



TILTED / AXIS

INDIGENOUS SPECIES

KHAIRANI BAROKKA





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Designed and illustrated by Khairani Barokka
Edited by Deborah Smith
Typesetting by Simon Collinson



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Indigenous Species



Words and art by
Khairani Barokka



*For my mother and father,
who taught me how to love
growing, living things, and
how to try to protect them.*

Introduction

In 2013, in Jakarta, I wrote a poem that seemed to propel itself onto the page. The idea I had in mind was to craft an accessible spoken word performance, involving subtitles and video art projections. What poured out onto the page encapsulated all the fury, dismay, and deep sadness that wells up when I encounter news stories on Indonesia's oceans, air or indigenous peoples. Stories of pollution and indiscriminate destruction; of short-sightedness, irresponsibility, and implicit disrespect; of circumstances which no human being should ever have to experience.

The feelings that gave rise to this poem were there in 1997, when widespread forest fires engulfed Kalimantan's rainforests,

and I saw my parents, an urban planner by training and an ecologist to whom this book is dedicated, drop everything to try and mitigate the damage. Yet the destruction continues year by year, through the fires and forced relocations used to clear the way for new factories and plantations, through the seas of rubbish that surround our 17,000-plus islands, and through the deadly smog which killed nearly one hundred thousand Indonesians last year alone, and many thousands abroad.

Because of course, this is not just Indonesia's story. At this ominous stage of climate change, all of our futures are tied to that of the orangutans in Kalimantan, of the hundreds of indigenous cultures spread across the islands, of kids in



Jakarta whose days are spent laughing and singing amidst automobile fumes. We live in a world where what we ingest, peruse in bookstores, slather on and wash off are all direct products of unsustainable forestry systems, where the crises of ecosystems may not enter the consciousness of those who consume their fruits on a daily basis. We are all just trying to live a good life, and for many of us that entails access to products, whether “budget” or “luxury”, that are tapped from jungles we’ve never even been close to.

So out came *Indigenous Species*, first performed in 2013, as a spoken word poem at Melbourne’s Emerging Writers’ Festival. And then, one day, I found myself at a residency in Malaysia, a place of quiet and calm. Trees outside my window, holding

the city at arm’s length. Thinking about the jungle, I remembered this poem, and found that the images I’d imagined for the original production were still there inside my head. Longer story short, it became a proposal for a book, one where these images would be a tactile experience, existing alongside text—and also alongside Braille.

This work is meant to be an experiment that arose in response to the question, asked over the years by blind and visually impaired artists and activists, “Why is there such a huge disparity in terms of how accessible literature (Braille books, audiobooks, and accessible PDFs, etc.) and books in visual-text are brought into the world?” Why, for that matter, are there virtually no books where Braille is written





alongside text? Audiobooks are often released later than visual-text books, and only a tiny percentage of books make it into Braille at all—and this is, of course, speaking of the language in the broad sense. English Braille itself has three encoding forms, and Braille is mapped differently in Korean, Japanese, etc.

The last thing this book is meant to be is an act of charity. As a disabled person myself, but one who accesses two-dimensional text and images with ease (thanks to glasses and contacts), I am an outsider who in no way intends to “voice for the voices of the voiceless”, or to imply that blind and visually-impaired people are not long-standing advocates for their own community. This community includes several friends and colleagues to whom I

am hugely indebted for educating me. I am also in favour of at least understanding the social model of disability, where “disabled” is not the opposite of “unable” but “enabled”, and that many disabilities are societal and societally exacerbated. The Braille-and-tactile form of this book is an effort to emphasize one form of such discrimination, which persists in the publishing industry. Its contents, however, were created in a haze of anger and bewilderment at what has been happening in my own and other countries. If you’re sighted and are reading the “flat”, non-Braille, non-tactile version, you’ll notice the word “Braille” (in Braille) on every other page. This is an attempt to invert what scholar Georgina Kleege alerts us to in her article “Visible Braille/ Invisible Blindness”—the usual visibility of





Braille in public places for the benefit of sighted people. I believe this corresponds to the usual lack of Braille in literature meant for sighted people, which can mask publishing's discrimination. Thus *Indigenous Species* attempts to make the absence of Braille visible and felt in its sighted-reader version, just as sight-impaired or blind readers feel its absence in every two-dimensional book.

The bright pink-orange-blue-purple-green river is a contemporary print, not an established, traditional one. I am of two minds when I look at prints like this: on the one hand, "cultures evolve, and art can go anywhere", but on the other, "To what extent does the effort that goes into making and marketing contemporary prints displace knowledge of our

traditions, knowledge we risk losing?" The bright river water, flowing through each page of the book, is loosely analogous to the forces of time and commercialism. Inspired by artists who subvert visual and linguistic notions of blackness to glorify the colour and give it depth, as well as highlighting the dehumanisation of black Americans, I wanted "bright" and "neon" to evoke anxiety and pressure in relation to the mass destruction of rainforest, indigenous habitats, and native cultures of all kinds. I wanted to show that though the rainforest does contain bright colours, its darkness is actually a sign of its health. Thus, in this story, darkness is soothingly alive, while the fear lies in artificial colours and freneticism. There are a few traditional motifs from Dayak cultures that I did incorporate in accordance with





their meanings, i.e. the floating symbols traditionally worn by travellers match the verse on that page. The crab is from a traditional form of tattooing. But the visuals take their cue from contemporary glitch artists as much as from forest-dwelling inhabitants' practices of inking on skin or dyeing and weaving. Also, my mother is the woman holding up the cloth (so please be kind to that page).

Almost ten years ago, I found myself in a small, narrow boat in Kalimantan, working as a fixer/field producer for the BBC, gathering sound effects of the jungle. Frighteningly, what I could hear and what

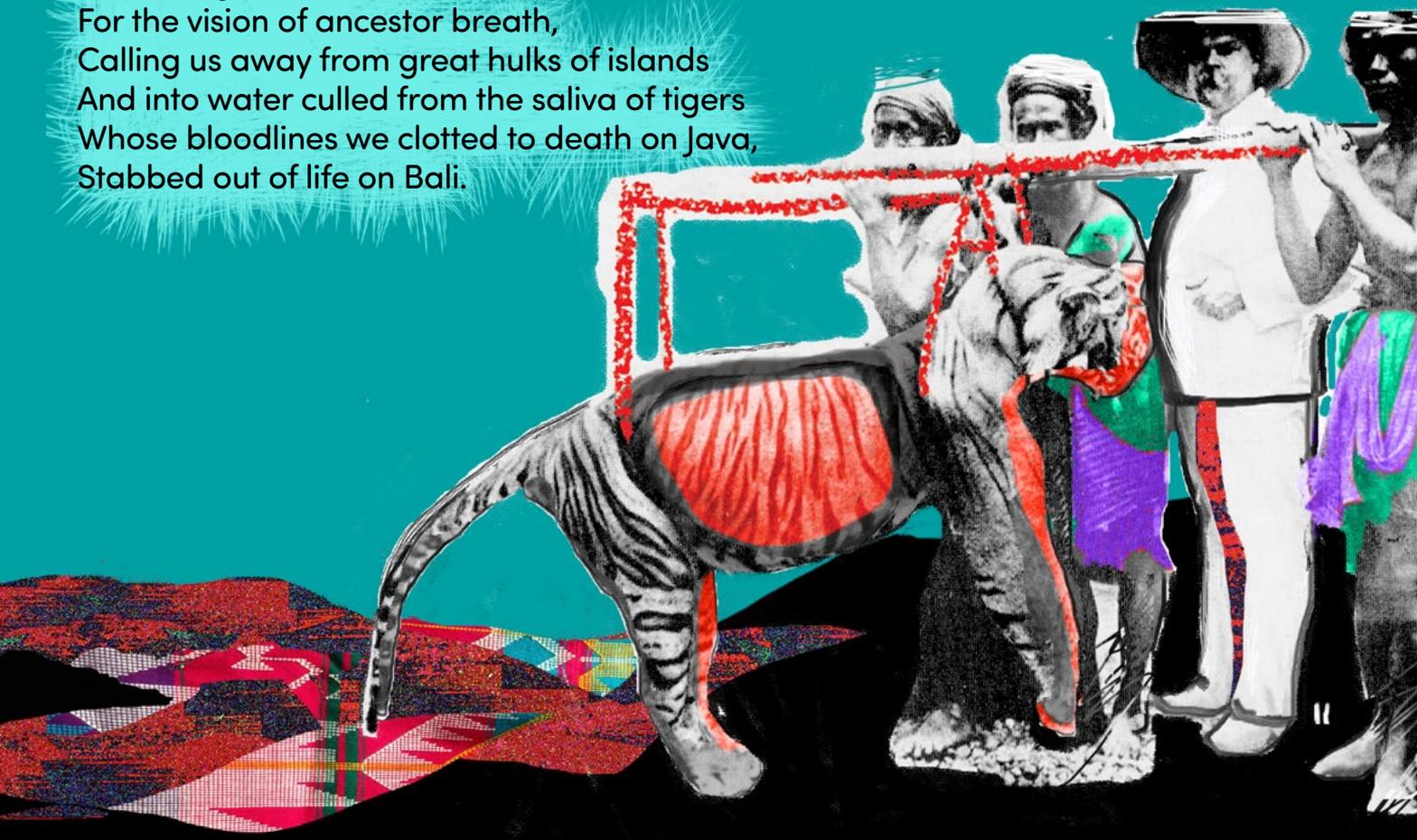
was recorded was the continuous whirl of unseen buzzsaws, tearing down the beauty around me, threatening to close in. Even today, I feel anxiety when I recall this sound. Perhaps this panic and chaos and confusion, translated visually and aurally and textually, can incite the same recognition of bewilderment, of sped-up loss in real time. I hope the neon in this book will shock someone into slowing down, into letting go of “growth” obsessions, and into a sense of urgency. For we have an urgent need to rescue all the wisdom that we push aside, that we set fire to and let drown, in the form of all the indigenous species with whom our lives are linked.

