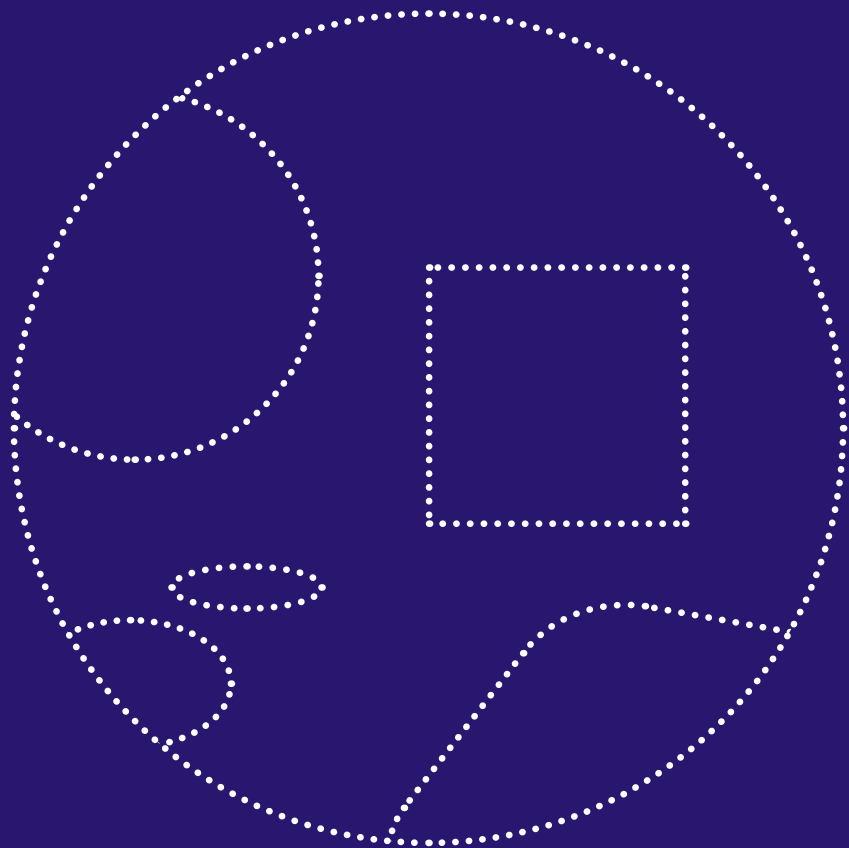
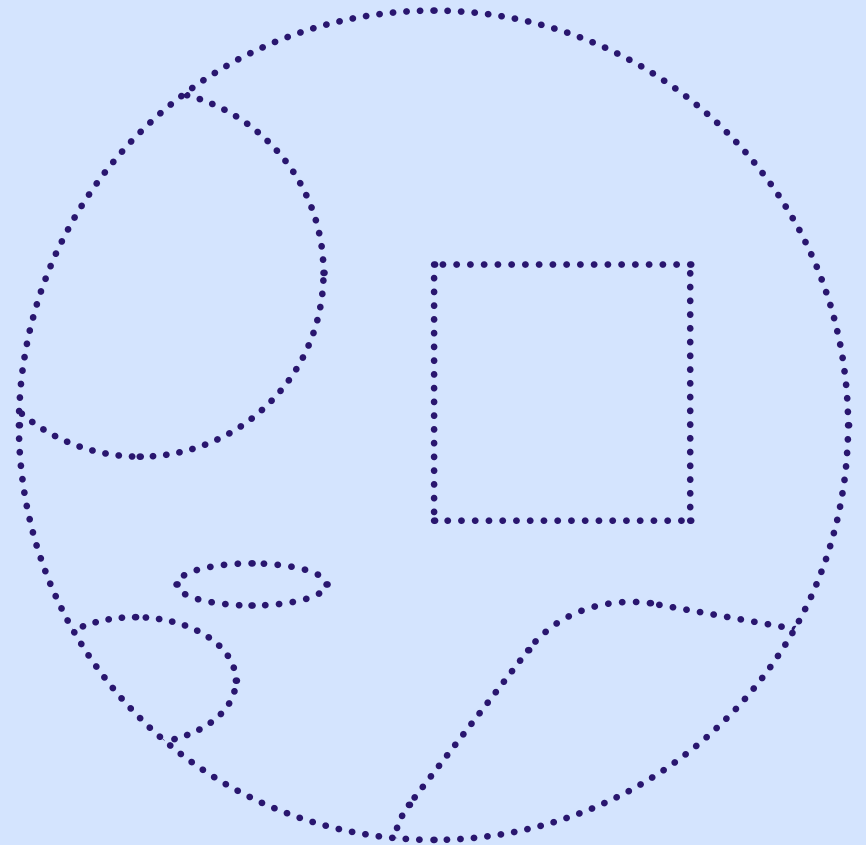


# SHAPELESS SHAPES



**INSTITUTE ON STATELESSNESS AND INCLUSION**

# SHAPELESS SHAPES



INSTITUTE ON STATELESSNESS AND INCLUSION

## Foreword

The birth of contemporary human rights was preceded by incredible suffering. People were denied their right to exist by so-called 'authorities' who used power to destroy rather than protect. The world came together to say '...never again... [to] the scourge of genocide' and carefully constructed a system of human rights designed to safeguard the inherent dignity and worth of every individual. Irrespective of who they were or where they lived.

Under biological classification, as a single life form, we human beings constitute one 'race'. Whether we are 'squares, circles, triangles, hexagons' or other shapes too rare and unique to imagine, we are all deemed protected by laws determined by the State, but guaranteed by the international community. Yet race ideology seems impossible to shake off and may be enjoying a renaissance. Despite everything we know.

We live in spaces recognised as 'States', ostensibly with governments that can serve our needs and guarantee our rights. But we live in time of crisis.

What happens when a State turns racist, exacerbating difference, sealing borders and rejecting those who seek refuge? If it feeds a narrow sense of belonging and privilege, denying human empathy in the face of suffering? When it cheats: constructing false historical narratives and generating fear and hatred of the Other?

Statelessness – not having a nationality – is manufactured to exacerbate difference and justify exclusion. It must be combatted with truth and empathy. This compelling book developed by one of the world's leading actors on statelessness, demonstrates the cost of collective apathy and marginalisation on real lives. Can you stand for the erasure of identity? Will you turn away because it does not concern you? Or will you take a stand with those that work to hold power accountable?

### **Joshua Castellino**

Executive Director, Minority Rights Group International  
Board Member, Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion

**To all the Shapeless Shapes in the world:**

**Thank you for showing those who look hard enough, that ultimately, we all are shapes, no matter how same or different we might be.**

**Hanna and Amal**

1

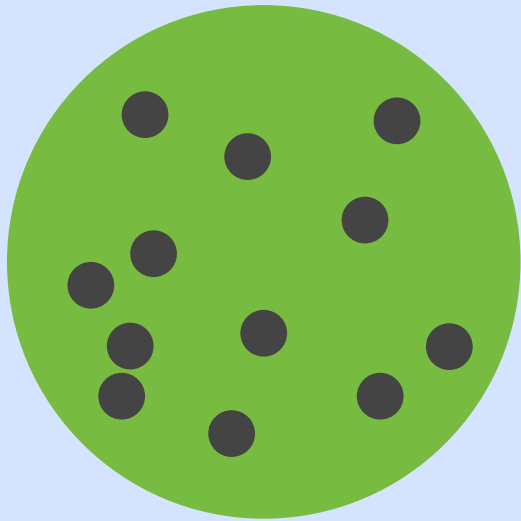
SHAPES

The world was

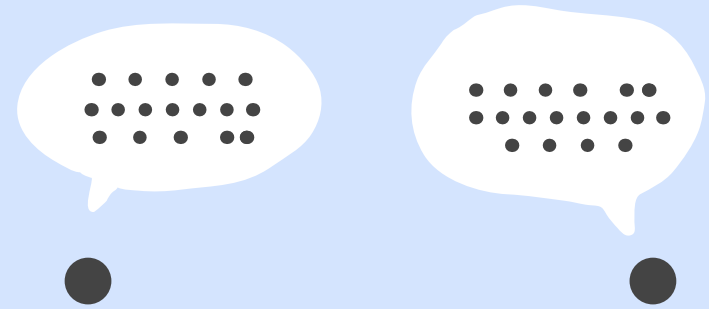


full of shapes.

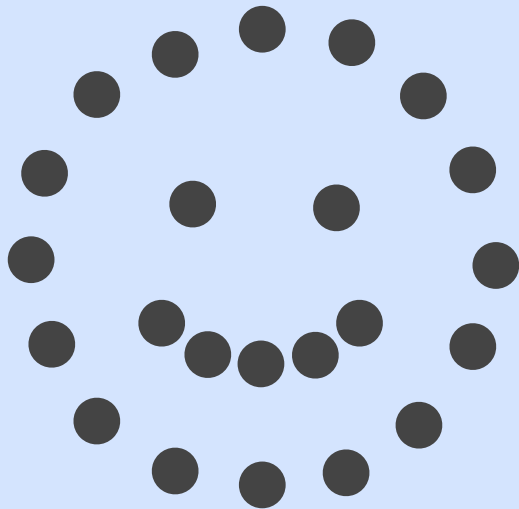
Circles lived in Circleland,



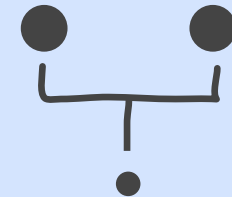
spoke in circles,



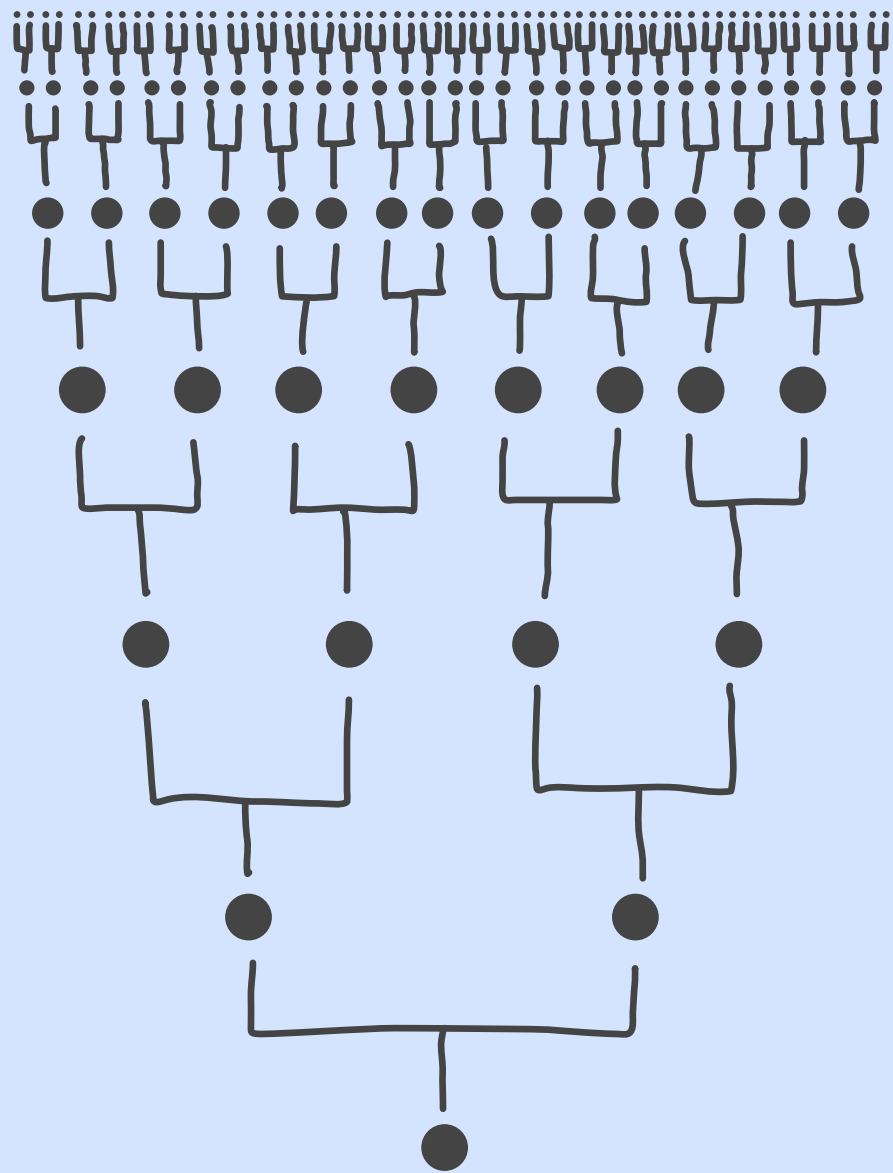
celebrated each others' well-roundedness,



and had baby Circles.

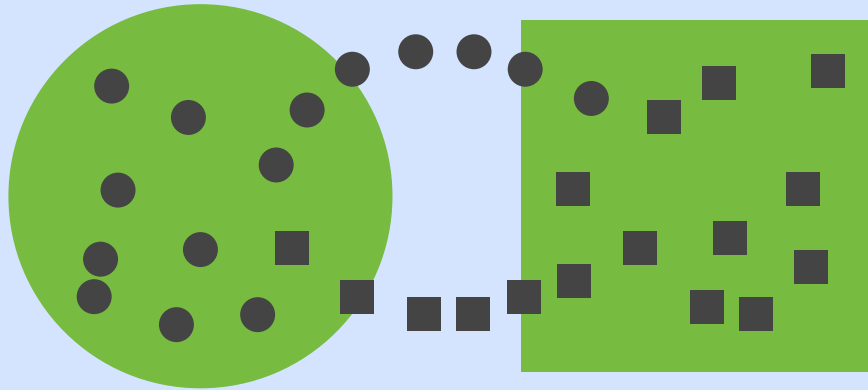


Their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents were all Circles too, even though some may not have been perfectly round.

