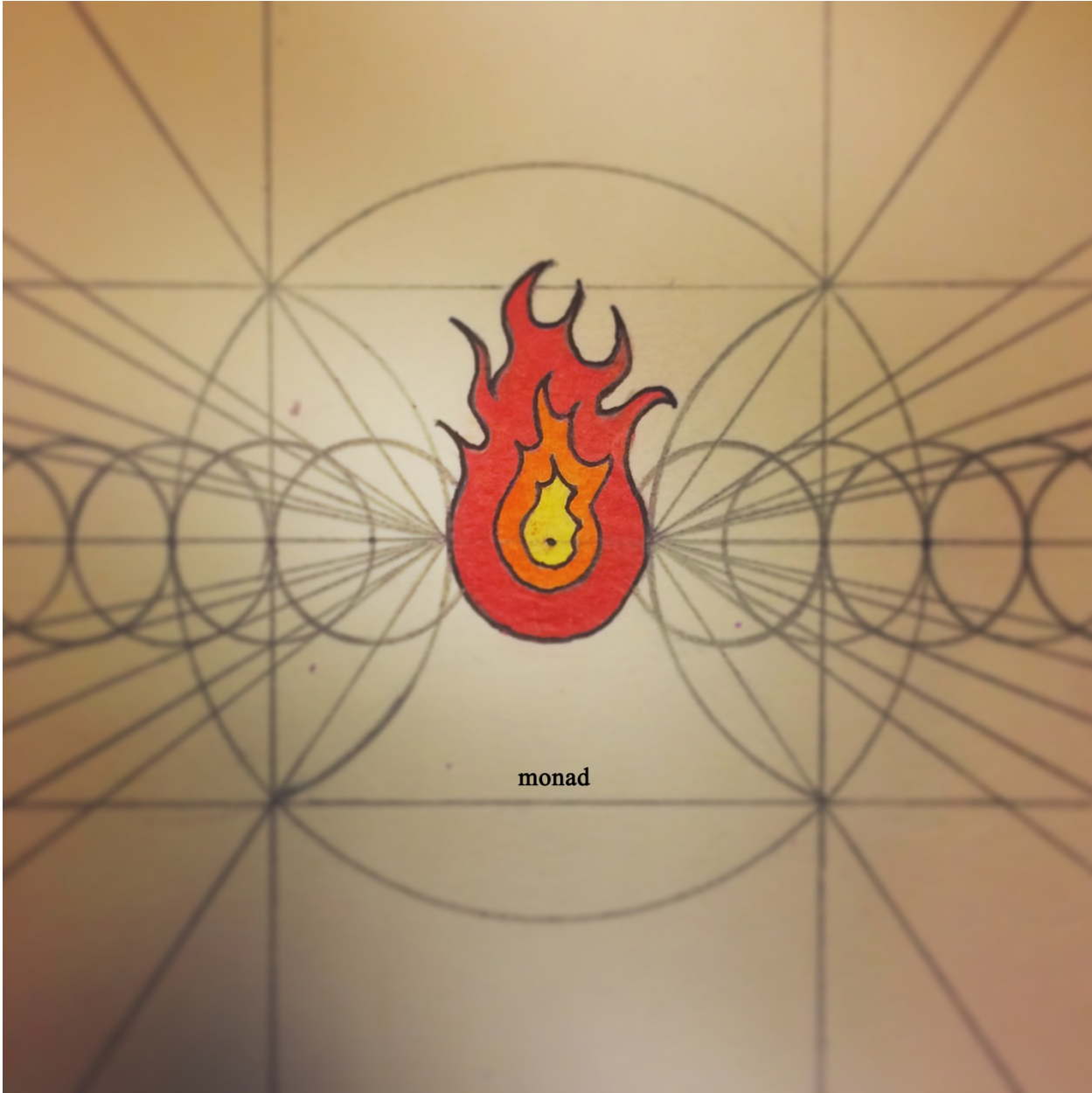


Scout McComb

Homecoming King

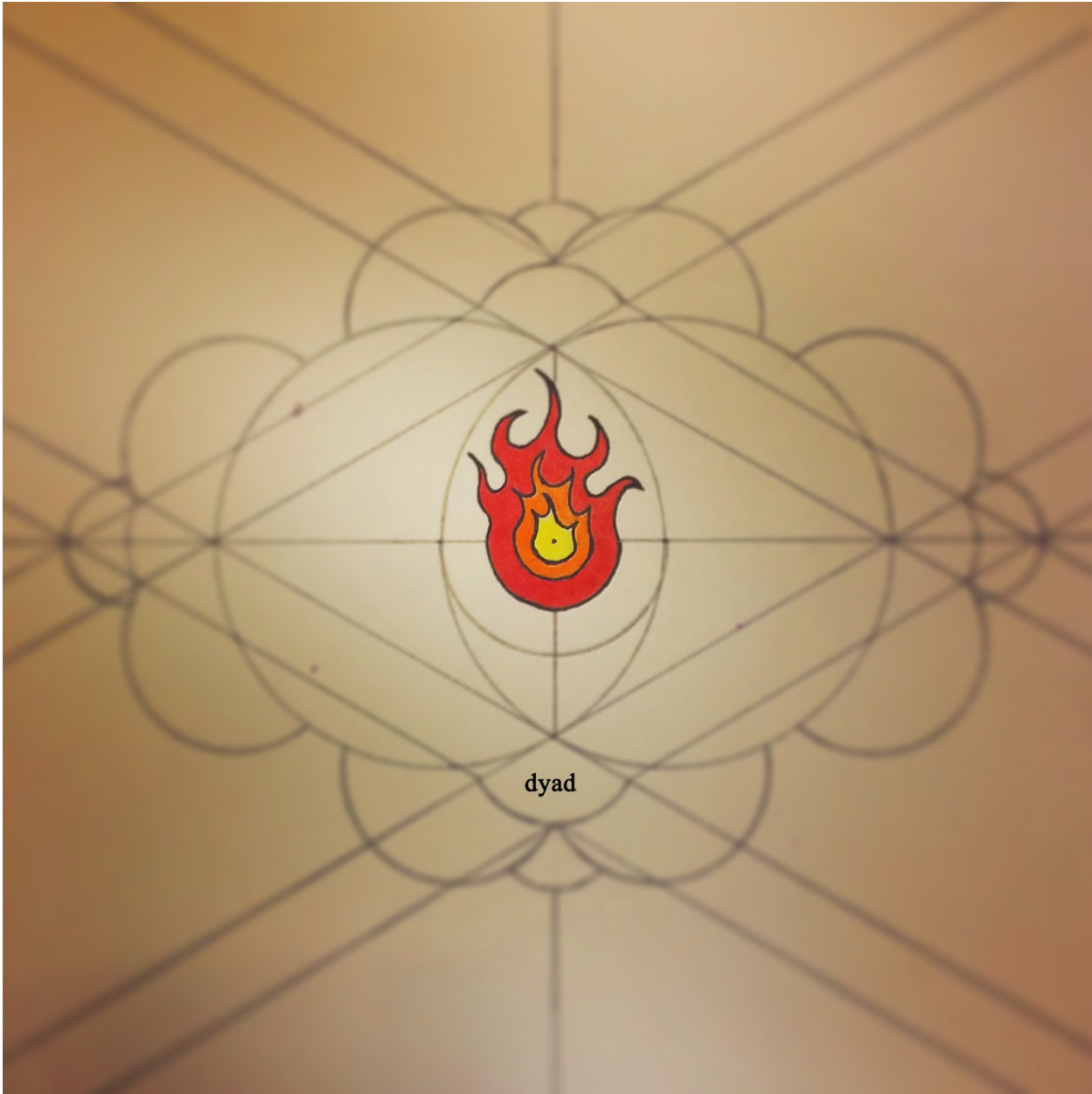
I awoke in burnt orange darkness my faceside mashed against the pebbled earth the smell of sunlight warming cedar pollen the taste of dirt upon my rumflavored tongue. Cicadas buzzed in the grass their din cadenced by such dull unthinking repetition that I sensed as I often sensed when listening to the ancient tunes of nature an inarticulable horror at the heart of existence...I opened my eyes....they were already open...gazing into my cupped palm and the dark orange haze therein...

Moved my hand. Blinking hard at the appearance of *life*. The asterisked sun breaching a cedar grove on the upper rim of a steep river valley its gauzy white light sweeping down sheer limestone cliffs and across the riverside glade in which I lay sprawled twisted bent like the policetape outline of a man flung from a passing riverboat.