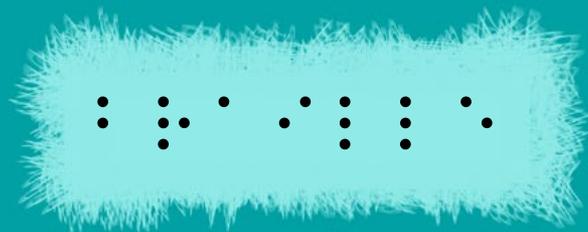
Khairani Barokka
September 2016



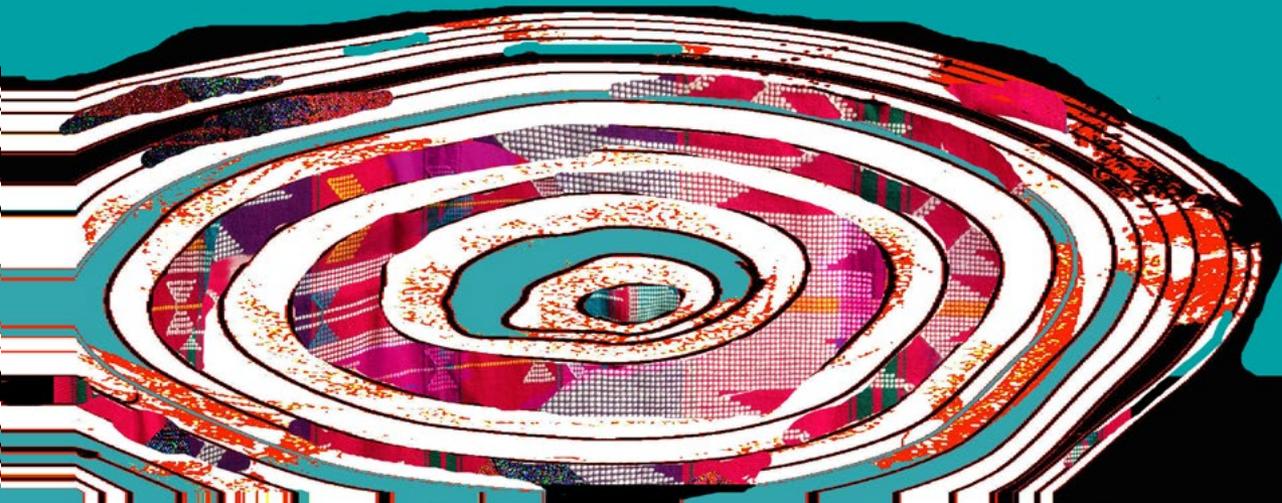
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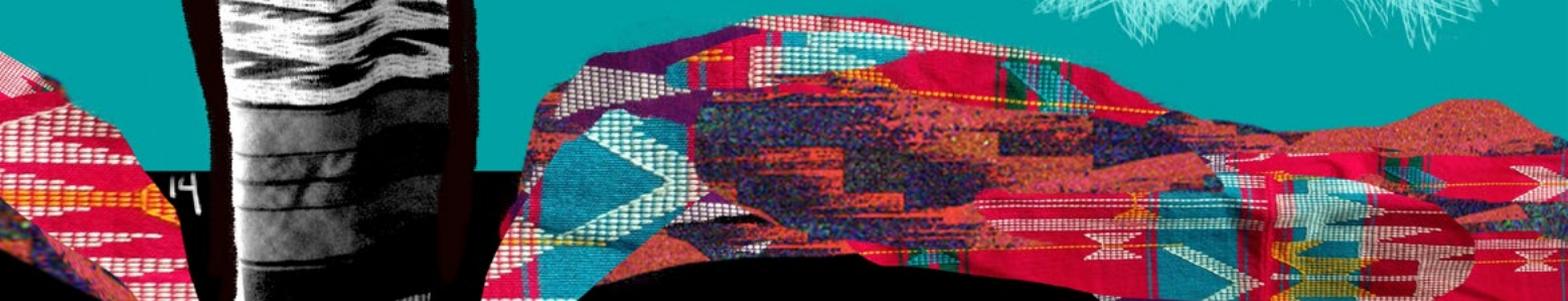
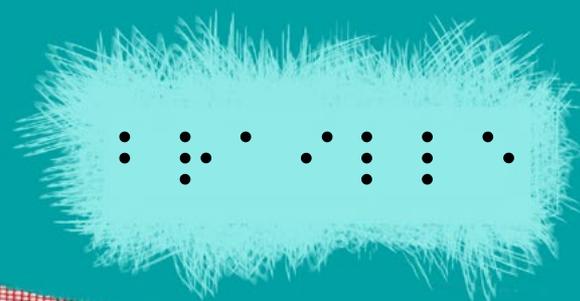
When you abduct me down the rotten river,
You make sure to wrap some rope around the hull,
Lest the current gets swept into dreaming,
And the dugout boat loses sight
Of carvings and knives
For the vision of ancestor breath,
Calling us away from great hulks of islands
And into water culled from the saliva of tigers
Whose bloodlines we clotted to death on Java,
Stabbed out of life on Bali.





When you wrap chloroform in my mouth,
We are drifting past open sores of forest,
Pestilent red wounds in the trunks
Exposing great-great-grandmotherly rings,
The circumferences it takes for
Rainforest to sprout its many legs of mystery,
The soup of a complex resilience,
Rustbucket water feeding ferocity as green gasps wide
And devours canopy, the crazy lush of it tickling
Away into the ocean.

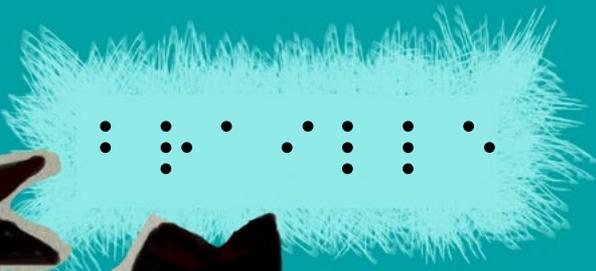
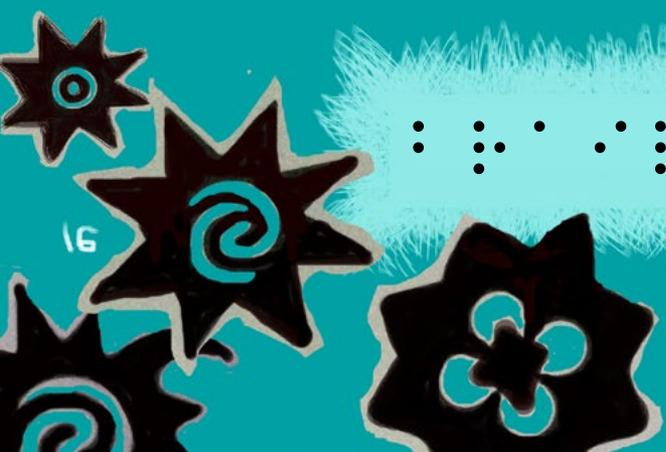


