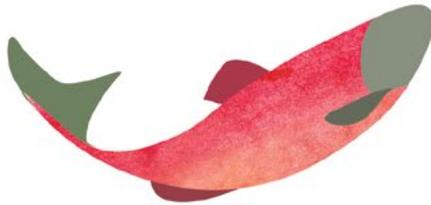


the
heart
of a
river



by Eileen Delehanty Pearkes
illustrations by Nichola Lytle

The Heart of a River

by Eileen Delehanty Pearkes

illustrations by Nichola Lytle

I would like you all to imagine for a moment
that you are water.



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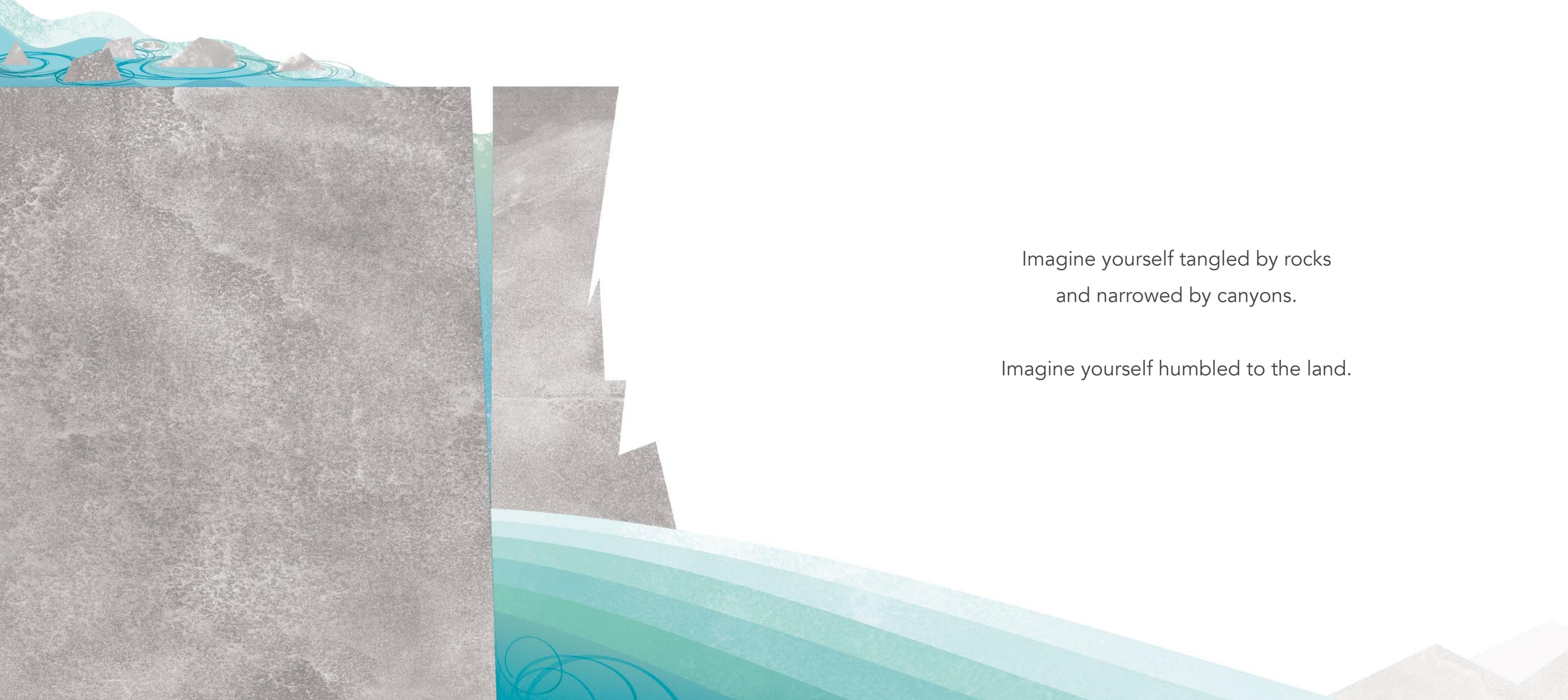
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Not water in a glass,
still and calm as a lake,





but water being poured,
water on a journey,
water moving downhill
to the sea.



Imagine yourself tangled by rocks
and narrowed by canyons.

