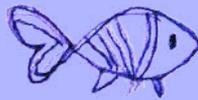
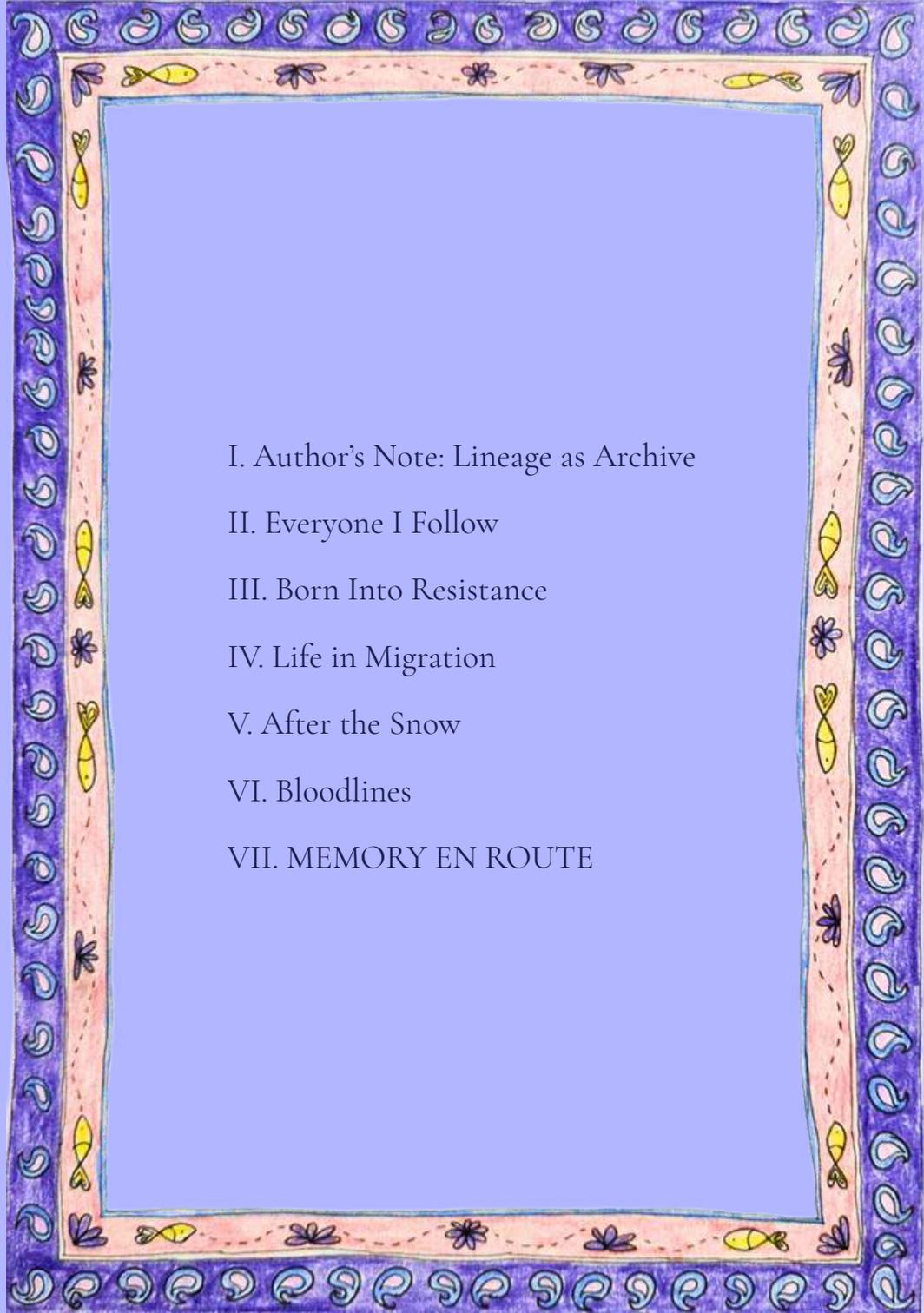


Motherlands

Fariha Nawar



- 
- I. Author's Note: Lineage as Archive
 - II. Everyone I Follow
 - III. Born Into Resistance
 - IV. Life in Migration
 - V. After the Snow
 - VI. Bloodlines
 - VII. MEMORY EN ROUTE



PAINTING

AS FACT

FACT

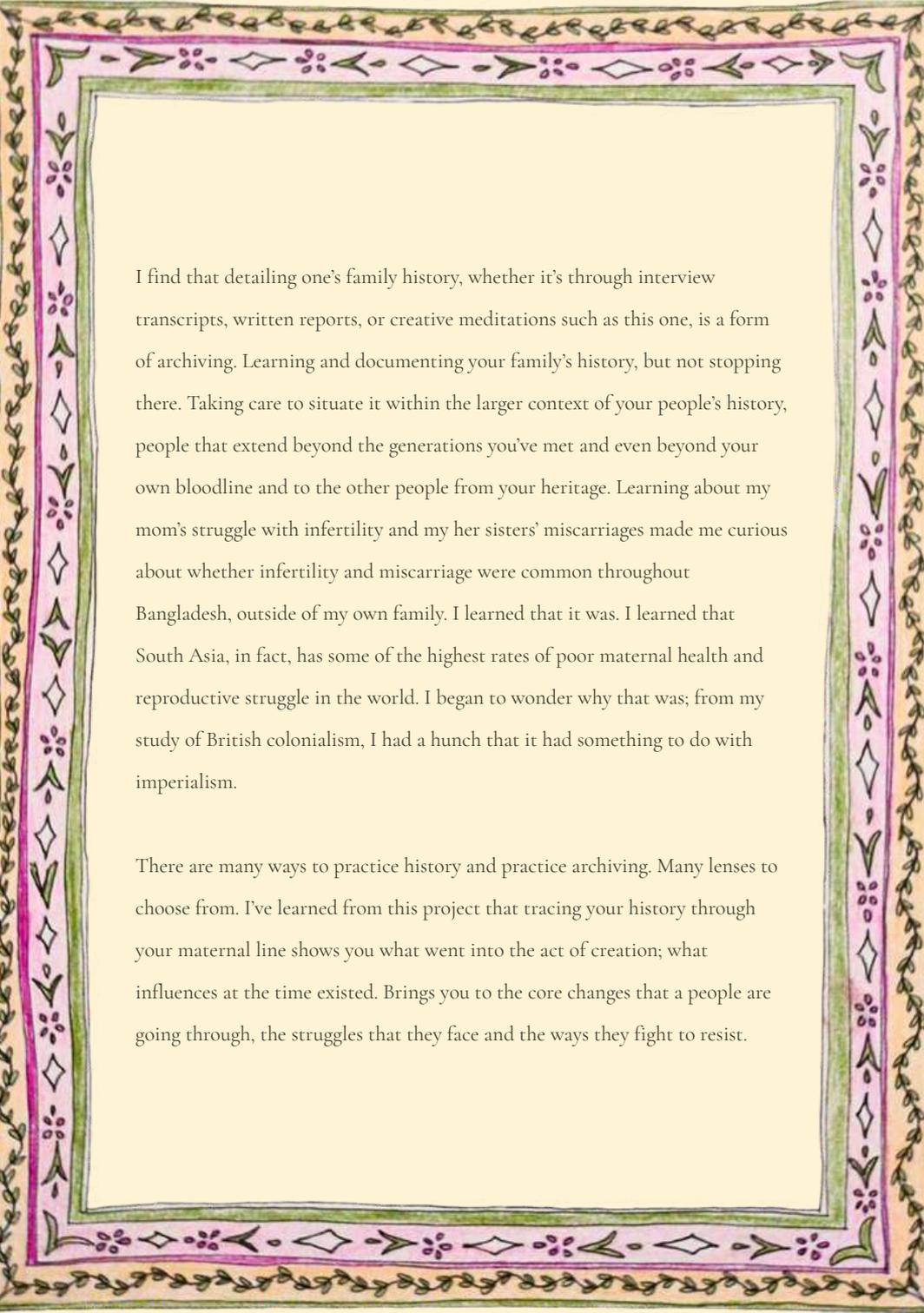
AS FICTION

Author's Note: Lineage as Archive

This zine encompasses a series of essays, and poems, and original artwork that came out of a deep dive into my personal history, including my birth and lineage.

