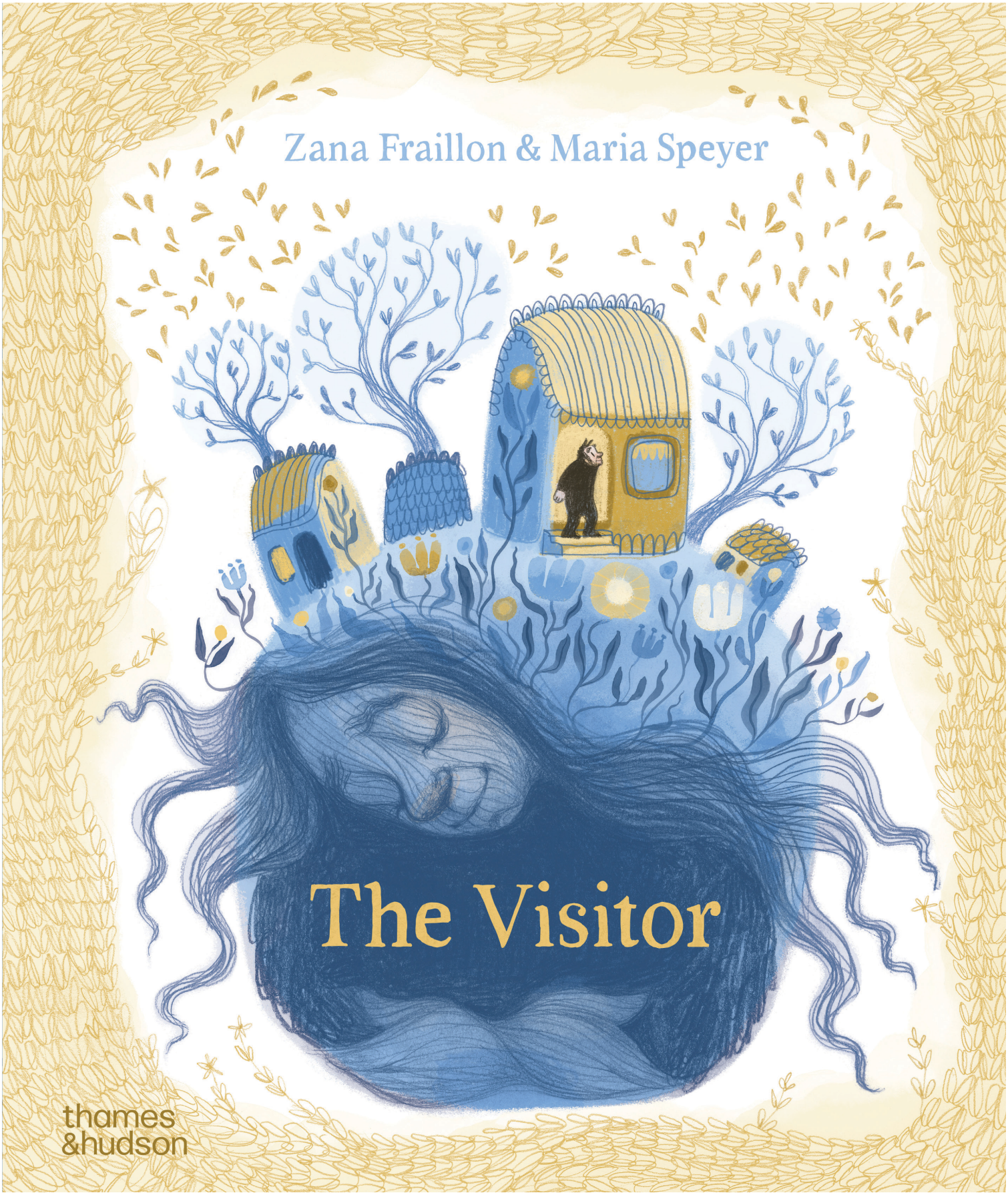
TEACHERS' NOTES

THE VISITOR

Written by Zana Fraillon and illustrated by Maria Speyer

Teachers' notes prepared by Nina Ross



Thames & Hudson Australia acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work. For our head office in Naarm (Melbourne), we respectfully acknowledge the people of the Kulin Nations. We recognise the continuing connection to culture and story passed down through generations of Indigenous Australians that unite people, environment and ways of seeing. We pay respects to elders past and present, and recognise their continuing connection to land, waterways and community. Sovereignty has never been ceded. It always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

Blurb

A mysterious woman is knitting a blanket just outside Tatar's door. It's a marvellous blanket full of colours and noises and stories – Tatar's stories. And it's so big that it must almost be finished . . .

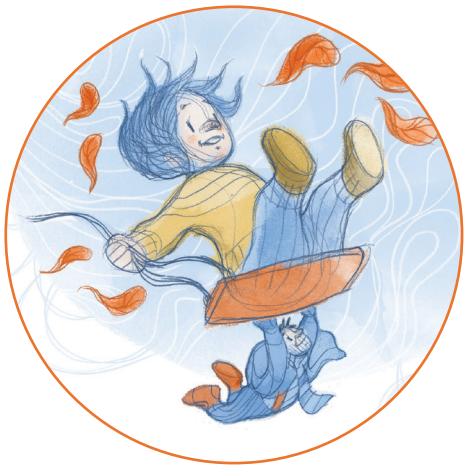
From award-winning author Zana Fraillon and illustrator Maria Speyer comes a luminous story about what happens when we open the door to one of life's great unknowns.

Synopsis

The Visitor is a story about life. It invites readers to ask, 'What if death is not something that makes life disappear, but an embrace that makes us part of everything?' Through ethereal illustrations in a muted colour palette, *The Visitor* tells the story of Tatar, an elderly man who encounters Death on his doorstep. While being guided by the mysterious shapeshifting woman who seems vaguely familiar, he revisits happy memories of childhood, family and place. Tatar experiences a range of emotions as the woman silently knits a patchwork blanket of his life story, from fear of the unknown to negotiation, curiosity, and finally, acceptance of what lies ahead.