Imagine yourself humbled to the land.



That has always been my experience.

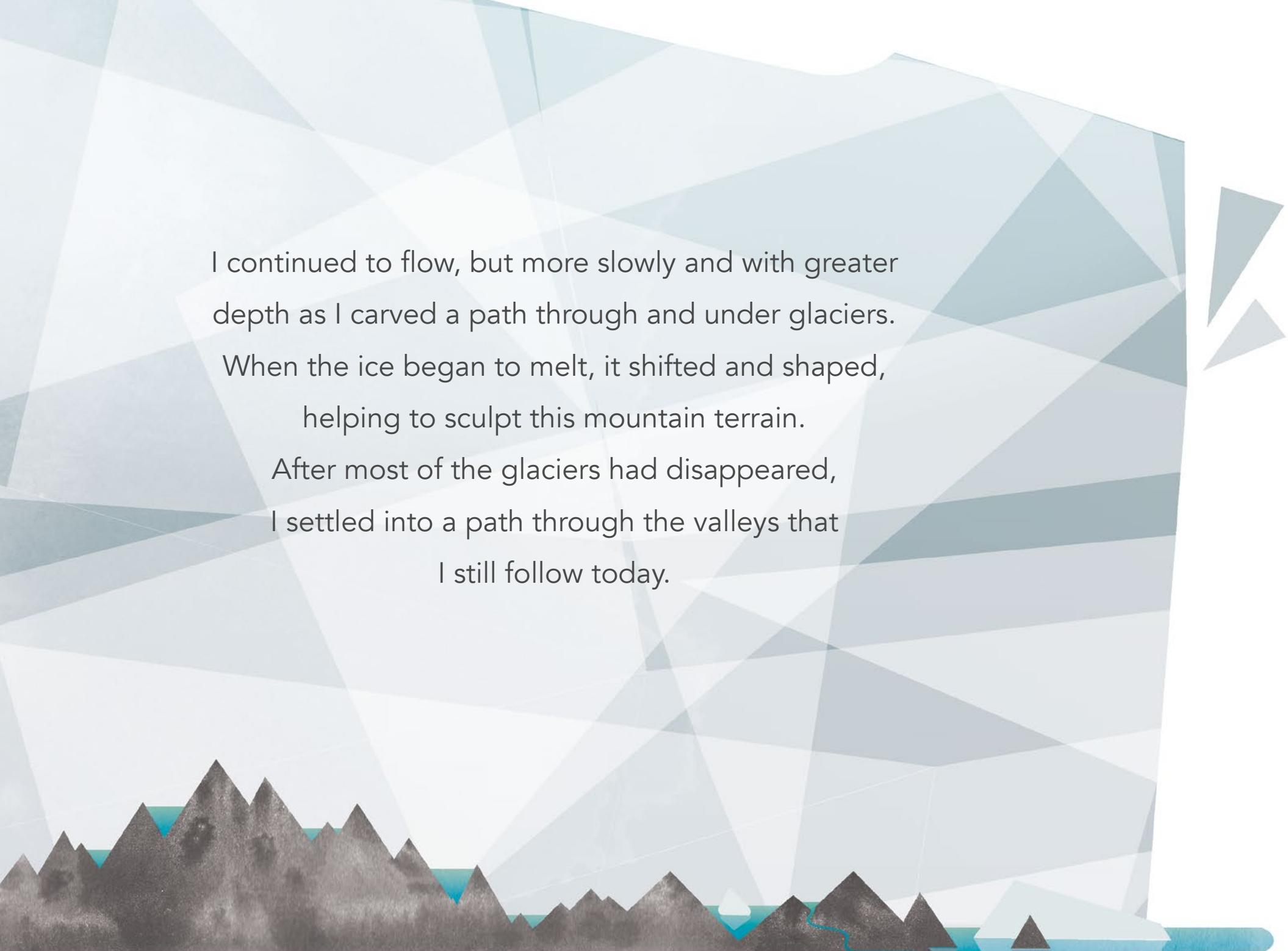
I am the Columbia River.

This is my story:



The earliest memories I have of myself are very faint.
Like your earliest childhood memories,
I cannot remember much about when
I first came into being.

I know that I have flowed for close to 20 million years. I know
that I changed course many times
as volcanoes erupted and lava bubbled
across the Pacific Northwest.
Then, ice completely covered the land
I journeyed across.