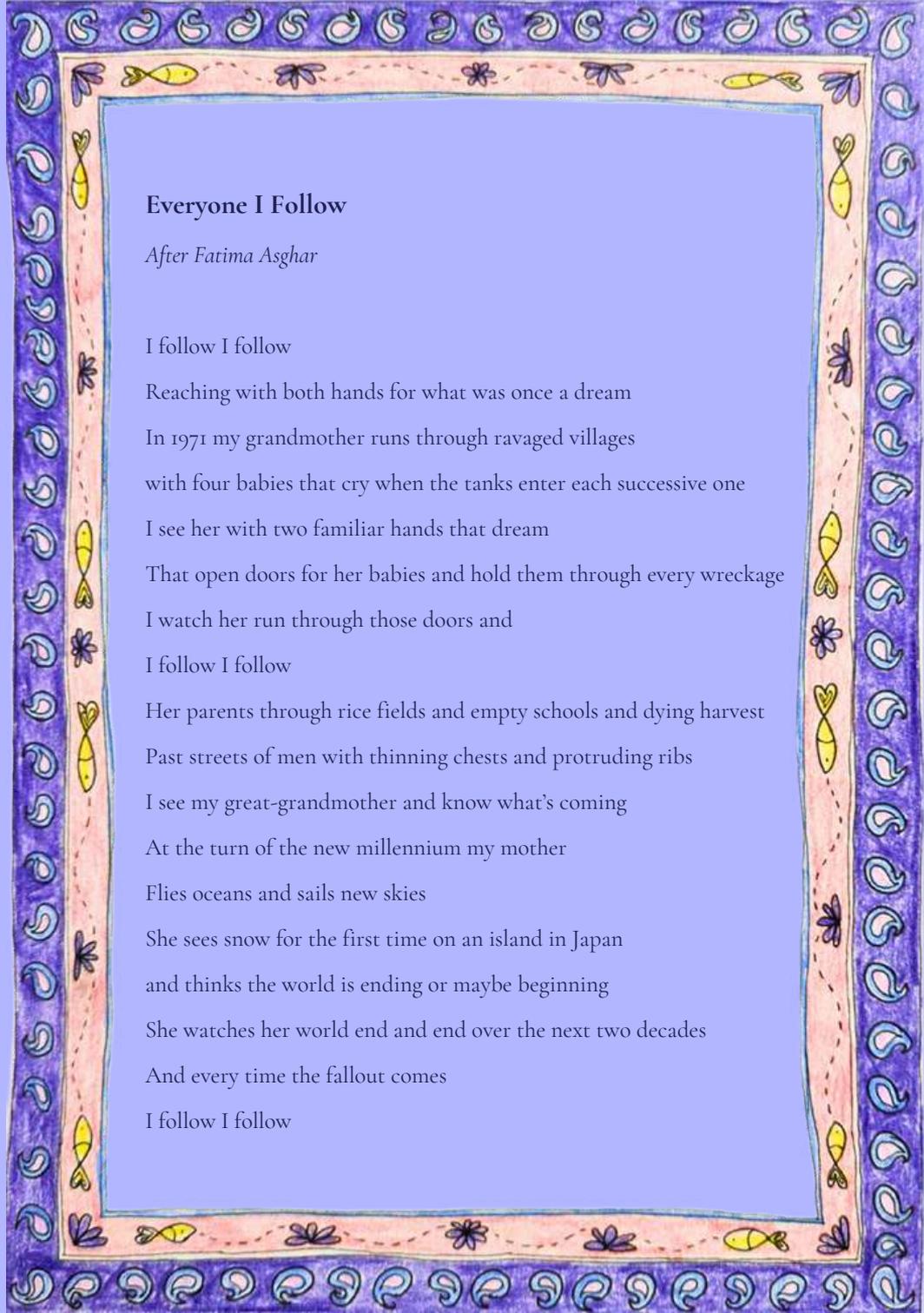
This has been an interesting process, one that I began by interviewing my mother. The most effective way of doing this was by asking one question and letting her speak freely; my mom is someone who loves to talk, which was to my advantage for this project. I wrote down every single word she said; another way of effectively doing this would be recording the conversation.

After our conversations I read through my shoddy transcripts for patterns and things I found thought-provoking or moving.



I find that detailing one's family history, whether it's through interview transcripts, written reports, or creative meditations such as this one, is a form of archiving. Learning and documenting your family's history, but not stopping there. Taking care to situate it within the larger context of your people's history, people that extend beyond the generations you've met and even beyond your own bloodline and to the other people from your heritage. Learning about my mom's struggle with infertility and my her sisters' miscarriages made me curious about whether infertility and miscarriage were common throughout Bangladesh, outside of my own family. I learned that it was. I learned that South Asia, in fact, has some of the highest rates of poor maternal health and reproductive struggle in the world. I began to wonder why that was; from my study of British colonialism, I had a hunch that it had something to do with imperialism.

There are many ways to practice history and practice archiving. Many lenses to choose from. I've learned from this project that tracing your history through your maternal line shows you what went into the act of creation; what influences at the time existed. Brings you to the core changes that a people are going through, the struggles that they face and the ways they fight to resist.



Everyone I Follow

After Fatima Asghar

I follow I follow

Reaching with both hands for what was once a dream

In 1971 my grandmother runs through ravaged villages
with four babies that cry when the tanks enter each successive one

I see her with two familiar hands that dream

That open doors for her babies and hold them through every wreckage

I watch her run through those doors and

I follow I follow

Her parents through rice fields and empty schools and dying harvest

Past streets of men with thinning chests and protruding ribs

I see my great-grandmother and know what's coming

At the turn of the new millennium my mother

Flies oceans and sails new skies

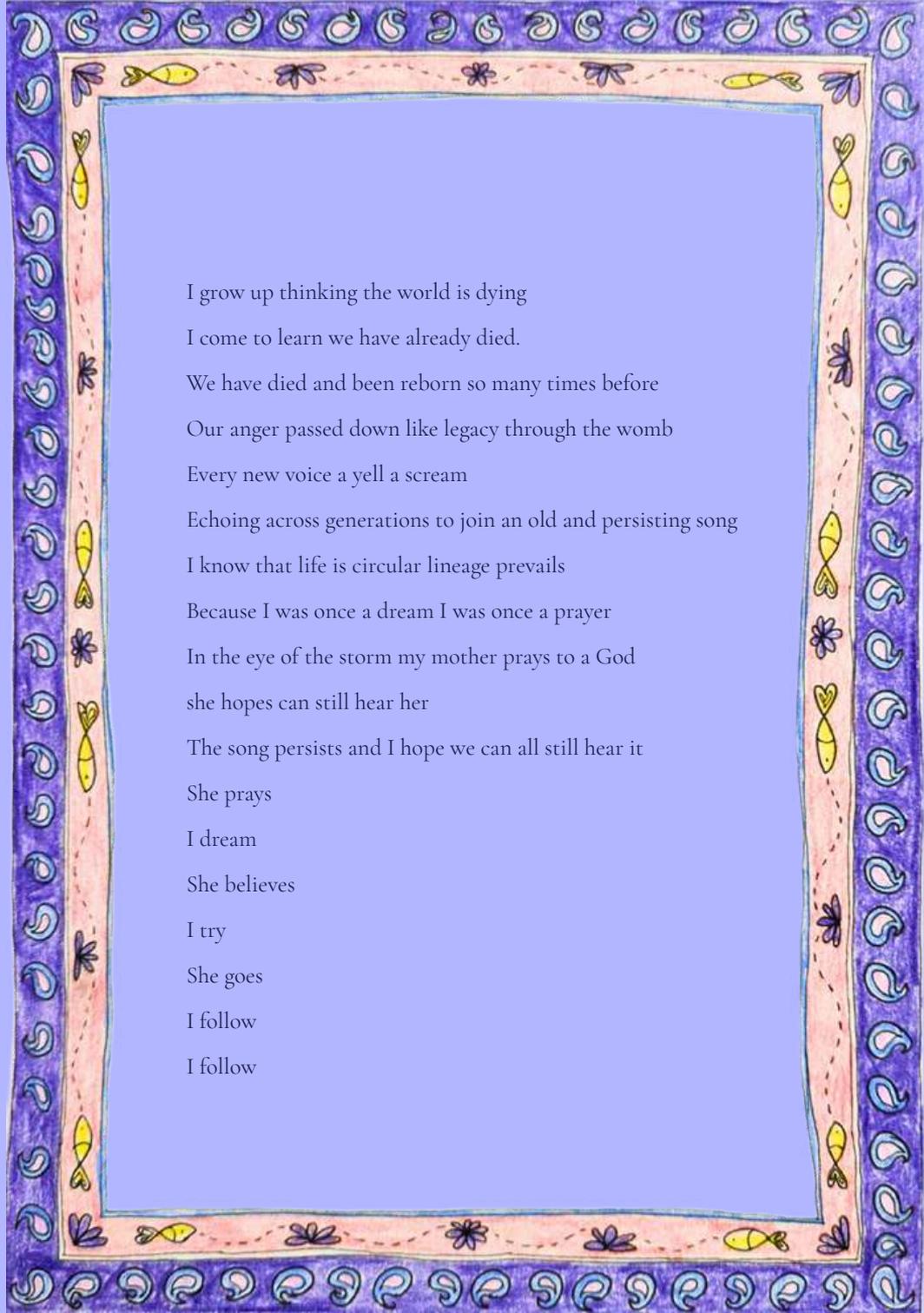
She sees snow for the first time on an island in Japan

and thinks the world is ending or maybe beginning

She watches her world end and end over the next two decades

And every time the fallout comes

I follow I follow



I grow up thinking the world is dying
I come to learn we have already died.
We have died and been reborn so many times before
Our anger passed down like legacy through the womb
Every new voice a yell a scream
Echoing across generations to join an old and persisting song
I know that life is circular lineage prevails
Because I was once a dream I was once a prayer
In the eye of the storm my mother prays to a God
she hopes can still hear her
The song persists and I hope we can all still hear it
She prays
I dream
She believes
I try
She goes
I follow
I follow