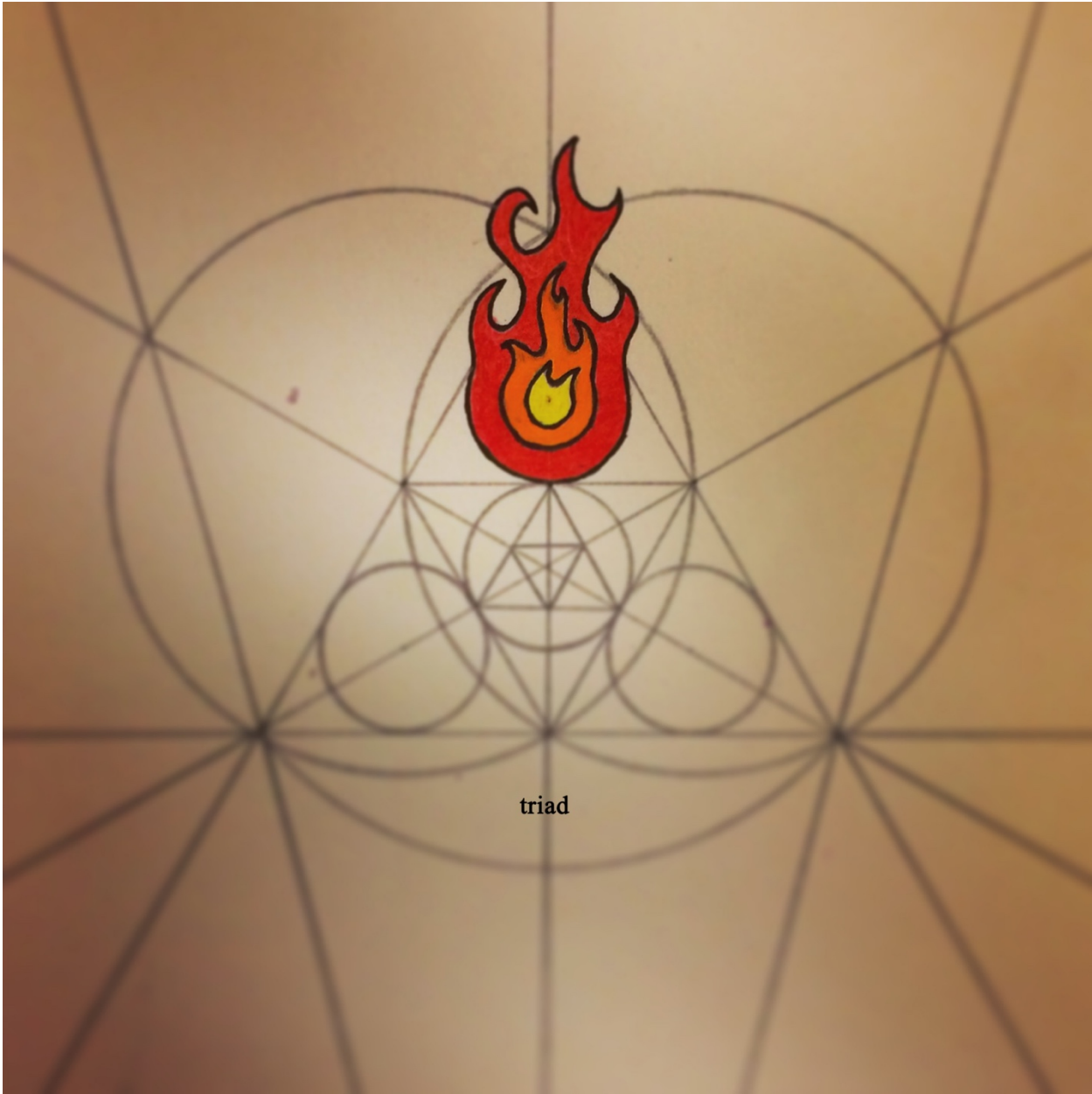
Turned to my other side. Watching the river flow along the grassy bank. Silent witness to whatever conflagration had consumed me the night before. The dark indigo central channel moving swiftly its shallower sides rived off and curling in cerulean ringlets towards the shore. Pollen and dust floating thru the volume of sunlight that at once hovered above the waterface and plunged into its hologrammic depths. I looked up, the azure sky a river unto itself, folded between high limestone cliffsides, a large bird tracking thru its translucence like a black stylus upon a color swatch. I did not know what type of bird it was but felt that I should. A boat captain in the middle of middle age shouldn't I know something about circling birds? Except I didn't except to think that I should.