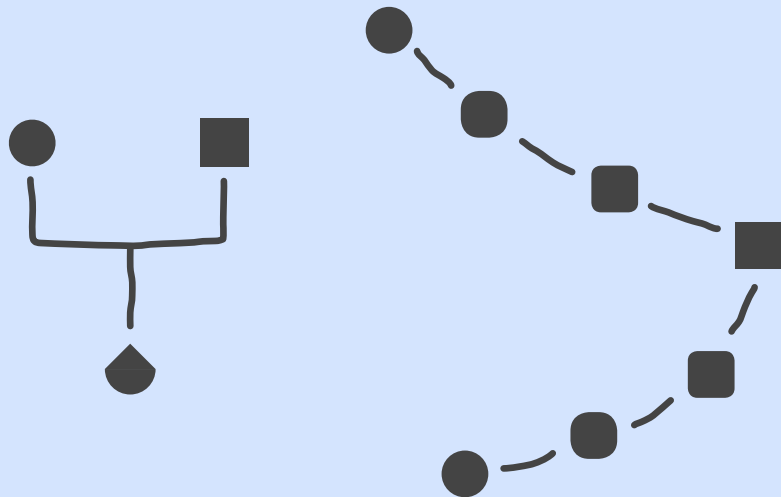


*Shapes belonged with their own kind.*

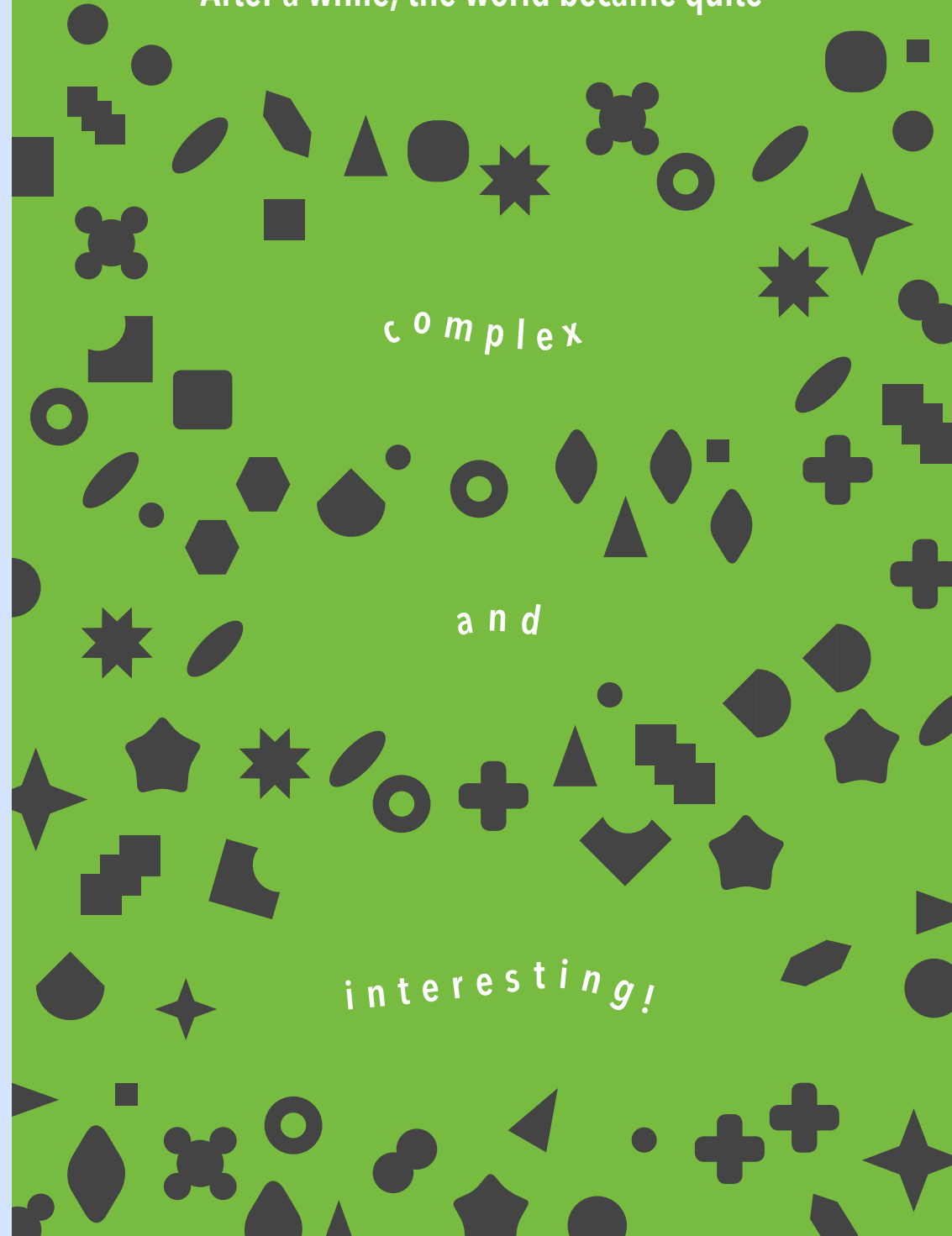
But they began to move around.  
Visiting, travelling, relocating to other lands,



mixing, marrying, and becoming like other shapes.



After a while, the world became quite



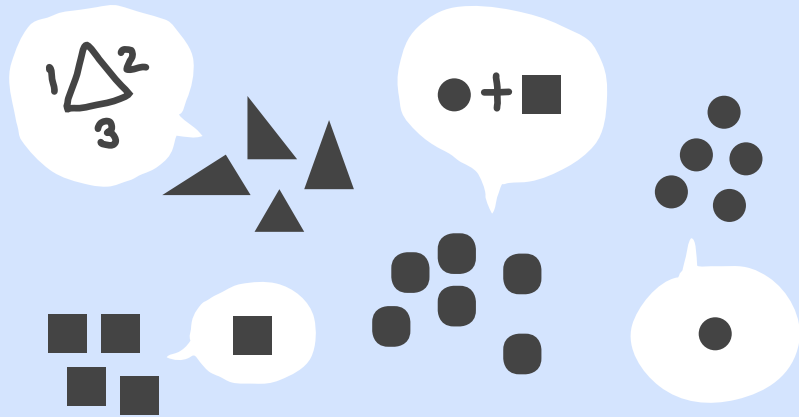
*complex*

*and*

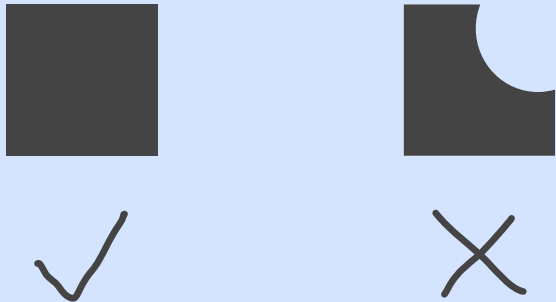
*interesting!*



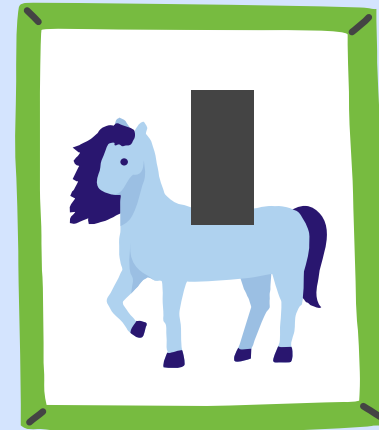
Some shapes thought they should  
organise and define themselves.



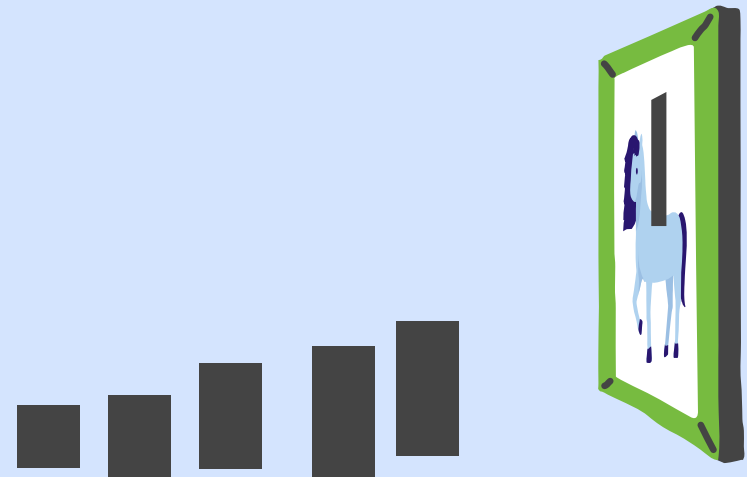
“Who would belong? Who would not?”  
And so, they began to notice and emphasise  
their differences.



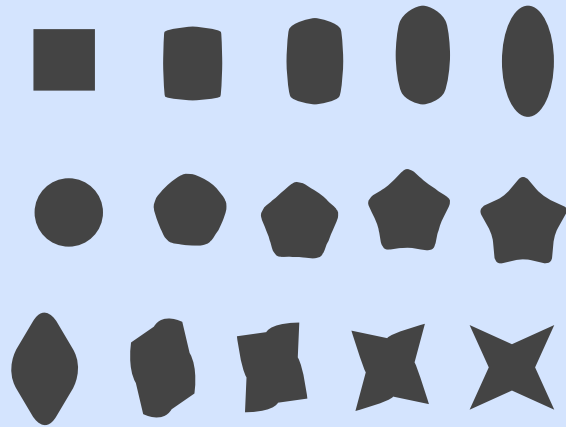
Some lands recognised the special place  
of their historical shape.



Only shapes that looked like this,  
would truly belong.



With a bit of practice and exercise,  
shapes were able to reshape themselves.



Other lands celebrated their diversity.  
They found more important things that  
bound them together.



A few lands tried to unite through symbols.  
One group of different shapes,  
named their home Starland.



They designed a star hat for themselves to wear,  
and spoke in a star language.



When babies were born,



they each got a star hat as a celebration,  
regardless of what their shape was.



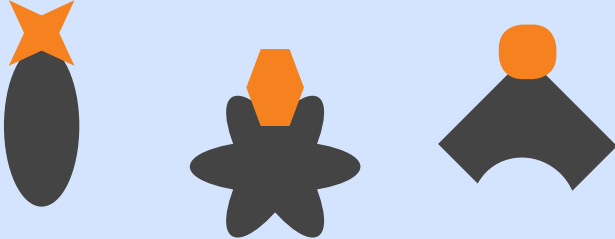
The longer they wore their hat, the larger it grew –



So that big, bright, beautiful Stars would adorn their land in the future.



A number of lands followed suit. So, different shapes were united under their commonly shaped hats.



Some shapes even owned many hats!



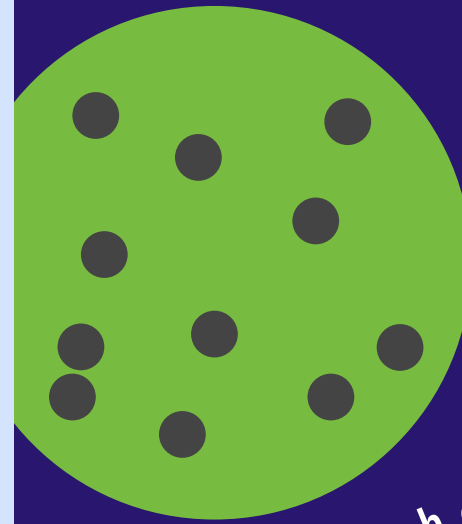
Hats represented lots of different things.  
Identity, belonging, freedom, pride, privilege...  
just to name a few.



Some shapes dreamed of wearing a hat.  
Some didn't.



Shapes belonged with their own kind –



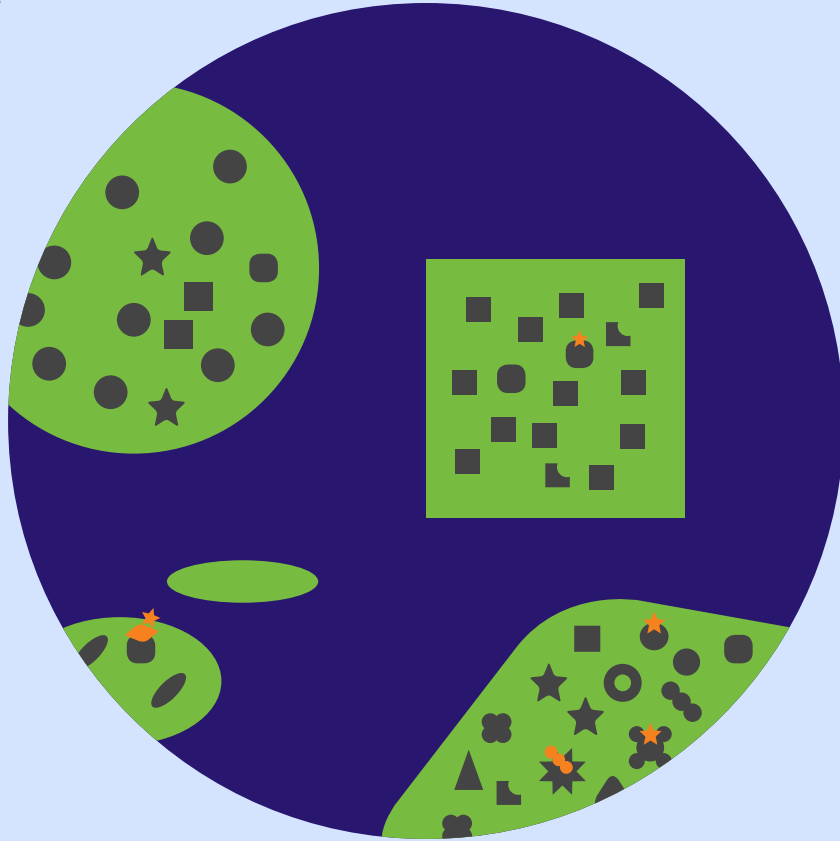
*the same kind... and*



*the different kind.*

And all the shapes lived  
happily ever after.

THE



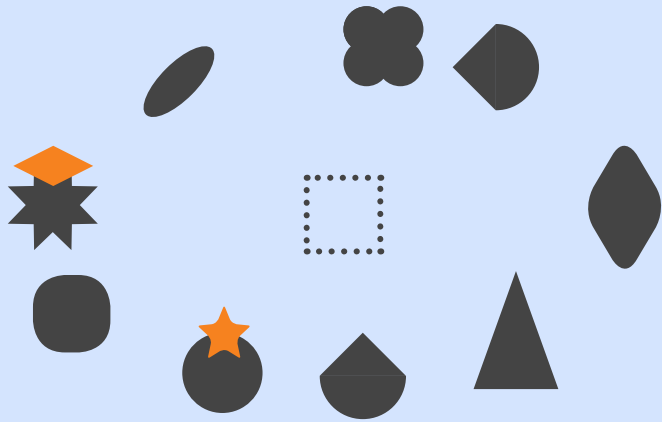
END

But no,  
this is not a fairy tale.  
Things were not so simple....