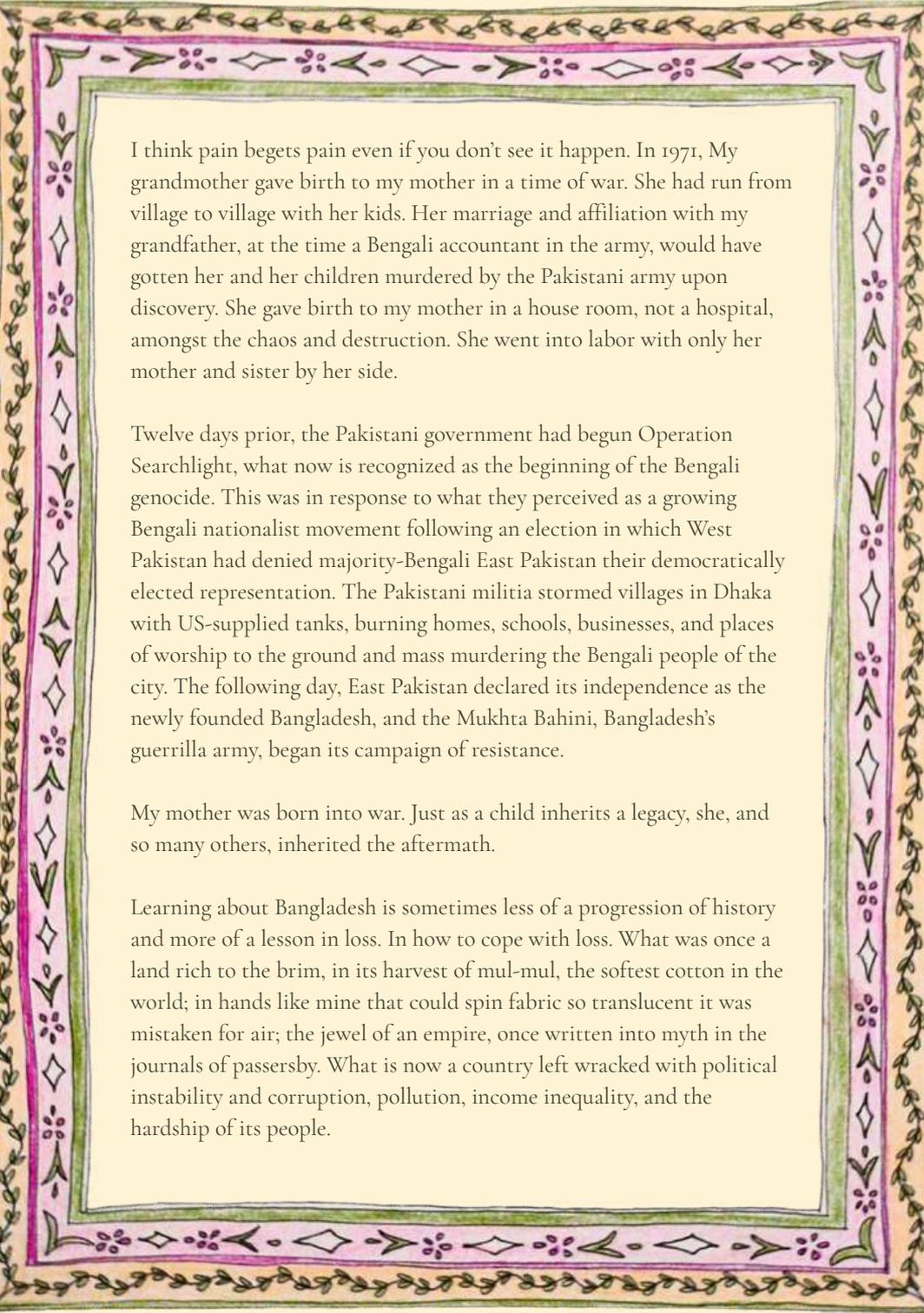
Born into Resistance

My mother was the first historian I ever knew. As our designated family historian, at least once a year, she would grab the pen and paper nearest to her—whether a newly opened notebook or a half-used calendar—and draw me a comprehensive family tree, down to the very last detail. I was to become a historian myself, one day: to know every piece of our family history, and my lineage.

The story often started or pivoted at the point of her birth: my grandmother, spending the latter part of her fourth pregnancy running from village to village with multiple small children, then having a baby in a warzone. It was the birth of my mother, but it was also the birth of Bangladesh; a point of reckoning for the entire country.

My mother was born in tandem with the birth of her nation. Both were born of struggle. As I've come to understand, much of our history echoes from here.

Having a mother who was born in such a pivotal year means a couple of things for me. One, I am able to easily remember the year of Bangladesh's founding simply by remembering how old my mother is. Two, from before I can remember, I was told in detail the stories of Bangladesh's genocide and histories of oppression. This is because for my mother, telling her birth story is inseparable from telling the story of our people's history. For her, it is not as simple as detailing a day spent in the hospital. She cannot leave the genocide part out. Since I was a kid, my parents have pretty much instilled in me that our people are revolutionaries, poets, and scholars; and more so, that we've struggled. That we've struggled quite a lot.

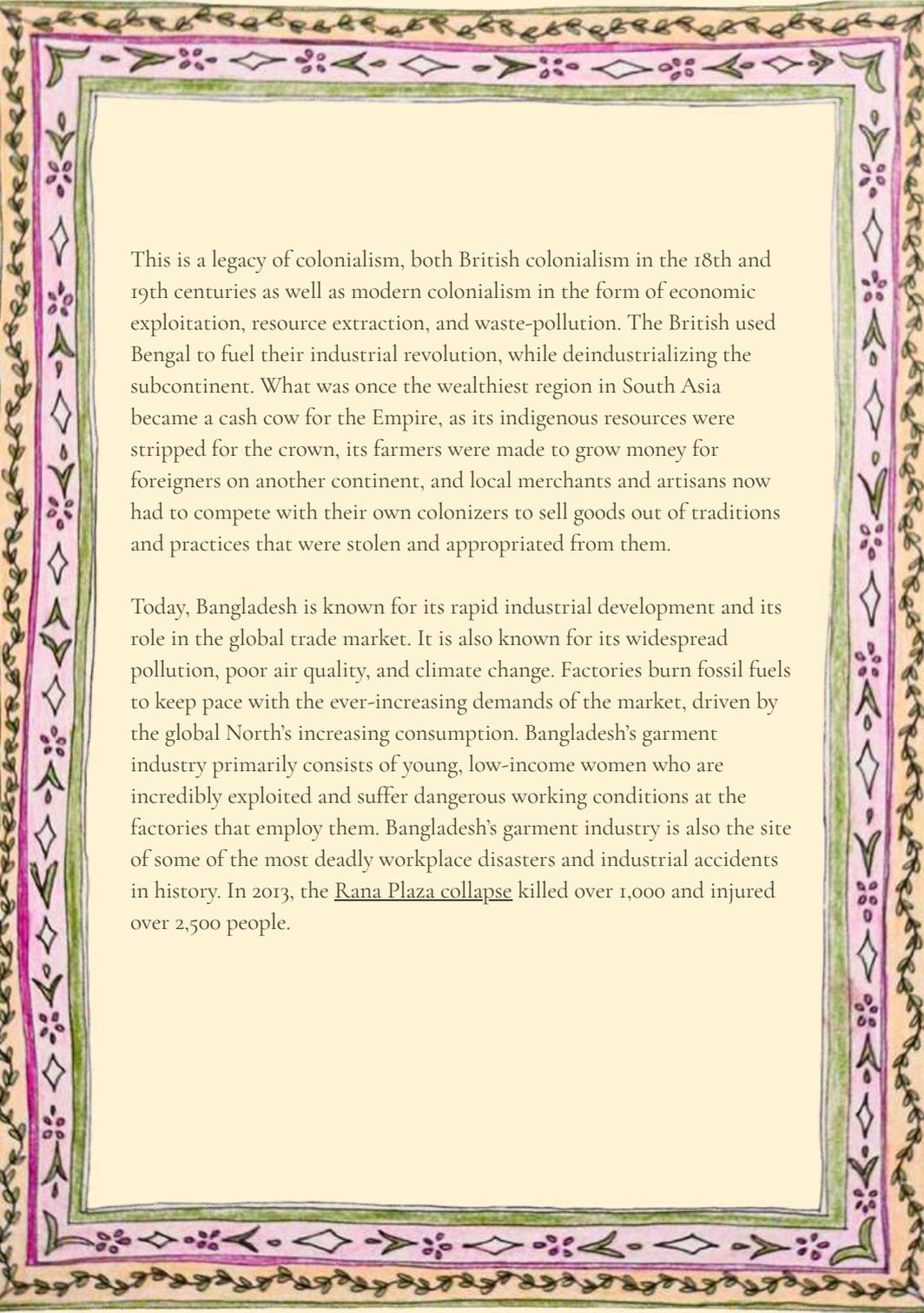


I think pain begets pain even if you don't see it happen. In 1971, My grandmother gave birth to my mother in a time of war. She had run from village to village with her kids. Her marriage and affiliation with my grandfather, at the time a Bengali accountant in the army, would have gotten her and her children murdered by the Pakistani army upon discovery. She gave birth to my mother in a house room, not a hospital, amongst the chaos and destruction. She went into labor with only her mother and sister by her side.

Twelve days prior, the Pakistani government had begun Operation Searchlight, what now is recognized as the beginning of the Bengali genocide. This was in response to what they perceived as a growing Bengali nationalist movement following an election in which West Pakistan had denied majority-Bengali East Pakistan their democratically elected representation. The Pakistani militia stormed villages in Dhaka with US-supplied tanks, burning homes, schools, businesses, and places of worship to the ground and mass murdering the Bengali people of the city. The following day, East Pakistan declared its independence as the newly founded Bangladesh, and the Mukhta Bahini, Bangladesh's guerrilla army, began its campaign of resistance.