The vertiginous valley walls were blotted with caves their black yawns directing the light of the world towards depths rumoring treasure but turning finally foul of lung, trapping birdsong and oxygen in pockets of blackdamp, drawing heavymetal toxins down ancient lagoons carved smooth by stalactite cum overflowing terraced rimstone pools dripping milkblue upon jewelrous pool spar, eyeless newts with ricepaper skin darting thru the dark like crazed dinosaurs miniaturized by time, once great predators of field and valley lost in the earth's duodenum after taking refuge during a jurassic storm.



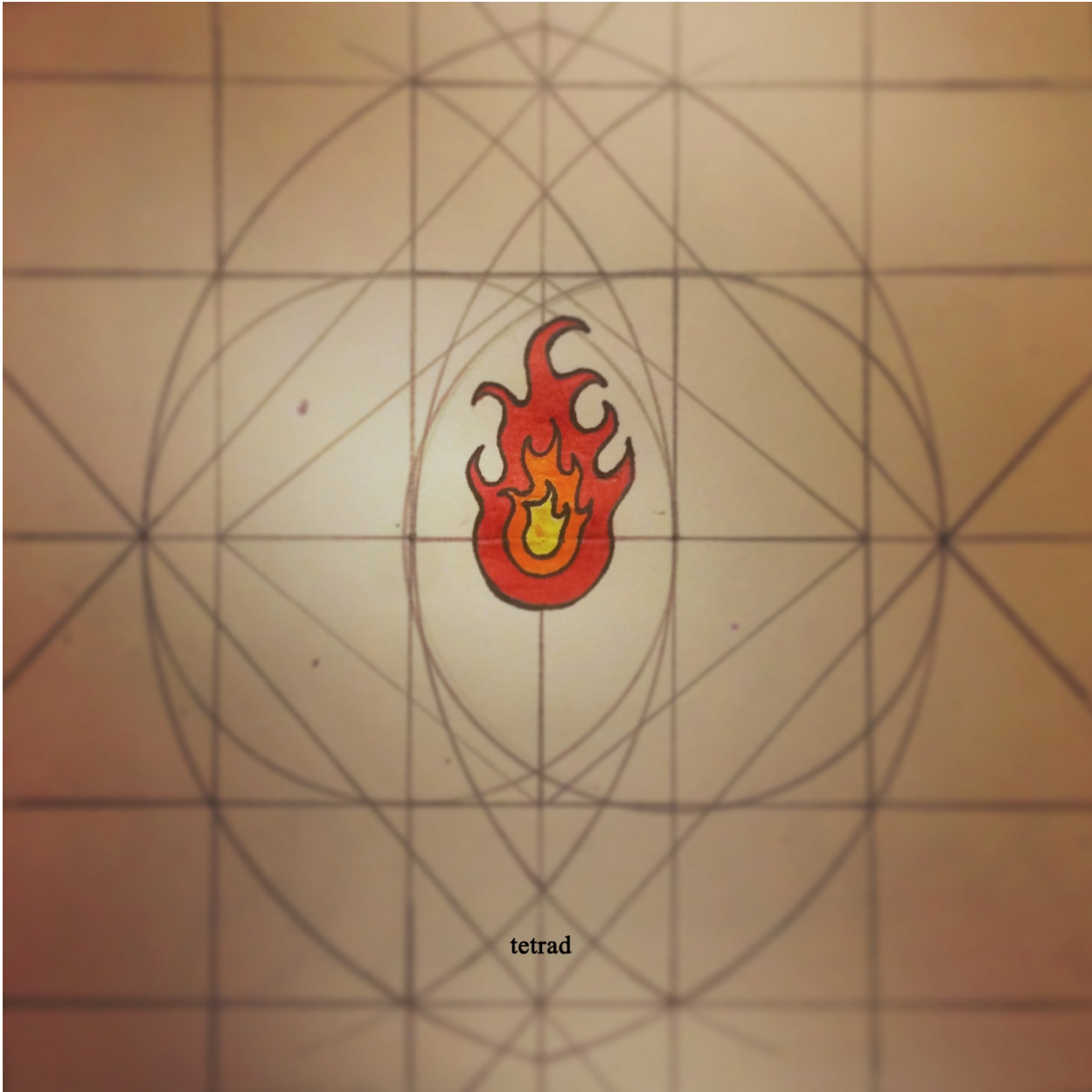
I stood up. Brushing laurels of haycolored buffalograss off the sleeves of my captain's blouse. Gilt shoulderboards askew. Navyblue cotton fabric torn at the elbows and knees. Stepped towards the water and stooped down at the sandy brink of a slowly circling eddy waterstriders skating across its surface trailing vanishing ribbons of white sunlight. Hordes of gnats drifting above the main current like confetti. Cupped water in my hands and splashed my face. Cupped more and began sipping it. My reflection torturous in the rippling water.

I gazed downstream. Something about the high valley walls and hard black shadows and primordial riversounds filling me with a mixture of melancholy and doom. Perhaps it was the overwhelming immensity of life present in that natural vignette or perhaps it was the concealed cruelty that I could sense rooting beneath it or perhaps it was both the immensity and the cruelty casting a doubly black shadow in which I crouched like some caveman beneath a wuthering ledge, uncared for, insignificant. Under threat. I want to say forgotten but you have to be remembered before you can be forgotten.