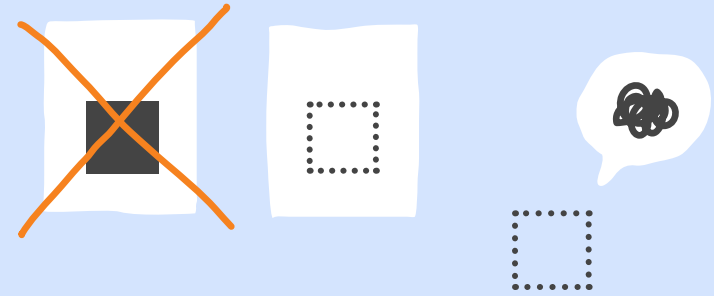
2

SHAPELESS SHAPES

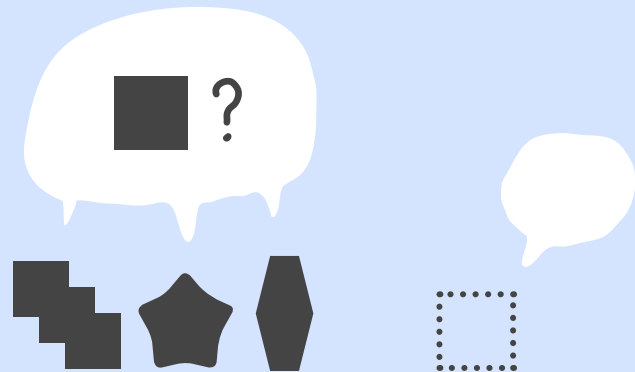
In this world of shapes, lived some shapes who were deemed to be shapeless.



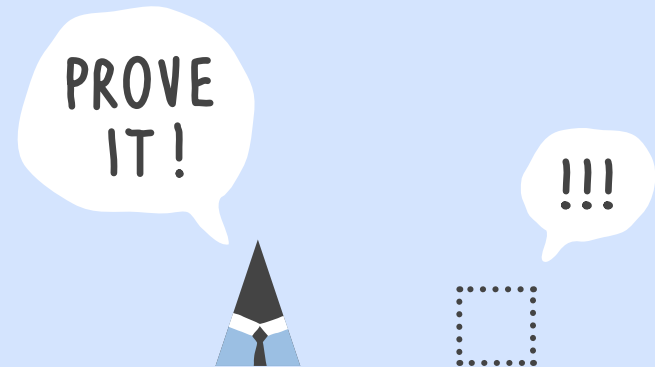
How do you prove you are a shape, if you have no papers saying which shape you are, or if your papers say you are shapeless?



To the untrained eye, they looked just like other shapes. But whenever they were asked to prove their shapeliness, they could not.

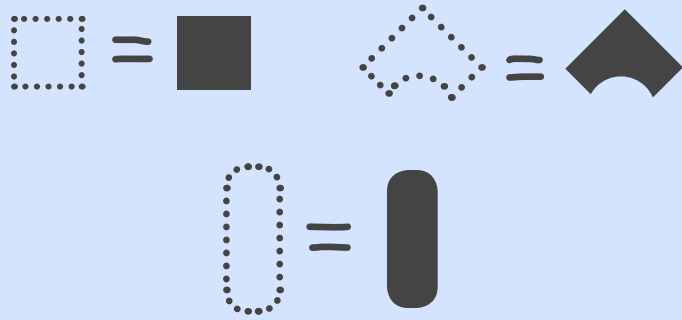


Most did not even know they were shapeless, until the shape police asked them to prove it!

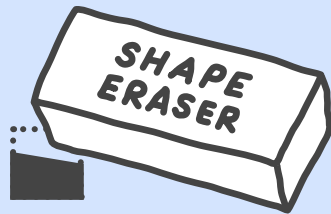




You might ask,  
"how can a shape be shapeless?"  
A shape, by definition, is a shape!



But just as some shapes are given,  
some shapes can be taken away.

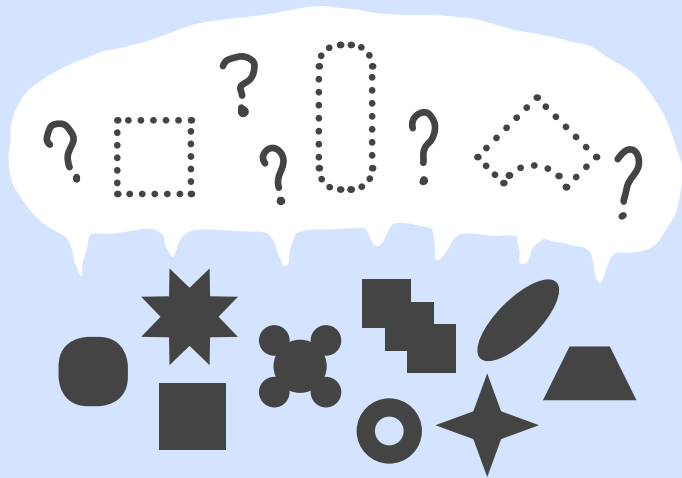


Being made shapeless can leave shapes feeling  
angry and frustrated; lonely and depressed.

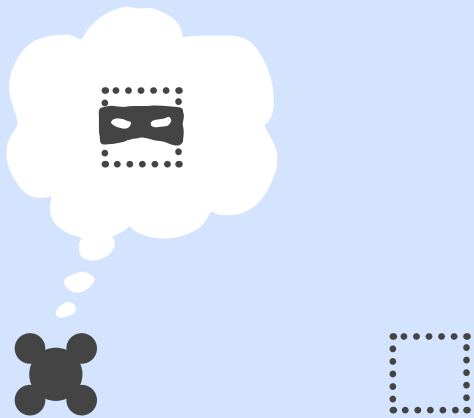
HOW ANGRY  
WOULD YOU FEEL,  
IF YOUR SHAPE WAS  
TAKEN AWAY, OR  
NO ONE BELIEVED YOU  
WHEN YOU SAID  
YOU WERE A  
SQUARE?!



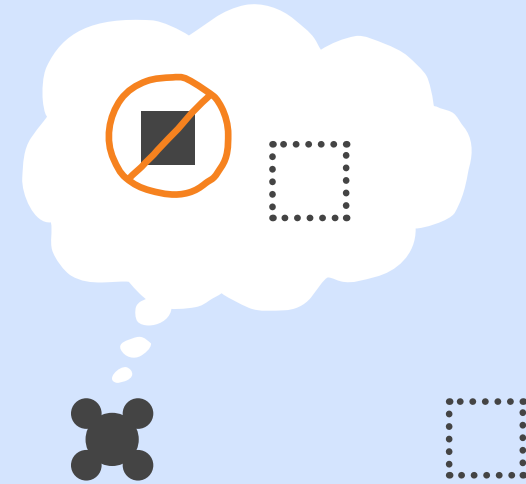
Despite this injustice, most shapes had never seen or heard about Shapeless Shapes.



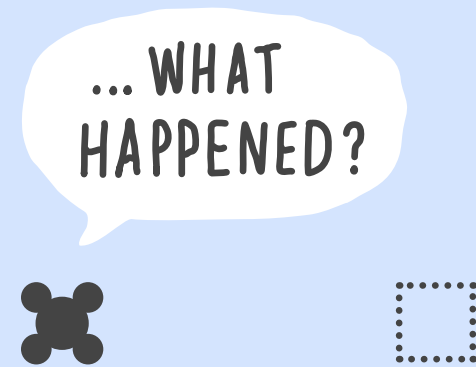
Or those who had heard of them, assumed that they had done something horrible,



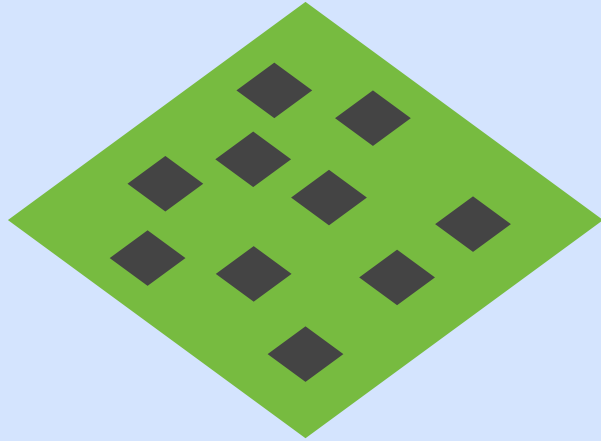
or had gone where they didn't belong.



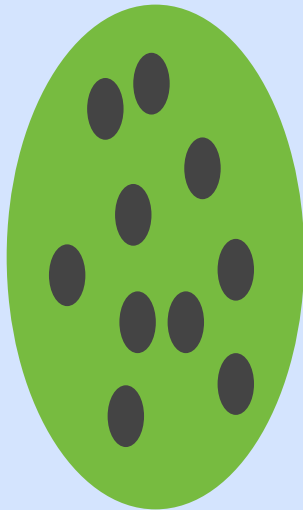
But this is because they didn't know their history. The truth was very different.



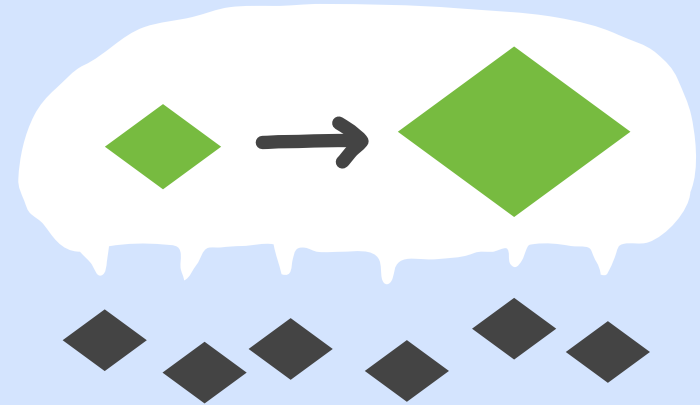
Here's one way in which shapes were made shapeless. Some time ago, Diamonds lived in Diamondland



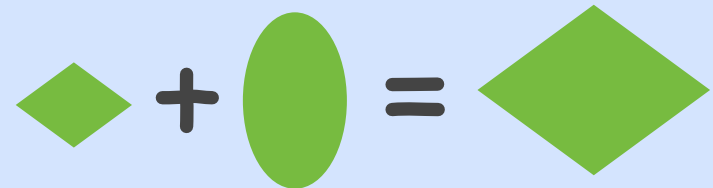
and Ovals in Ovaland.



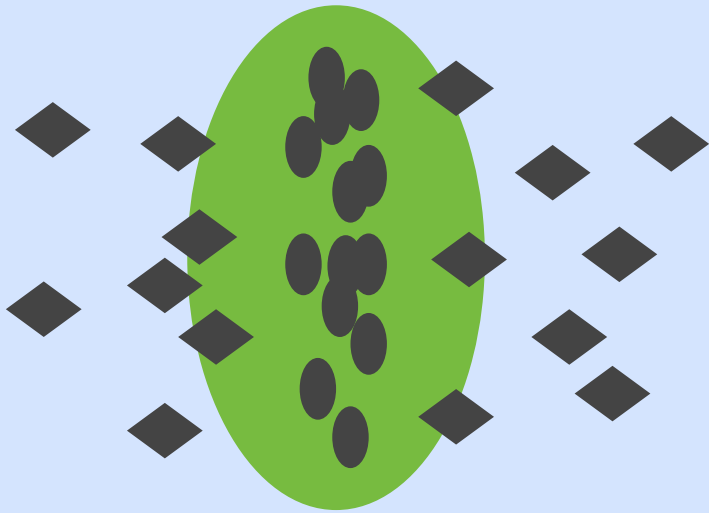
One day, the Diamonds decided to make their land bigger



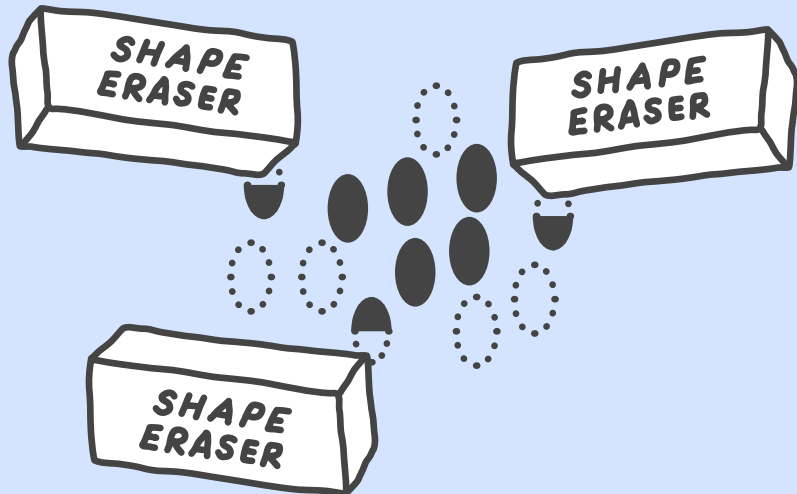
by taking over Ovaland.