I continued to flow, but more slowly and with greater depth as I carved a path through and under glaciers.

When the ice began to melt, it shifted and shaped, helping to sculpt this mountain terrain.

After most of the glaciers had disappeared, I settled into a path through the valleys that I still follow today.

You are old enough to know that nothing that becomes big and grand starts out that way.

It is the same with a river.



I begin my journey across the land as a trickle --

in a wetland in the Rocky Mountain trench.

I flow north for a while, growing larger and stronger and

more defined before I bend south through

the Purcell and Selkirk mountains

toward the sea.

It has always been my goal to reach the ocean.

All water wishes to join its great mother,

the expanse of salt sea

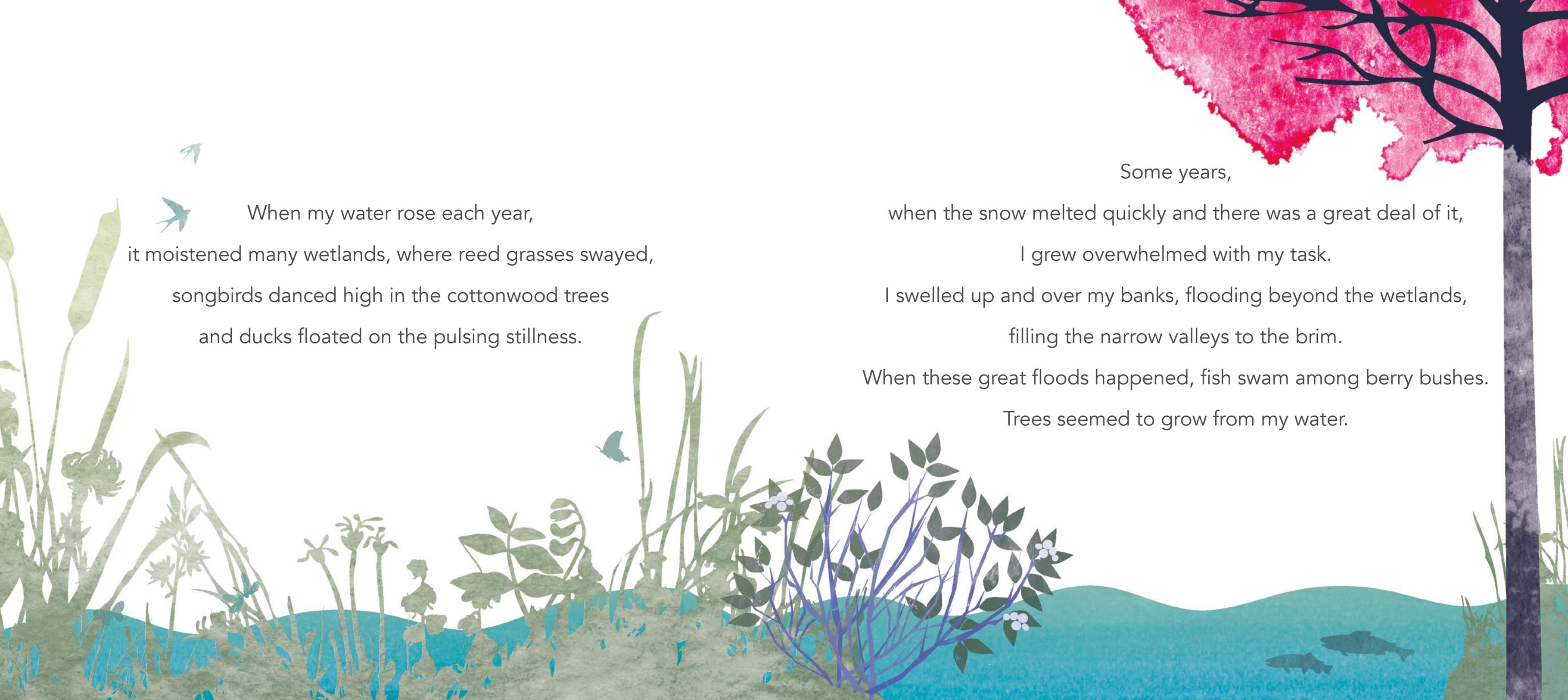
where many fish swim free.