I trudged downstream. Slogging along the curving riverbank. My black derby shoes scalloping the damp sand my torn blouse billowing in the breeze my mind a maelstrom of thoughts of figuring pondering calculating wondering. Nothing new in the narrative just a rehashing of generic mindmash, brainbowl garbage. Trout shadows creased the riverbottom the fish invisible against fishcolored stones. Sweetgrass reeds clawing out of the mud and bent towards the riffling water like witching sticks. Pennants of dark green moss waving behind riverboulders in the nearby shallows. Crickets in their exoskeletons of black firescale popping thru the air as I gestured thru their feeding grounds.

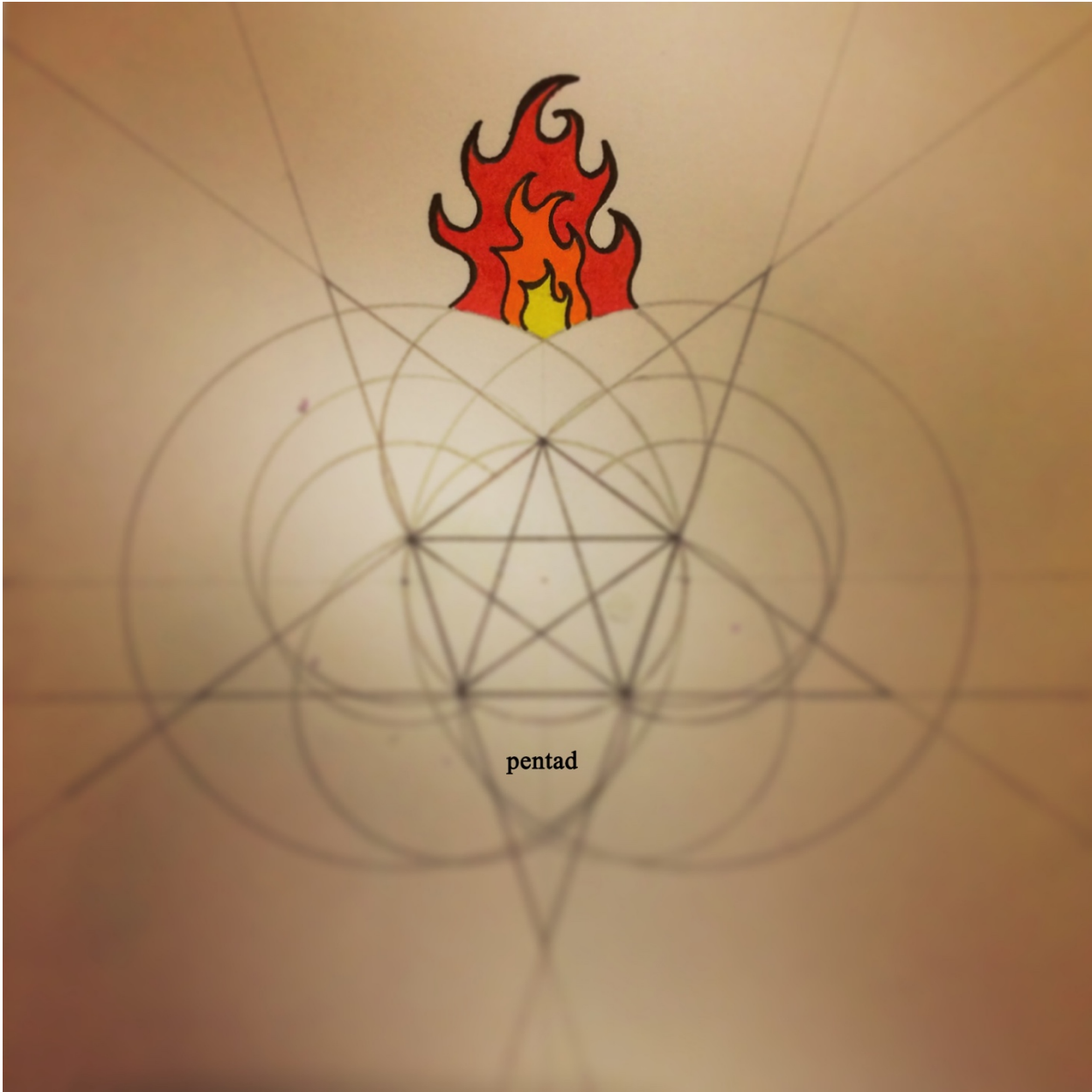
And so I trudged, the steep gray cliffside giving rise to a fantasy in which a simulacrum of me stands above the valley watching me walk along the valley floor, I look up, scanning the cliff in the middle distance for my doppelganger, and see gray smoke billowing into the blue sky above the valley wall on the opposite side of the river. I stopped walking. Visored my eyes with my hands, tracing the smoke down to a location near an oak tree growing atop a wide ledge about two hundred feet up the cliff face. The smoke pluming up from behind the tree as though from a chimney. I hurried on.



