way" (Duncan 225) since the 1950's, Superman is a particularly strong example of this connection between superheroes and abstract ideals.

While Moore himself is not American, he would have been aware that many of his readers were at the time he was writing the comic, in addition to having his own,

more personal connection to Superman and American comics in general. As a symbolically potent cultural icon and an integral part of both Moore and many of his readers' formative years, Superman's life and potential death carried far more meaning than those of characters who are entirely new. Killing Superman then doesn't give the impression of simply killing a fictional character, but the impression of killing something much larger. This is not, of course, to say that killing superman would literally destroy American culture, but rather that his connection to it fosters an emotional protectiveness in creators and audiences, even if it isn't a fully conscious one.

Given that being a long-running superhero character associated with more abstract cultural elements is not something that is unique to Superman, it is reasonable to assume that the nostalgic bonds and feelings of protectiveness that they fostered are not unique to him, either.

Superheroes, particularly long-running ones who have had a chance to become cultural symbols and for creators and audiences to have formed nostalgic bonds with them, can prove hard for creators to be willing to let go of even in stories that call for the characters' deaths, leading to a cycle of presumed death and resurrection.

### **Acknowledgements of the Trope Within Comics**

The cycle has become so widespread for so long that it has made its way into the stories of the comics themselves. However, these acknowledgements to how the world within the comics works tend not to delve too far into its implications. In some cases, it is treated simply as an aside or a pithy observation made by a character before the story moves on. This is the case in one X-Men comic, where upon the return of a presumed-dead team member, another character comments on how "[s]ometimes it seems that in

mutant heaven, there are no pearly gates, but instead revolving doors” (David 18) before moving on in the conversation. This comment is not the point of the scene and so is not dwelled on, not even getting a whole panel to itself. In other cases, it is used as the punchline to a joke that leans on the fourth wall, such as the Spiderman comic in which an obituary writer bemoans how often obituaries for superheroes and villains need to be retracted, making a throwaway comment foreshadowing the return of the Avengers and Fantastic Four from their presumed deaths. (DeFalco) Because of this, the scene acts more as a wink at the audience from the writers than anything else.

While this is certainly not to condemn any of the comics mentioned above or imply that these approaches are wholly incorrect, this overall lack of exploration is in my opinion a lost opportunity. As mentioned previously, superhero comics are no stranger to more somber or serious storylines, and the genre has already been used as a way to explore themes of loss and grief. The aforementioned story *What If ... The Invisible Girl Had Died?* uses the outlandish world of the Fantastic Four as a means to explore the characters’ reactions to the death of one of their own. A comic reader is unlikely to have ventured into an alternate reality in search of a cure for quantum instability, but they very well may relate to the feeling of helplessness and despair from losing a loved one after trying everything in their power to save them that is exhibited by the surviving Fantastic Four members. While the situations these stories present are, at least on the surface, quite fantastical, the emotions they convey are anything but. In some ways, the fantastical scenarios are actually able to accentuate the emotion that they portray, where an exaggerated situation more accurately depicts the emotional intensity felt by someone in a more mundane version of the situation.

Using these stories as a baseline, it should be possible to apply this same depth of emotion to other fantastical scenarios found in superhero fiction. Moving past the surface-level jokes about them, repeated resurrections have the potential for a great deal of tragedy. For the people left behind when a superhero dies, there may be some comfort in the knowledge that their loved one has returned from apparent death before and may do so again. However, this same knowledge could also eat away at the finality of death and prevent any feeling of lasting peace or acceptance.