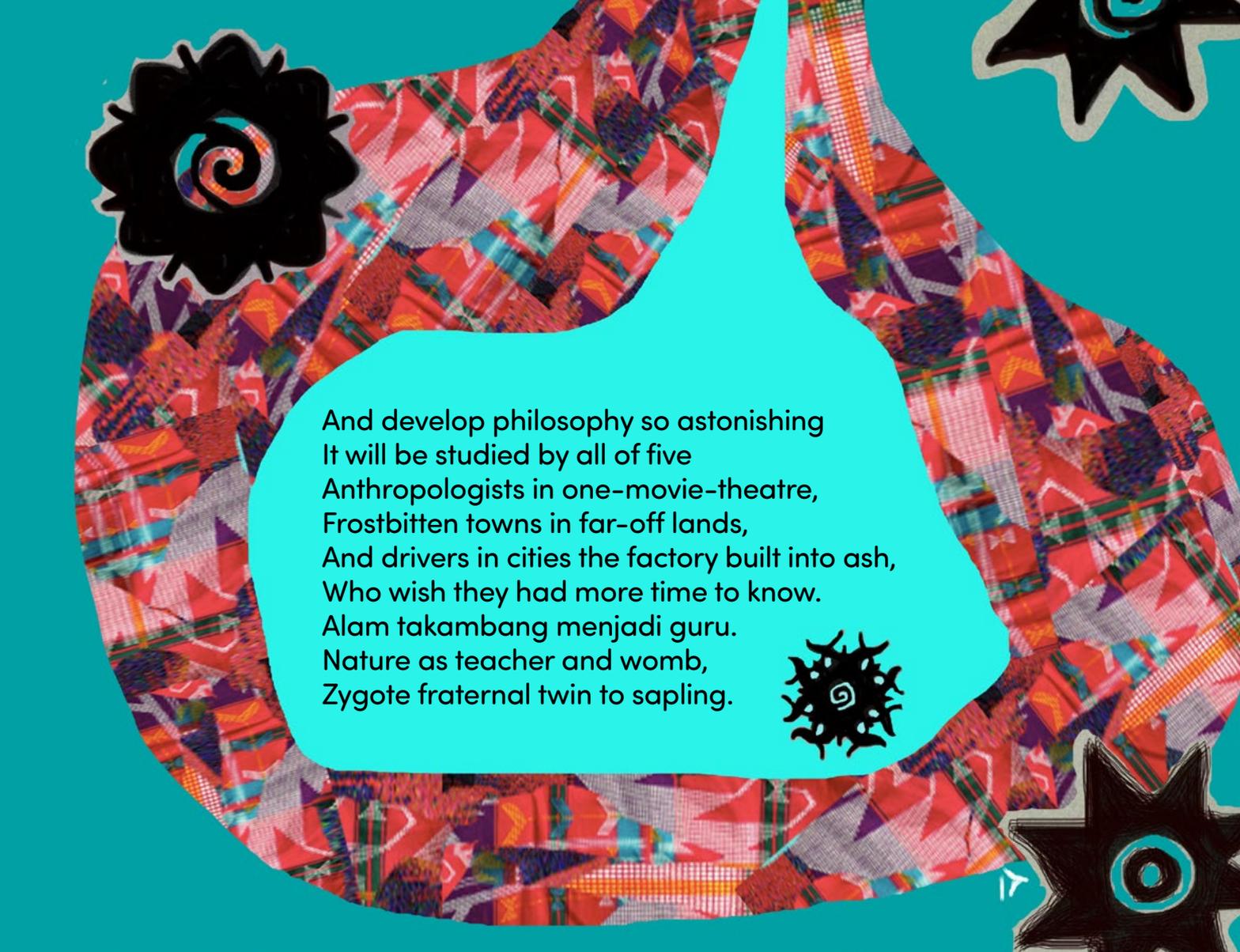


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A woman wearing a white headscarf is seen from the chest up, holding a large, dark-colored blanket with a complex geometric pattern. She is positioned inside a structure made of dark, tangled branches, resembling a nest or a traditional dwelling. The background is a solid teal color. In the bottom left corner, there is a colorful, abstract pattern of geometric shapes in shades of red, orange, yellow, and purple. The overall composition is layered and textured.

I would tell you this,
But you are already knotting
One of my ankles tight to the other:
We once let the jungle
Whittle our lives down to habit,
Forest sculpting foraging patterns,
Spice configurations in soups,
Longhouse architectural trends,
How women live with bleeding,
What we can't name our children,
How we groom the pelts on our bodies,



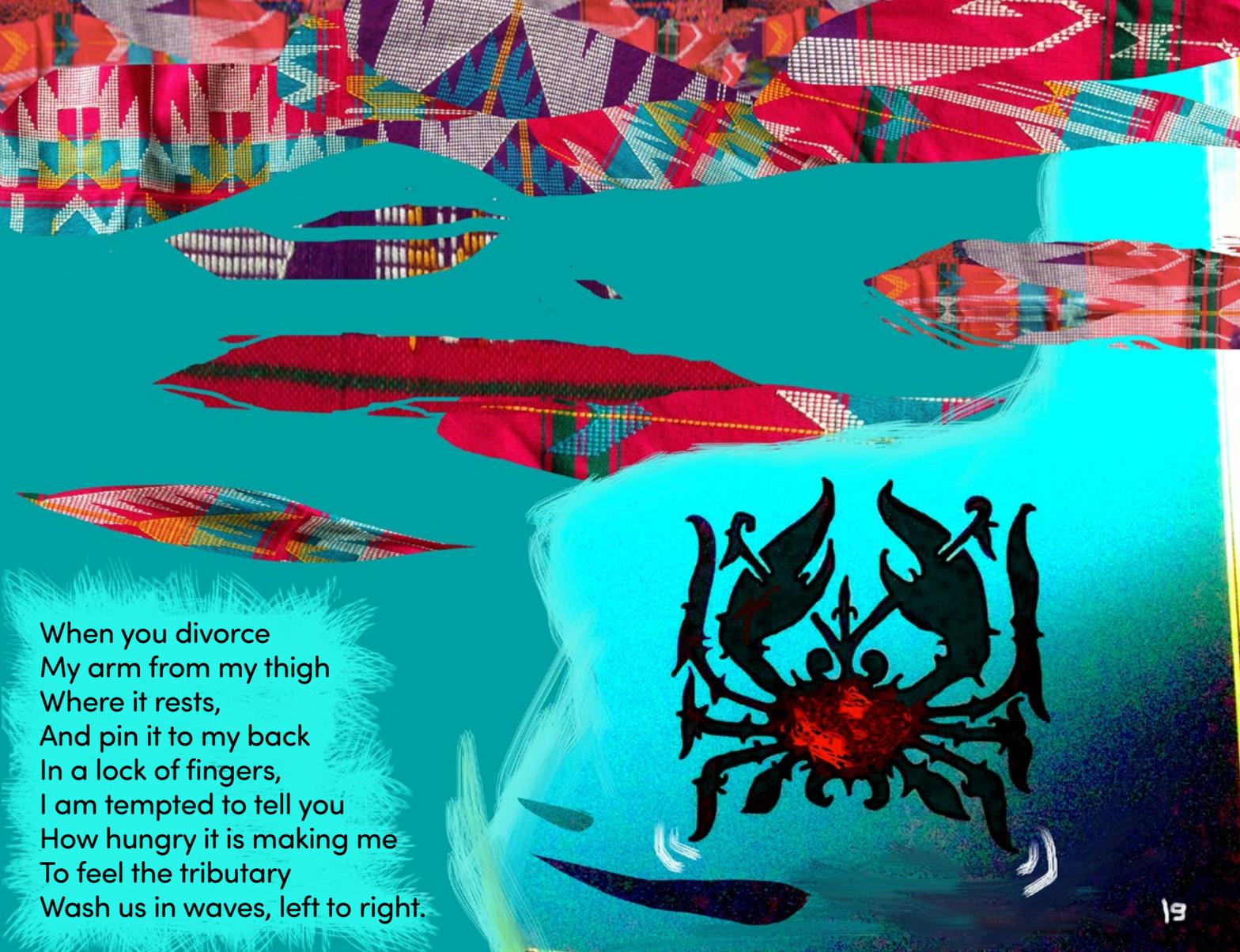


And develop philosophy so astonishing
It will be studied by all of five
Anthropologists in one-movie-theatre,
Frostbitten towns in far-off lands,
And drivers in cities the factory built into ash,
Who wish they had more time to know.
Alam takambang menjadi guru.
Nature as teacher and womb,
Zygote fraternal twin to sapling.