tetrad

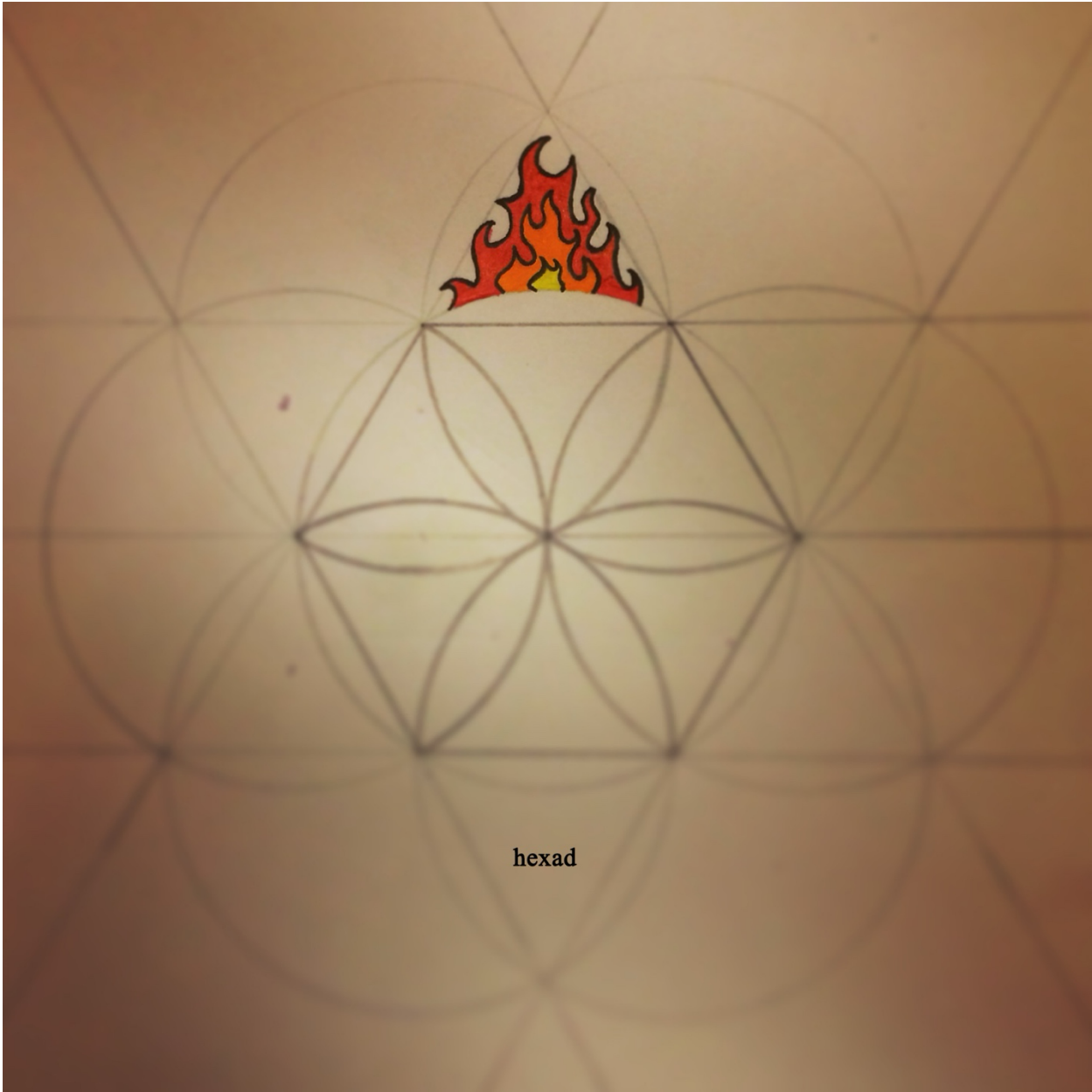
An hour later found me standing in the afternoon shadow of the cliff ledge, looking up, pondering access. The sandy bank across the river led to a thick blackberry bramble behind which karst limestone puzzled vertically upward about a hundred and fifty feet before profiling out to form a natural stone buttress that supported the ledge the karst contours giving the impression of a stone deity locked in eternal watching somnolence, the guardian avatar of a people long gone but for some mystical lineage of fire attendants left behind to stoke a ten thousand year old flame its embers swirling up a handpatted mud chimney into the sequinous night sky, jewelrybox sky, exploded starmaps telling tales of ancestral heroes and wishgranting beasts, mystic swordspells and lustful goddesses...or so I desired...all this I desired...my brain always recurved towards the impossible the amazing...a drunkard's longing for marvels...

I continued walking in the shadow of the ledge. Gazing at the gray rock beneath it. Loamy soil sinking beneath my feet. Slow wind curling upstream. Browngreen river gurgling along its earthcut. Shadows upon the stone breaking in a jagged line against the sunlight where I emerged from the shade and just at that moment - as I stepped out from beneath the ledge's silhouette and into the warm sunlight - the stones and stoneshadows lined up in such a way to reveal a series of hand and footholds carved into the cliff face. The feature vanished as soon as it appeared. I stopped walking. Backed up. The feature appeared again, but clearer now, of a primitive stairscape hewn into the karst limestone, ascending to the cliff ledge with its oak tree and companion smokeplume. I looked up at the sky, the sun's projection angle and the fragmented karst perfectly aligned to reveal the hidden steps, and realized that if I'd walked by several minutes earlier or later the anomaly would not have been visible.



I touched my collar. Unbuttoned it. Some inner heat animated and conveyed to the surface of skin, incinerating whatever hangover shame drooped thru my psyche. Walked to the river's edge and plunked my toe caps into its liminal stagnance taking care not to look at the carved steps again not to look at the impossible thing again. Visored my hands above my eyes to observe the water going beneath a glistening white pellicle of reflected sunlight. Gaging speed, depth, wind direction. How far downstream would I drift before emerging upon the opposite bank? Where were the hazards the sunken boulders the snaggy branches. A boat captain's fluid dynamics.