Themes



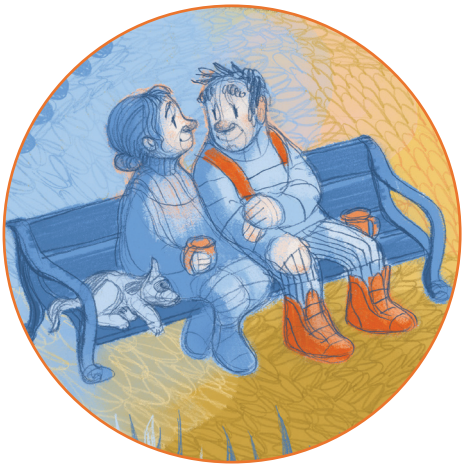
IMAGINATION &
CURIOSITY



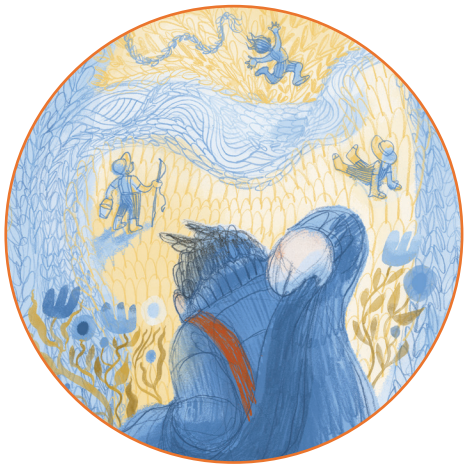
LIVING WORLD &
LIFE CYCLES



DEATH & GRIEF



RELATIONSHIPS &
KINSHIPS



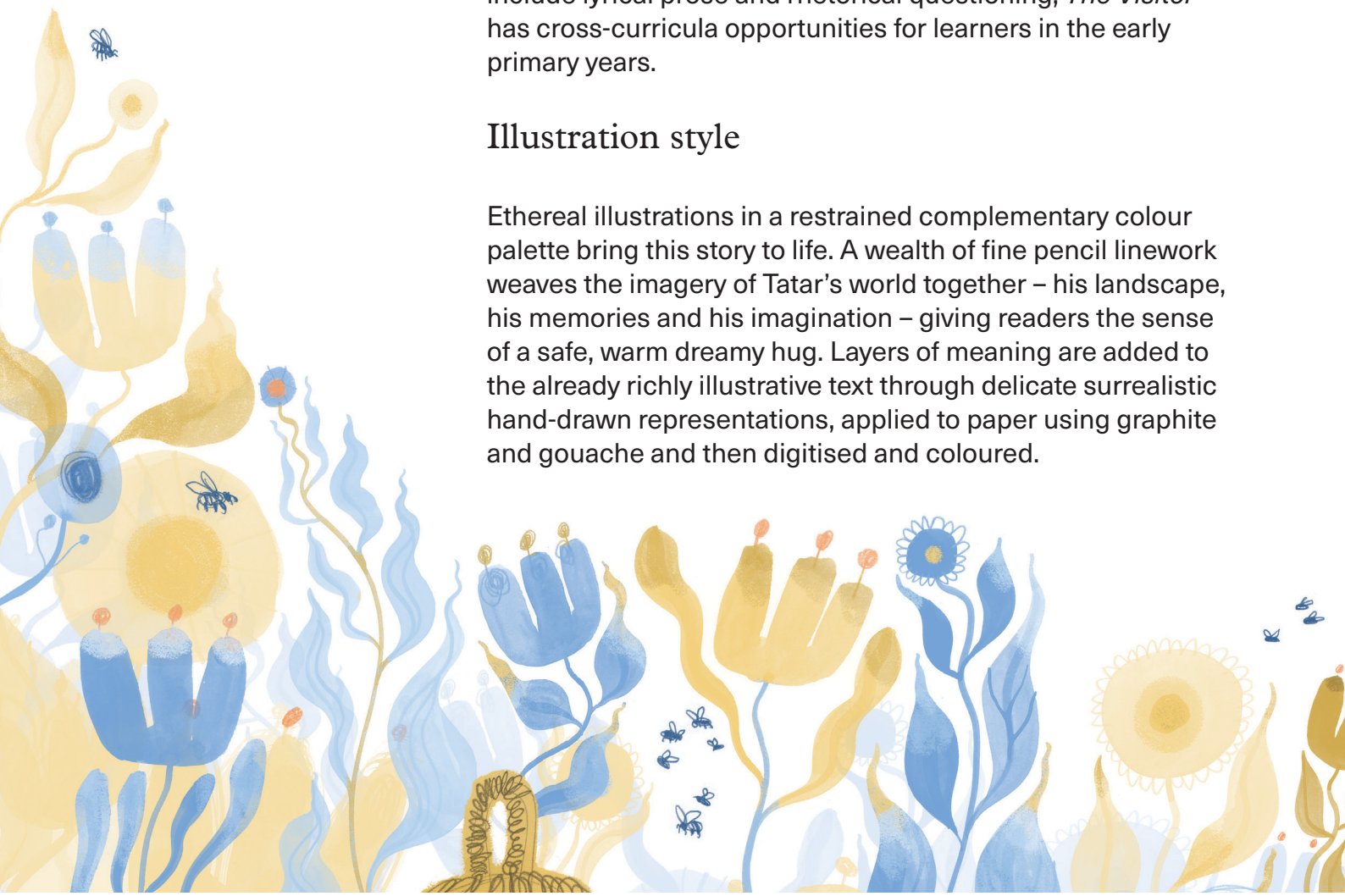
NOSTALGIA & MEMORY

Writing style

The Visitor encourages readers to engage in a sense of wonder for what might happen to us when we die. As children go through a stage of development where the question of death becomes very important, this book can be a way of supporting these discussions, as well as providing comfort for those personally touched by the death of a loved one. Approaching the subject of death directly, with age-appropriate language through the personal journey of Tatar, *The Visitor* provides scope for readers' individual belief systems and imaginations in a way that isn't inherently sad or scary. The story unfolds like a folktale, both familiar and reassuring, and relays Tatar's questions to Death, which become a fabulating and lively journey through memories of the past and ideas about the future, tying together landscape and time. *The Visitor* encourages deep thinking while celebrating life. Reflecting on Tatar's life allows readers to venture into questions about what might happen when we step off this earthly plane and into the unknown. Using repetitive verse with poetic devices that include lyrical prose and rhetorical questioning, *The Visitor* has cross-curricula opportunities for learners in the early primary years.

Illustration style

Ethereal illustrations in a restrained complementary colour palette bring this story to life. A wealth of fine pencil linework weaves the imagery of Tatar's world together – his landscape, his memories and his imagination – giving readers the sense of a safe, warm dreamy hug. Layers of meaning are added to the already richly illustrative text through delicate surrealistic hand-drawn representations, applied to paper using graphite and gouache and then digitised and coloured.



About the author

Zana Fraillon is an internationally acclaimed, multi-award-winning author of books for children and young adults. Zana's books have won the Prime Minister's Literary Award, the Amnesty CILIP Honour Award, the ABIA Book of the Year for Older Children, the Readings YA Prize, NSW Premier's Literary Awards and the CBCA Honour Book Award. *The Bone Sparrow* was chosen as the biennial book to represent Australia for the International Board on Books for Young People. Zana was born and lives in Naarm (Melbourne) but spent her early childhood in San Francisco. She has degrees in history and teaching and a doctorate in creative writing.

Author motivation

My ninety-six-year-old great aunt told me that she was frightened of dying. I was suitably horrified having assumed that, by ninety-six, one would have come to terms with this already. I wanted to write something for her that would help comfort her. At the same time, my seven-year-old great nephew had become quite obsessed with death and dying – he was full of questions. I wanted to provide a story for him that might help him imagine his way through.



About the illustrator

Maria Speyer is a Danish illustrator and fine artist based in Sydney. Her debut Australian picture book *A Feather on a Wing* was published in 2022. Maria lives with her husband and daughters in Sydney, where she draws, paints and writes in her studio at home. She has presented papers on imagistic thinking and the phenomenology of drawing and published and illustrated a number of Danish children's books.

Illustrator motivation

When you illustrate a picture book, you have the opportunity not only to make visible images that are already in the words but to add layers of meaning and make connections across the story.