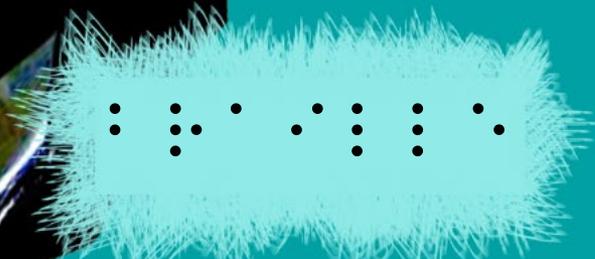




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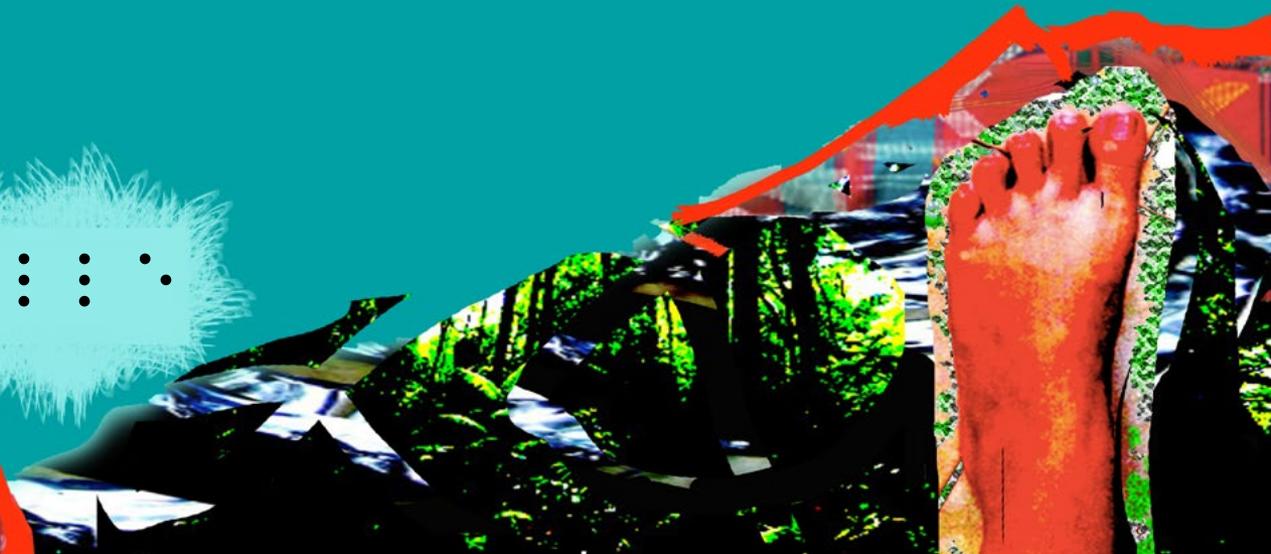


When you divorce
My arm from my thigh
Where it rests,
And pin it to my back
In a lock of fingers,
I am tempted to tell you
How hungry it is making me
To feel the tributary
Wash us in waves, left to right.

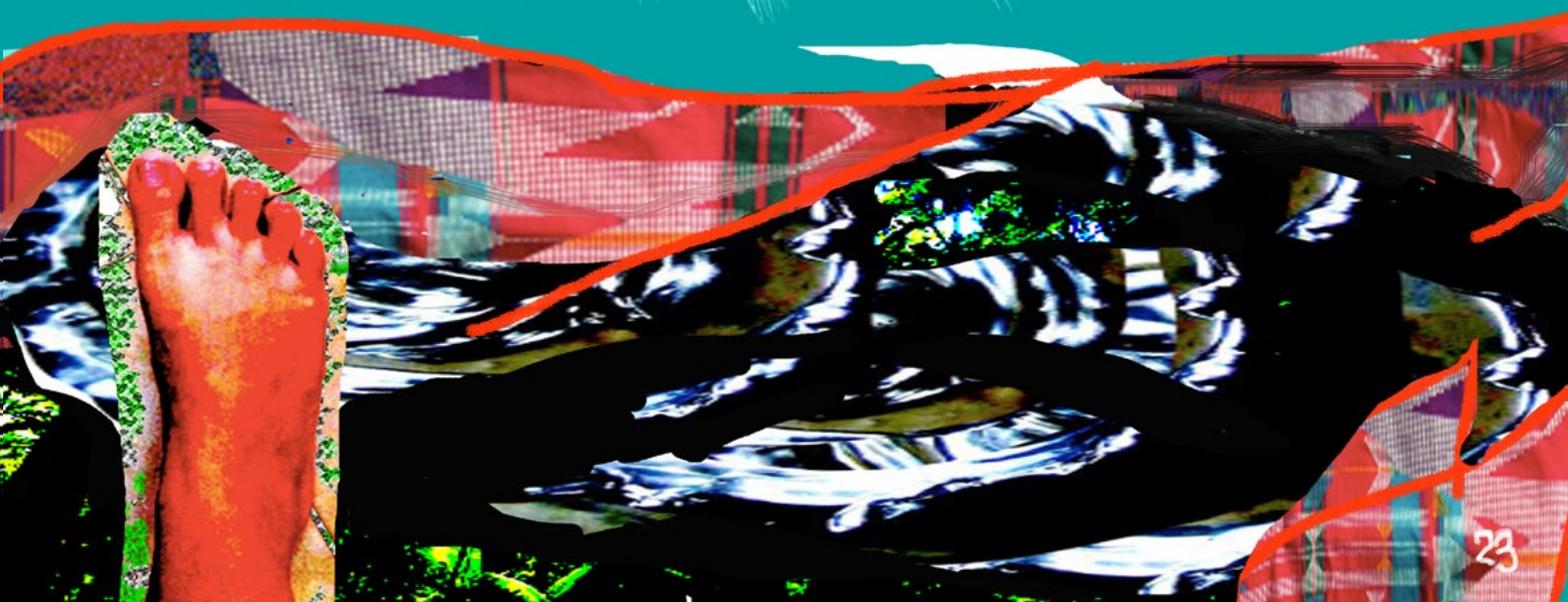




And I don't want to grow old
As you paddle downriver
With the mercury
Beating down your synapses,
Eating at your unborn childlings,
While I close my eyes
And look away
And pretend girls my age
Don't live here and won't.



You have blindfolded me,
But I've been down here before,
So I know how there are islands
Of roots to stand foot on,
Battling for space
And historical worth
In the eyes of the species
We peacock ourselves to be,