### **Ambiguous Loss**

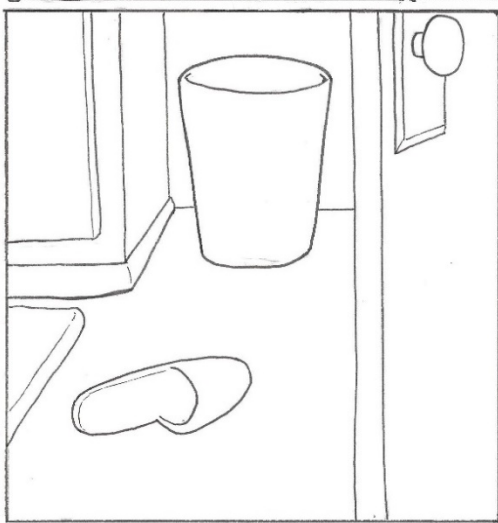
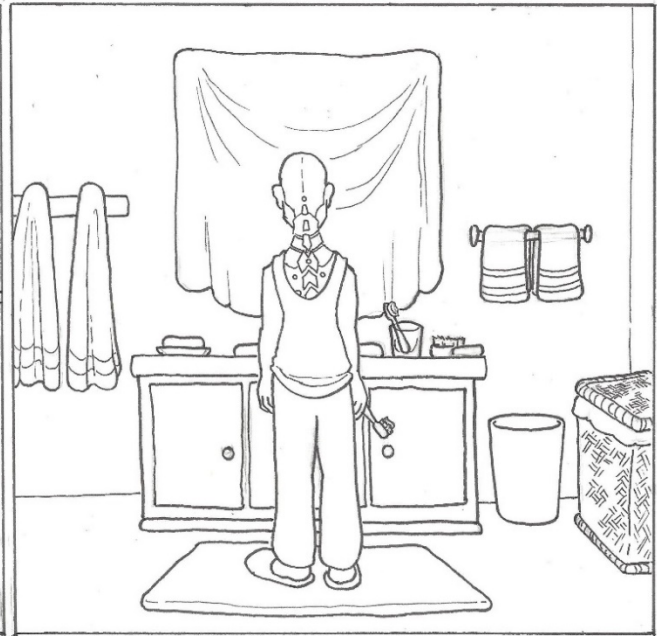
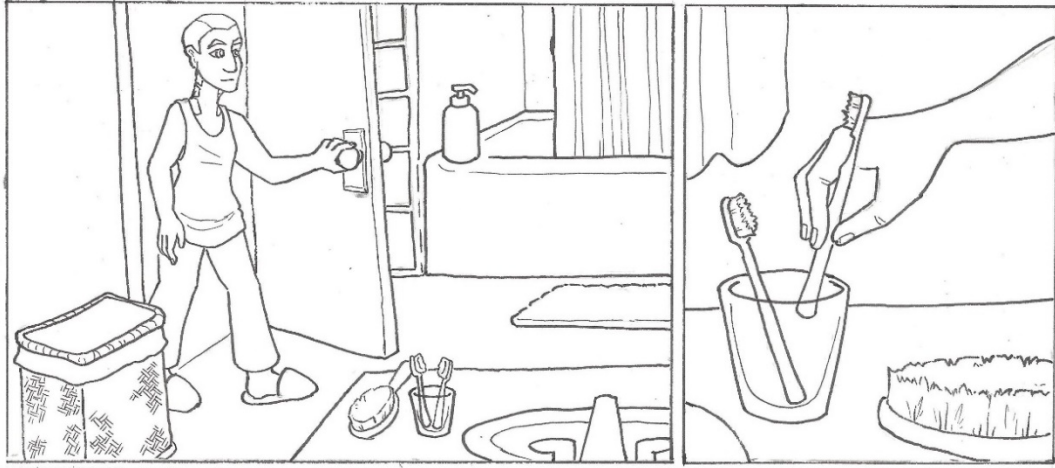
“Ambiguous loss” is a term coined by therapist and researcher Pauline Boss to describe a similar phenomenon in the real world, when “there is no verification of death or no certainty that the person will come back or return to the way they used to be.” (“FAQ: Ambiguous Loss”) The uncertainty created by the death of a comic character who is expected but not guaranteed to return can be used to create a parallel to the real-life experience of ambiguous loss. More specifically, it resembles the type 1 variety, where a loved one is still psychologically present despite being physically absent. This can apply a variety of different situations, including an adoptee’s feeling of loss for birth parents that they never knew but who are presumably still out in the world somewhere, the families of soldiers missing in action, victims of kidnappings, or casualties of natural disasters, where their loved one is likely dead despite there being no body to confirm that this is the case. Similar to the setup of *What If The Invisible Girl Had Died?* and related comics, readers are unlikely to have had a loved one literally return from the dead, but they very well may be able to relate to a loss that lacked definitive closure.