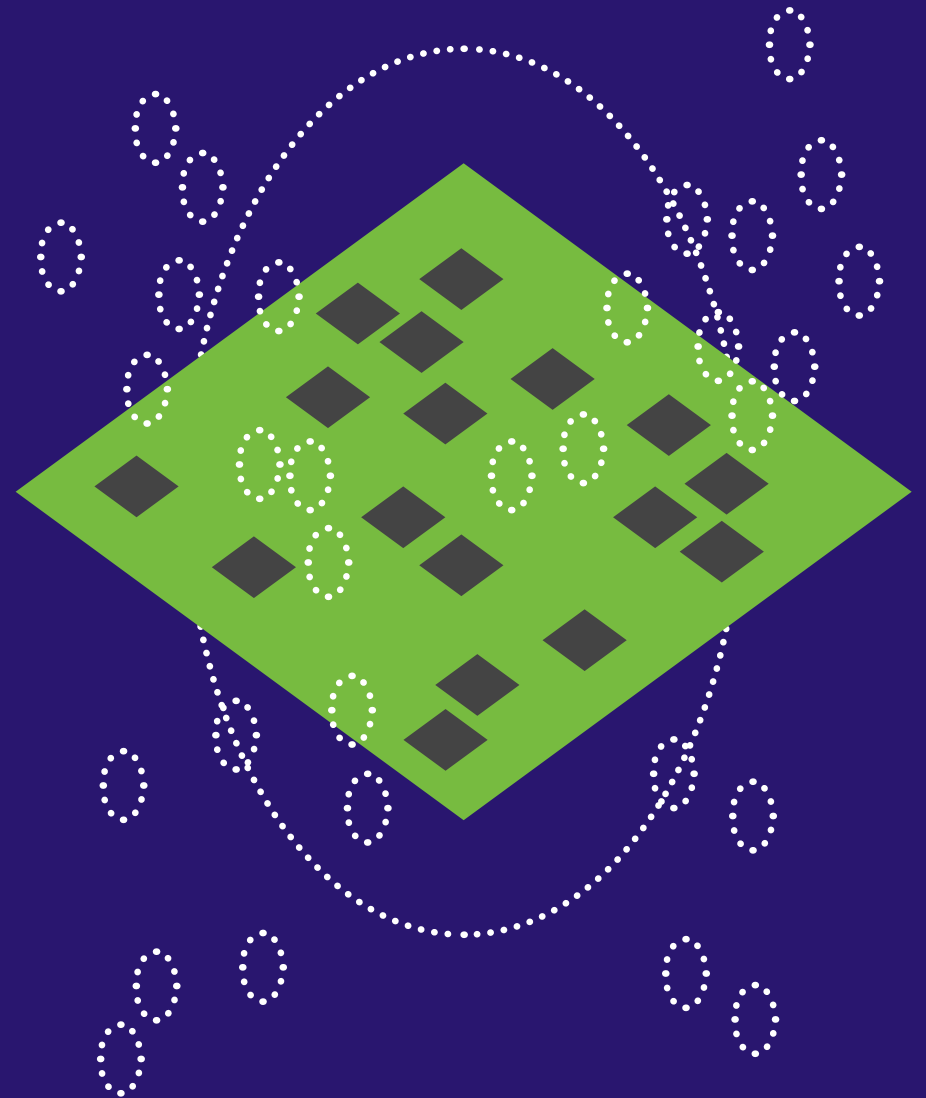
They attacked Ovaland with terrifying force.



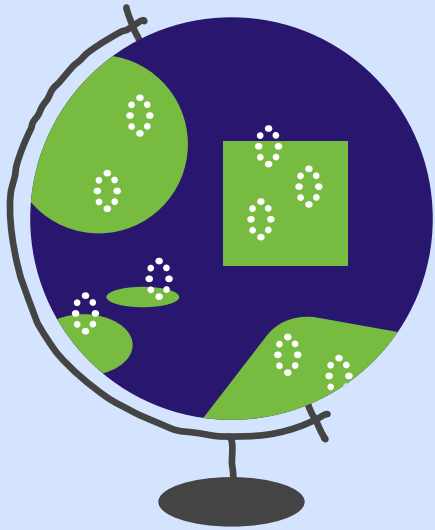
They then erased the Ovals shapes and said:



"From today, this too is Diamondland.  
There is no Ovaland, and there are no Ovals.  
You are Shapeless Shapes.  
Leave our land immediately, or face your death!"



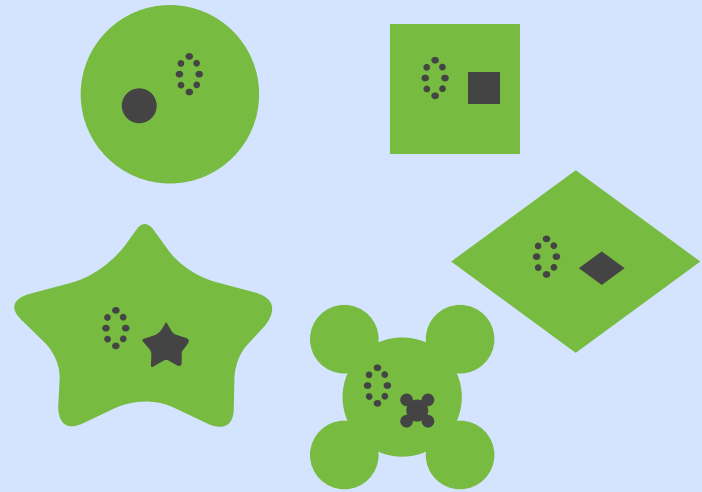
Overnight, Ovals became shapeless,  
wherever they were –



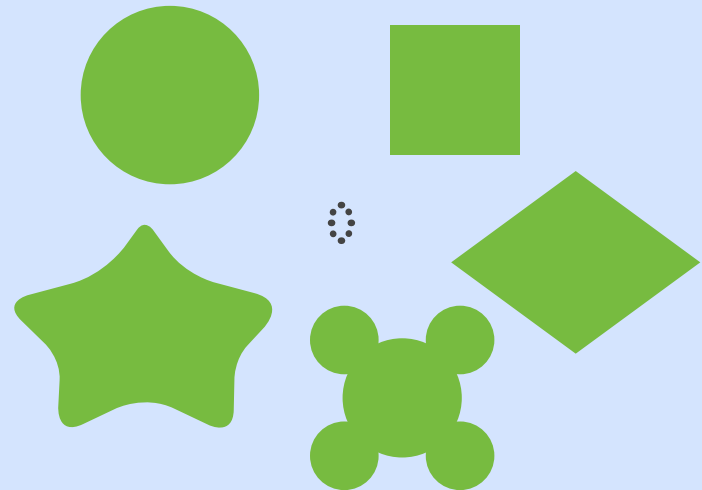
on airplanes, in restaurants,  
even in their own homes.



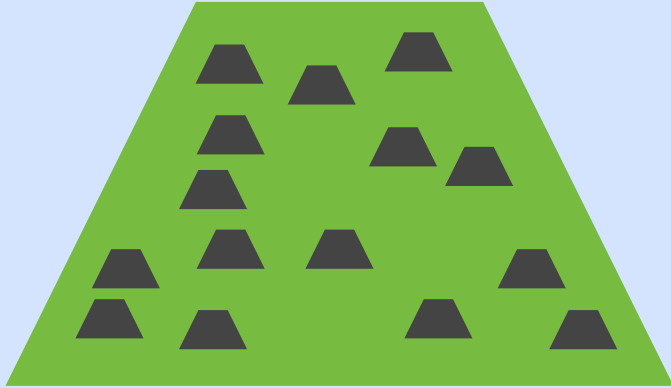
As Ovaland was no more, they were  
displaced and shapeless, wherever they went.



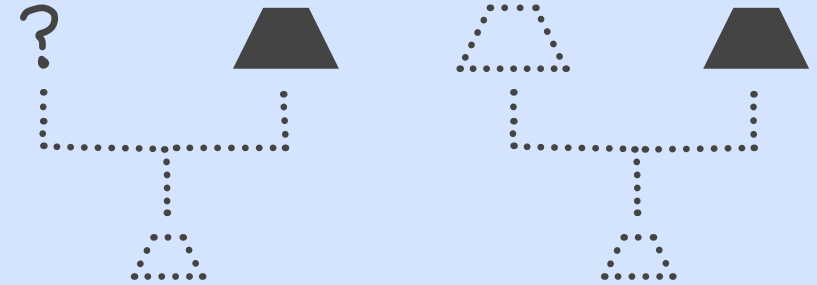
They belonged nowhere.



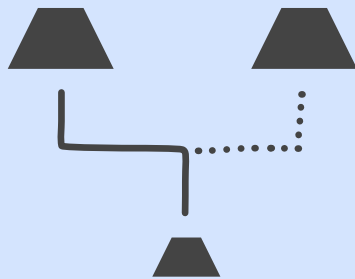
Or take the case of the Trapezoids living in the wonderful Trapezoidia.



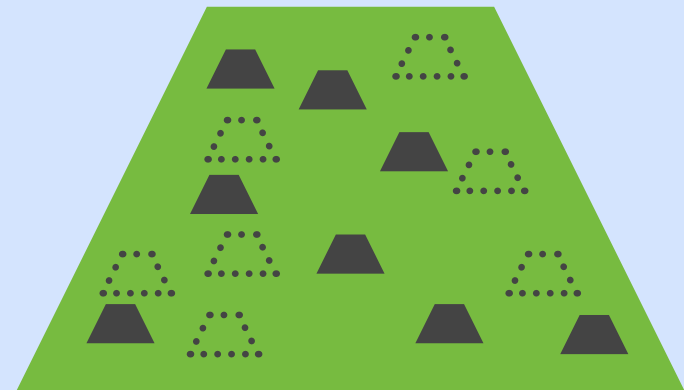
So if the father is out of the picture, or is himself shapeless, the baby's shape is erased.



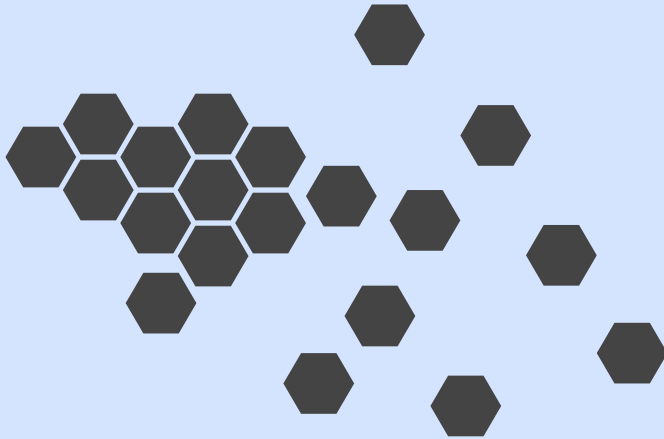
Mother Trapezoids are not allowed to pass on their shapes to their babies.  
Only fathers are.



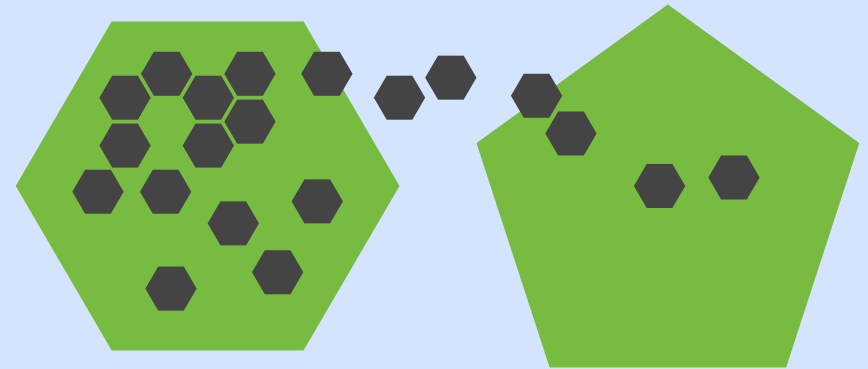
Today, many shapeless Trapezoids live there.



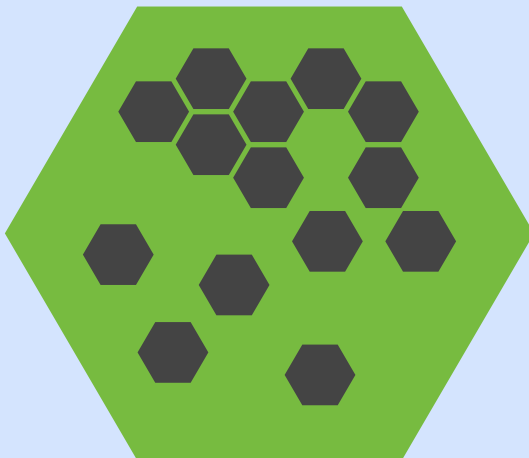
Then there are the Hexagons of unity and strength.



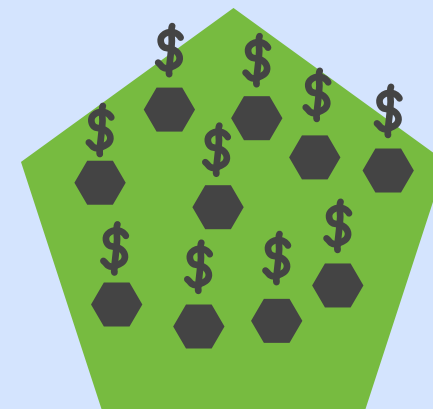
But many went to neighbouring Pentaland, to work on their bee farms.



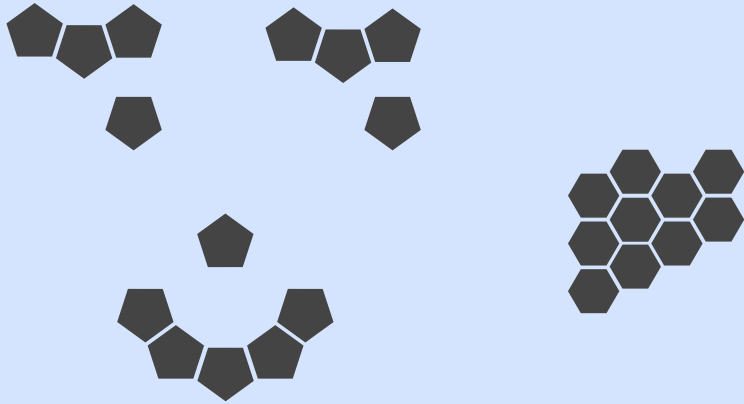
Those who live in Hexaland have their shapes.



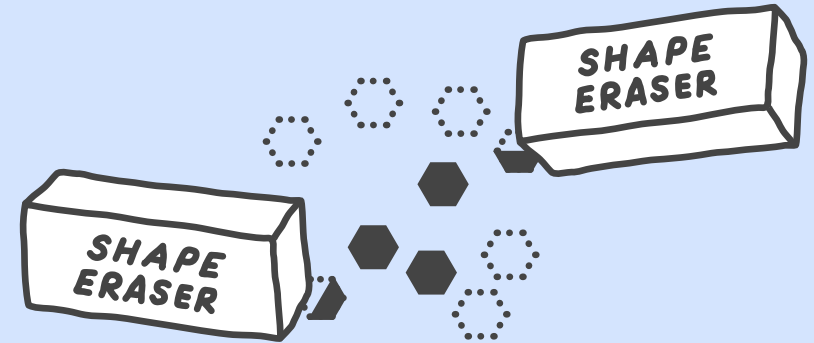
Over generations, the Hexagons contributed to making Pentaland wealthy and prosperous.