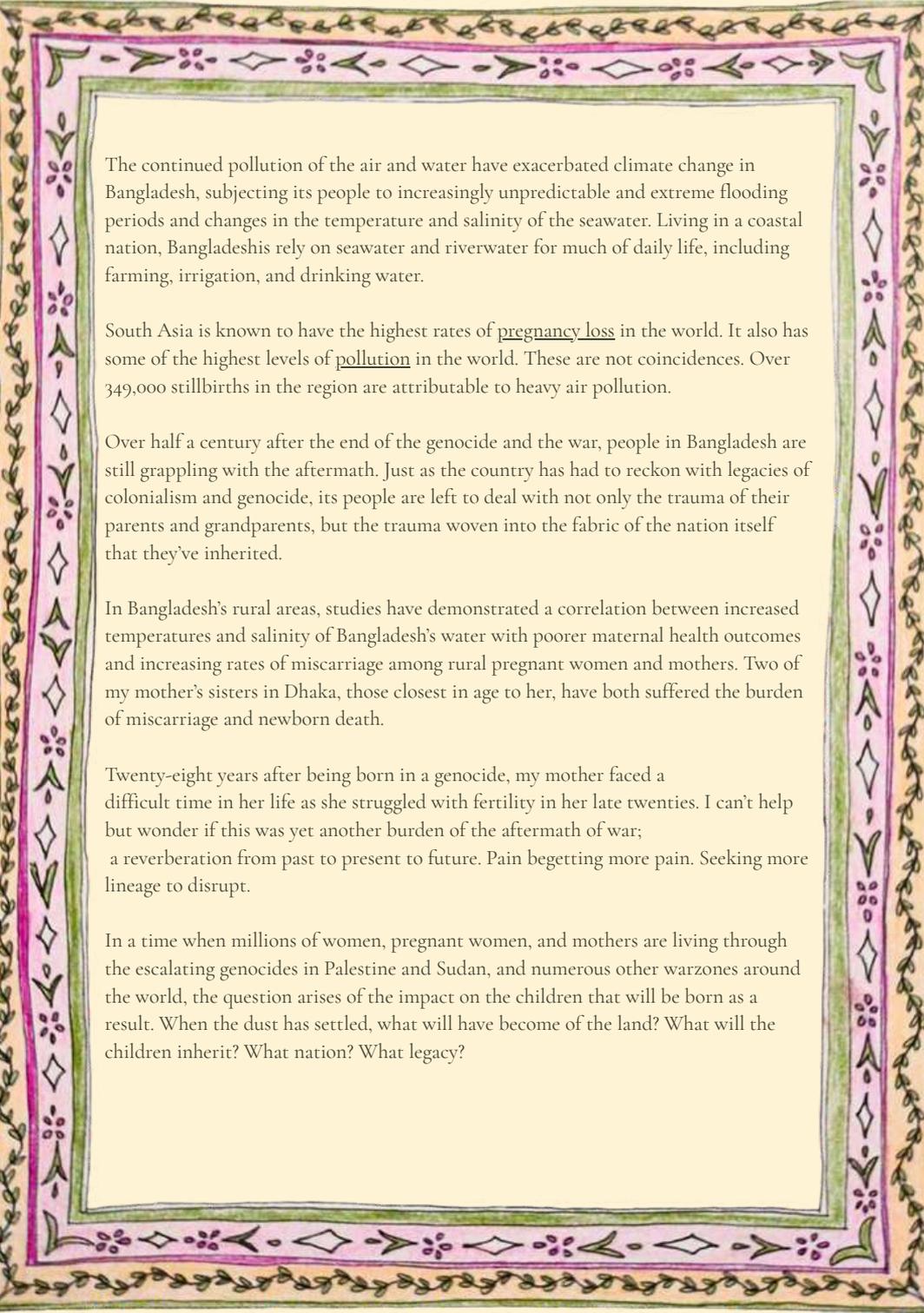
My mother was born into war. Just as a child inherits a legacy, she, and so many others, inherited the aftermath.

Learning about Bangladesh is sometimes less of a progression of history and more of a lesson in loss. In how to cope with loss. What was once a land rich to the brim, in its harvest of mul-mul, the softest cotton in the world; in hands like mine that could spin fabric so translucent it was mistaken for air; the jewel of an empire, once written into myth in the journals of passersby. What is now a country left wracked with political instability and corruption, pollution, income inequality, and the hardship of its people.



This is a legacy of colonialism, both British colonialism in the 18th and 19th centuries as well as modern colonialism in the form of economic exploitation, resource extraction, and waste-pollution. The British used Bengal to fuel their industrial revolution, while deindustrializing the subcontinent. What was once the wealthiest region in South Asia became a cash cow for the Empire, as its indigenous resources were stripped for the crown, its farmers were made to grow money for foreigners on another continent, and local merchants and artisans now had to compete with their own colonizers to sell goods out of traditions and practices that were stolen and appropriated from them.

Today, Bangladesh is known for its rapid industrial development and its role in the global trade market. It is also known for its widespread pollution, poor air quality, and climate change. Factories burn fossil fuels to keep pace with the ever-increasing demands of the market, driven by the global North's increasing consumption. Bangladesh's garment industry primarily consists of young, low-income women who are incredibly exploited and suffer dangerous working conditions at the factories that employ them. Bangladesh's garment industry is also the site of some of the most deadly workplace disasters and industrial accidents in history. In 2013, the Rana Plaza collapse killed over 1,000 and injured over 2,500 people.



The continued pollution of the air and water have exacerbated climate change in Bangladesh, subjecting its people to increasingly unpredictable and extreme flooding periods and changes in the temperature and salinity of the seawater. Living in a coastal nation, Bangladeshis rely on seawater and riverwater for much of daily life, including farming, irrigation, and drinking water.

South Asia is known to have the highest rates of pregnancy loss in the world. It also has some of the highest levels of pollution in the world. These are not coincidences. Over 349,000 stillbirths in the region are attributable to heavy air pollution.

Over half a century after the end of the genocide and the war, people in Bangladesh are still grappling with the aftermath. Just as the country has had to reckon with legacies of colonialism and genocide, its people are left to deal with not only the trauma of their parents and grandparents, but the trauma woven into the fabric of the nation itself that they've inherited.

In Bangladesh's rural areas, studies have demonstrated a correlation between increased temperatures and salinity of Bangladesh's water with poorer maternal health outcomes and increasing rates of miscarriage among rural pregnant women and mothers. Two of my mother's sisters in Dhaka, those closest in age to her, have both suffered the burden of miscarriage and newborn death.

Twenty-eight years after being born in a genocide, my mother faced a difficult time in her life as she struggled with fertility in her late twenties. I can't help but wonder if this was yet another burden of the aftermath of war; a reverberation from past to present to future. Pain begetting more pain. Seeking more lineage to disrupt.

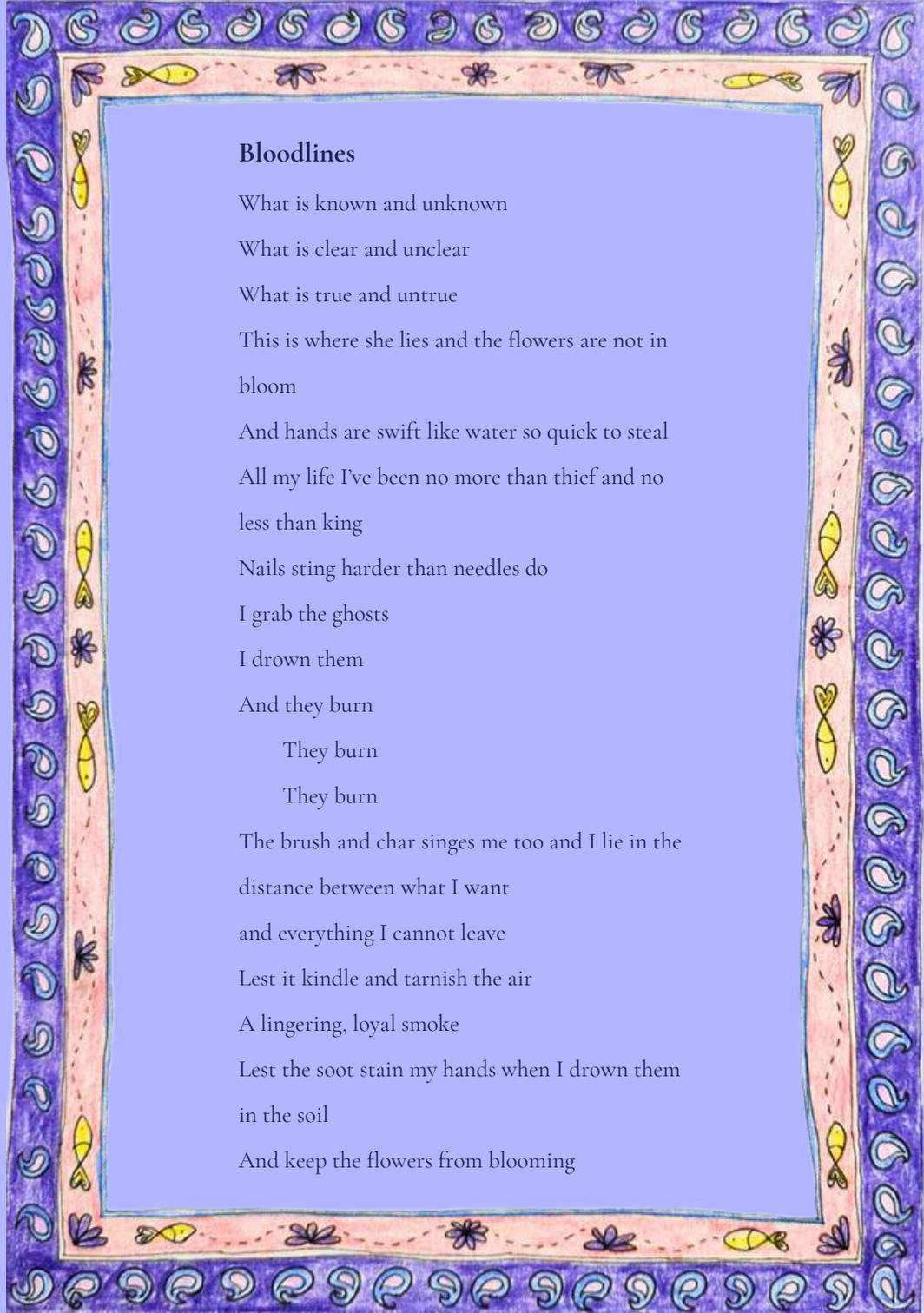
In a time when millions of women, pregnant women, and mothers are living through the escalating genocides in Palestine and Sudan, and numerous other warzones around the world, the question arises of the impact on the children that will be born as a result. When the dust has settled, what will have become of the land? What will the children inherit? What nation? What legacy?