In the case of *The Visitor*, the words are already so dense with imagery that my first inclination was to pull the illustrations in the opposite direction, to pare back and show the main character's journey towards death in very simple, dreamy drawings, almost as if the reader was squinting at the details that are already richly illustrated in the words. Then, as I delved deeper into the world of *The Visitor*, I couldn't resist this richness and wanted the pictures to match the story's depth of texture. I've tried to do this with a wealth of lines weaving together Tatar's world, his landscape, his memories and his imagination, giving the pictures (I hope) the feel of a warm hug. *The Visitor* is a story with depth and richness. It has details and ideas that readers can keep exploring as the story is read again and again. I have tried to draw the illustrations with the same care, and I hope they invite readers to keep coming back to them.



Australian curriculum links

The learning activities in these teachers' notes provide opportunities to access curriculum links within the Australian Curriculum V9 and the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) V2.

This book supports:

- inference and symbolism (how words and image work together)
- imagination and curiosity
- lyrical prose, repetitive verse and rhetorical questioning
- lateral thinking
- connection between visual literacy and imagery

Learning activities are not prescriptive, and educators, grief counsellors and parents can select, adapt and differentiate suggested activities to suit the age, interests and abilities of learners.

Please see the end of the teachers' notes for the aligned curriculum codes.





Wellbeing support

Engaging with the theme of death can prompt a response from readers of all ages, whether they have recently experienced a death, have previously experienced grief or are yet to.

Children aged between five and eight years sometimes see death as a temporary event that can be reversed. They may believe a deceased person can still feel, eat and think. They are beginning to understand that there are different causes of death and it's forever.

Grief impacts the way children learn
Grief affects many parts of the brain, including the ability to focus and concentrate. Short-term memory is impacted. Children may zone out or be unable to retain new information. It can take time for children to accept death and show signs of grief. Grief can cause decreased appetite, stomach aches, headaches, bad dreams, or toileting regression.

Behaviours of grief in children
Children may show some, all or none of these behaviours:

- Feel intense short bursts of sadness or anger, then go back to acting normal or playing
- Try to process using toys, artmaking, or playing games to act out death and funerals
- Become clingy, angry or act younger than their age
- Ask a lot of questions and show curiosity about death and funerals
- Be quick to blame themselves, specific people or be angry at death
- Worry about their own death or the health and safety of their parents or carers
- Take on a parenting role to siblings and friends
- Be concerned about being seen as 'different' to their peers while also feeling isolated



Tips for teachers

- Check in with parents and carers
- Acknowledge the loss when children experience grief
- Use honest concrete language and avoid euphemisms
- Normalise big emotions, validate feelings and answer repetitive questions
- Encourage student-led learning and include individual and group activities that unpack grief and loss
- Offer flexible timing for learning sequences, short breaks when needed and distractions like allocating classroom jobs
- Provide a designated safe space in the classroom and sensory tools to self-regulate
- Use a visual exit card to visit with the school counsellor or another school support person
- Resume a normal routine where appropriate and watch for changes in behaviour

Helpful resources

Be You – 'Supporting children and young people affected by grief' https://beyou.edu.au/resources/fact-sheets/grief-trauma-and-critical-incidents/supporting-children-and-young-people-affected-by-grief

Be You – 'Grief' https://beyou.edu.au/resources/fact-sheets/grief-trauma-and-critical-incidents/grief

Grief Australia – 'Children and Grief (Primary School)' https://www.grief.org.au/ga/ga/Content/Information-Sheets/Grief_and_Children_Aged_6_12.aspx

Emerging Minds – 'Understanding and supporting primary school-age children who have experienced grief and loss' https://emergingminds.com.au/resources/understanding-and-supporting-primary-school-age-children-who-have-experienced-grief-and-loss/

Common Ground – 'Death and Sorry Business' https://www.commonground.org.au/article/death-and-sorry-business

Support services

Mental health and community support services available for children, young people, families, carers and educators:

- Beyond Blue – 24/7 mental health support service
  1300 224 636
  https://www.beyondblue.org.au/
- headspace – Online support and counselling to young people aged twelve to twenty-five
  1800 650 890
  https://headspace.org.au/ or webchat
  https://headspace.org.au/eheadspace
- Kids Helpline – 24/7 crisis support and suicide prevention services for children and young people aged five to twenty-five
  1800 551 800
  https://kidshelpline.com.au/
- Lifeline – 24/7 crisis support and suicide prevention services
  131 114
  https://www.lifeline.org.au/
- 13YARN – 24/7 crisis support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
  139 276
  https://www.13yarn.org.au/

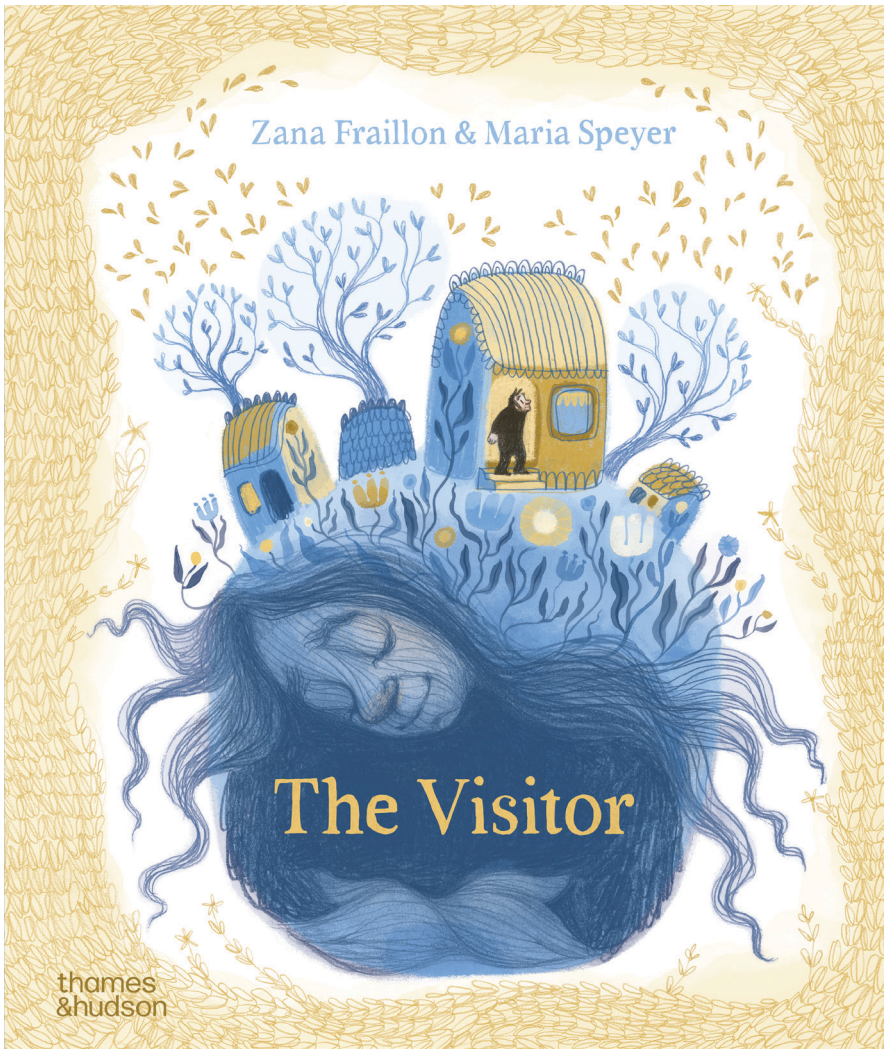


Notes

Before reading the text

Exploring the cover and illustrations

- Before reading *The Visitor*, look carefully at the front cover and use the following questions to prompt a discussion:
  - What can you see?
  - What do you think the story will be about?
  - Where will the story take place?
  - Who will the main characters be?
  - What emotions do you think you might feel while reading the book or after?