For thousands of years, I worked freely
but with care and diligence
throughout the four seasons.

As the air warmed in spring,
I began to receive melting snow from the land.
By early summer, I would swell like the belly of a whale
as I passed through the mountains.
I would foam and swirl, pausing occasionally in lakes,
racing splendidly through canyons and over falls.



Some years,

when the snow melted quickly and there was a great deal of it,

I grew overwhelmed with my task.

I swelled up and over my banks, flooding beyond the wetlands,

filling the narrow valleys to the brim.

When these great floods happened, fish swam among berry bushes.

Trees seemed to grow from my water.

When my water rose each year,
it moistened many wetlands, where reed grasses swayed,
songbirds danced high in the cottonwood trees
and ducks floated on the pulsing stillness.

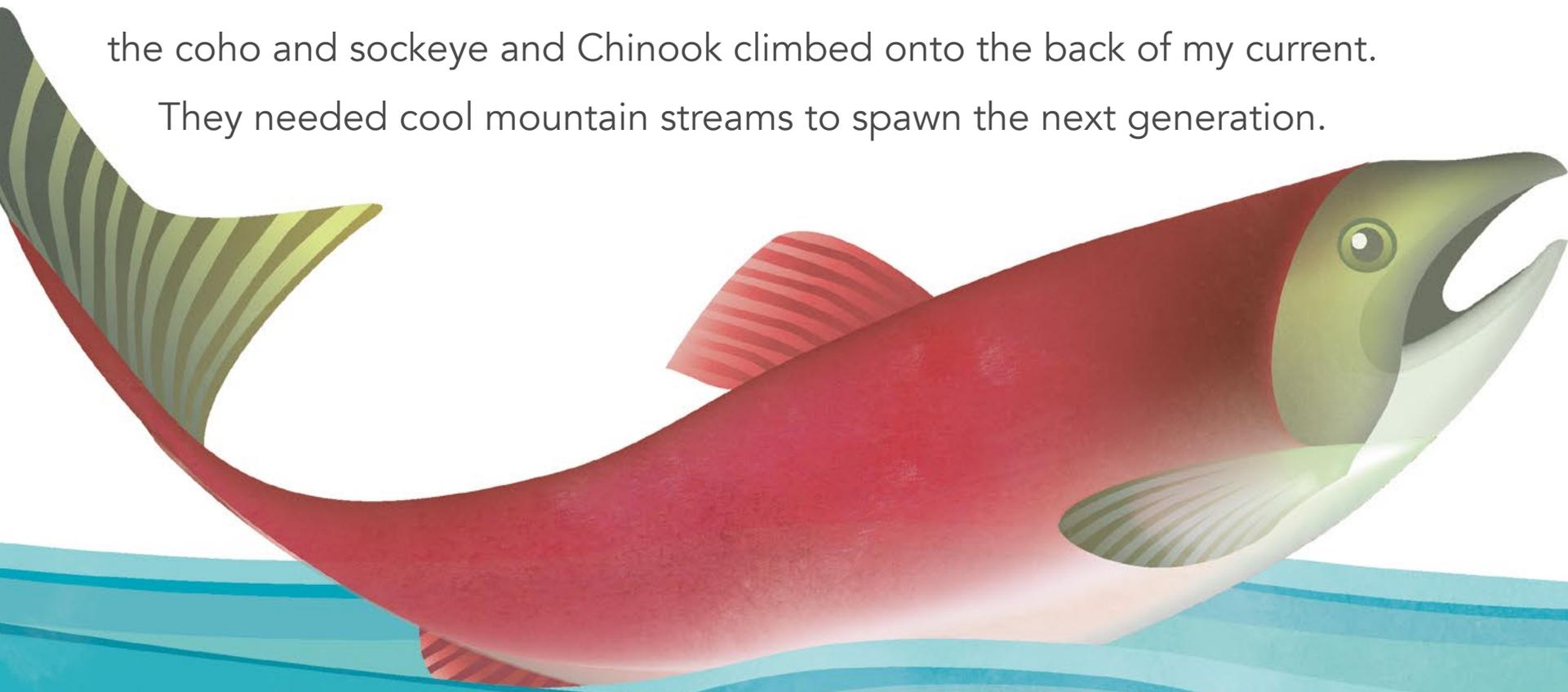


In mid-summer and into the autumn,
just like an ocean breath being inhaled,
I brought salmon back from the coast.