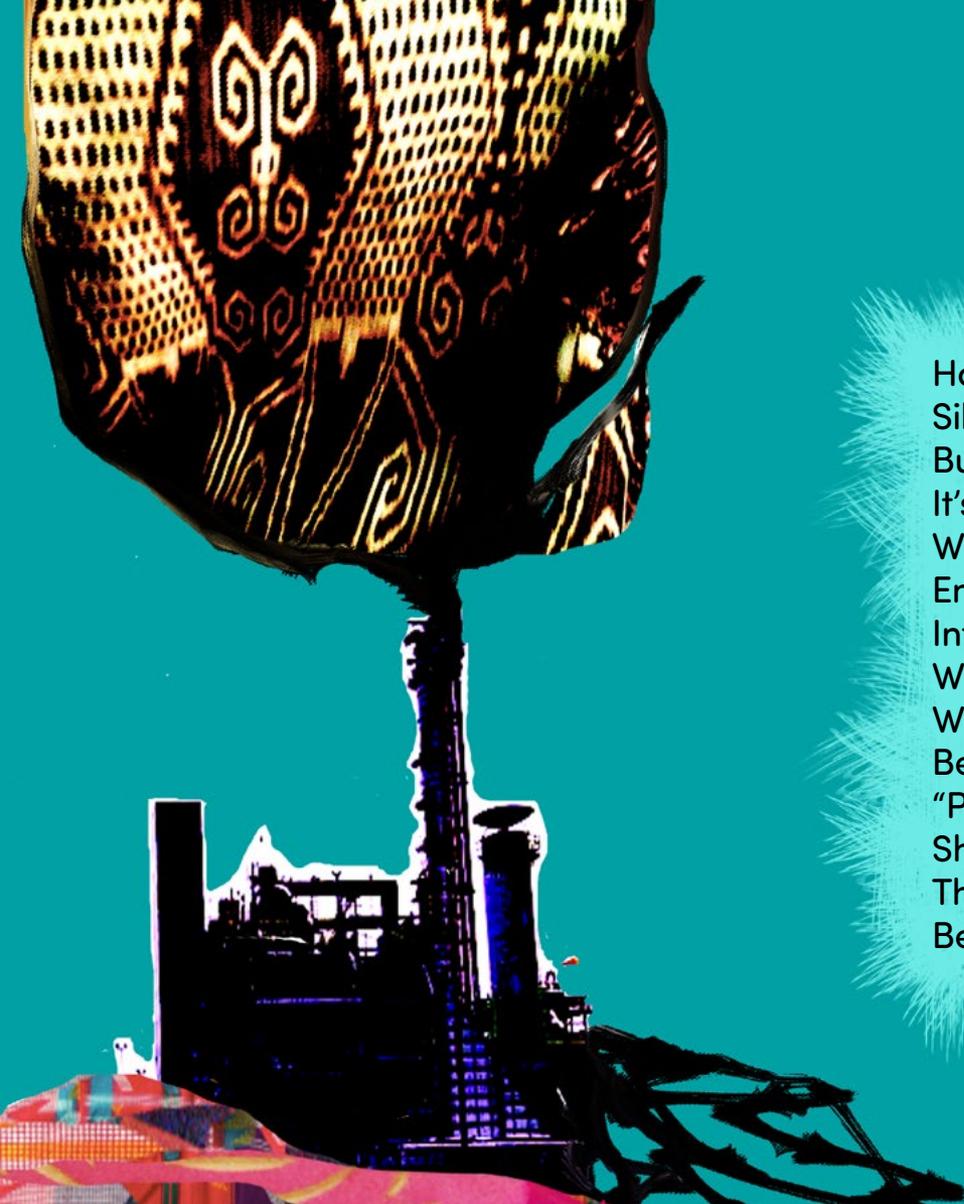




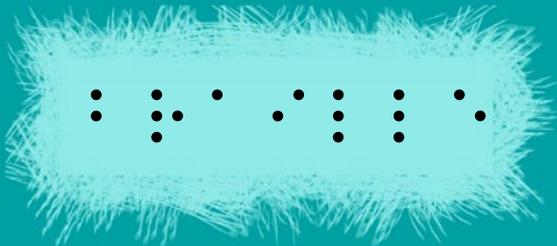
With reptiles
Gargantuan as ignorance,
Brute big as guilt
And delicate as birdsong.
Centrifugal humidity swirling
Into sweltering, heat-soaked,
Drenched evolution—
Centipedes big as your forearm.
Orangutan carcass
The feast of this famine.



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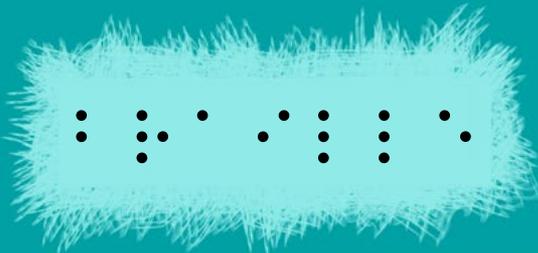


Hard to tell from your
Silence where you're taking me.
But I'm guessing
It's loin-deep in the place
Where they're collapsing
Entire cosmologies
Into pulp and paper,
Where the length of time
We can stay where we were bred
Before our stories turn into
"Proyek" and palm oil oozes away,
Shucking down like lightning
The seconds before we leave
Because we have to.



I bet you, from the raucous
Machinery I'm hearing
And the smell of rashness,
That this is where the grease deals
Are siphoned into miners' food.
And where they are packing down
Eons of intricacies and strength
From the forest to molecular form
On a woman's lipstick bottle in Iowa,



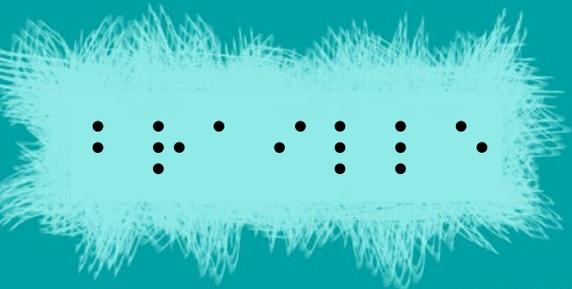


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The likelihood a child
Will know not to generalise
The word "Dayak" to one tribe
Frittered down to cardboard boxes
For the rubbish metropolis
Of Bantar Gebang outside Jakarta,
Where kids sift through the vomit
Of our haste and money
And they smack their lips.







Are you giving any time
To the waves of energy
I'm sending you
From this internal monologue?

I'm telling you, mister,
Don't mess with me.

They used to breed
tigers and ligers for show,
Half orange stripes
and half ruddy mane.
They bred me the same.

Savage-savant, prime "primitive"
To the ends of my toenails,
And so this hatred
of wearing heels
When they can't be
run into the dirt,
And that is the point,
to my thinking, of feet.

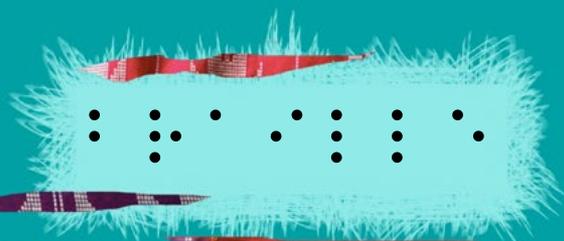


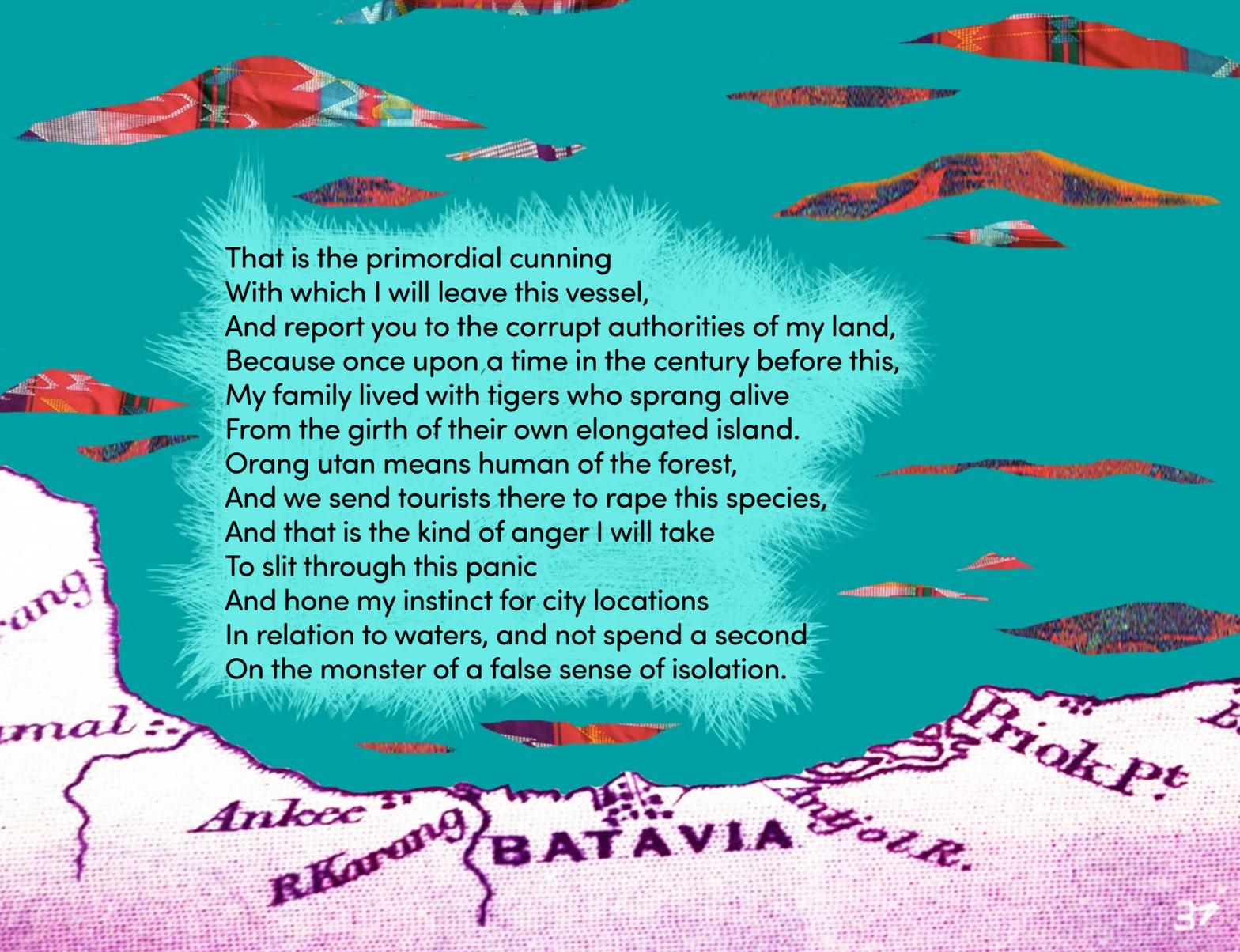
You're not listening
To the sounds in my throat,
And I'm getting thirsty on this canoe.
In Gunung Halimun Salak
National Park in 1990,
They went on an expedition citing
No conclusive evidence
Of Javanese tigers' persistent existence.
But it is easy to dodge discovery
By your murderers.
Pawprints are easily disguised by species
So few as to be sacred.