- Spend some time just looking at the illustrations and use the following questions to support learners to share their ideas in a written or verbal reflection:
  - What page is your favourite in *The Visitor*?
  - Why is this page your favourite?

In *The Visitor* the colour palette includes complementary colours. To learn more about colour theory, visit the Pantone 'What are the properties of color? webpage. Consider if particular colours evoke different emotions. Using crayons or paint, record all the colours you can identify on the page by creating colour swatches and labelling them.



While reading the book

Reflective pauses

While reading through *The Visitor*, pause and do a check-in with learners. Consider appropriate times that may be needed to take a break, start an activity from the teachers' notes, or talk about what emotions or memories the story is evoking. Make space and time to unpack reflections.

Imagining the other side of life

- Display these pages from *The Visitor* below. Support learners to share and document what they imagine happens after death on the template page at the end of the teachers' notes.

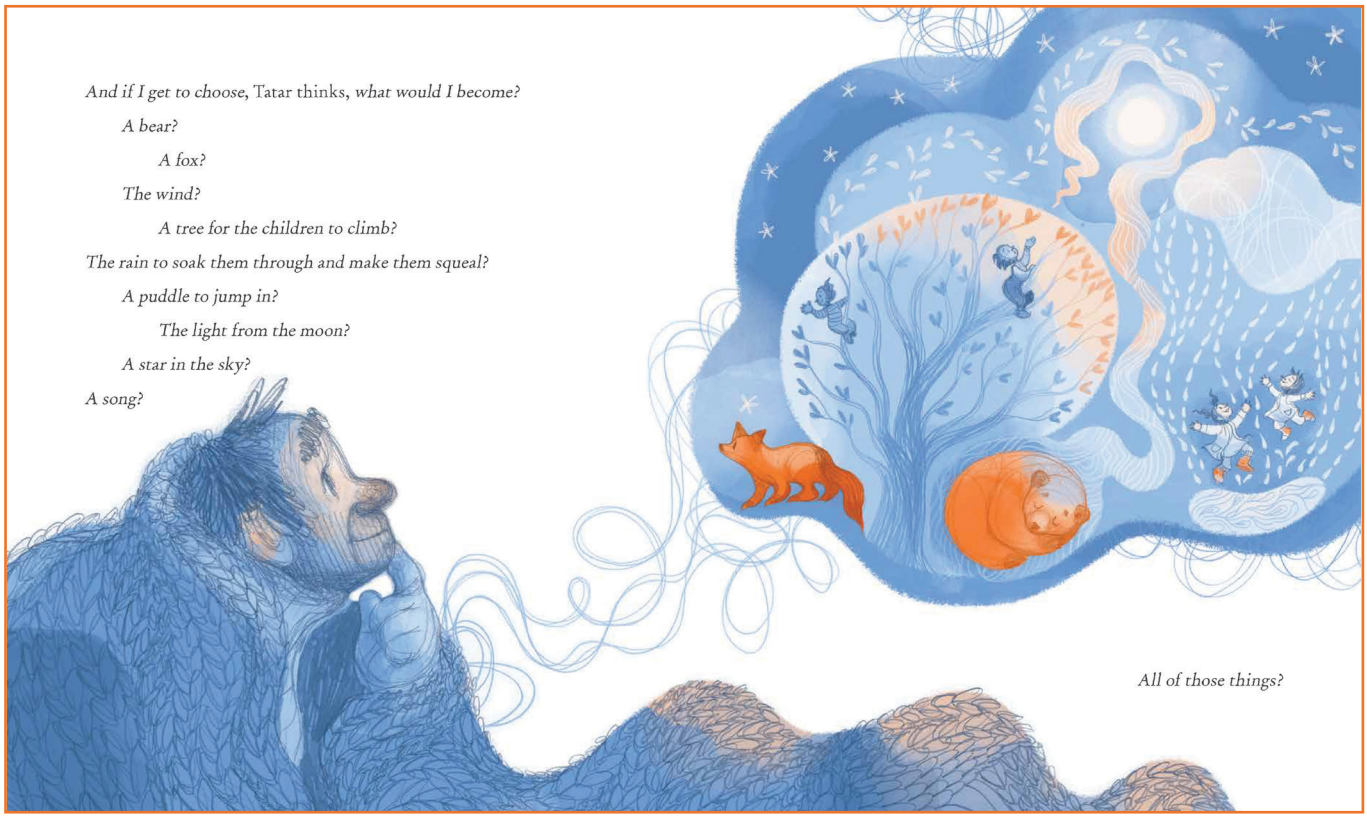


- Encourage learners to recount Tatar's memories of his grandparents' farmhouse and how he thinks about connecting with his grandchildren.

- Use the following extract from the book to support a discussion about the places learners would go if they were invisible and could fly:

  'Will we turn invisible and fly?! Or will I become a ghost?'
  Tatar thinks of all the places he could go if he was a ghost and invisible and could fly.





- Could people turn into different beings, animals or forms when they die? Using the following questions as prompts, ask learners to write a journal entry, a poem, act out a short play or create an artwork to depict their imaginings:

  What does it look like, smell like, sound like, feel like in this place? Are there any religious beliefs that influence this imagining?

Grief feels like . . .

- Individually or as a group, discuss what grief and loss can feel like, or what learners imagine grief to feel like. The following prompts and a multisensory approach can help learners articulate the feelings of loss and grief into words or a drawing using the template included within the teachers' notes.
  - Are there any types of foods or scents that could represent the feelings of loss and grief?
  - What does grief feel like in our bodies?
  - Does it feel like a big backpack sitting on your shoulders?
  - Does it feel like a heavy ball in your tummy?
  - Does it feel like a cold, wet rainy day or a thunder cloud?
  - Does grief feel like big waves at the beach?
  - Is grief sharp, prickly, jagged or smooth to touch?
  - If we wore glasses when grieving, what colour would the lenses be?



After reading the book

Understanding grief with friends from Sesame Street

Watching short videos can help support children's understanding of the complex theme of death and grief:

Elmo learns how to deal with the loss of a loved one
Elmo and his daddy Louie talk about their favourite memories of Elmo's Uncle Jack.
https://youtu.be/x-DgyPLH7sM?si=sU6XggWwxxHJOiXs

Andrew Garfield and Elmo explain grief
Grieving may never completely end, but working through difficult feelings can get easier with time.
https://youtu.be/EVlXbiP4x2E?si=tStjtUJm7xP4wLb7



Heart helpers

Remembering who helps and supports during times of change and loss can minimise feelings of isolation and foster resilience and a sense of reassurance.

- To create a garland of heart helpers, cut out the heart shapes from the template included with the teachers' notes.
- Learners write their name on the large heart and decorate it with images of their interests and favourite things, using paint, markers, feathers, etc.
- On each smaller heart, write the name of friends, family members, teachers or any other person who can be relied on, even a pet.
- Thread string through a punched hole in each heart and fix it in place with sticky tape so the hearts don't slide and overlap.
- Display the garland of heart helpers in the classroom or at home.