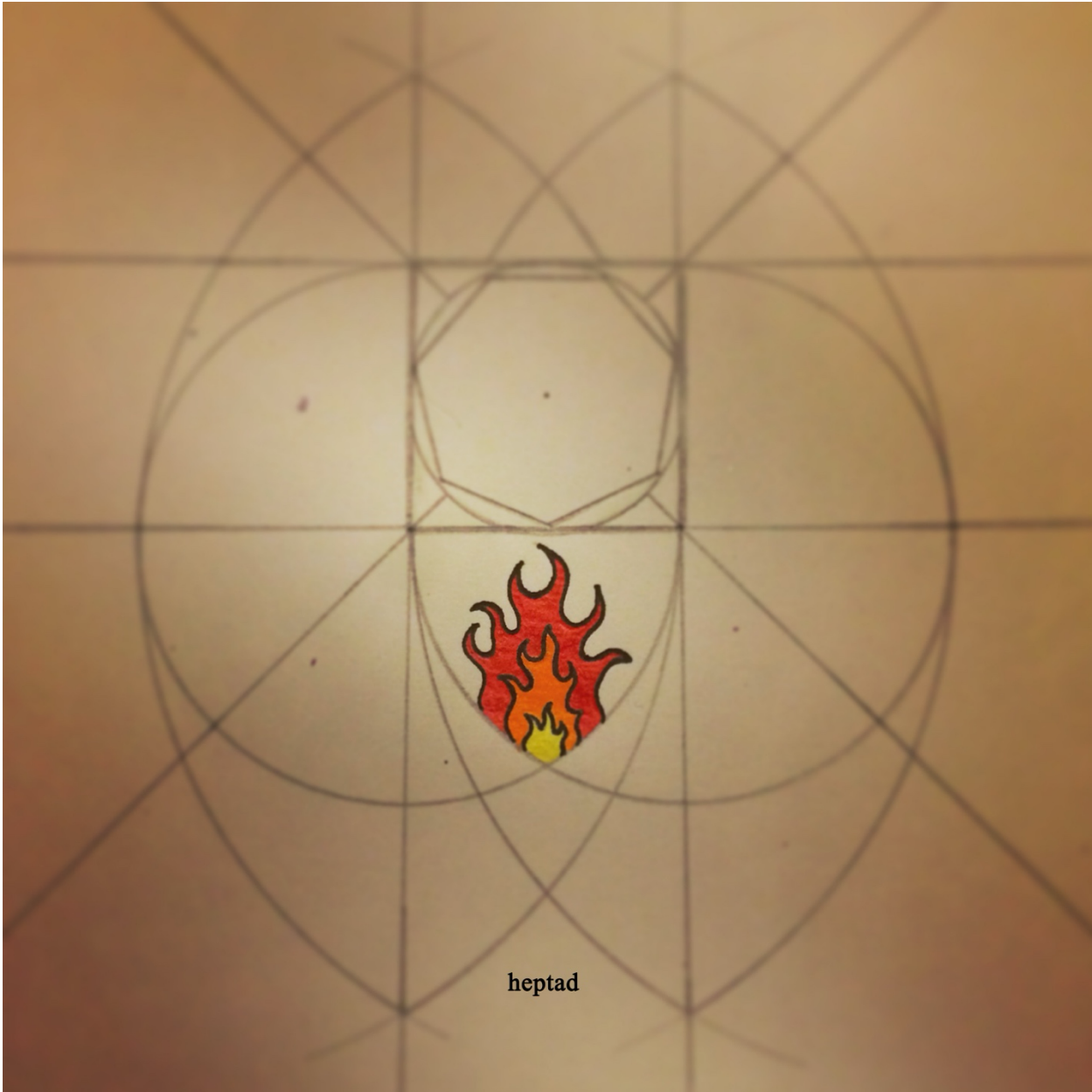
Having calculated my approach I turned and began walking upstream the warm sunshine and cantillating riversounds lending something peaceful to the afternoon air something like benevolence like goodwill like friendliness, which was in high contrast to my usual perception of life as something hostile not just generally but *personally*...and an uninspiring slog besides.....but here was a mystery! a true one! and I was destined to conjoin with it, the timing too uncanny to think otherwise, and for only the second or third time in my life I felt noticed by Life, or by the God of it, or the force behind it, or something, and I had the sense that the context in which I found myself was authentically mine and that the bewildering mess called 'my life' had always bent towards this one bright moment and it was a moment that I desired to exist in, which was a rare feeling for me, and I wondered if that was how happy people felt most of the time, all of the time.



hexad

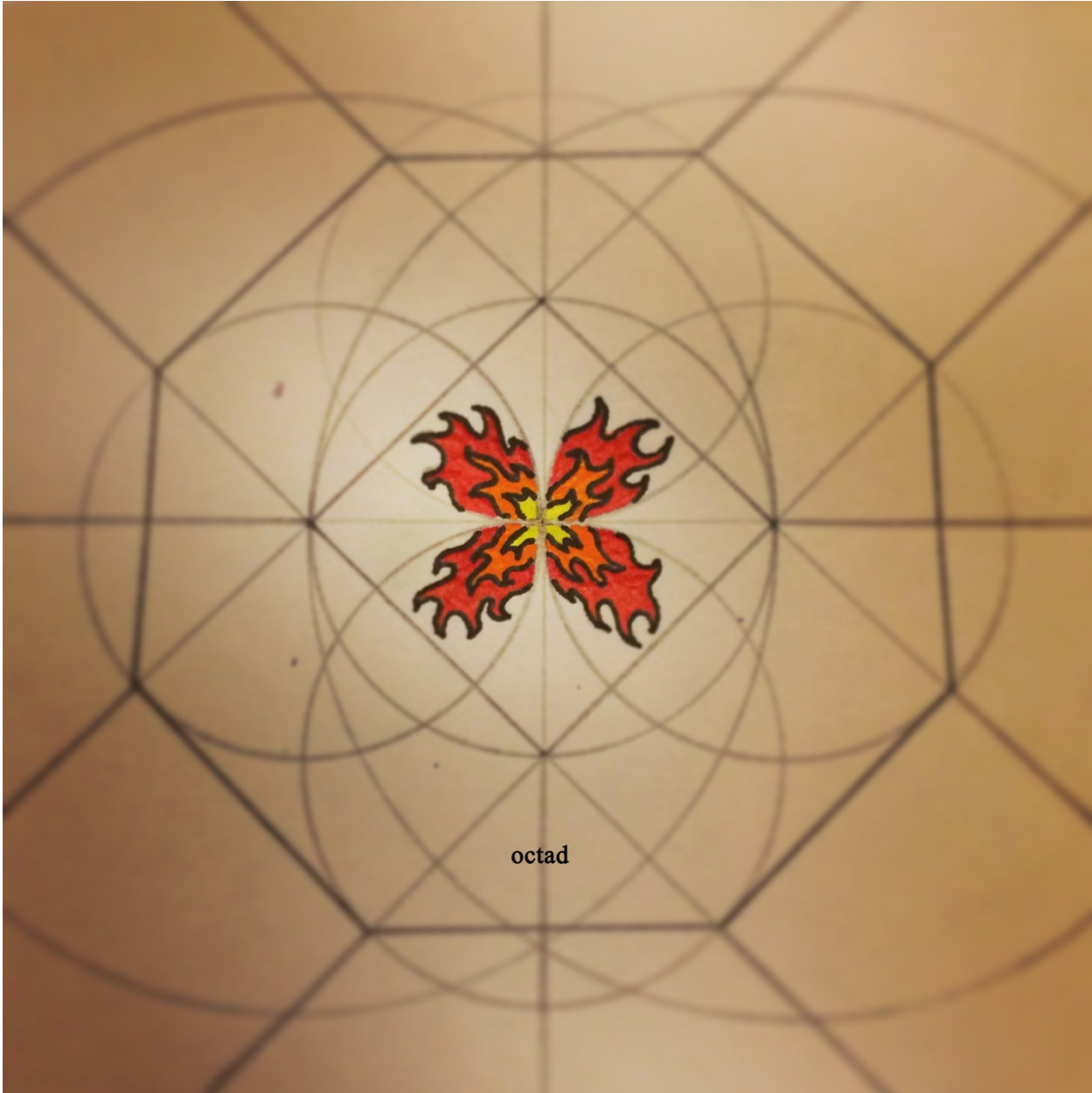
At a point upstream I took off my pea coat and dress shirt and folded them. Looked around for a place to set them. Kneeled and laid them in my shadow my fingers lingering upon the navy blue coat playing over its die-cast brass buttons and thick cotton braille as if noticing such details for the first time. The last time. I turned into the sunlight and rolled my slacks up to my knees and took off my derby shoes and tied them together with a carrick bend and slung the shoes around my neck and stepped off the path into a riverward meadow blotted with black-eyed susans and mexican hat and bluebonnets a floral panoply ending abruptly at an embankment overhanging the inner shallows of a meander, the final saturated meter of yellow and vermilion and blue flowerpetals arcing into the air above the loping river and in that colorwave I stood, shoes dangling above my ribs like black gourds, pale pink legs covered with bronze pollen, the sunlight bronze upon my chest.