## Part 2: Portfolio

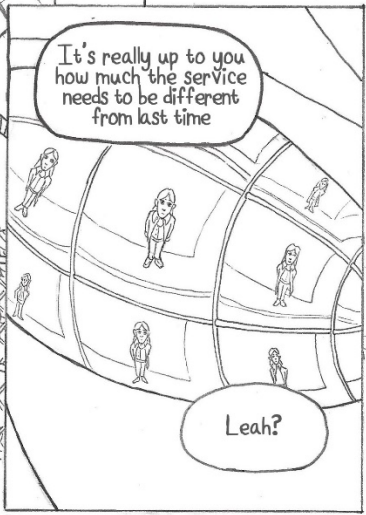
### Chapter 1: Leah

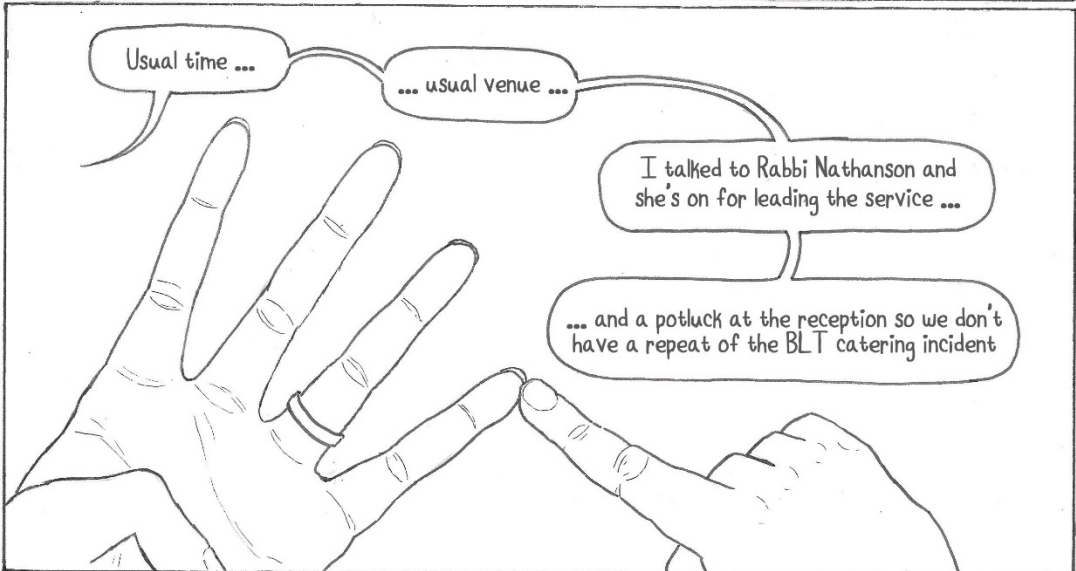




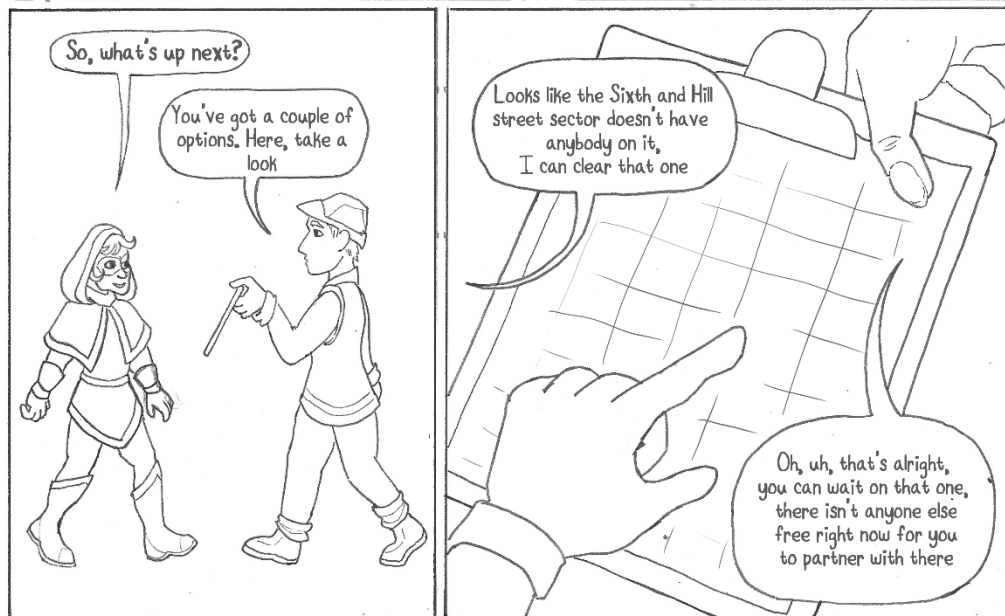
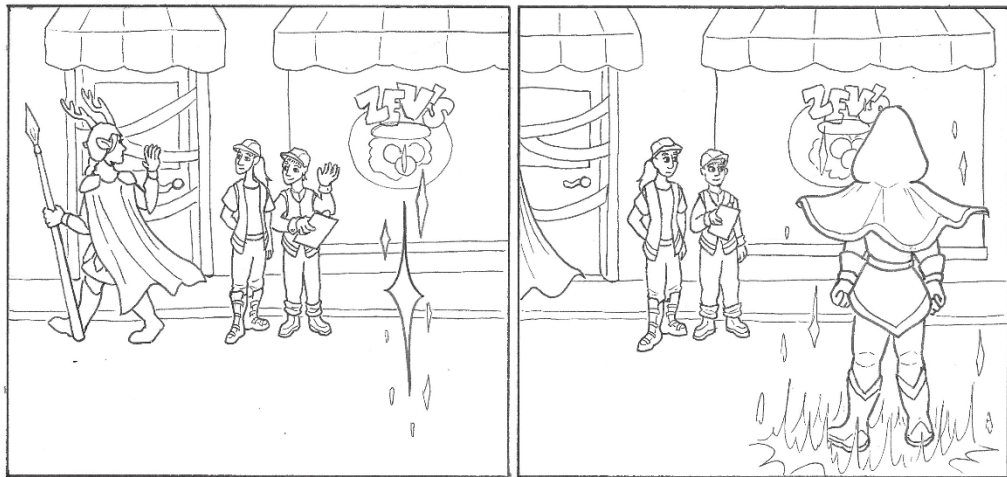