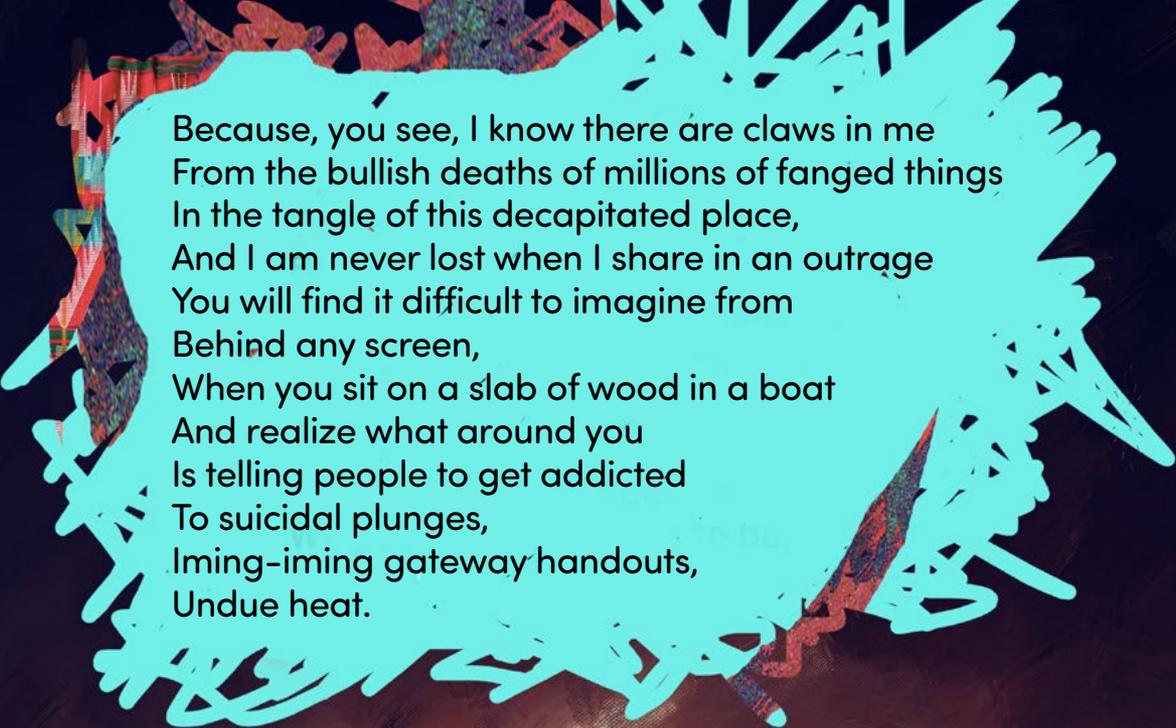
ALVAT
BLOTT
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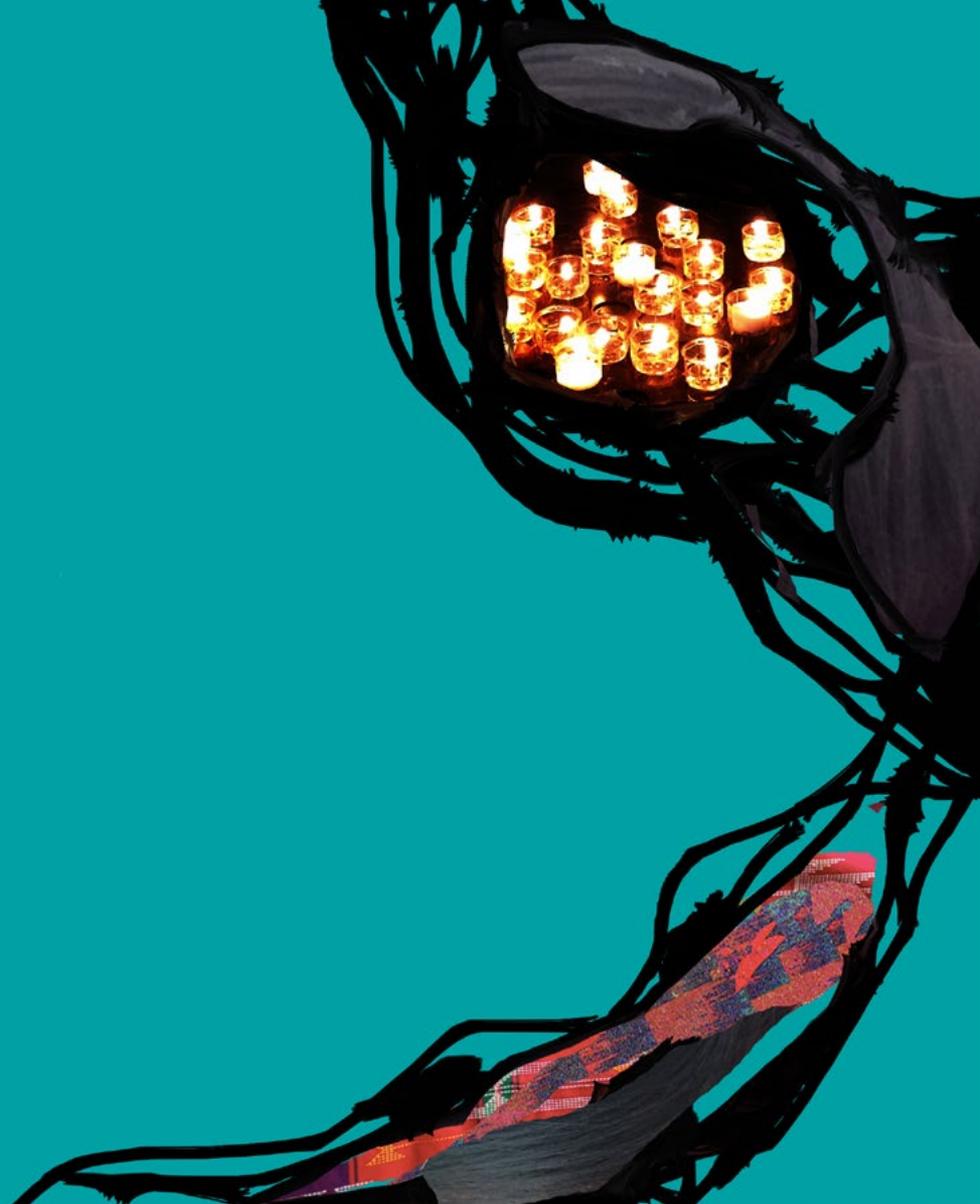
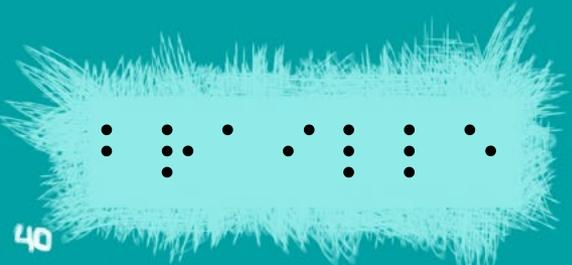
That is the primordial cunning
With which I will leave this vessel,
And report you to the corrupt authorities of my land,
Because once upon a time in the century before this,
My family lived with tigers who sprang alive
From the girth of their own elongated island.
Orang utan means human of the forest,
And we send tourists there to rape this species,
And that is the kind of anger I will take
To slit through this panic
And hone my instinct for city locations
In relation to waters, and not spend a second
On the monster of a false sense of isolation.