I stepped down the embankment and walked across the shoal the silt suctioning my feet and slurping obscenely around each toe my footprints filling with sorrel mudwater flecked with twinkling pyrite. The scent of cold riverwater and stone moss drying in the sun. Rotting trout scale, cedar allergen. As the water grew deeper the mud transitioned to smooth riverstones that kneaded painfully into my soles such that I dove forward and began swimming sidestroke, watching my speed relative to the shore quicken as I glided into the central channel where I turned upon my back and bobbed along with the current, surprised to see that I had already pulled about even with the blackberry bramble at the base of the karst cliff, the mysterious smoke plume still billowing into the blue sky, a long gray forearm reaching up into the late afternoon sunlight and vanishing from sight as I floated into the shadow beneath the stone ledge.



heptad

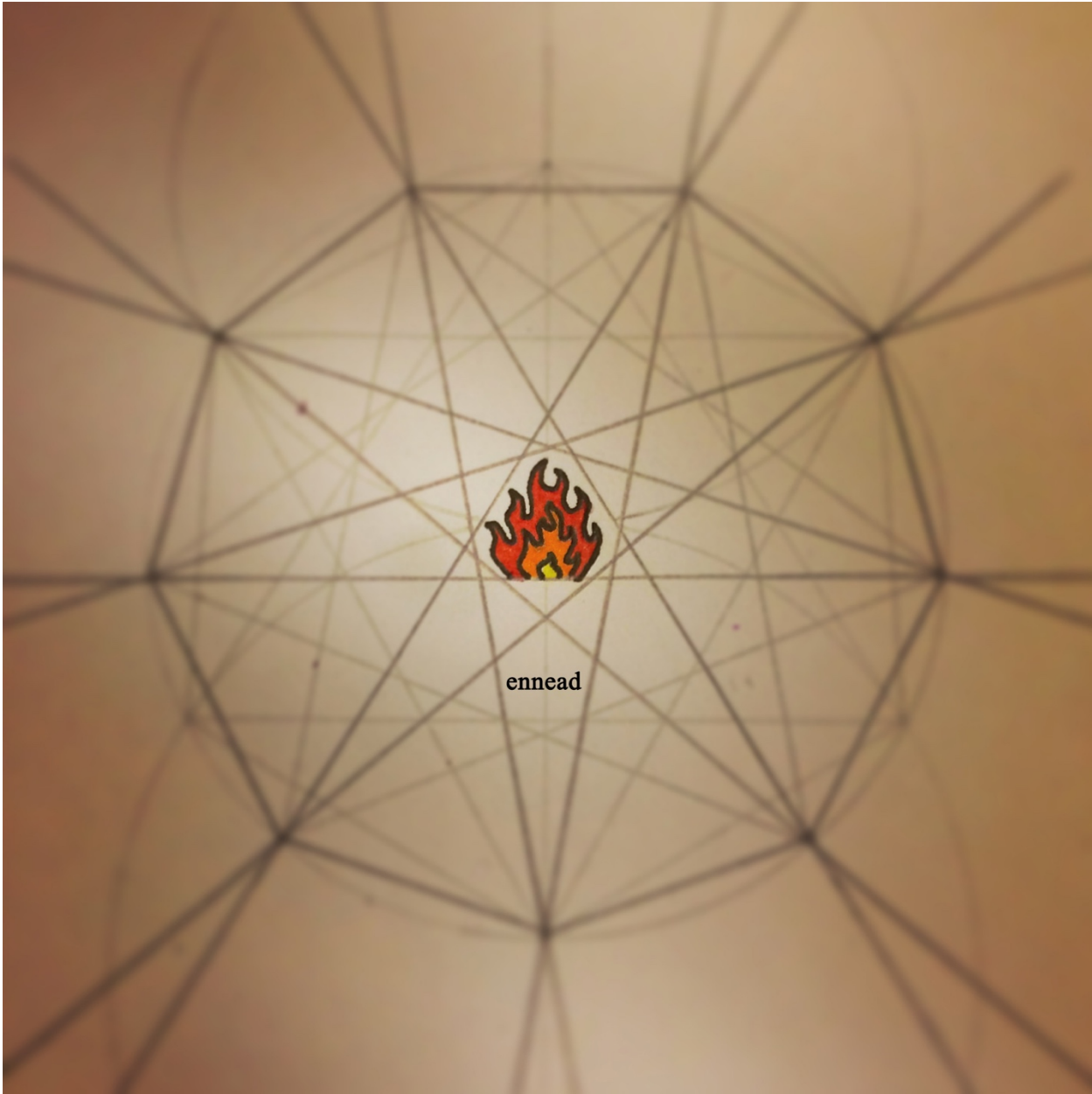
Afraid that I would overshoot my exit point I turned to swim towards the shore but just at that moment something grabbed my foot and swung me several feet underwater the swiftly moving current holding me prone the cold water shooting thru my nostrils my sinuses burning vision blurred hearing muffled as I thrashed to the surface managing a shallow breath before being pulled back down again, panicking now as I curled forward to pry my foot loose. I was immediately flung back. My ankle broke. I stopped struggling. There were only so many units of motion left. Pushing my tongue against the back of my teeth I looked around for something anything god please help me god oh god but instead of a god I found the blurry apparition of a stone bridge lying in tranquil ruin beneath me, its mossy stone voussoirs scattered upon the calm sundappled riverbottom, a massive keystone lying like a giant's medallion halfburied in the mud, the jumble of parapets which had caught my foot in the manner of a chinese fingertrap. My immediate feeling was relief that what had captured me had once been beautiful, built by humans, and with that thought my vision began to fade pain began to fade physical boundaries began to fade as in my mind's eye I recalled myself drunkenly fumbling a keyring off a small shelf above an engine room door the myriad keys caked with verdigris but for one shiny brass key dangling upon a separate smaller keyring marked by a red floating key fob advertising a fishhouse. McDade's. I unlocked the door and stumbled into the dark engine room inhaling gear oil fumes while sliding my hand along the wall feeling for the generator's control panel the smooth varnished beadboard giving way to cold metallic instrumentation and a large thumb switch that I pressed down for several seconds before flicking up, the onan generator shuddering in its angle iron brackets the yellowish overhead light crazing thru its pillshaped mesh cage illuminating an enormous detroit diesel engine heaving over six metal chafing pans full of oil, hydraulic hoses coiling out from the pump and going thru the stern wall like the tentacles of a leviathon disappearing into another dimension.