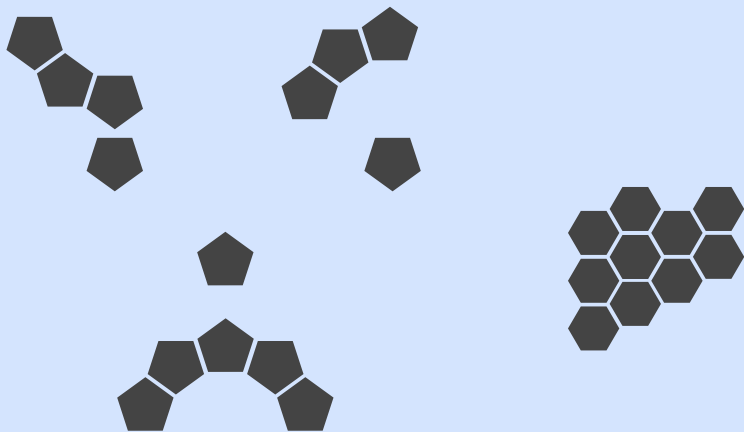
But as they looked different, they were always ridiculed by the Pentagons.



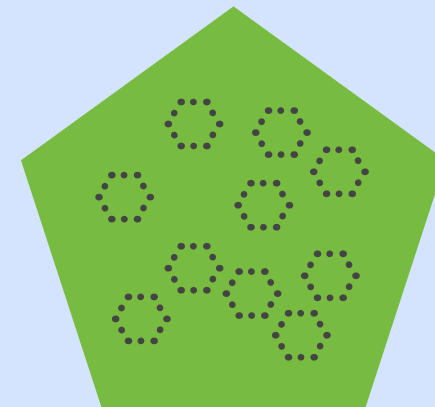
One day, the Pentagons decided to erase the Hexagons shapes.



And over time, the ridicule became fear and hatred.



They made them shapeless, just like that.

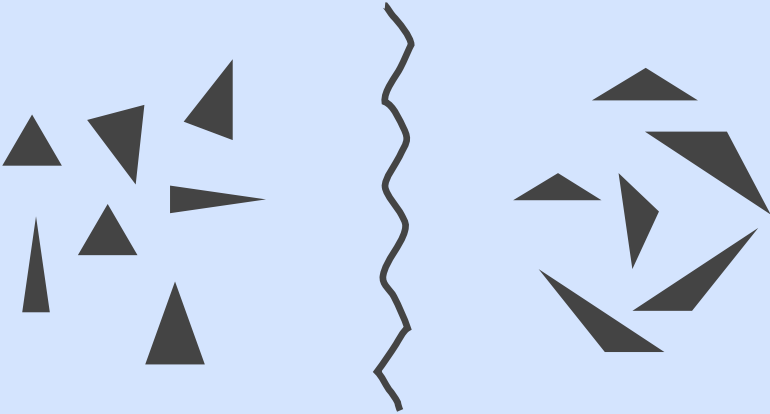




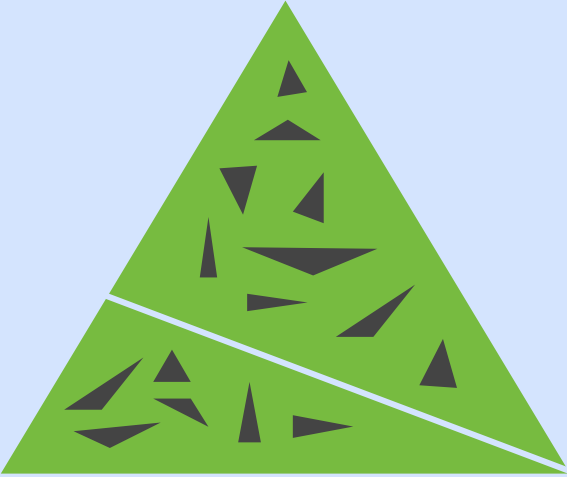
And there was the famous incident of TriangleLand,



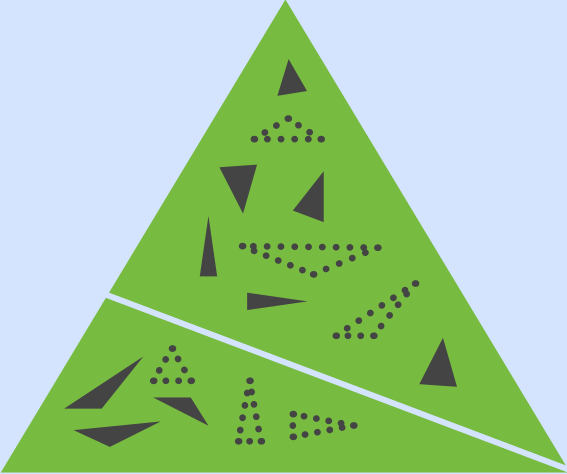
which split into two due to a war between the 'Acutes' and the 'Obtuse.'



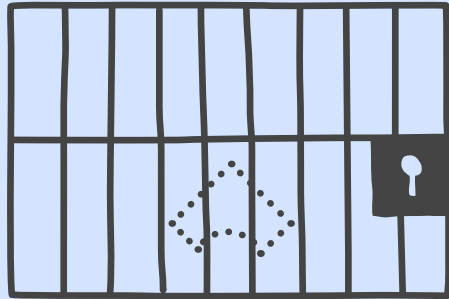
After the split, many Acute triangles still lived in Obtuseland, and Obtuse triangles in Acuteland –



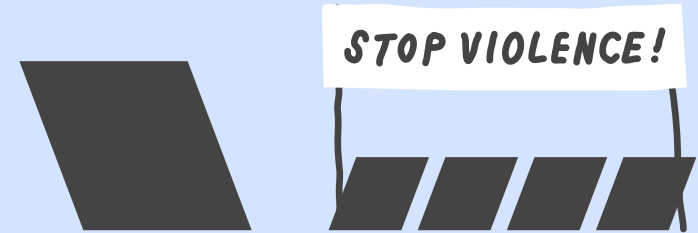
until, seen as threats to national unity, their shapes were erased.



Some shapes were erased because they had acted against their land,



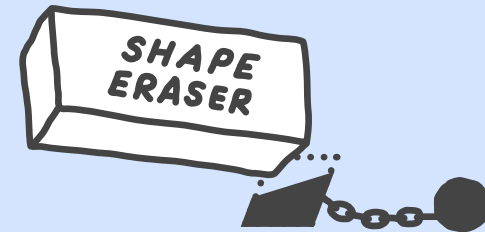
Or because they actually loved their land very much, and bravely opposed the powerful shapes who took control and started ordering everyone about.



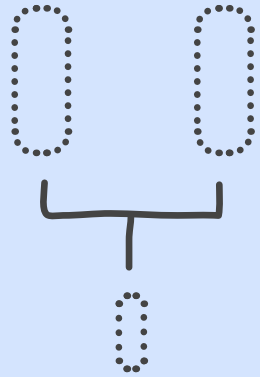
or because they were suspected of having done so.



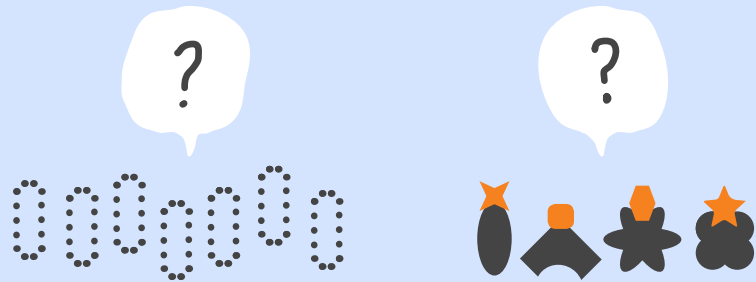
It has been said that a shape should never be stripped of its shape as a punishment, but this still happens!



Worst of all, the babies of Shapeless Shapes can also be born shapeless



These babies have no idea they've been denied their shape, just as other babies have no idea they've been given a shape hat.



Some shapes were told they didn't belong with their own kind.



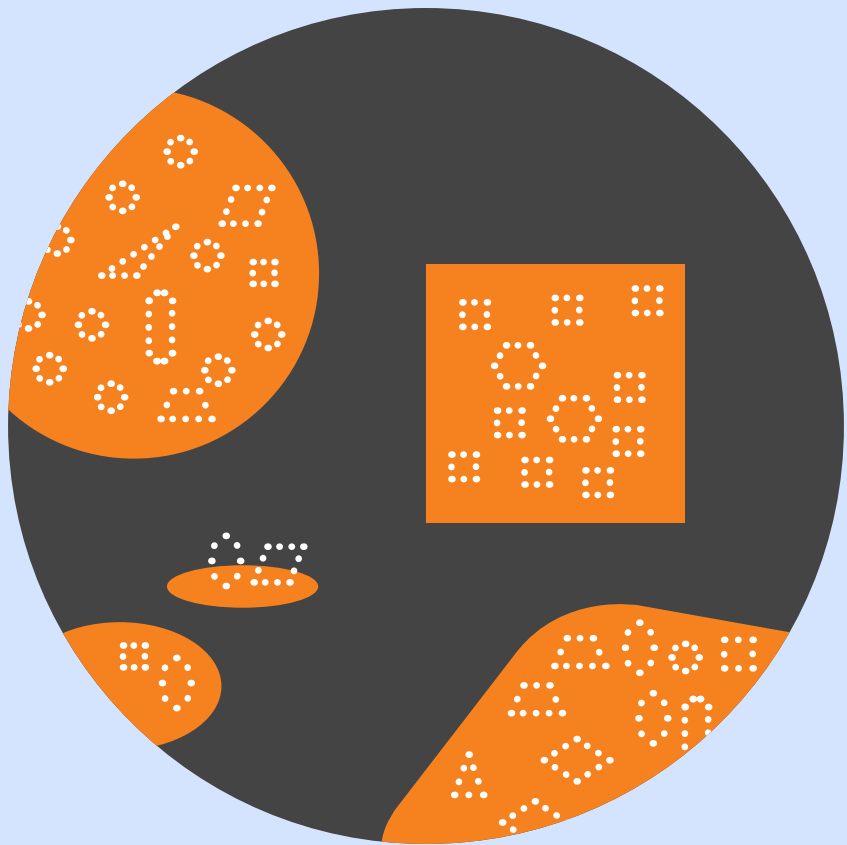
*They were sent to unfamiliar places*

*or stuck in their own homes.*



*And all the shapeless shapes  
lived miserably ever after.*

THE



END

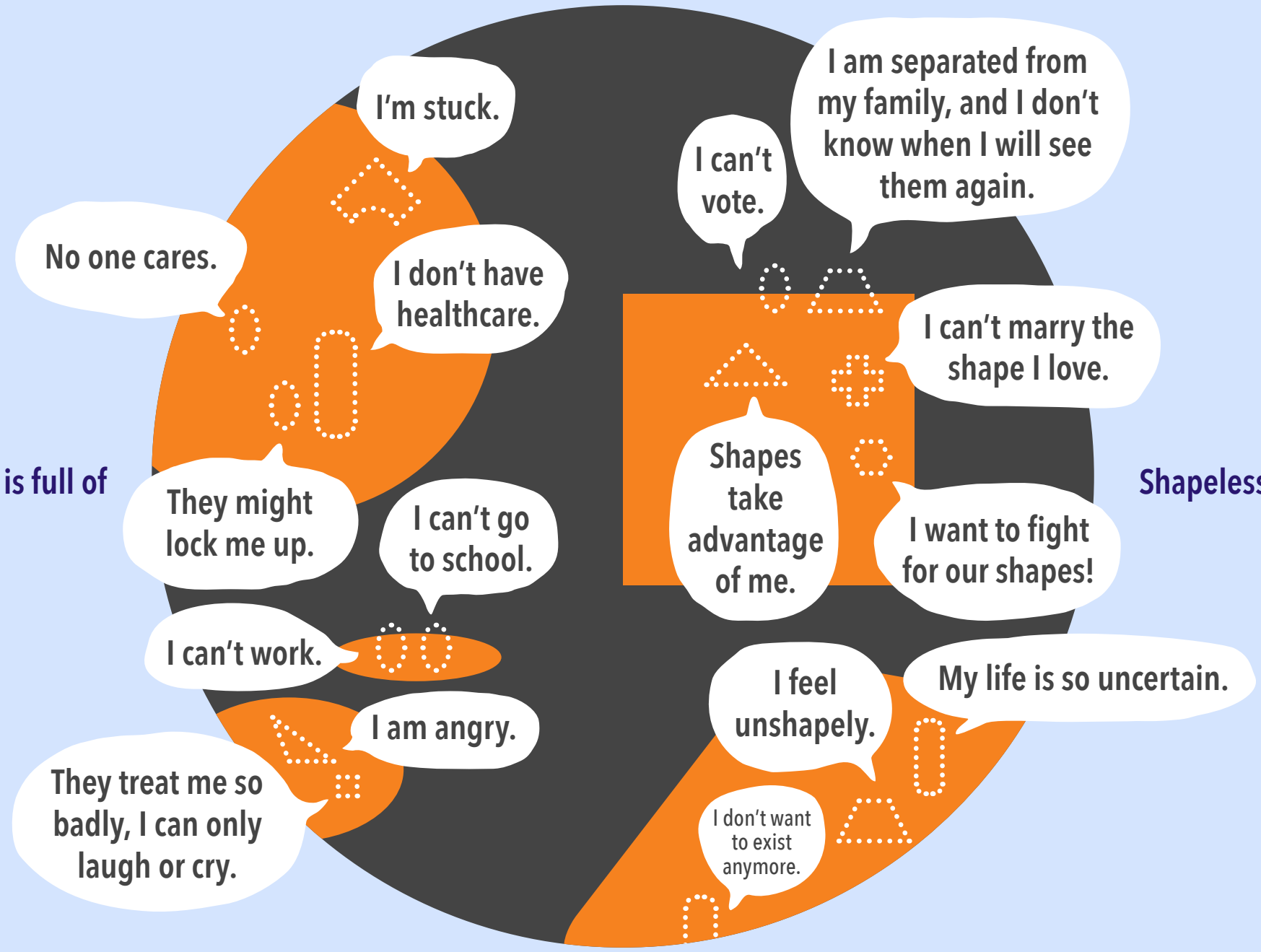
*But this is not a history book.  
The struggle goes on!*

3

SHAPELESS TO  
SHAPES

The world is full of

Shapeless Shapes.



No one cares.

I'm stuck.

I don't have healthcare.

I can't vote.

I am separated from my family, and I don't know when I will see them again.

I can't marry the shape I love.

Shapes take advantage of me.

I want to fight for our shapes!

They might lock me up.

I can't go to school.

I feel unshapely.

My life is so uncertain.

I can't work.