My grandfather passed away of liver disease when I was six. We had just visited my extended family in Dhaka three months prior; I will always be grateful that my mother got the chance to say goodbye. I remember very little about him, other than the stories my mother has told me. The most common story is the one of the war, the story she most often recalls about our family: The one of her being born in a warzone, my grandfather being trapped in West Pakistan, him having to smuggle his way out of the country with the help of an Afghan merchant's vegetable cart.

Other times, she tells this one: Upon his return to Bangladesh, when he reunited with their family, her relatives and family friends gathered all of the other babies around my mother's age and presented them in front of him, asking him to guess which one was his. After all, he had never seen my mother after she'd been born. Everytime she tells me this story, my mother says, smiling, that he pointed to her, saying, "this one is my child." Somehow, he was able to single her out among the group. Something about their connection persisted, despite them having never met.

This tells me that even if the story of her birth is inextricable from one of pain, it is also inextricable from one of resilience. My mother was born into resistance. In many ways, I believe I was as well.



Bloodlines

What is known and unknown

What is clear and unclear

What is true and untrue

This is where she lies and the flowers are not in
bloom

And hands are swift like water so quick to steal

All my life I've been no more than thief and no
less than king

Nails sting harder than needles do

I grab the ghosts

I drown them

And they burn

They burn

They burn

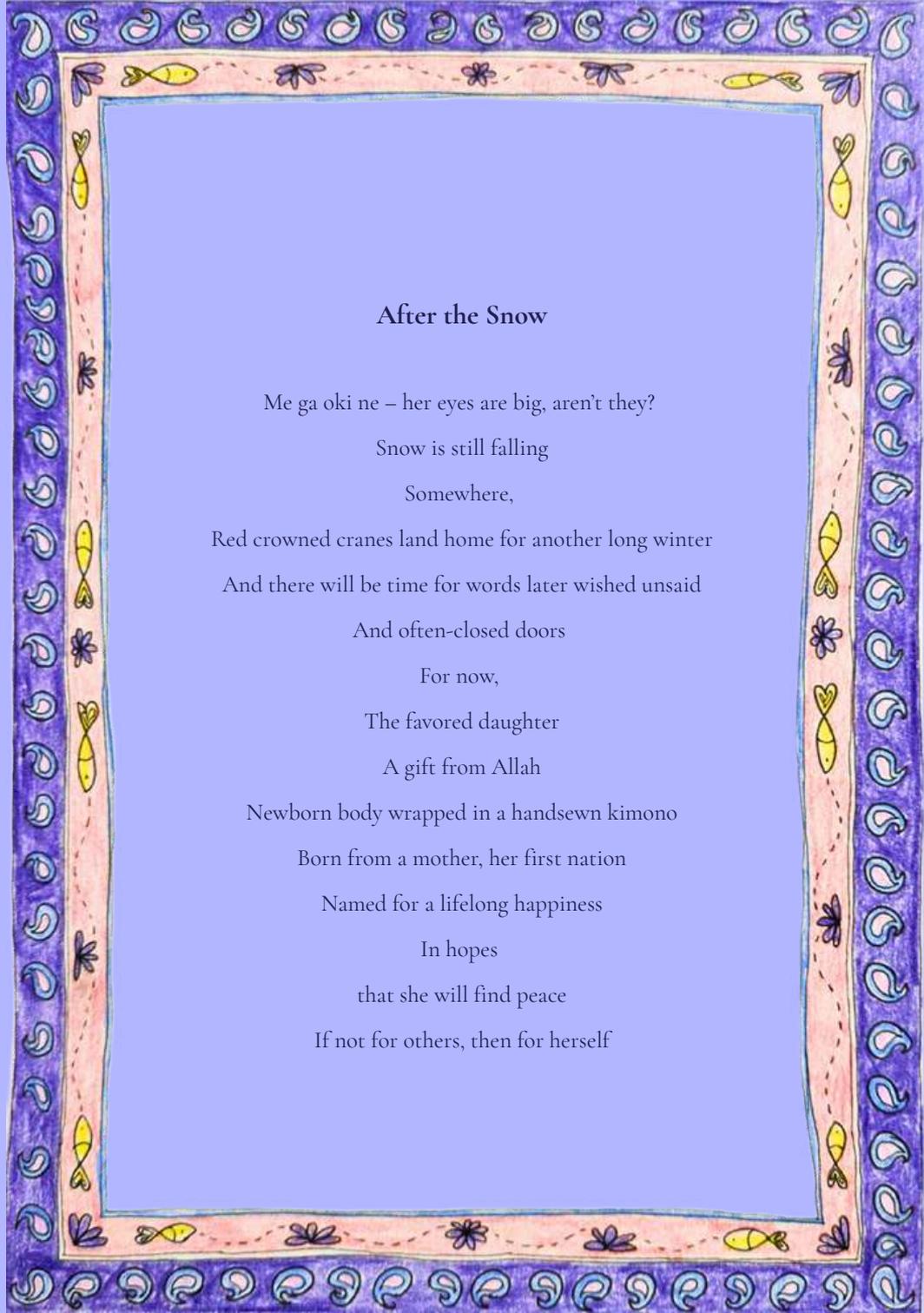
The brush and char sings me too and I lie in the
distance between what I want
and everything I cannot leave

Lest it kindle and tarnish the air

A lingering, loyal smoke

Lest the soot stain my hands when I drown them
in the soil

And keep the flowers from blooming



After the Snow

Me ga oki ne – her eyes are big, aren't they?

Snow is still falling

Somewhere,

Red crowned cranes land home for another long winter

And there will be time for words later wished unsaid

And often-closed doors

For now,

The favored daughter

A gift from Allah

Newborn body wrapped in a handsewn kimono

Born from a mother, her first nation

Named for a lifelong happiness

In hopes

that she will find peace

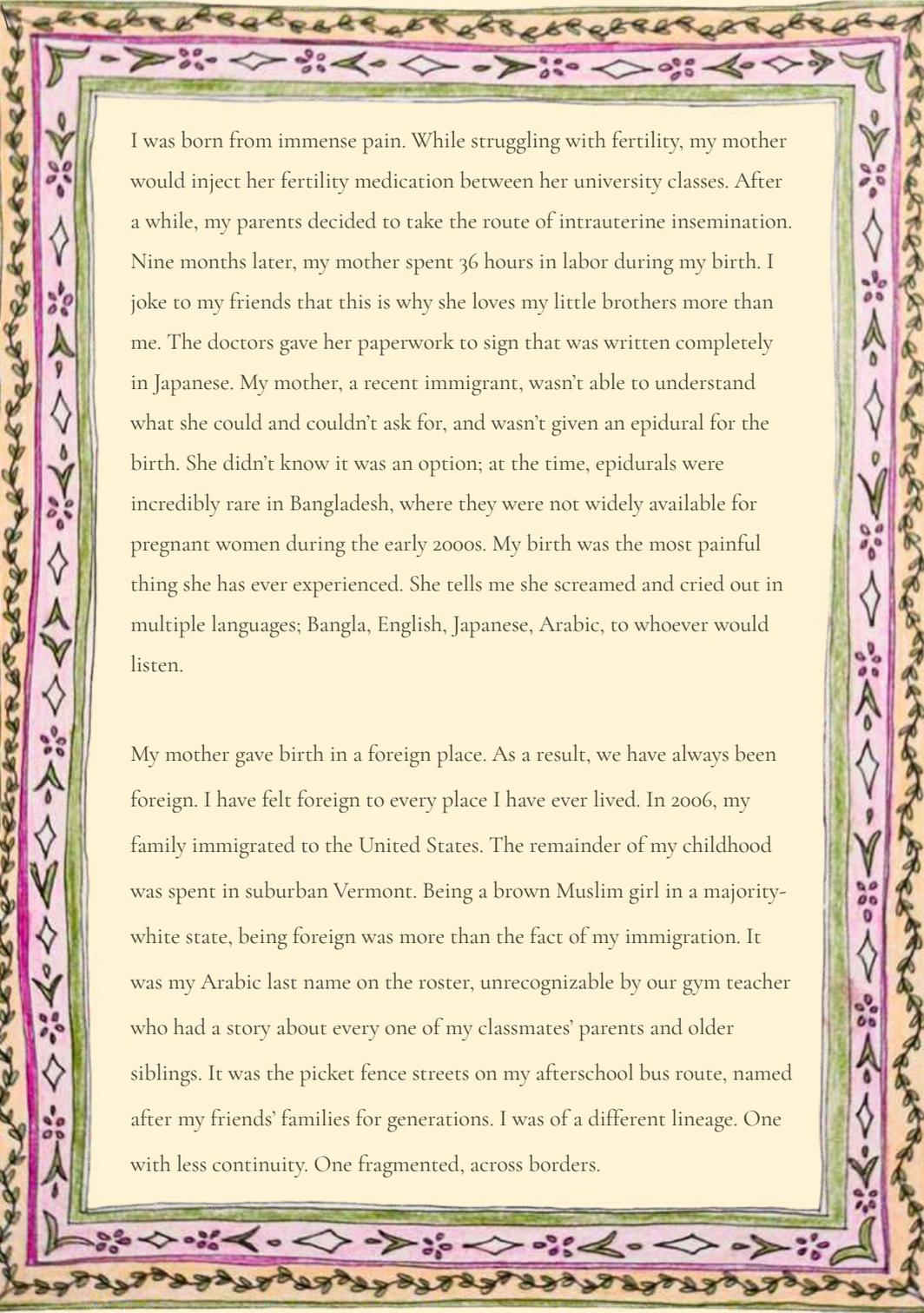
If not for others, then for herself

Life in Migration

My life has been lived across borders. My mother made the decision to have a child while living in Bangladesh, gave birth to me in Japan, and raised me in Vermont. I carry each of these places with me, as if she sewed them into me every step of the way.