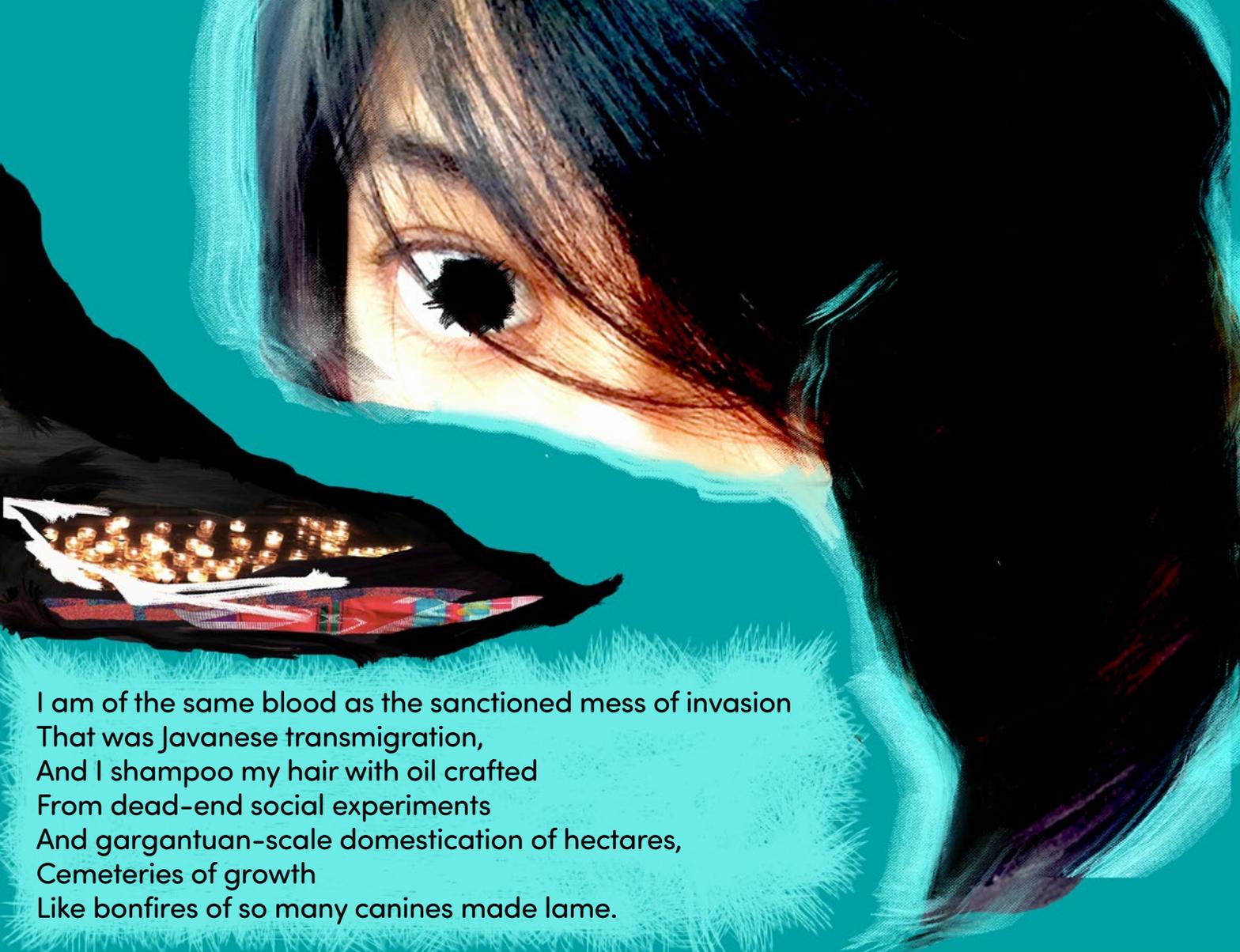
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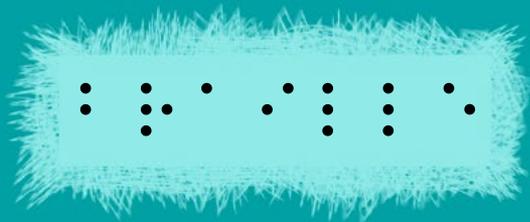
Because, you see, I know there are claws in me
From the bullish deaths of millions of fanged things
In the tangle of this decapitated place,
And I am never lost when I share in an outrage
You will find it difficult to imagine from
Behind any screen,
When you sit on a slab of wood in a boat
And realize what around you
Is telling people to get addicted
To suicidal plunges,
Liming-iming gateway handouts,
Undue heat.