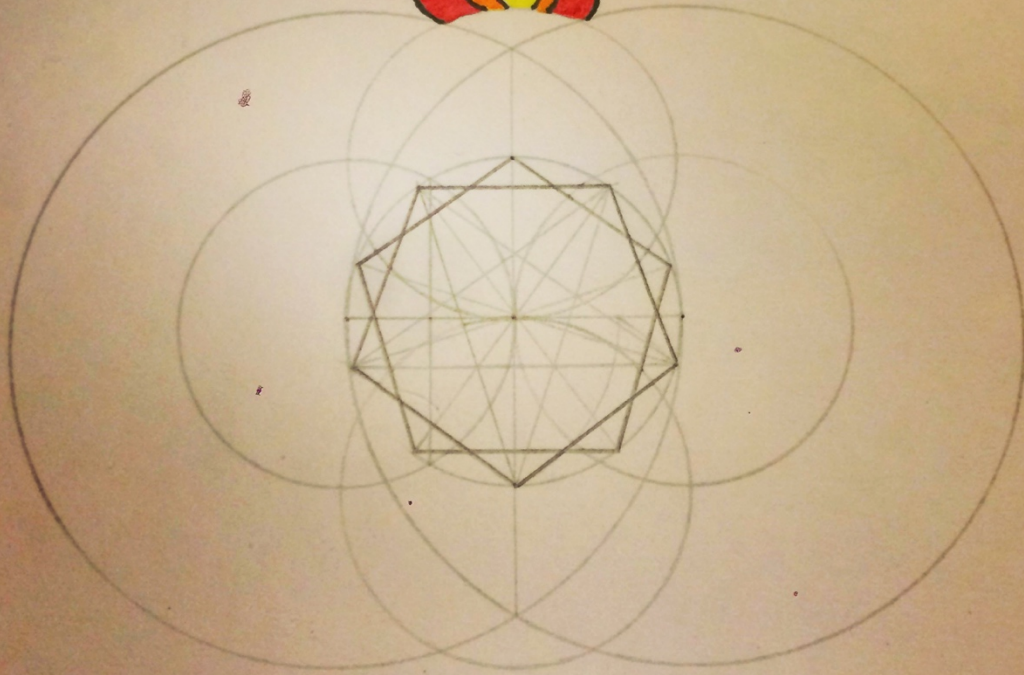
octad

I then saw myself as a teenager putting tables and chairs out on the bow of a boat the lonely metal scrapesounds echoing along a concrete bulwark before traveling thru a field of dying winter rye and vanishing into the traffic passing along a lakeside boulevard the high school sweethearts walking awkwardly along the sidewalk the families emerging from pier-side restaurants and all those other things which I knew existed but only existed to me as handshadows playing across dark and brooding boatshadows.

Then flashes of myself as a young boy building campfires and brewing wild herb tea and cooking red snapper in banana leaves with lemonslices butter pepper rosemary and sleeping in my sea canoe beneath the sequinous ribbon of the Milky Way one summer as a runaway along the gulf coast, the happiest season of my life, trundling thru the shallows of an estuary building a fish farm, laying in the sand with eyes closed holding conch shells to each ear and napping within that soft roar like a cosmic deity stretched out across the multiverse.



And now here I stand upon the riverbank, gazing at the steps carved into the cliff face. The sun exactly overhead, radiating a boulevard of light down the pearly white karst. I wear no clothes but my body is painted with pigments pressed from earth and stamen. I step forward and begin to climb, my hands and feet are familiar with the route. The scent of woodsmoke fills the air.



decad