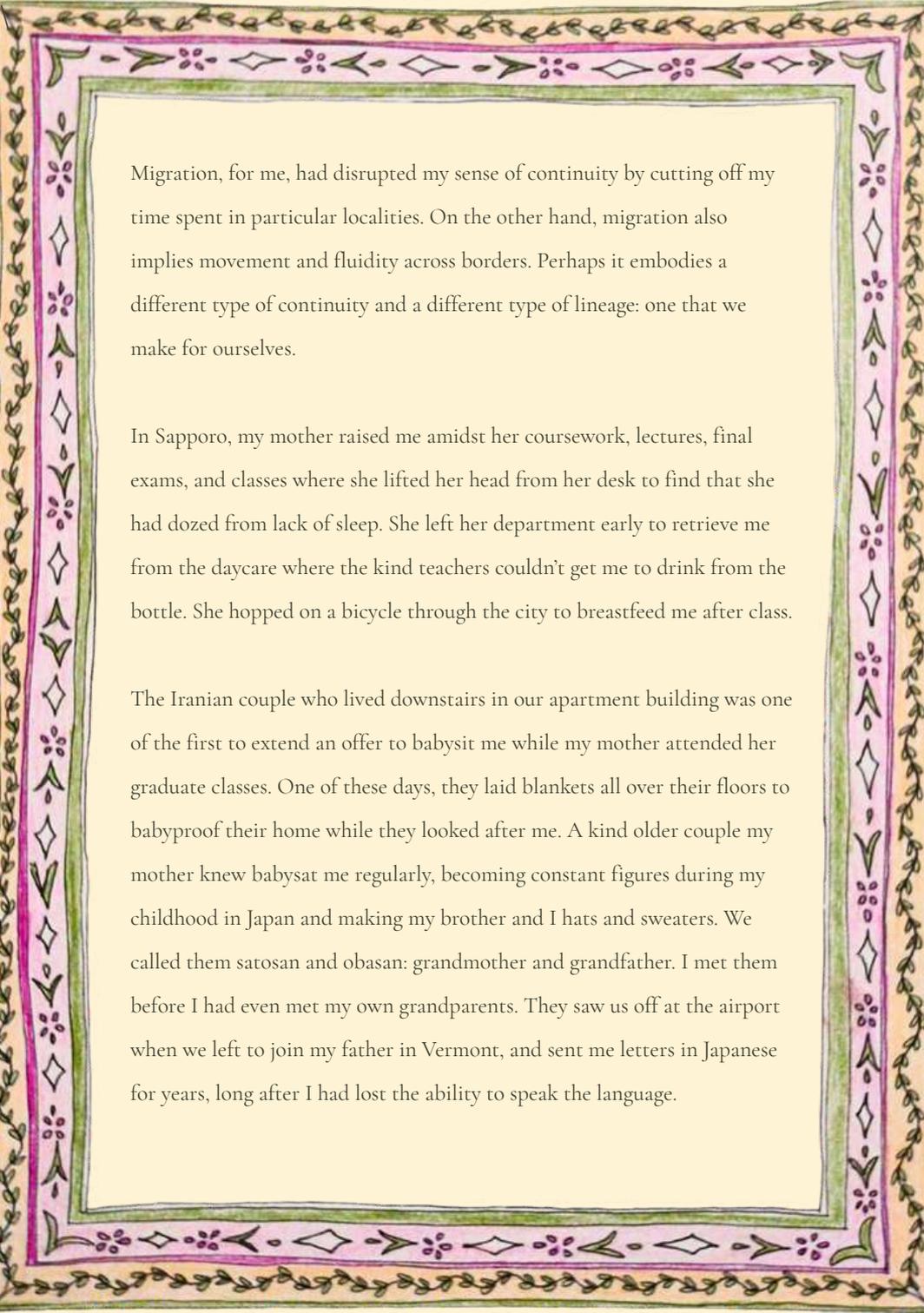
I was born in Sapporo, the capital city of Hokkaido, the northernmost island of Japan. Contrary to what one might think of Japan, Hokkaido is known for its colder months, especially for the several feet of snow that fall every winter. I was born during one of these frigid winters; a tiny brown baby born in the maternal ward of the Hokkaido University hospital. My mother was a graduate student at the university at the time. She worked at that very hospital, and she tells me now that all of her coworkers and even her professors came to visit her that week when I was born.

From the minute I was born, I was foreign. Someone she knew brought me a tiny baby kimono to wear.



I was born from immense pain. While struggling with fertility, my mother would inject her fertility medication between her university classes. After a while, my parents decided to take the route of intrauterine insemination. Nine months later, my mother spent 36 hours in labor during my birth. I joke to my friends that this is why she loves my little brothers more than me. The doctors gave her paperwork to sign that was written completely in Japanese. My mother, a recent immigrant, wasn't able to understand what she could and couldn't ask for, and wasn't given an epidural for the birth. She didn't know it was an option; at the time, epidurals were incredibly rare in Bangladesh, where they were not widely available for pregnant women during the early 2000s. My birth was the most painful thing she has ever experienced. She tells me she screamed and cried out in multiple languages; Bangla, English, Japanese, Arabic, to whoever would listen.

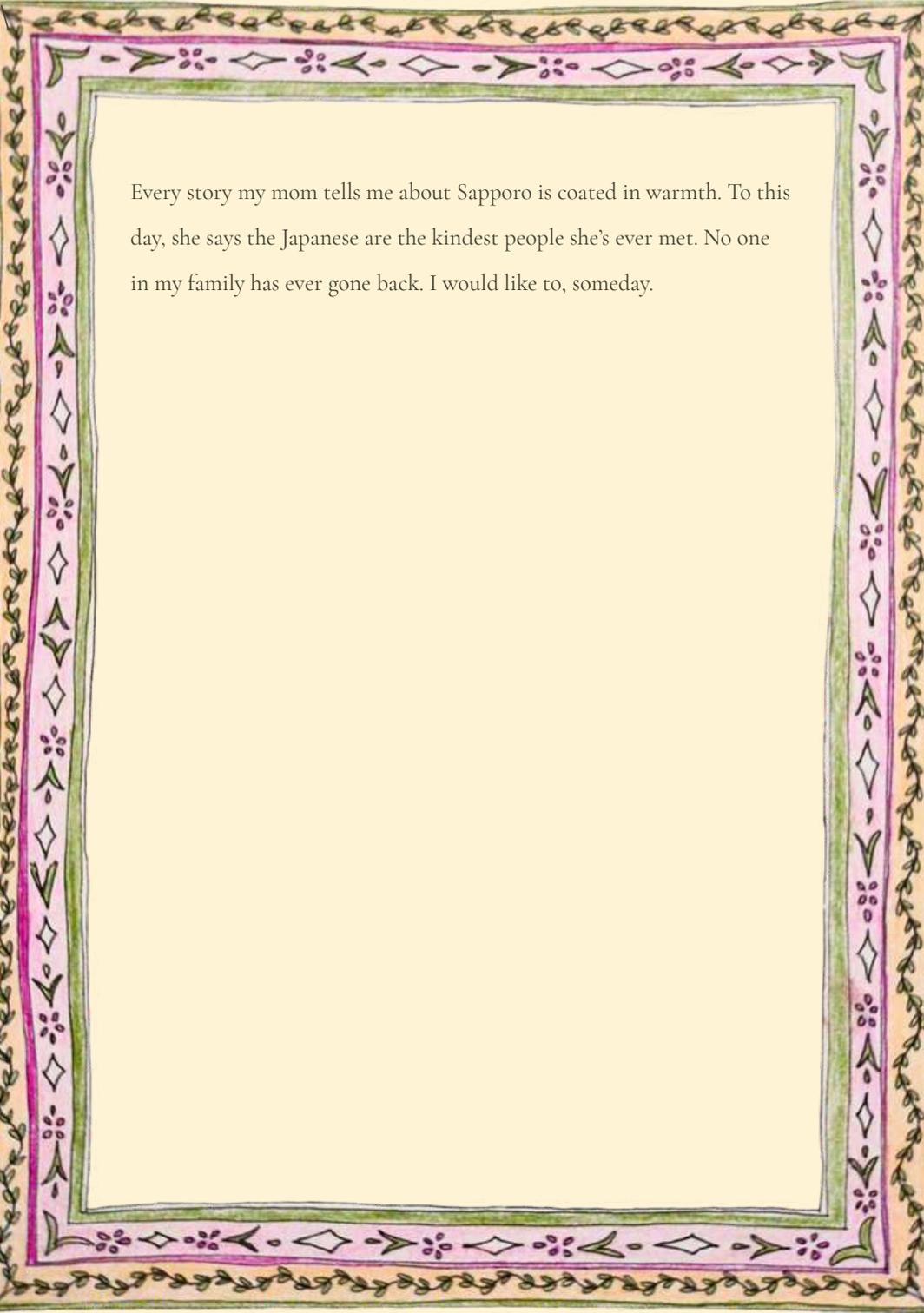
My mother gave birth in a foreign place. As a result, we have always been foreign. I have felt foreign to every place I have ever lived. In 2006, my family immigrated to the United States. The remainder of my childhood was spent in suburban Vermont. Being a brown Muslim girl in a majority-white state, being foreign was more than the fact of my immigration. It was my Arabic last name on the roster, unrecognizable by our gym teacher who had a story about every one of my classmates' parents and older siblings. It was the picket fence streets on my afterschool bus route, named after my friends' families for generations. I was of a different lineage. One with less continuity. One fragmented, across borders.