Character studies

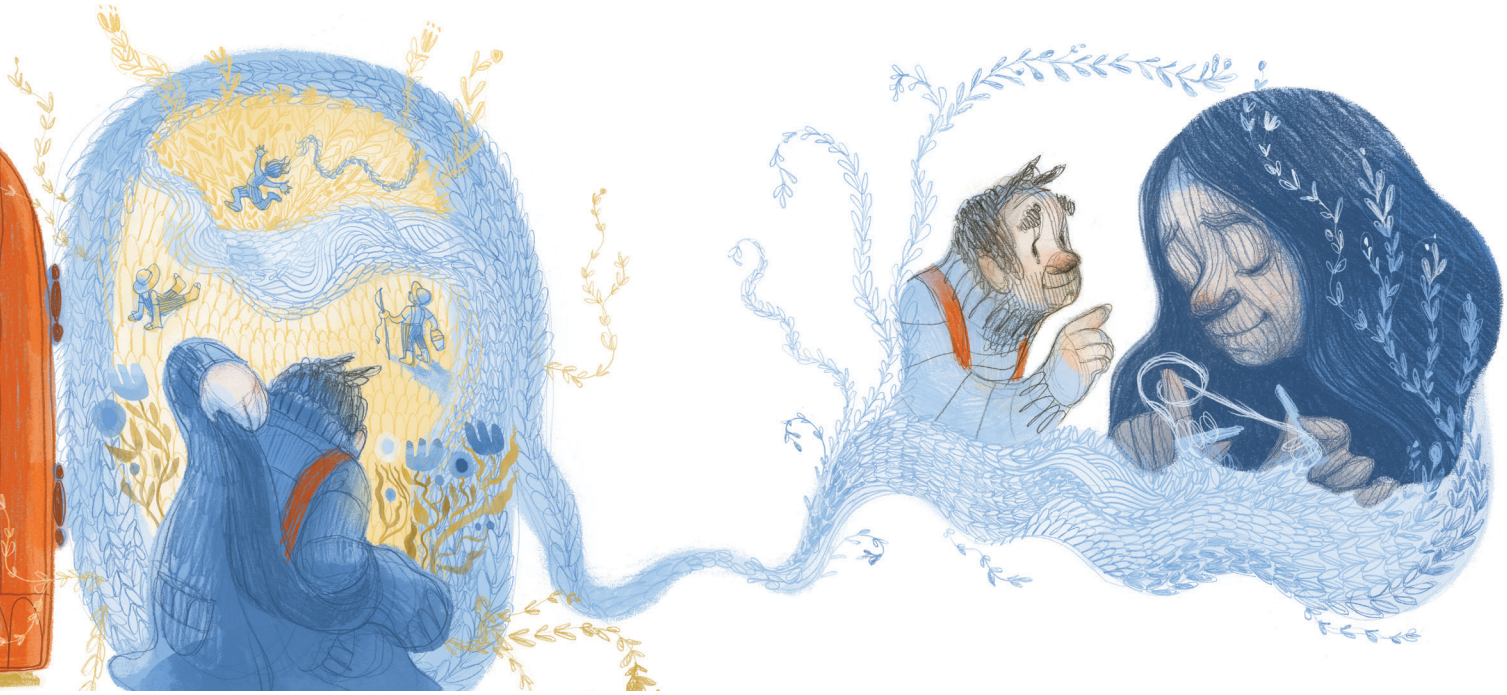
Discuss the two main characters in *The Visitor*. Learners then draw an image of each character or write a descriptive paragraph about each character using the following questions:

The Woman

- Who is the woman who visits Tatar?
- Why is she sometimes very old '*dressed all in black or furs or a raggedy cloak*' and sometimes young, '*wearing a gown of flowers, dancing with loose leaves falling in a whirlwind around her*'?
- What connection could she have to Tatar?
- Why do you think she has been chosen as his guide?

Tatar

- What recollections does Tatar think about throughout the story?
- Who are the people Tatar has strong relationships with?
- Tatar's emotions change over the duration of the story. In the beginning, how does he feel when the woman arrives? How does Tatar behave when the woman doesn't speak to him? What emotions could he be feeling? How does he feel when the woman stops knitting? What has made Tatar's emotions shift at this point?
- What memory does Tatar have that includes swallows? Who could the two swallows at the end of the story, '*dancing together in the light of the morning sun*' be?





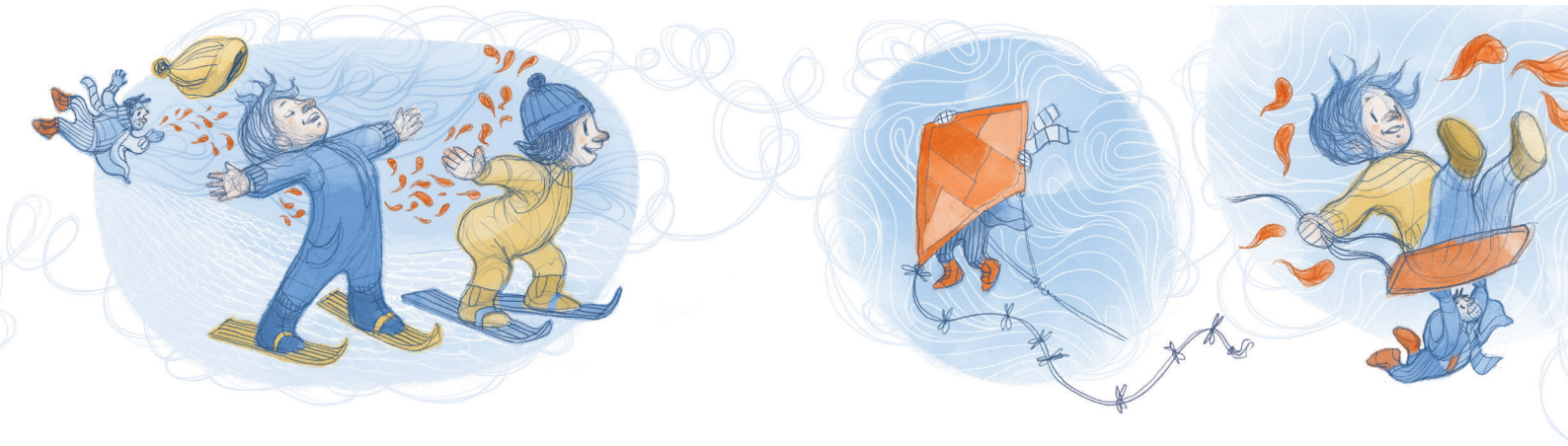
Bereavement beads

Beading is a creative way to improve fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination.

Create a bracelet of bereavement beads to remember someone special and happy memories with them.

- On a piece of paper, make a note about why each different bead was chosen and place the bead next to it.
- Use different sized wooden beads, buttons or dyed penne, rigatoni, or macaroni pasta.
- Take a photo of the paper to help remember what each bead represents.
- Thread the beads onto string and tie it at an appropriate length to allow it to go over the head.
- Display the creations in the classroom or around the school or wear them on days that are difficult, in memory of someone special.