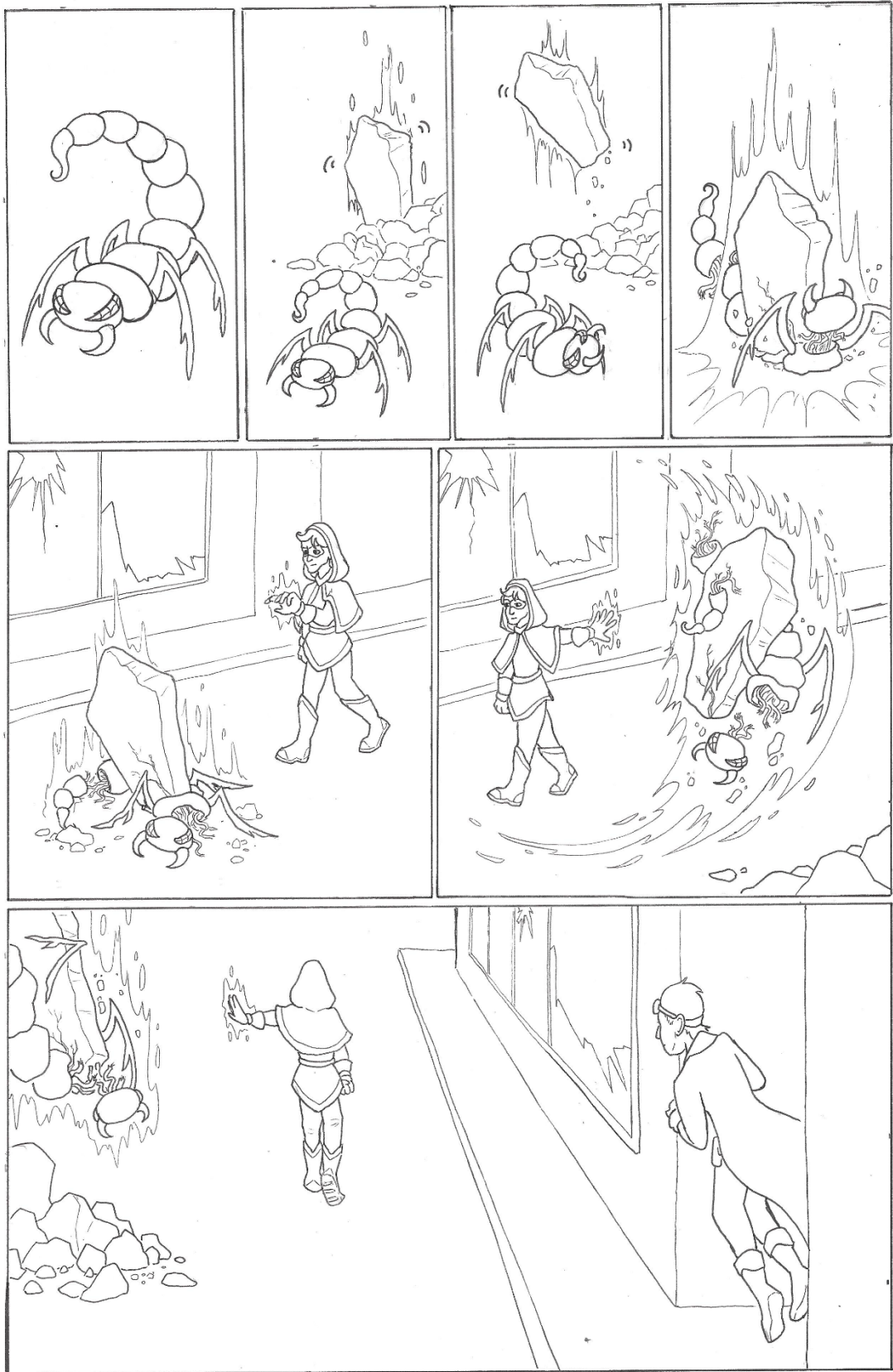




## Chapter 2: Naomi

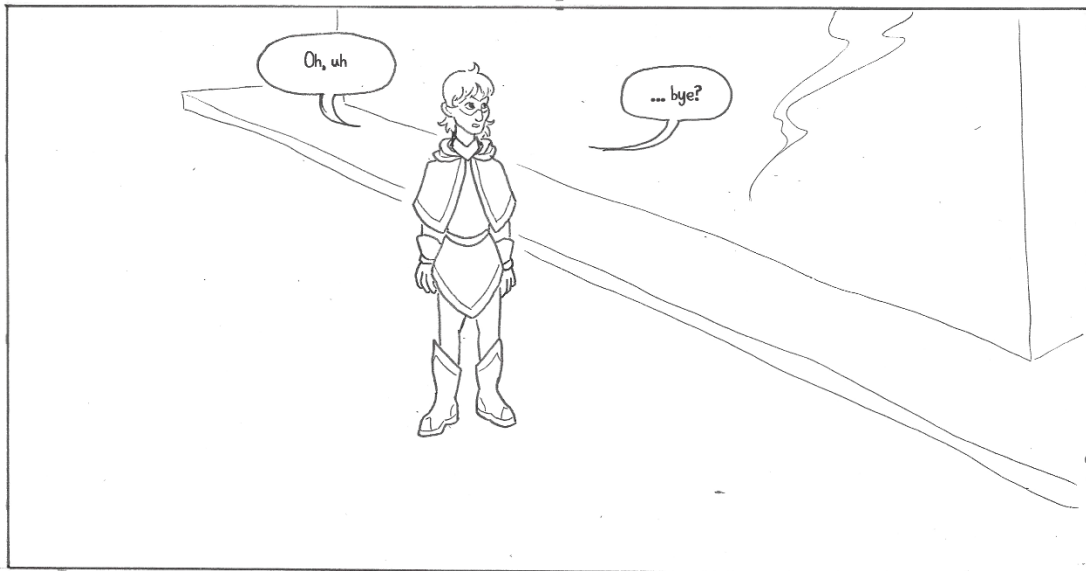