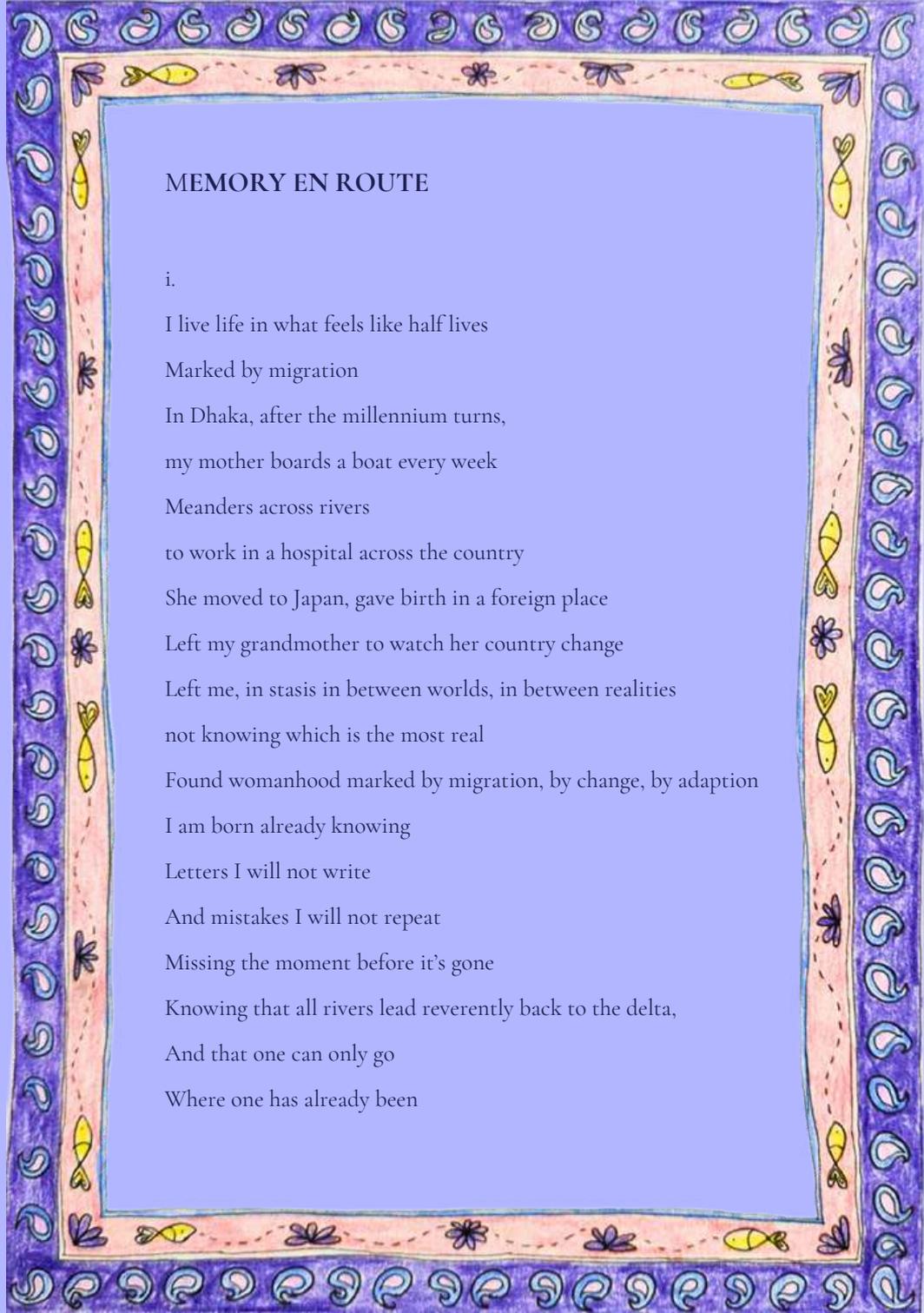
Migration, for me, had disrupted my sense of continuity by cutting off my time spent in particular localities. On the other hand, migration also implies movement and fluidity across borders. Perhaps it embodies a different type of continuity and a different type of lineage: one that we make for ourselves.

In Sapporo, my mother raised me amidst her coursework, lectures, final exams, and classes where she lifted her head from her desk to find that she had dozed from lack of sleep. She left her department early to retrieve me from the daycare where the kind teachers couldn't get me to drink from the bottle. She hopped on a bicycle through the city to breastfeed me after class.

The Iranian couple who lived downstairs in our apartment building was one of the first to extend an offer to babysit me while my mother attended her graduate classes. One of these days, they laid blankets all over their floors to babyproof their home while they looked after me. A kind older couple my mother knew babysat me regularly, becoming constant figures during my childhood in Japan and making my brother and I hats and sweaters. We called them satosan and obasan; grandmother and grandfather. I met them before I had even met my own grandparents. They saw us off at the airport when we left to join my father in Vermont, and sent me letters in Japanese for years, long after I had lost the ability to speak the language.



Every story my mom tells me about Sapporo is coated in warmth. To this day, she says the Japanese are the kindest people she's ever met. No one in my family has ever gone back. I would like to, someday.



MEMORY EN ROUTE

i.

I live life in what feels like half lives

Marked by migration

In Dhaka, after the millennium turns,

my mother boards a boat every week

Meanders across rivers

to work in a hospital across the country

She moved to Japan, gave birth in a foreign place

Left my grandmother to watch her country change

Left me, in stasis in between worlds, in between realities

not knowing which is the most real

Found womanhood marked by migration, by change, by adaption

I am born already knowing

Letters I will not write

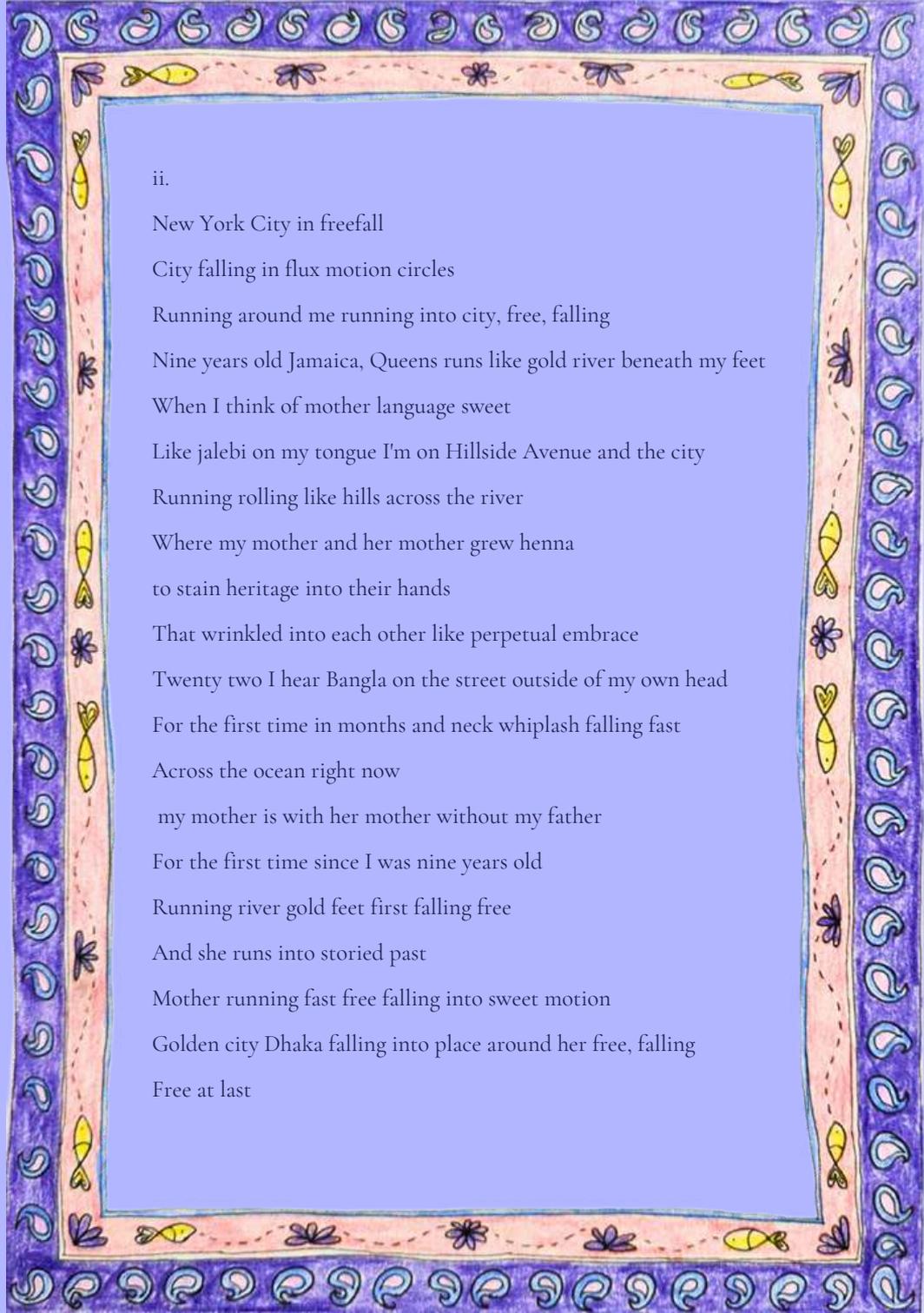
And mistakes I will not repeat

Missing the moment before it's gone

Knowing that all rivers lead reverently back to the delta,

And that one can only go

Where one has already been



ii.