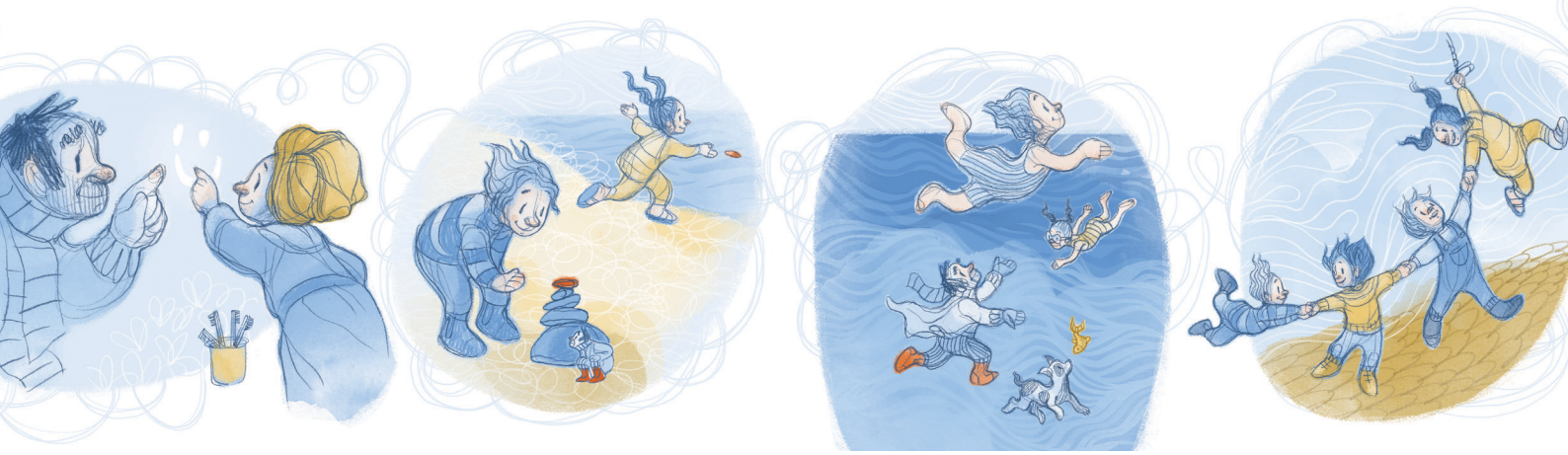
Alternatively, if learners have not experienced grief, their bereavement beads could focus on Tatar's journey from the story of *The Visitor*, with each bead capturing his experiences with the woman at his door, knitting the patchwork blanket.



Story stones – My favourite day

Sharing stories about a special person honours their memory and enables their legacy to live on.

- While thinking about a favourite day spent with a special person, consider the key moments and map out what happened using visual anchors and significant words.
- Responsibly collect some smooth, flat river rocks and paint images or write words on each rock using acrylic paint, paint pens or permanent markers to narrate the shared story. Use a deliberate colour palette to define the mood of the story, from bright and cheerful colours to darker sombre colours depending on the event.
- When the paint is dry, place them in an indoor memory garden, or if the rocks are going to live outside, seal them so they will remain vibrant during all weather conditions.
- Learners could also draw an image of their favourite day or write a journal entry on the template page included with the teachers' notes.
- If comfortable, learners can use the stones to share their story with a friend, family members or with the class.



Indoor memorial garden

Creating a small individual space to hold special memories about a special person can help to process emotions, honour relationships and feel a sense of comfort and connection.

- To make an indoor memorial garden, gather some twigs from outside to use as flower stems.
- Using paint, paint pens, craft supplies and photos, decorate the outside of a pot plant or smaller plastic container.
- Place a decent amount of decorative sand, pebbles or rocks as a base to allow the twigs to stand up.
- Create colourful flowers using cardboard, crayons, paint, tissue paper, feathers, etc, and use adhesive or wool to attach them to the sticks.
- Arrange the flowers in the container and place any cherished items or symbols in too.
- Display them in the classroom or at home.
- Learners could write a poem or journal entry about a memory of the special person.

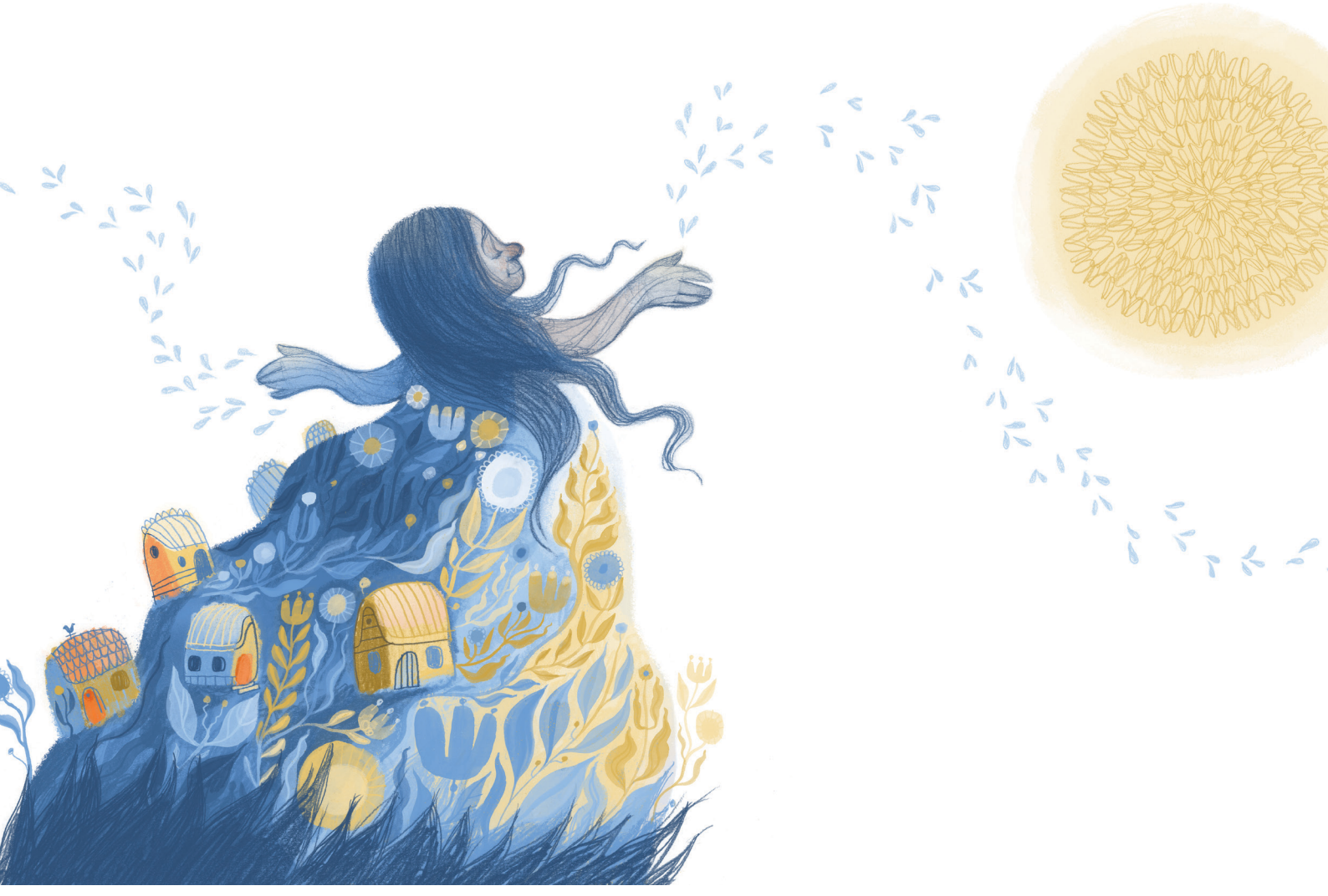
Alternatively, learners' indoor memorial gardens could focus on Tatar from the story of *The Visitor*.