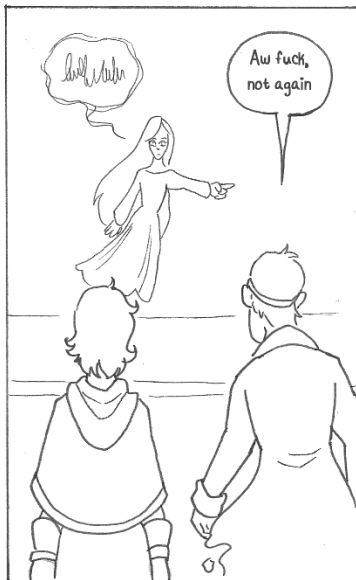
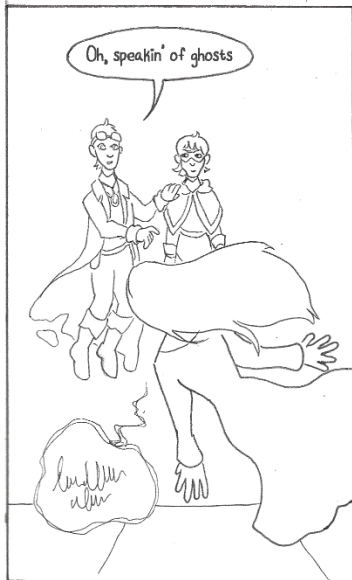
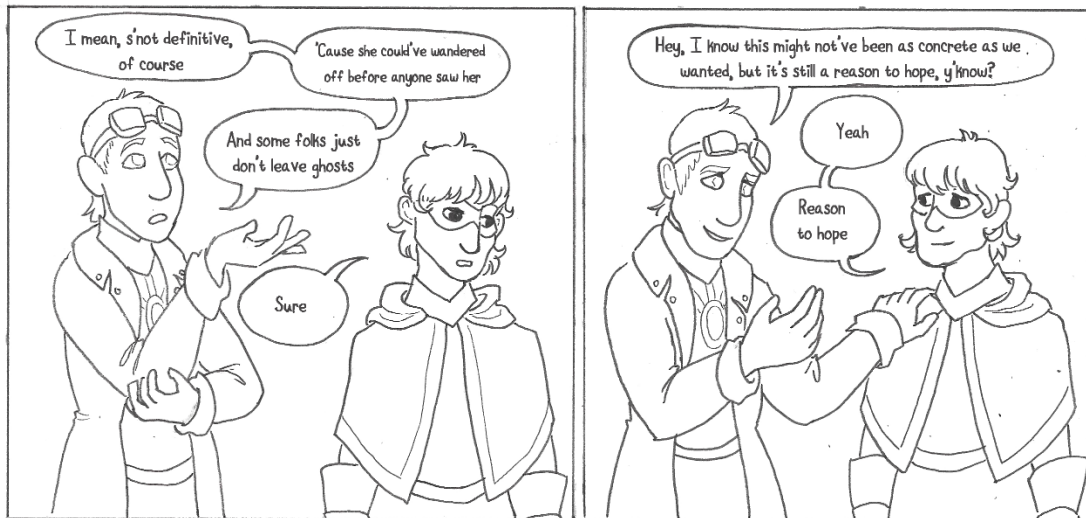