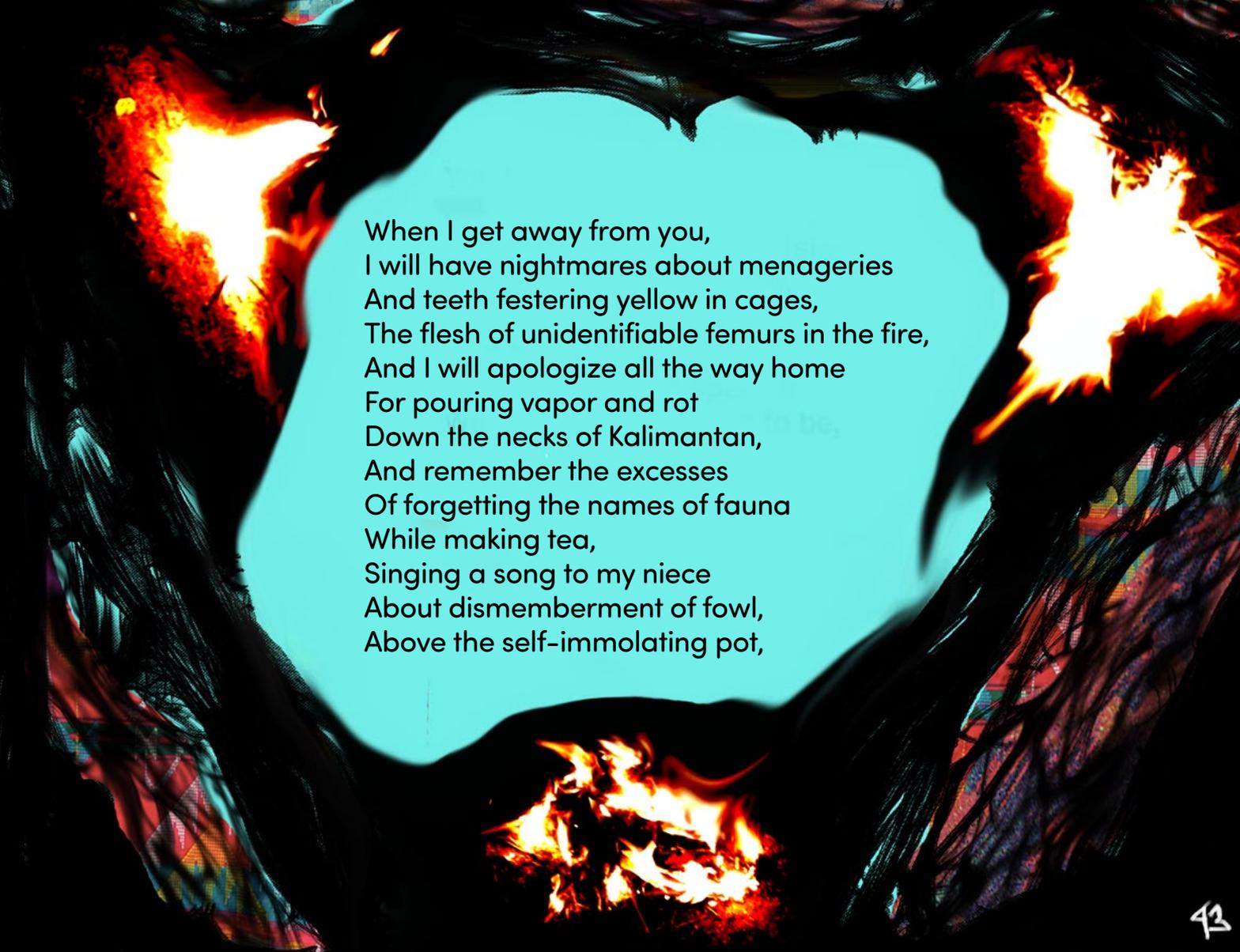




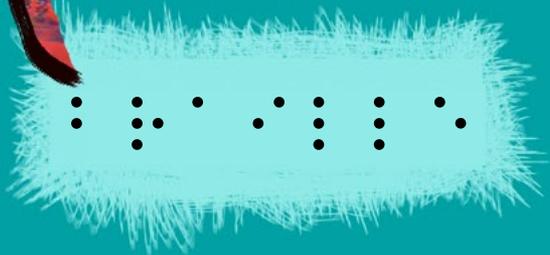


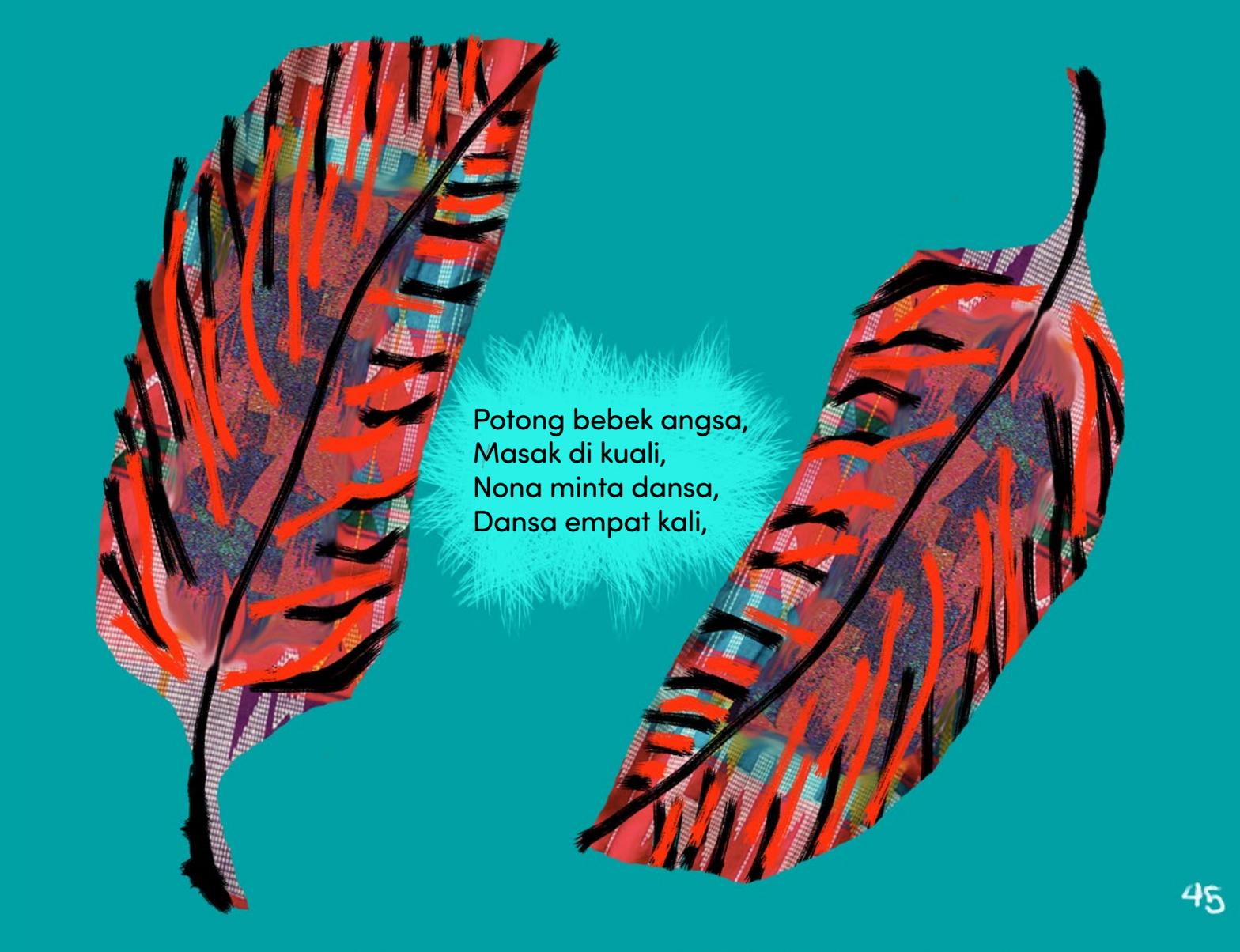
I am of the same blood as the sanctioned mess of invasion
That was Javanese transmigration,
And I shampoo my hair with oil crafted
From dead-end social experiments
And gargantuan-scale domestication of hectares,
Cemeteries of growth
Like bonfires of so many canines made lame.



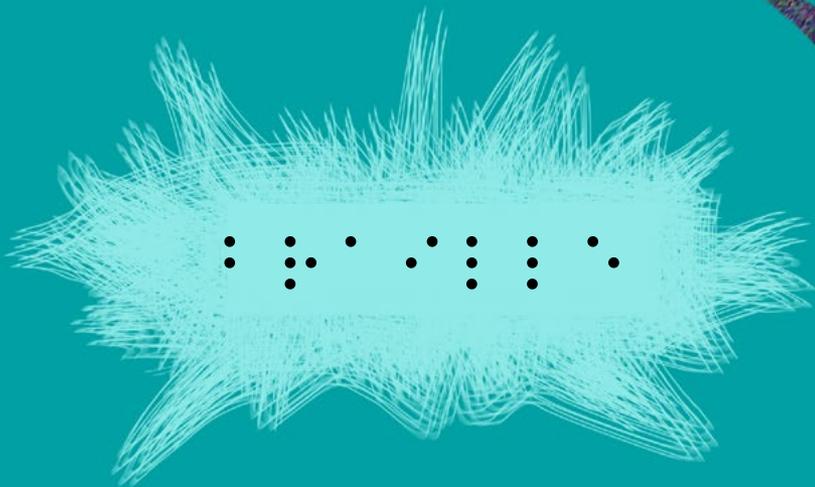


When I get away from you,
I will have nightmares about menageries
And teeth festering yellow in cages,
The flesh of unidentifiable femurs in the fire,
And I will apologize all the way home
For pouring vapor and rot
Down the necks of Kalimantan,
And remember the excesses
Of forgetting the names of fauna
While making tea,
Singing a song to my niece
About dismemberment of fowl,
Above the self-immolating pot,



The image features two large, stylized leaves on a teal background. The leaves are decorated with vibrant red and black brushstrokes, giving them a textured, artistic appearance. In the center, a bright, glowing teal starburst shape contains a four-line poem in Indonesian. The text is white and clearly legible against the starburst.

Potong bebek angsa,
Masak di kual,
Nona minta dansa,
Dansa empat kali,



Jolting like a beast awake in the night
With how nothing on a boat is solid
When it rests on kidnap
And the wrong kind of
silt.





Glossary

Alam takambang menjadi guru.

Nature becomes teacher. A saying in Bahasa Padang, also known as Baso Minang, from West Sumatra.

Proyek

Literally “project”, but used specifically in terms of work projects i.e. construction deals, mining contracts, etc.

Dayak

The name attached to around 200 groups in Kalimantan, is often used to indicate a collective.

Iming-iming

Perks, the use of tools of persuasion.

*Potong bebek angsa,
Masak di kual,
Nona minta dansa,
Dansa empat kali*

This is a popular children’s song in Bahasa Indonesia. The lyrics say:

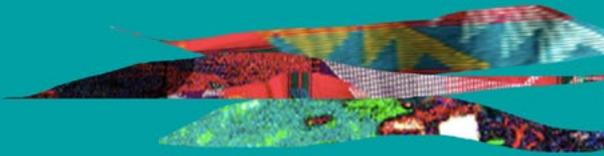
Cut up the swan,
Cook it in a pot,
Missy wants to dance,
Dances four times



Acknowledgements

This book is dedicated to the extraordinary individuals who are my parents, and I'd like to thank them, my brother, and my extended family for their love and joy. I hope I have been able to give the same amount of care and loyalty. While creating this manuscript, my nieces and nephews often entered my mind, as well as worries about the world they've come into. I hope they will come to know many growing-wild spaces, and an Indonesia rich in the will to protect and resurrect local knowledge systems. My partner, the BFG, agreed to help set up and take the photos on pages 1, 24 and 47 of this book. My thanks for this, bedrock support and much laughter. Dominique, Kristin,

JF, and other dear friends inspired and nourished me—thank you. Great thanks to access support and physicians who have helped me be able to finish this book in London. To my colleagues and teachers at Goldsmiths, in particular my brilliant supervisor Dr Alice Andrews, thank you for continuously challenging me, and for collectively giving our curious minds a home. The LPDP Scholarship allowed me to find that home, for which I am grateful. As mentioned, the earliest performance manifestation of *Indigenous Species* appeared in Melbourne, Australia at the 2013 Emerging Writers' Festival, and a draft manuscript and seeds of this book began at Rimbun Dahan Residency in



Kuang, Malaysia; my sincere and great gratitude to both. Valuable knowledge of traditional motifs from Kalimantan was gleaned from *Exquisite Ornaments of Kalimantan: Its [sic] Power and Significance*, commissioned by DEKRANAS (The National Crafts Council of Indonesia) and published in 2014. To the blind and visually-impaired friends, artists, activists, writers and scholars along the way who have brought me into your world views, I owe you the world, as this is my attempt at translation in honour of your work. Finally, in my wildest dreams I could never have imagined a press agreeing so enthusiastically to the proposal for this book, with such support for artistic freedom in

experimental endeavour, including the sourcing of Park Communications to make this project a reality—for that, I dearly thank my publisher Deborah Smith, typesetter-extraordinaire Simon Collinson, cover designer Soraya Gilanni, publicist Sarah Shin, and intern Sabeena Akhtar of Tilted Axis Press. *Indigenous Species* would have languished in captivity without your faith in these pages. To readers, my thanks in advance for giving your time to delve into a warped jungle. I hope you'll enjoy this attempt at conveying the rapidly-vanishing, and the urgency more than ever of respecting rainforests, their inhabitants, and many different ways to be and feel in the world.





A young girl is abducted aboard a boat bound upstream on an Indonesian river, a landscape scarred by pollution and consumerism. But it is also a place from which she herself is indigenous, and if she can root herself back into its landscape and languages, she may yet save herself.

Frenetic neon artwork accompanies poised, rhythmic poetry in this debut from writer, performer and artist Khairani Barokka. *Indigenous Species* is also a bold and necessary experiment in making a sight-impaired-accessible art book: Tilted Axis is producing a separate edition which will feature Braille alongside text for sighted readers, and tactile imagery.



£15 / \$20



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