New York City in freefall

City falling in flux motion circles

Running around me running into city, free, falling

Nine years old Jamaica, Queens runs like gold river beneath my feet

When I think of mother language sweet

Like jalebi on my tongue I'm on Hillside Avenue and the city

Running rolling like hills across the river

Where my mother and her mother grew henna

to stain heritage into their hands

That wrinkled into each other like perpetual embrace

Twenty two I hear Bangla on the street outside of my own head

For the first time in months and neck whiplash falling fast

Across the ocean right now

my mother is with her mother without my father

For the first time since I was nine years old

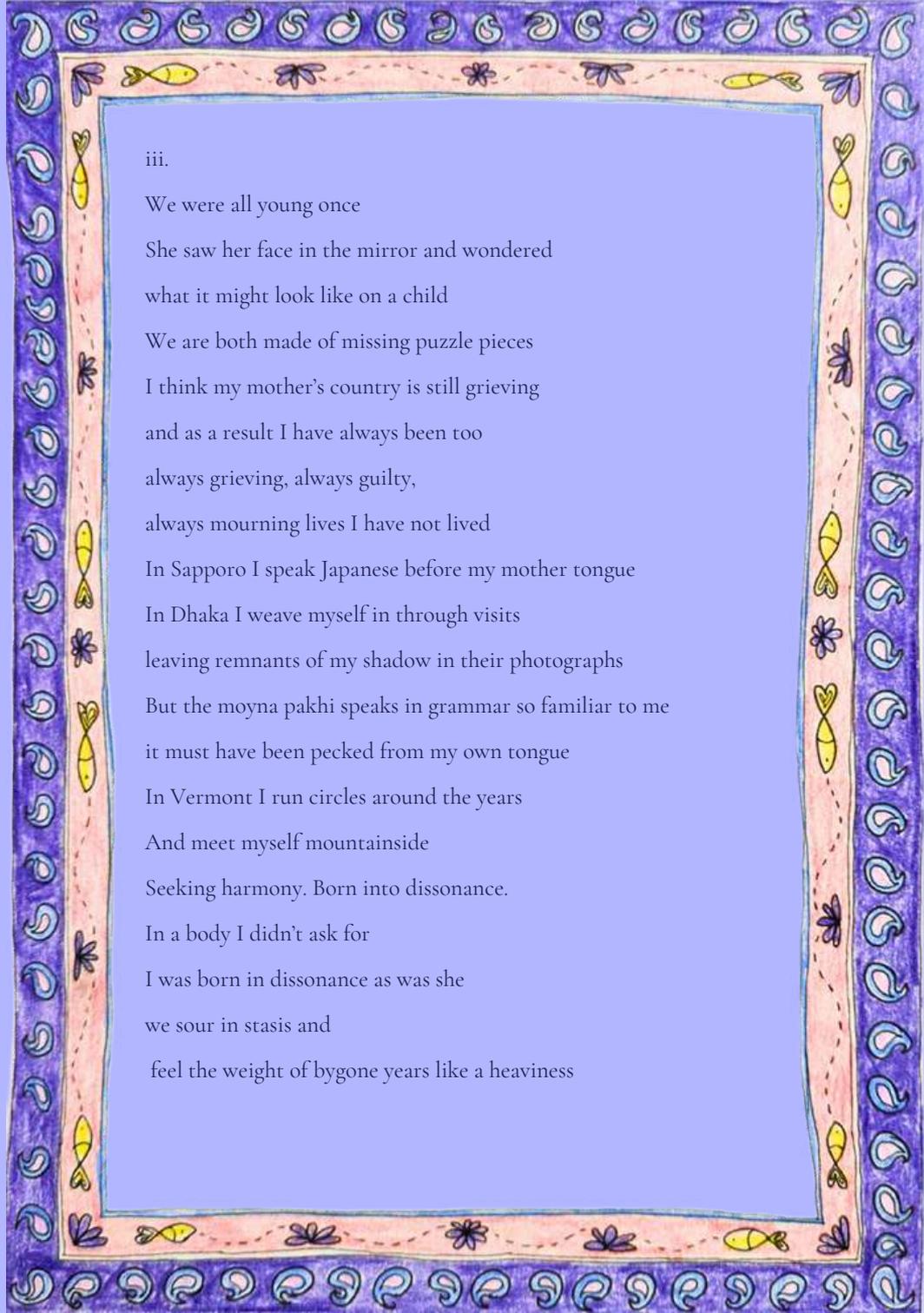
Running river gold feet first falling free

And she runs into storied past

Mother running fast free falling into sweet motion

Golden city Dhaka falling into place around her free, falling

Free at last



iii.

We were all young once

She saw her face in the mirror and wondered
what it might look like on a child

We are both made of missing puzzle pieces

I think my mother's country is still grieving
and as a result I have always been too

always grieving, always guilty,

always mourning lives I have not lived

In Sapporo I speak Japanese before my mother tongue

In Dhaka I weave myself in through visits

leaving remnants of my shadow in their photographs

But the moyna pakhi speaks in grammar so familiar to me
it must have been pecked from my own tongue

In Vermont I run circles around the years

And meet myself mountainside

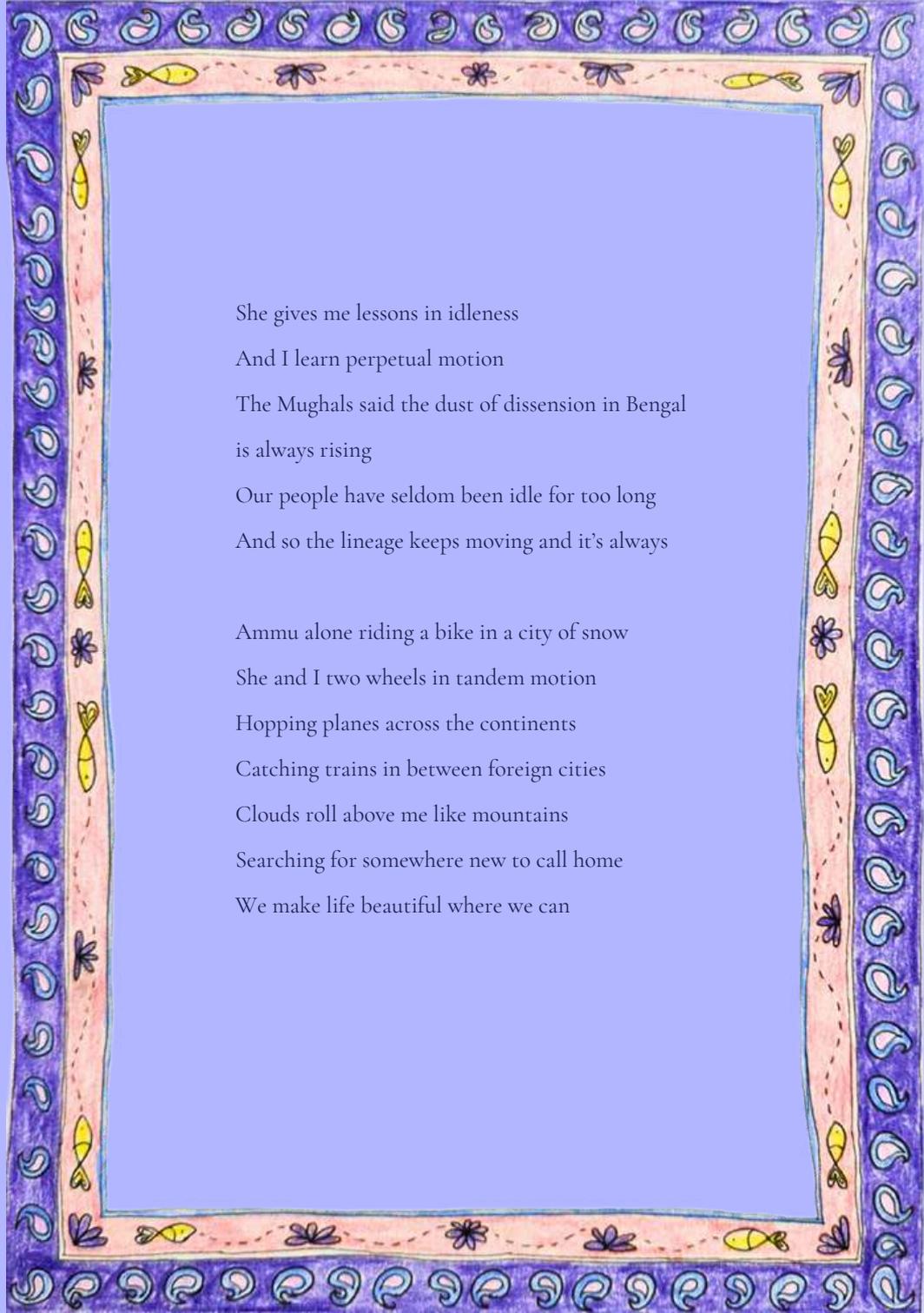
Seeking harmony. Born into dissonance.

In a body I didn't ask for

I was born in dissonance as was she

we sour in stasis and

feel the weight of bygone years like a heaviness



She gives me lessons in idleness
And I learn perpetual motion
The Mughals said the dust of dissension in Bengal
is always rising
Our people have seldom been idle for too long
And so the lineage keeps moving and it's always

Ammu alone riding a bike in a city of snow
She and I two wheels in tandem motion
Hopping planes across the continents
Catching trains in between foreign cities
Clouds roll above me like mountains
Searching for somewhere new to call home
We make life beautiful where we can