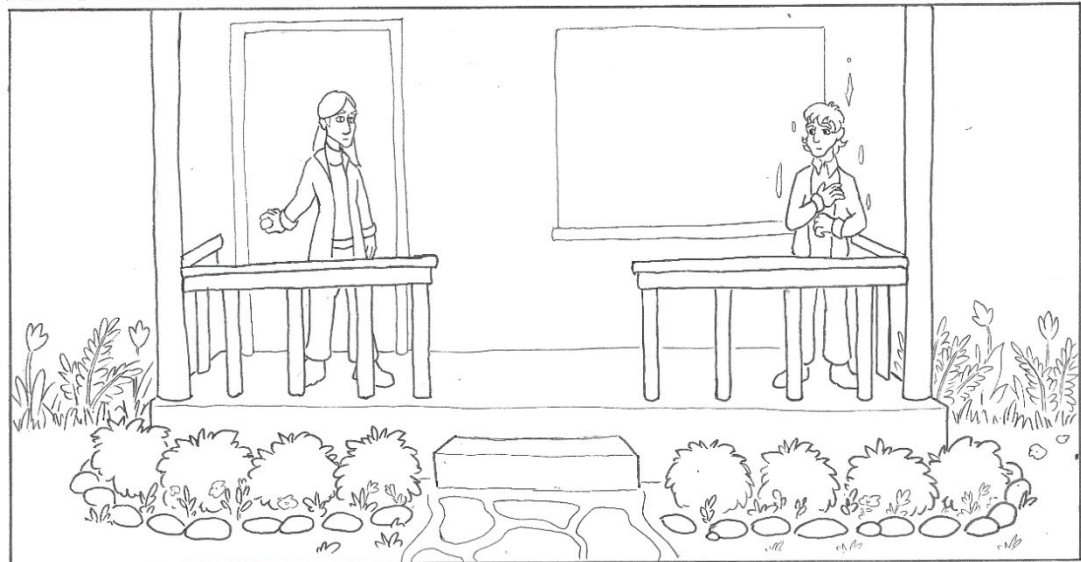
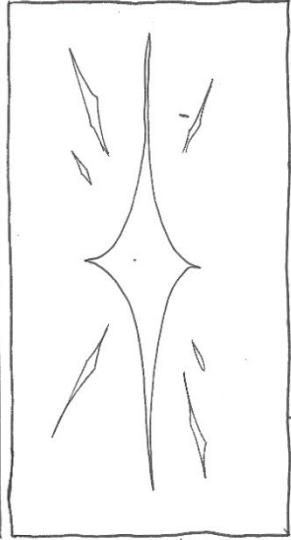
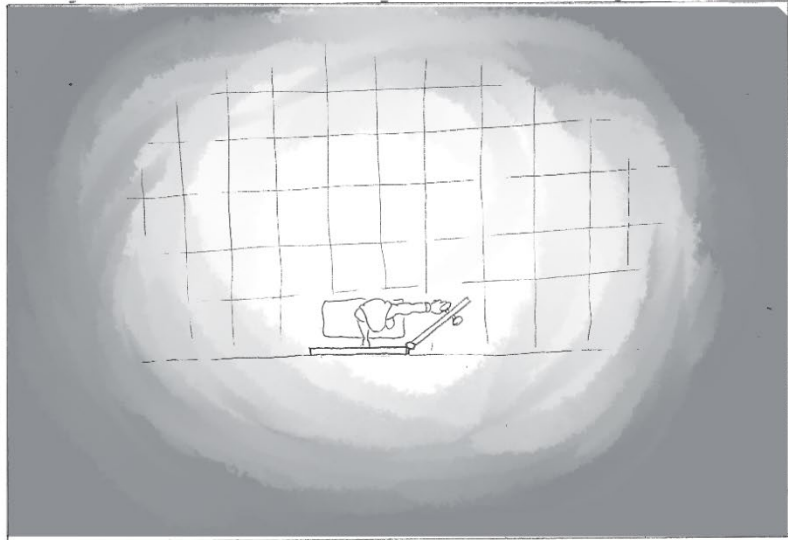
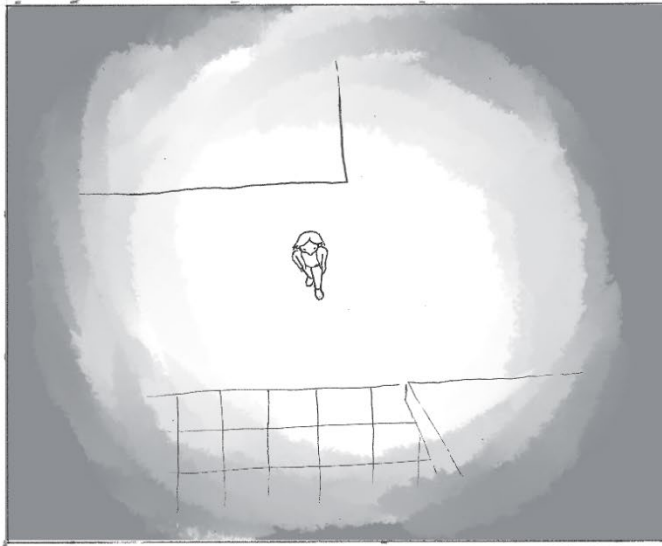






### Chapter 3: Abigail





### **Part 3: Portfolio Analysis**

My thesis portfolio is intended to mesh the fantastical situations of superhero fiction with the more relatable emotions these situations can represent, and in doing so connect the meta-acknowledgements of death and resurrection with the deeper emotional exploration the medium has shown itself to be capable of. The comic follows protagonists Leah and Naomi shortly after the presumed death of Abigail, a superhero who was Leah's wife and Naomi's mentor, during a battle with an army of bug robots. The intended implication is that Abigail has come back from presumed death several times before, leaving Leah and Naomi uncertain of if she is actually dead.

#### **Principles of Ambiguous Loss in Story Content**

The comic's plot centers around this uncomfortable uncertainty, and keeping with the principles of Pauline Boss's research on ambiguous loss, its conclusion doesn't resolve the uncertainty, instead being deliberately somewhat open-ended. Boss's work warns against pushing too hard towards the idea of "closure," which she categorizes as "a perfectly good word for real estate and business deals" but "a terrible word in human relationships." ("Navigating Loss Without Closure") She identifies a discrepancy between the stories that American culture predominantly prefers to tell about grief and the reality of a person actually experiencing it. In contrast to the neat and finite stories the majority of our media consists of, the process of grief and grieving is messy, nonlinear, and without a distinct endpoint, which can result in people trying to force their experiences of grief into more linear models. I feel that giving the comic a neat and definitive ending that reveals whether Abigail is alive or dead comes dangerously

close to this same impulse. However, it is also not intended as a story that leaves the characters in the same place that they started. The ending is intended to leave them at a point of hope, one where their problems are certainly not resolved, but where they both have the opportunity to connect with someone who is also trying to cope with a similar problem, should they choose to take it.

### **The Absence and Presence of Abigail**

Perhaps the most important aspect of the comic's visual design is the hopefully conspicuous absence of any images of Abigail to communicate the other characters' constant awareness that Abigail is not physically there. When writing the comic, I deliberately avoided including flashbacks, as they almost inevitably included Abigail in some capacity. Similarly, I designed the backgrounds in Leah and Abigail's house to never include any photographs that a reader might interpret as being of Abigail. Even beyond the boundaries of the comic itself, I didn't create a design for what she might look like.