Tree of thanks

Sometimes when big emotions feel overwhelming, it is helpful to focus on things that ground us in gratitude.

- Collect gum leaves or cut out leaf shapes from paper or card.
- On each leaf, use paint pens, markers or coloured pencils to draw an image or write the name of someone or something to be thankful for.
- Take an A3 piece of paper and draw the trunk of a tree with bare branches. Alternatively, use the blank tree template included with the teachers' notes.
- Glue each leaf of gratitude onto the branches to create a tree of thanks.
- If comfortable, learners can share stories about some leaves on their tree of thanks with the class and then display the creations in the classroom or around the school.
- Learners could create a tree of thanks for Tatar, with each leaf representing a memory, family member, place or pet he recalled in the story.



Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)

Outcome 1: ***Children have a strong sense of identity***
- Children feel safe, secure and supported
- Children develop their emerging autonomy, inter-dependence, resilience and agency
- Children develop knowledgeable, confident self-identities, and a positive sense of self-worth
- Children learn to interact in relation to others with care, empathy and respect

Outcome 3: ***Children have a strong sense of wellbeing***
- Children become strong in their social, emotional and mental wellbeing
- Children are aware of and develop strategies to support their own mental and physical health and personal safety

Outcome 4: ***Children are confident and involved learners***
- Children develop a growth mindset and learning dispositions such as curiosity, cooperation, confidence, creativity, commitment, enthusiasm, persistence, imagination and reflexivity
- Children develop a range of learning and thinking skills and processes such as problem solving, inquiry, experimentation, hypothesising, researching and investigating
- Children transfer and adapt what they have learned from one context to another
- Children resource their own learning through connecting with people, place, technologies and natural and processed materials

Outcome 5: ***Children are effective communicators***
- Children interact verbally and non-verbally with others for a range of purposes
- Children engage with a range of texts and gain meaning from these texts
- Children express ideas and make meaning using a range of media
- Children begin to understand how symbols and pattern systems work

Australian Curriculum Version 9 (Foundation – Year 3)

The learning activities in these teachers' notes provide opportunities to access the following curriculum links:

Foundation

English
- AC9EFLY05 – use comprehension strategies such as visualising, predicting, connecting, summarising and questioning to understand and discuss texts listened to, viewed or read independently
- AC9EFLE02 – respond to stories and share feelings and thoughts about their events and characters
- AC9EFLA07 – explore the contribution of images and words to meaning in stories and informative texts

Visual Arts

- AC9AVAFD01 – use play, imagination, arts knowledge, processes and/or skills to discover possibilities and develop ideas
- AC9AVAFC01 – create arts works that communicate ideas
- AC9AVAFP01 – share their arts works with audiences

Drama

- AC9ADRFD01 – use play, imagination, arts knowledge, processes and/or skills to discover possibilities and develop ideas
- AC9ADRFC01 – create arts works that communicate ideas
- AC9ADRFP01 – share their arts works with audiences

Health and Physical Education

- AC9HPFP01 – investigate who they are and the people in their world
- AC9HPFP03 – express and describe emotions they experience

Year 1

English

- AC9E1LE03 – discuss plot, character and setting, which are features of stories
- AC9E1LA08 – compare how images in different types of texts contribute to meaning
- AC9E1LA03 – explore how texts are organised according to their purpose, such as to recount, narrate, express opinion, inform, report and explain
- AC9E1LE02 – discuss literary texts and share responses by making connections with students' own experiences

Years 1 & 2

Visual Arts

- AC9AVA2D01 – experiment and play with visual conventions, visual arts processes and materials
- AC9AVA2C01 – use visual conventions, visual arts processes and materials to create artworks
- AC9AVA2P01 – share artworks and/or visual arts practice in informal settings

Drama

- AC9ADR2D01 – use the elements of drama and imagination in dramatic play and/or process drama
- AC9ADR2C01 – create and co-create fictional situations based on imagination and/or experience
- AC9ADR2P01 – share their drama in informal settings

Health and Physical Education

- AC9HP2P03 – identify how different situations influence emotional responses
- AC9HP2P05 - identify and demonstrate protective behaviours and help-seeking strategies they can use to help them and others stay safe

Year 2

English

- AC9E2LE03 – discuss the characters and settings of a range of texts and identify how language is used to present these features in different ways
- AC9E2LE02 – identify features of literary texts, such as characters and settings, and give reasons for personal preferences
- AC9E2LA08 – Understand that images add to or multiply the meanings of a text
- AC9E2LA09 – experiment with and begin to make conscious choices of vocabulary to suit the topic

Year 3

English

- AC9E3LE01 – discuss characters, events and settings in different contexts in literature by First Nations Australian, and wide-ranging Australian and world authors and illustrators
- AC9E3LA07 – understand how verbs represent different processes for doing, feeling, thinking, saying and relating
- AC9E3LA09 – identify how images extend the meaning of a text
- AC9E3LE03 – discuss how an author uses language and illustrations to portray characters and settings in texts, and explore how the settings and events influence the mood of the narrative

Year 3

Visual Arts

- AC9AVA4D01 – experiment with a range of ways to use visual conventions, visual arts processes and materials
- AC9AVA4C01 – use visual conventions, visual arts processes and materials to create artworks that communicate ideas, perspectives and/or meaning
- AC9AVA4P01 – share and/or display artworks and/or visual arts practice in informal settings

Drama

- AC9ADR4D01 – use the elements of drama to explore and develop ideas for dramatic action in improvisations and/or devised drama
- AC9ADR4C01 – improvise and/or devise and shape drama using the elements of drama to communicate ideas, perspectives and/or meaning
- AC9ADR4P01 – perform improvised and/or devised drama in informal settings