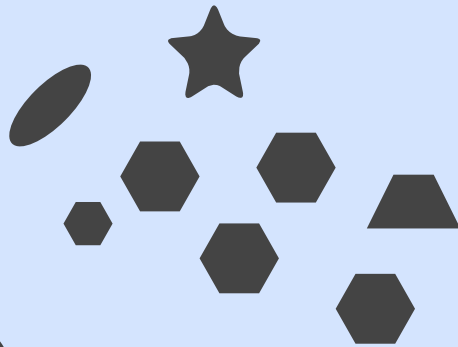
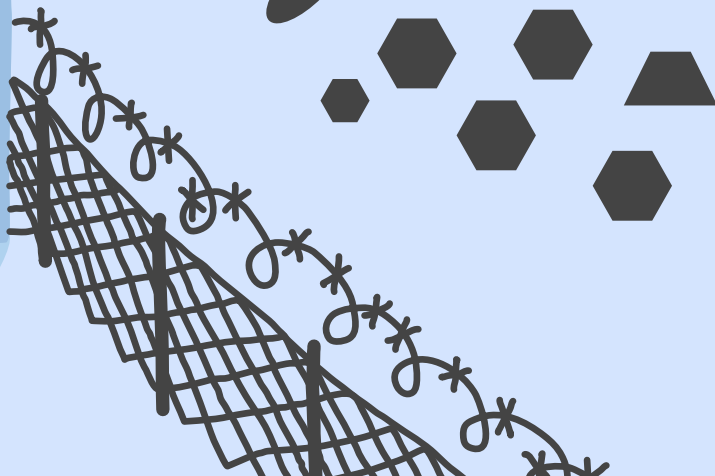
I am angry.

They treat me so badly, I can only laugh or cry.

I don't want to exist anymore.

Many Shapeless Shapes were forced to live in the shadows. They had not done anything wrong, but could be taken from their homes, put in prison and sent away.

They lived in fear. When they were ridiculed or treated badly, they just sucked it up.

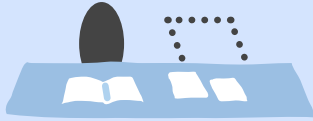




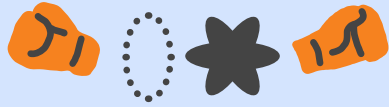


Some shapes joined these Shapeless Shapes in solidarity.

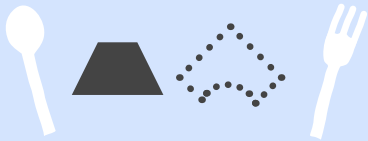
They worked



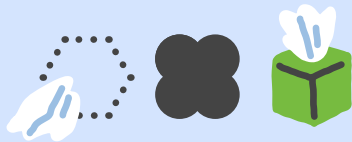
fought



ate



cried



laughed

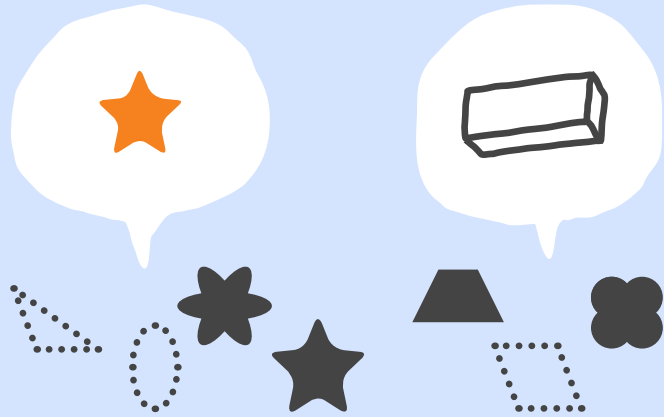


together.

These activist shapes campaigned for all Shapeless Shapes to have their rightful shape recognised. In doing so, they learned more about Shape Erasers;



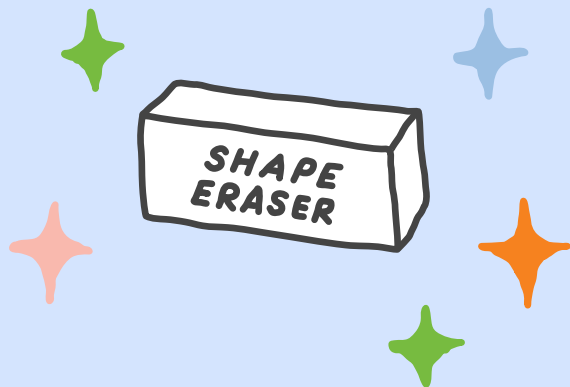
The activist shapes found that just as some shape hats were used to include, Shape Erasers were used to exclude.



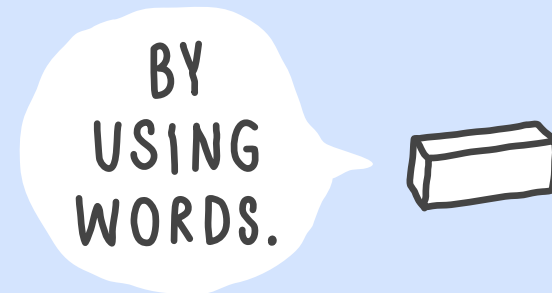
They were capable of stripping a shape of its shape, without actually, physically, changing anything about it.



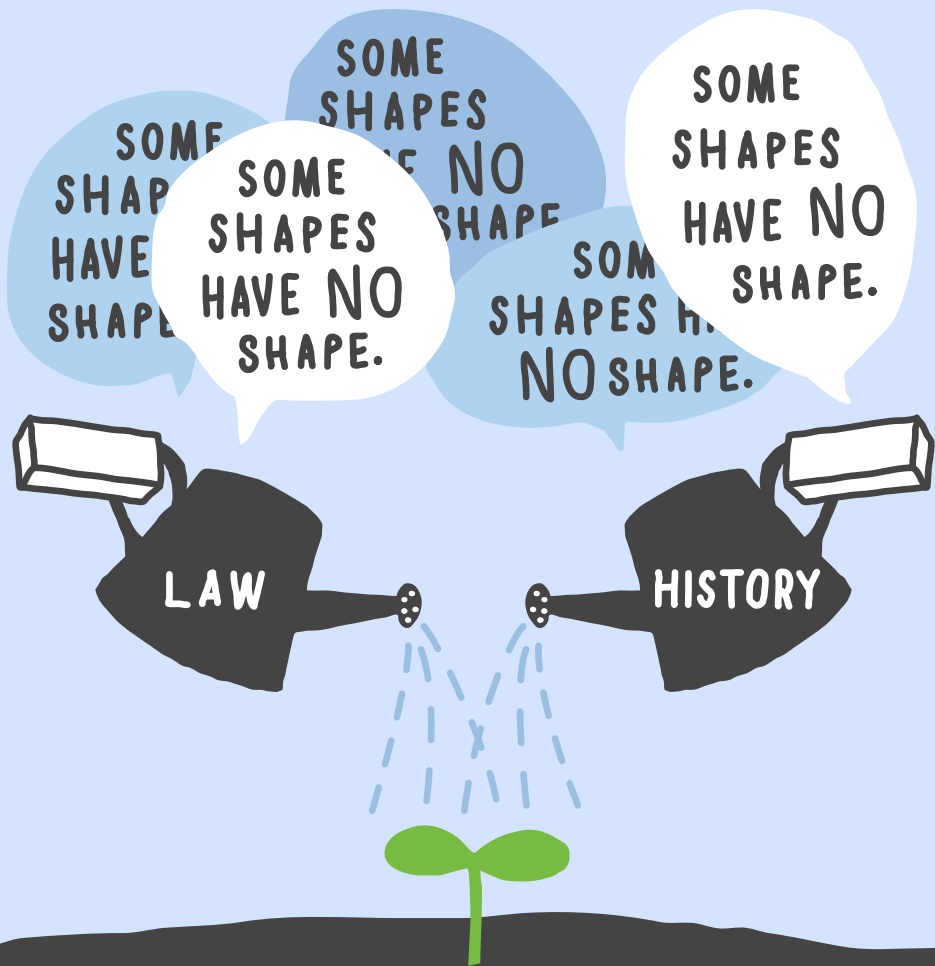
These Shape Erasers were very powerful – even magical – instruments.



They did this, through an ingenious method...



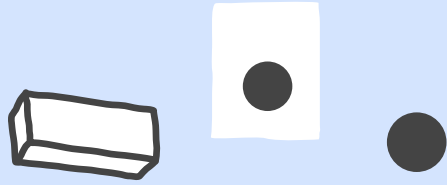
The Shape Erasers used words to say that some shapes had no shape. And by saying this over and over again, by writing it down in laws and histories, by planting the idea that some shapes could indeed be shapeless;



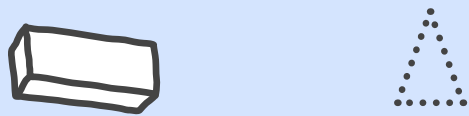
As time passed, these words were



By providing only some shapes with papers that confirmed their shape,



by not providing papers to others;



by disbelieving the stories of some shapes;



The Shape Erasers changed the way shapes saw and thought.



And so, shapes stopped seeing the shape before them, only the papers they had or did not have.

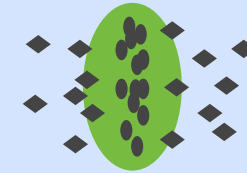


They stopped thinking about shapes based on who they were, but based on what they were told.

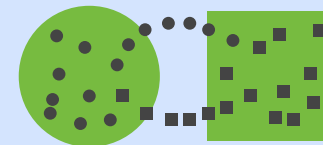


The Shape Erasers mostly targeted shapes whose shapeliness was anyway questioned.

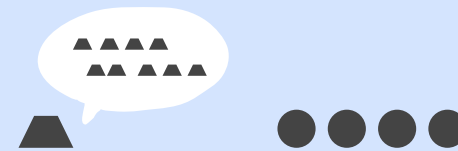
Shapes whose countries had been invaded,



who had moved somewhere else,



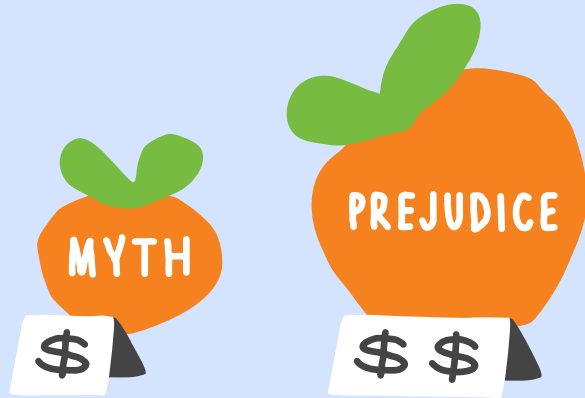
who looked or sounded different, and



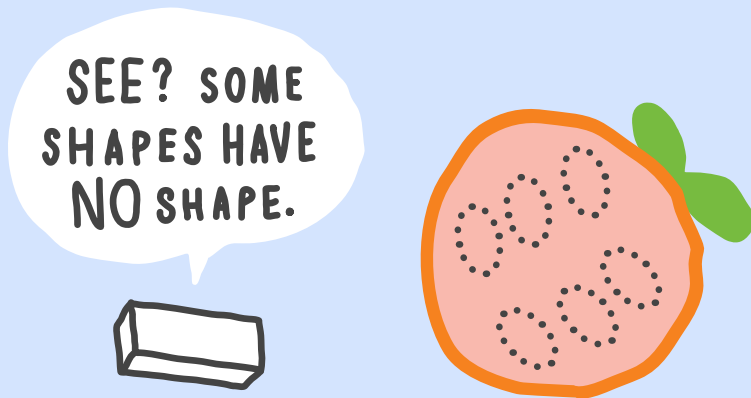
who had different beliefs.



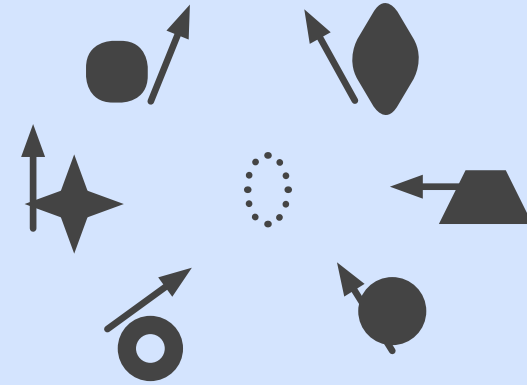
The Shape Erasers capitalised on existing myths and prejudices against such shapes,



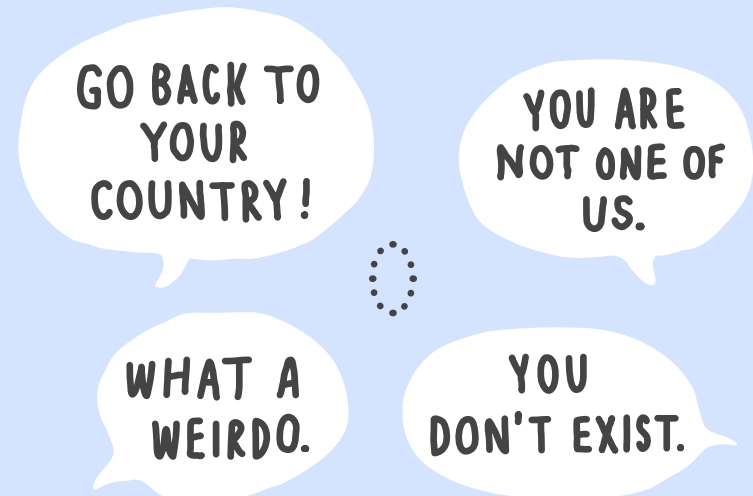
and took that extra step by saying they had no shape whatsoever.



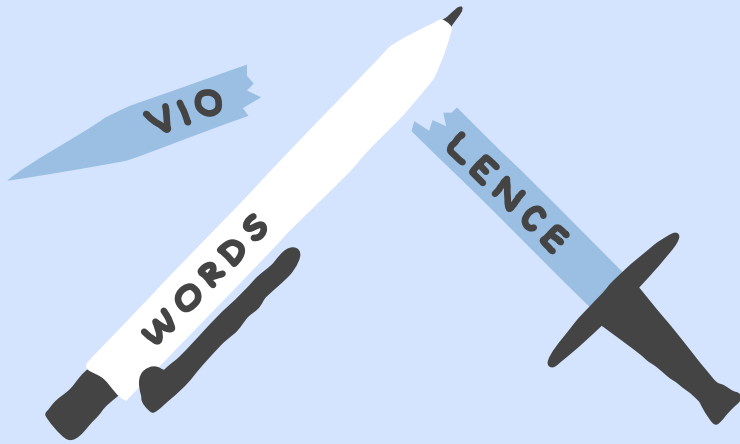
Once their shapes were erased, Shapeless Shapes were treated even worse.