However, just because Abigail never makes a physical appearance in the comic does not mean that she is completely absent from it. She persists as a presence in Leah and Naomi's minds that, in the comic's current form, manifests in an emphasis on the empty spaces and unused possessions that she left behind. These empty spaces alluded to in the title that would otherwise be occupied by Abigail have their emptiness highlighted, such as her chair at the kitchen table. The perspective of the panel makes the chair appear much larger in comparison to Leah than it actually is as a means to communicate its prominence in her mind. Its shape makes its framing of Leah almost resemble bars on a cage, cutting her off from the rest of the scene.



Fig. 1: Leah framed by Abigail's empty chair

### **Characterization and Presence Through Color Palette**

Due to unforeseen time constraints caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the comic could not be fully colored. However, as part of the planning process, I had developed a color palette to emphasize and elaborate on the other elements of the story. The figures included are mockups showing the planned color combinations as a way to demonstrate how this palette would function if I had been able to complete the coloring process. While they lack the nuance and detail that a properly colored and shaded comic would have, they are still able to communicate the basic ideas behind these color choices.



Fig. 2: Planned color scheme

Each narrative entity within the comic has a color associated with them. The clearest example of this is found in the two protagonists, whose colors dominate their wardrobes and possessions. Leah, associated with the color blue, wears clothing dominated by blue or blue-gray colors, has possessions scattered around her and Abigail’s house that are predominantly blue, and has eyes, skin, and cybernetics that are tinted blue. Naomi, associated with a cold purple, wears a superhero costume that is predominantly purple and has a purple particle effect that accompanies the use of her telekinesis and teleportation abilities.

Although she never appears in person, Abigail is connected to and represented by the color green. This is established through a similar logic to Leah’s color, where objects around her and Leah’s house that are presumably hers, such as the second toothbrush and set of keys, the shampoo in the bathroom, and the notebooks on the kitchen table, are all green.

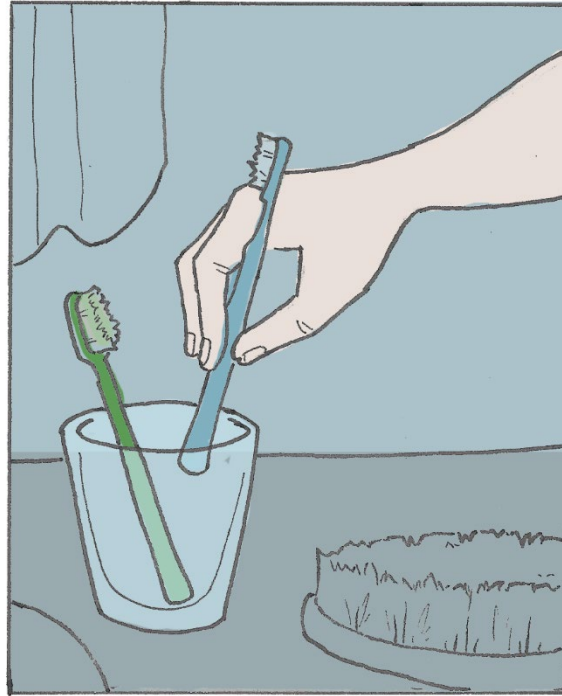


Fig. 3: Leah and Abigail's toothbrushes

After being established, the color green appears in the environment when Abigail is a presence in Leah or Naomi's minds, most notably being present during Naomi's conversation with the people organizing the cleanup, which happens in front of a green storefront, and Naomi and Leah's accidental meeting at the very end of the comic, a scene dominated by green plant life.

This representation of the connotations attached to people and things through their color palettes is continued with objects and people associated with the aftermath of the battle that presumably killed Abigail being marked with orange and gold.





Fig. 4: Leah meeting with the funeral director

This includes the warm, gold-tinted browns of the funeral director's office, the orange traffic cones, hard hats, and safety vests of the construction/cleanup crew, but also the eyes and highlights of the arachnoid robots left over from the battle. These colors were chosen to be complementary to Naomi and Leah's, making the elements of the story associated with them appear in opposition to the two protagonists. In the case of friendlier elements, such as the funeral director and cleanup crew, Leah and Naomi simply look out of place, highlighting their difficulty connecting with these people. In the case of overtly hostile elements, namely the robots, this hostility is accentuated with clashing colors.

### **Page Composition and Emotional States**

With emotional experiences at the forefront of the story, communicating the distinct feelings of both protagonists' experiences was extremely important to the comic's success. When arranging the panels together into page compositions, I

structured their layouts and sequences with the characters' emotional states in mind to ensure that the flow of the pages supported the story being told within the panels.

### *Specific to Leah*

Leah's section, depicting a feeling of exhausted depression, is structured to be slow and contemplative. The backgrounds are the most intricately detailed in the comic, with panels that linger on some of these small details to encourage readers to spend more time with these panels, therefore slowing down their experience of the story. The time that elapses between panels is often fairly short, which further contributes to a sense of slowness and puts increased emphasis on small movements.



Fig. 5: Leah brushing her teeth

This set of panels, which occupies more than a third of the page, only shows a few seconds' worth of time passing.