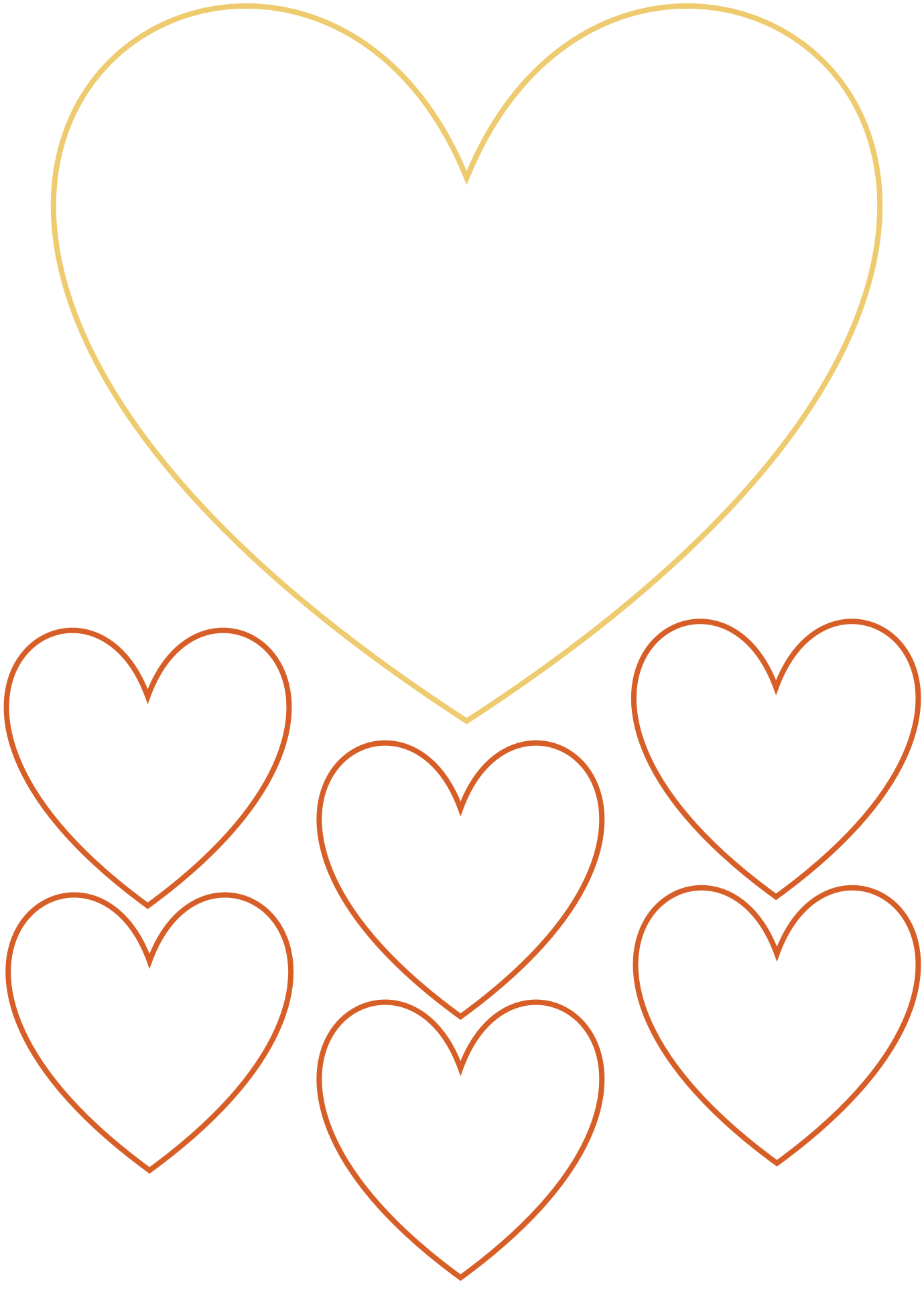
Health and Physical Education

- AC9HP4P01 – investigate how success, challenge, setbacks and failure strengthen resilience and identities in a range of contexts
- AC9HP4P06 – explain how and why emotional responses can vary and practise strategies to manage their emotions
- AC9HP4P10 – investigate and apply behaviours that contribute to their own and others' health, safety, relationships and wellbeing

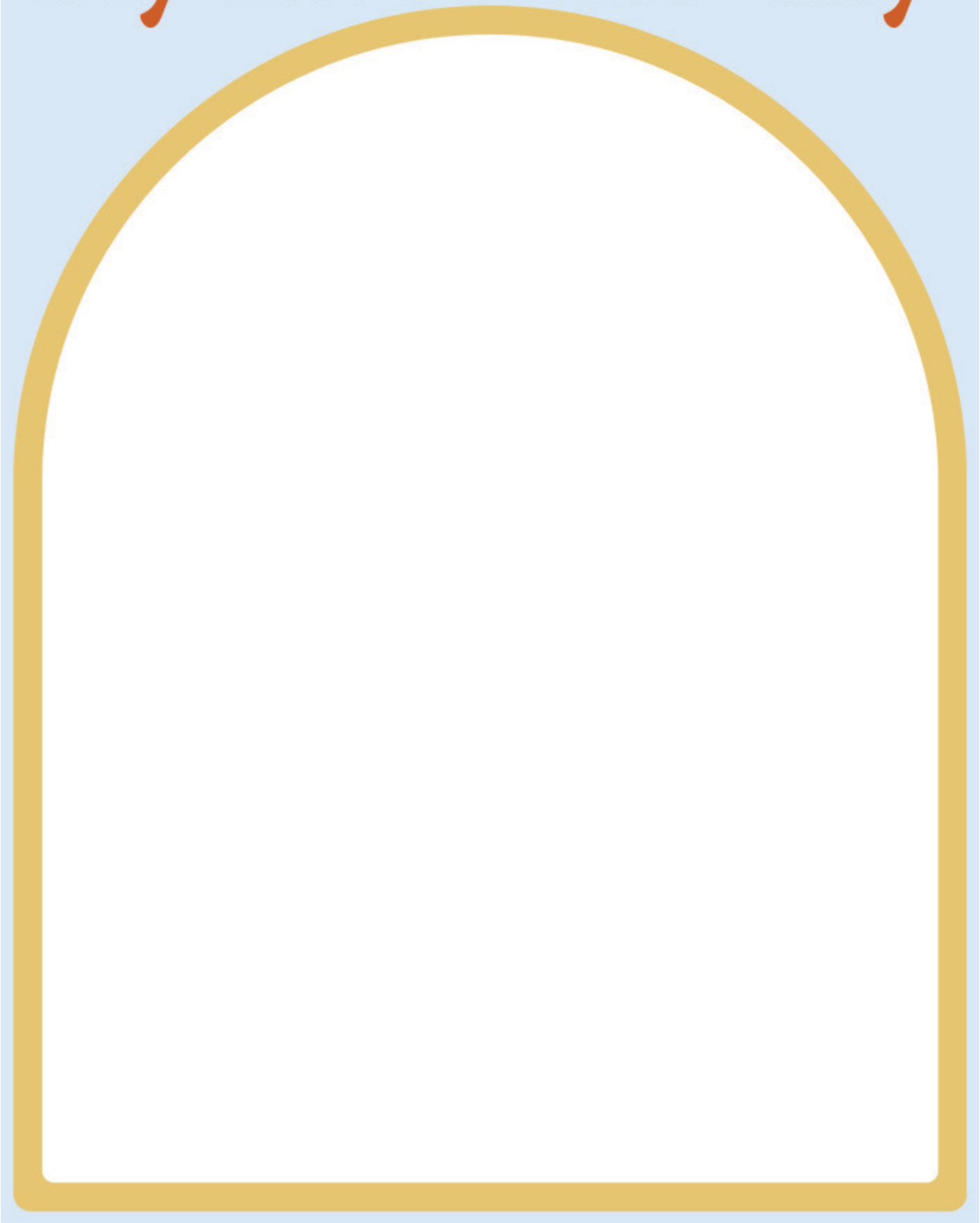
Imagining the otherside of life...

Grief feels like...

Heart helpers template



My favourite day



Tree of Thanks