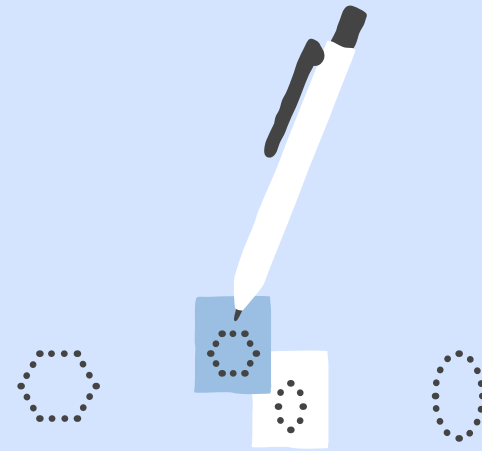
Insult was added to injury.



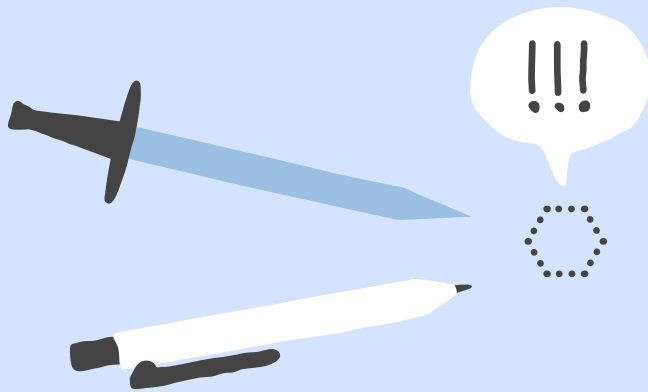
They say that the pen is mightier than the sword.



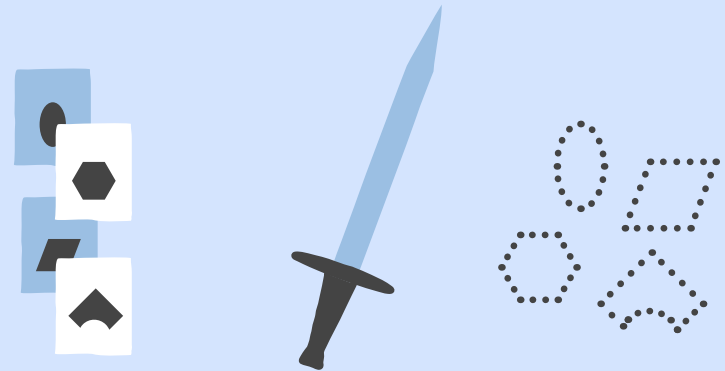
Pens wrote away the shapes of some.



But when the pen and sword work together,  
they are mightier still.



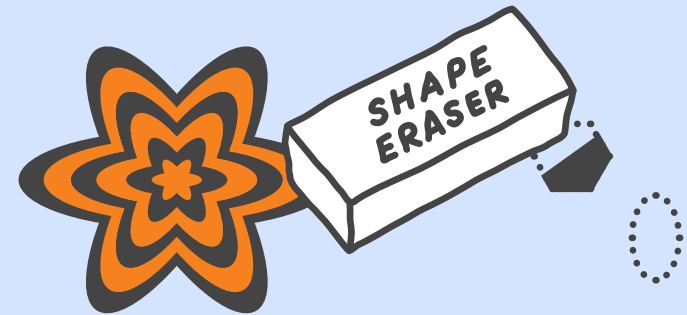
Swords stopped them getting it back.



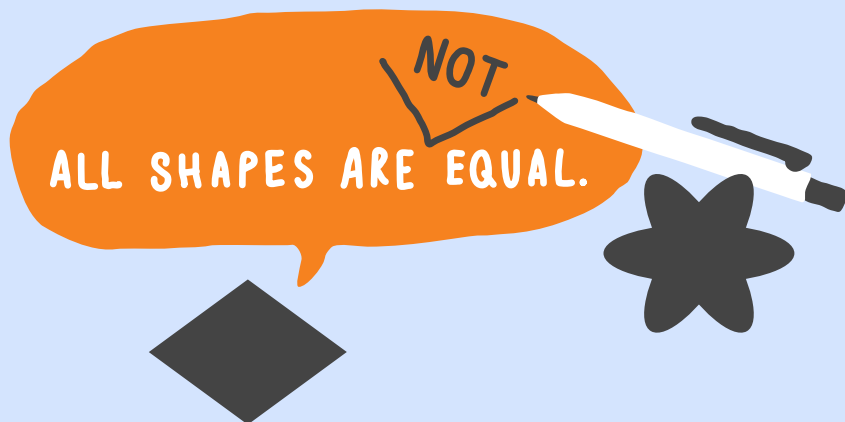
The sword-bearing wordsmith shapes spoke loudest and used the most force.



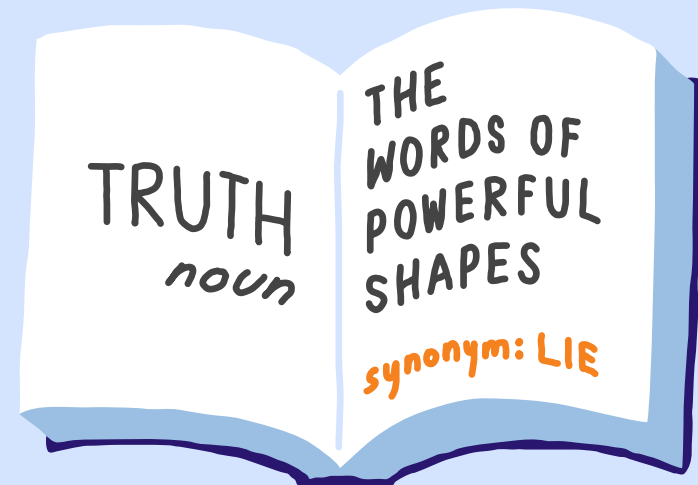
They magnified their own shapes and erased others.



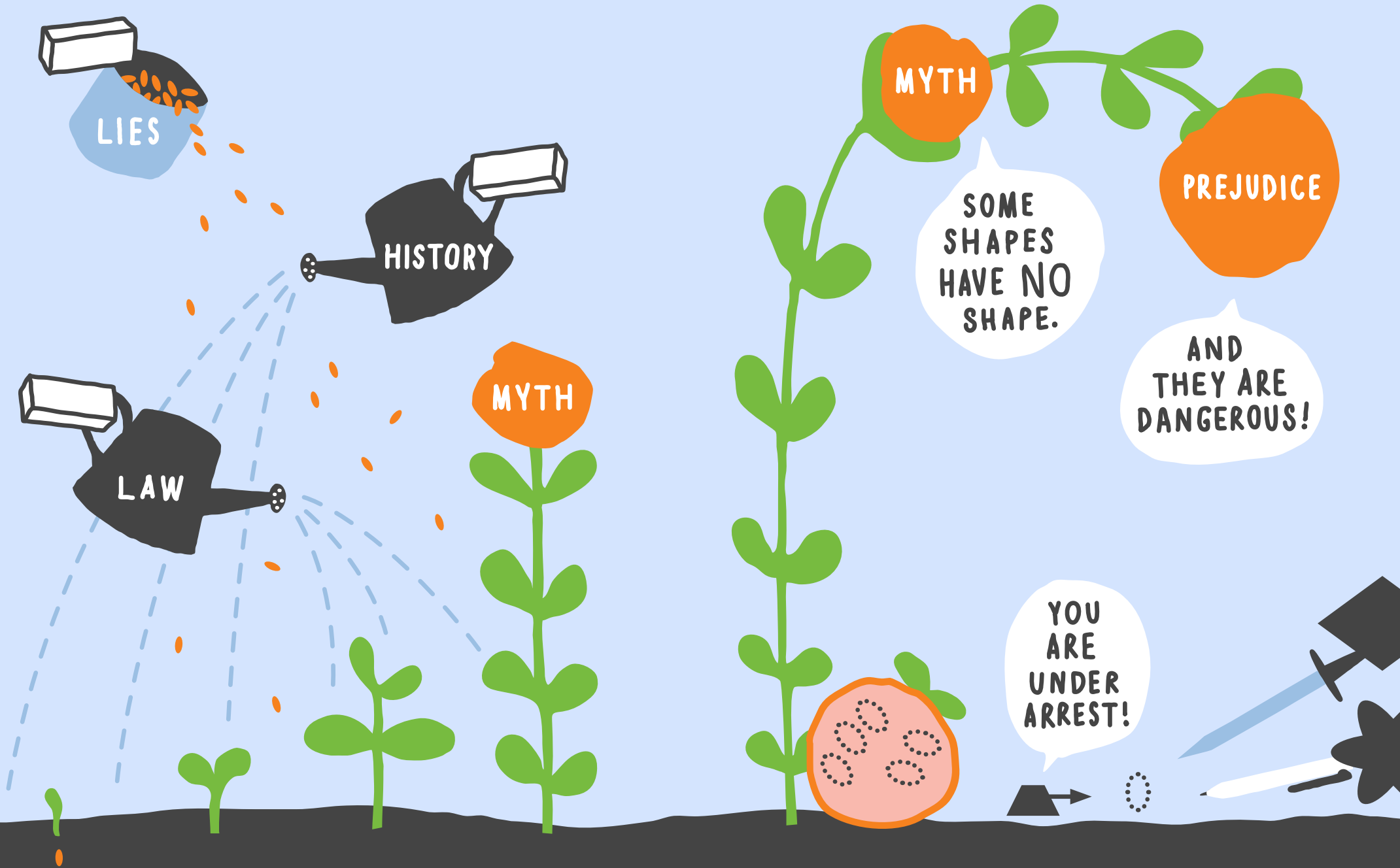
They used their power to spread fake news and rewrite history.



The truth was no longer true.







LIES

HISTORY

LAW

MYTH

MYTH

PREJUDICE

SOME SHAPES HAVE NO SHAPE.

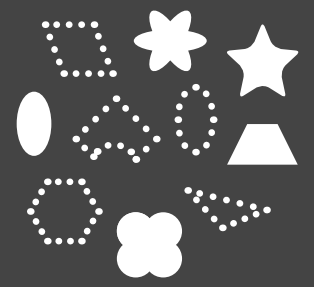
AND THEY ARE DANGEROUS!

YOU ARE UNDER ARREST!

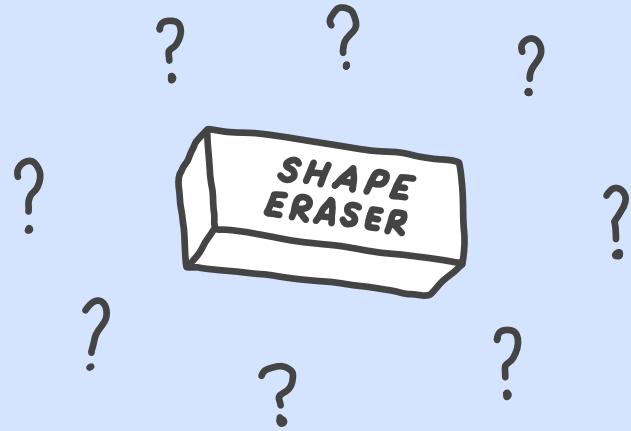
*This is what the powerful shapes did.*

*This was the dark reality that*

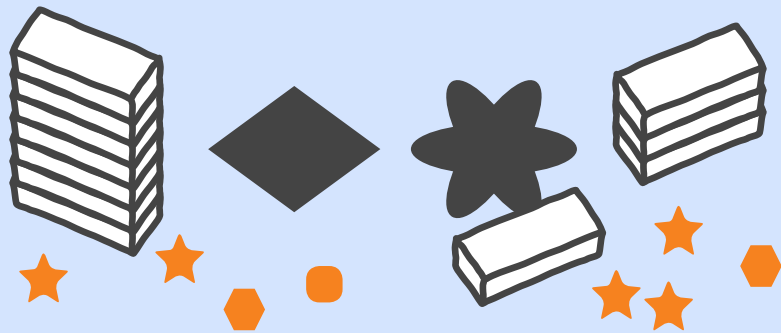
*confronted the activist shapes.*



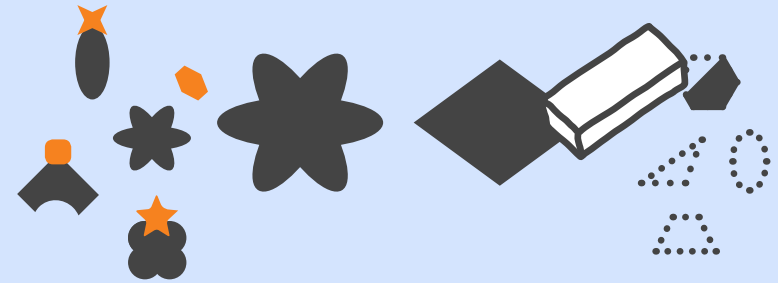
Who invented and used the Shape Erasers,  
you ask?



It was often, the same shapes who  
made and used the shape hats.



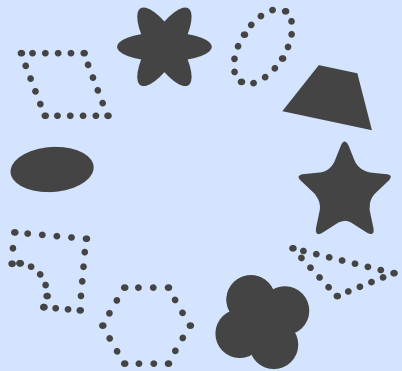
They were powerful and were meant to use  
their power to protect all shapes. But they  
protected only some, and harmed others.



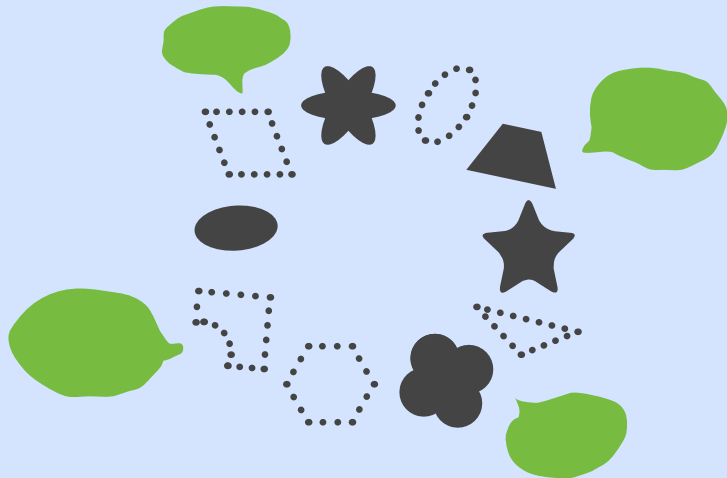
It was all very complicated and confusing.