This sense of time dragging out is continued in some of the transitions between scenes. Most scenes in Leah's section are connected by a transition sequence that

directly depicts her moving from one scene to another, such as the series of panels showing her walking from her house to where she encounters the robot wreckage. My intention is for these transitional panels to last for slightly longer than is strictly necessary to communicate the events of the story in order to force the reader to share in Leah's experience of trudging through the mundane motions of her life.

### *Specific to Naomi*

Naomi's section, characterized more by feelings of restless frustration, is structured to be faster and choppier. The section spends far less time transitioning between scenes and the transitions do not include panels showing Naomi between scenes, either literally or figuratively. This abruptness which Naomi enters and exits is further facilitated by her ability to teleport, which removes any longer transition even from the fiction of the story.

While Leah lingers on small movements and moments of stillness, Naomi and the characters she interacts with are almost constantly in motion. Even during conversations that don't, strictly speaking, require the characters to physically move around or otherwise do very much, I structured the scene so that characters would be in the process of moving or at least gesturing.



Fig. 6: Naomi talking to a cleanup organizer

While the dialogue could still function if both people were standing still, the panel is more dynamic because they are walking towards each other.

Additionally, the backgrounds are more simplified and sparing than the intricately detailed ones in Leah's chapter, meaning that a reader has less to take in before they move to the next panel. This facilitates a faster reading pace to match the impatient, restless energy Naomi experiences, therefore putting the reader in a similar mindset as her.

### *Overlapping Elements*

These elements converge in the final section, where, as the emotional states that had built during the previous two parts of the comic grow increasingly fraught, the very medium that the characters occupy starts to distort under their distress. Leah's

exhaustion and depression are visually manifested in the panels growing wider and filling with this gray fog as the point of view drifts higher up and further away from her. At the same time, the dialogue in the speech bubbles surrounding her fades to unintelligible lines. While Leah's emotional state grows distant and disconnected, Naomi's becomes increasingly tense and agitated, attempting to simulate the experience of having a panic attack in a medium without movement or sound. The panels become smaller and the point of view closer to induce a feeling of claustrophobia, and the speech bubbles get both more prominent and more difficult to read.

For the entire sequence, Leah and Naomi have been separated from each other by the gutter, or the empty space between panels. When they see each other for the first time in the comic, the gutter that had separated them disappears and stylistic distortions that characterized their respective halves of the page equalize and disperse. The composition of this final panel is meant to accentuate the potential for hope and for moving forward that exists in the moment it depicts. Both Leah and Naomi are still partially boxed in by the porch and its bar-like banister, where the way "out" of this constrained space is between them, marked by a gap in the banisters leading to steps and a path through the grass. To leave, both in a literal and metaphorical sense, they need to move towards each other.

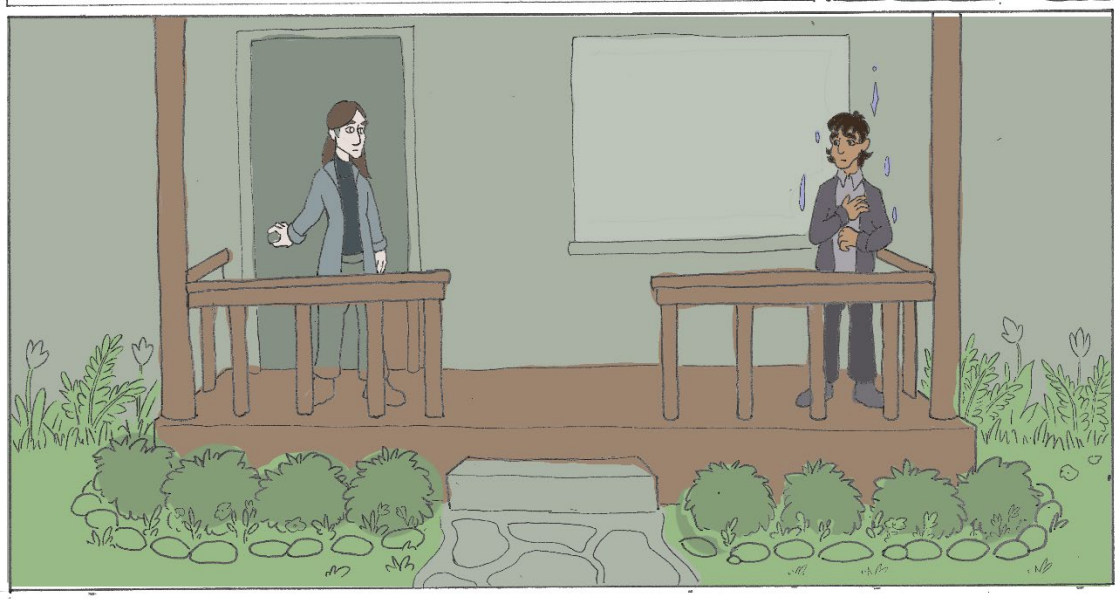


Fig. 7: Leah and Naomi meeting on the porch

## **Conclusion**

I spoke earlier in the paper about how I see the lack of engagement with the trope of continued superhero death and resurrection on a deeper emotional level to be a missed opportunity. In creating this piece, my hope is to contribute to filling this void and add to the larger cultural conversation surrounding grief.

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