So the activist shapes put their heads together...



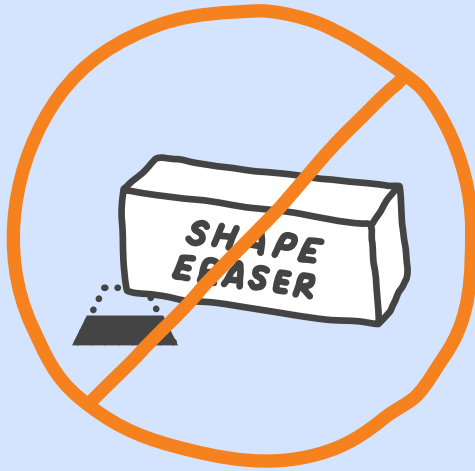
They decided they too should use words, to show that the words of the Shape Erasers were not true.



That they were lies.



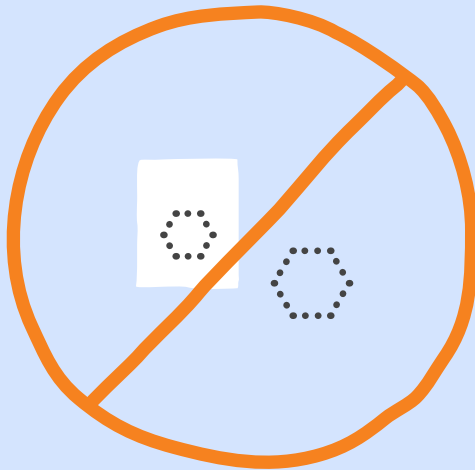
A shape cannot be made shapeless.



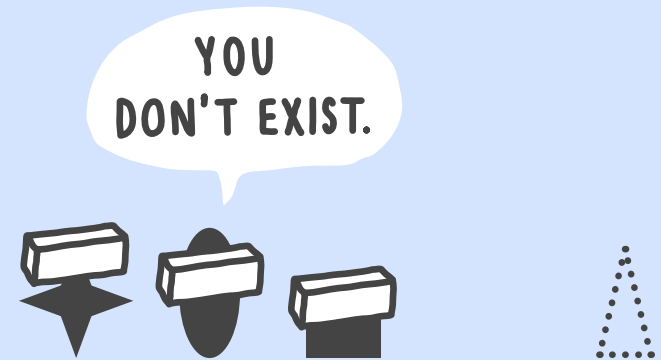
A history has many versions.



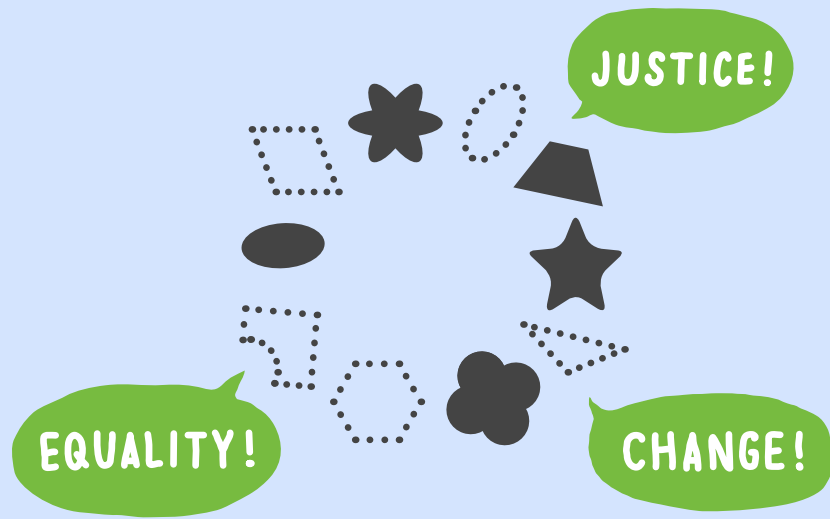
A document does not give or take away a shape.



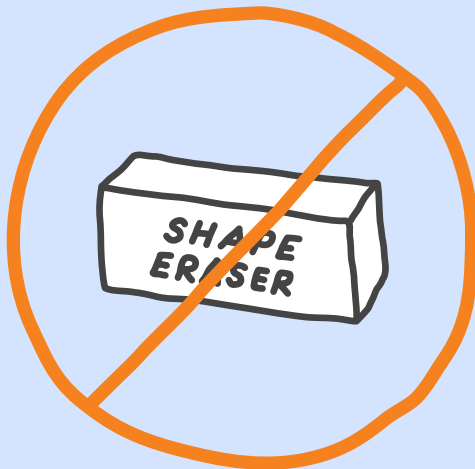
The Shapeless Shapes are not invisible, the Shape Erasers make us blind.



And so, the activist shapes continue to organise and demand justice, equality and change.



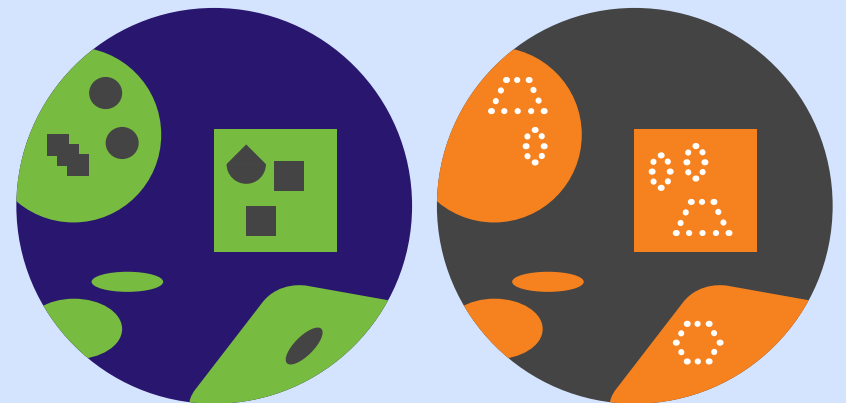
They show what an absurd, evil, and false concept, the Shape Eraser is.



They go to courts, do research, raise awareness, mobilise and empower.

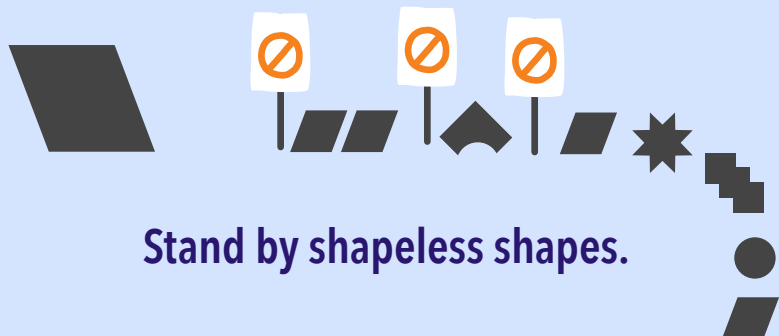


They ask, 'how can the same world be enjoyable to some, and humiliating to others?'



And now, they are asking us – in all our shapes and sizes – to join the movement.

Hold powerful shapes to account.

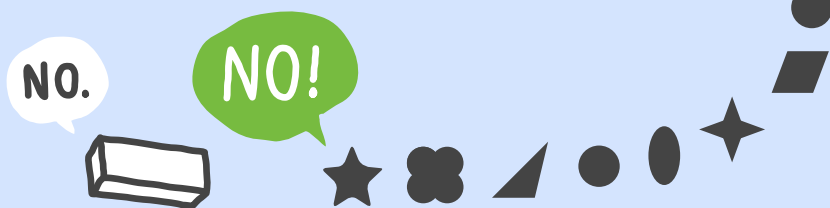


Stand by shapeless shapes.



Make our voices louder.

Do not take no for an answer.



No shape

should ever be

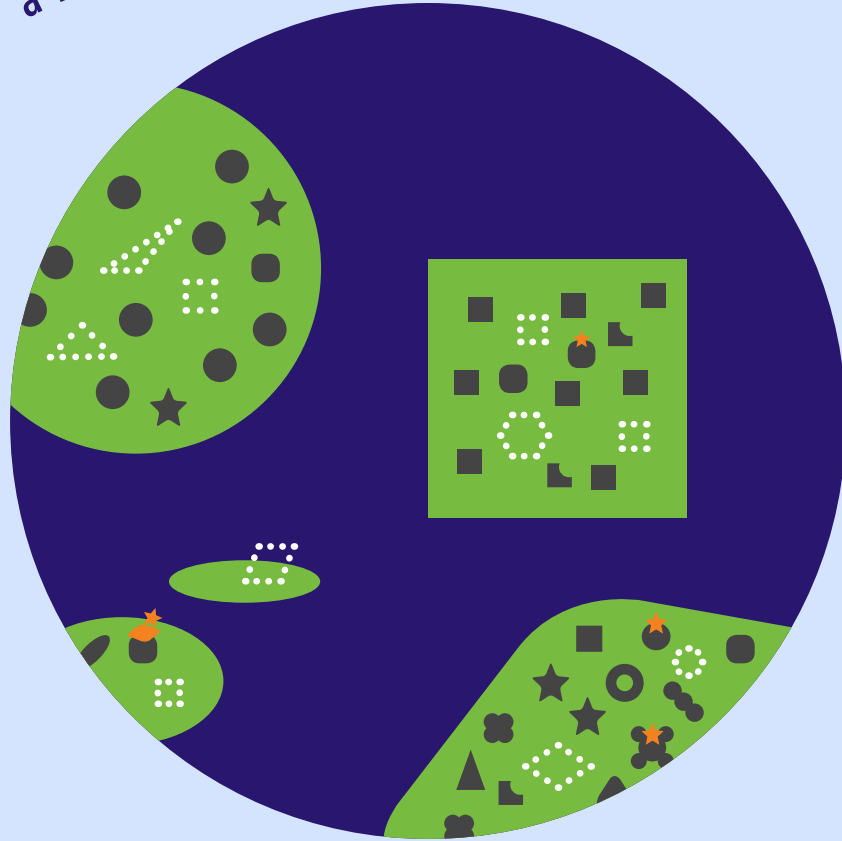
shapeless

again!

Please give back shape to Shapeless Shapes by filling them in with a pen.

And all the shapes realised  
they could live in  
solidarity with one another.

ACT



NOW

No,  
we cannot change the past,  
but the future depends on  
the present!



## This is a book about statelessness.

A stateless person is someone who is “not considered as a national by any state under the operation of its law”. **Article 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights** states that everyone has the right to a nationality and that no one shall be arbitrarily deprived of their nationality. Yet, there are more than 15 million stateless people around the world, and every ten minutes, another child is born stateless. Statelessness is often motivated by racism, xenophobia and patriarchy, which are underlying themes of this book.

Regardless of its cause, statelessness is an extreme form of exclusion. Stateless people are more vulnerable to discrimination, unequal treatment, marginalisation and even persecution. They are denied access to basic rights including education, healthcare, housing, employment and documentation. Many cannot travel, be safe or free, participate politically or have their voices heard.

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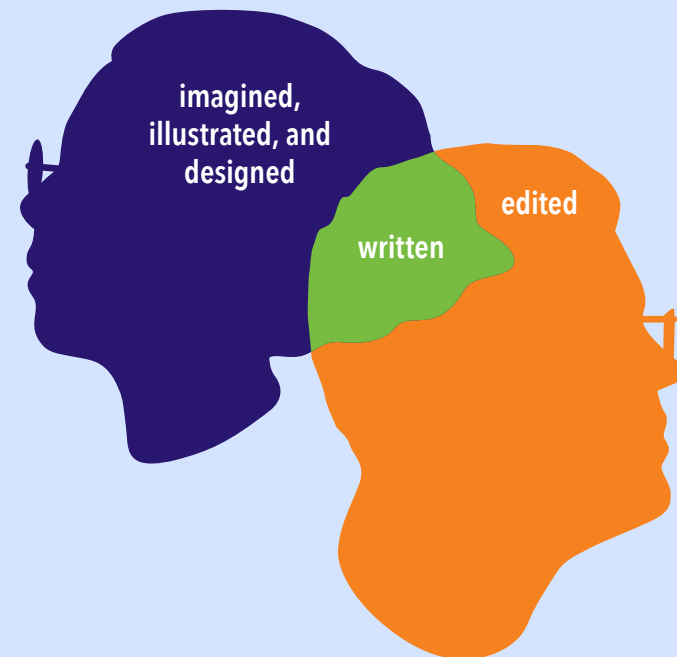
**This is also a book about the work of the Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion (ISI).** ISI is the first and only human rights NGO dedicated to addressing statelessness globally. Our Mission is to promote inclusive societies by realising and protecting the right to a nationality.

**Today, the right to nationality is increasingly under threat.** The instrumentalisation of nationality to isolate and scapegoat the Other has become a potent strategy of populist leaders with nationalist agendas. Minorities, those of migrant backgrounds, women, children, the disabled and other vulnerable groups are disproportionately impacted.

While the challenges are immense, the global statelessness field is also undergoing radical and fast-paced change. ISI is at the centre of efforts to build the field, through convening, empowering and nurturing a core body of global actors and activists – both stateless and with nationality. **A global movement against statelessness is emerging.**

To learn more about statelessness, ISI’s work and the global movement, please visit [www.institutesi.org](http://www.institutesi.org)

A shape called Hanna Kim



A shape called Amal de Chickera

## Acknowledgments

Hanna Kim is an artist, designer, social justice advocate, and a Soros Equality Fellow. Amal de Chickera is a co-founder and co-director of ISI and a Fellow at Middlesex University.

This book was originally conceived and created as Hanna's independent project in **GHP 262: Emerging Issues in Humanitarian Response and Human Rights Protection** at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health in 2017, with continual guidance from Jacqueline Bhabha, Professor of the Practice of Health and Human Rights from Harvard FXB Center for Health and Human Rights.

We are grateful to Professor Bhabha and everyone else whose encouraging words and critical feedback was crucial to the development and improvement of this book.

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**All proceeds from the sale of this book will go to support the work of stateless activists around the world.**

IDENTITY  
BELONGING  
HISTORY  
FREEDOM  
DISCRIMINATION  
INJUSTICE  
ACTIVISM  
STATELESSNESS