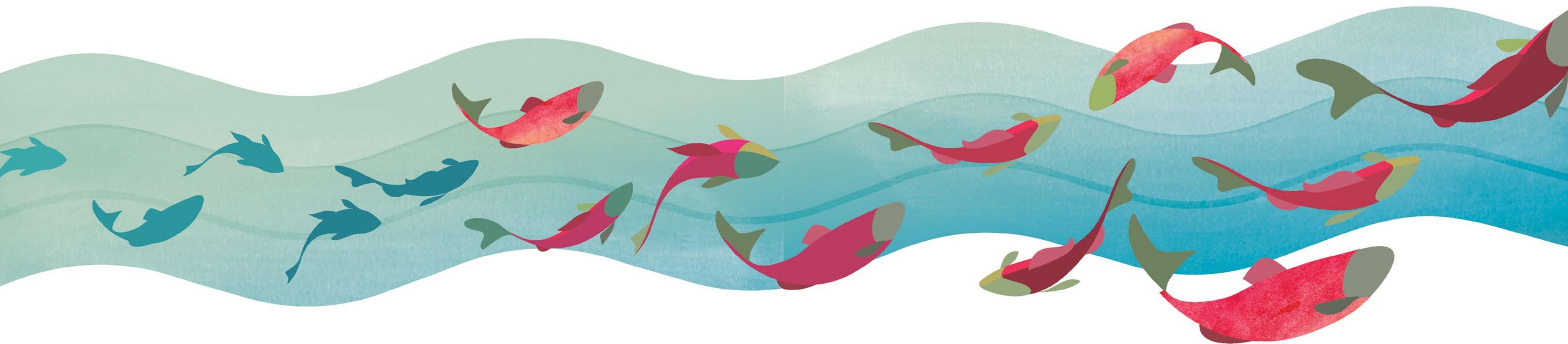
Down at the place where my waters greeted the sea,
the coho and sockeye and Chinook climbed onto the back of my current.
They needed cool mountain streams to spawn the next generation.

They moved up in my waters, to the birthplace we shared,
the Columbia Mountains.

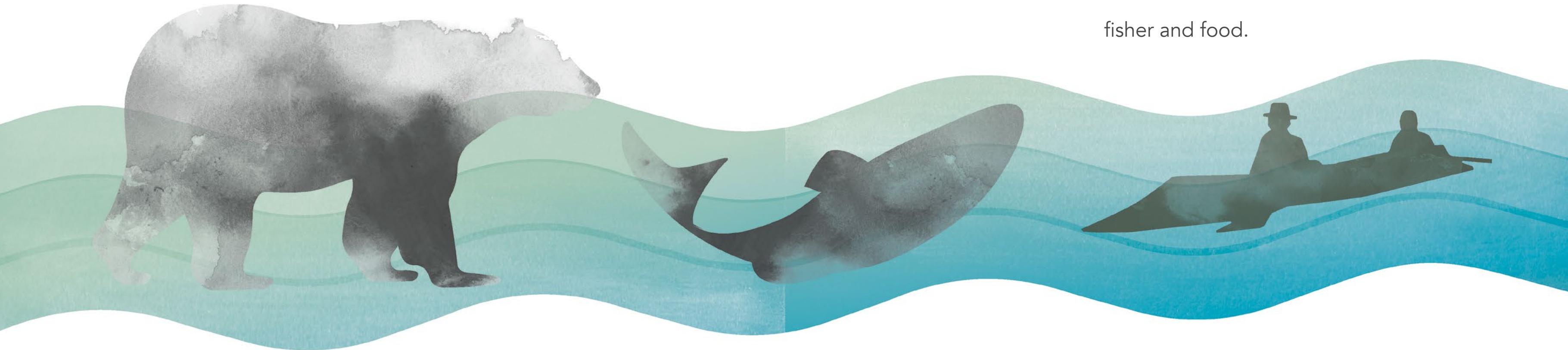


I like to think that each year
I brought a memory of the sea back into the mountains

when I carried the salmon home.



I like to think that I threaded together
the ancient beads of water and land,
salmon and bear,
fisher and food.





In winter, I grew still.

In places I froze hard.

Fish moved into my deepest waters,
underneath the ice.

This was my time of rest
and deep dreaming.





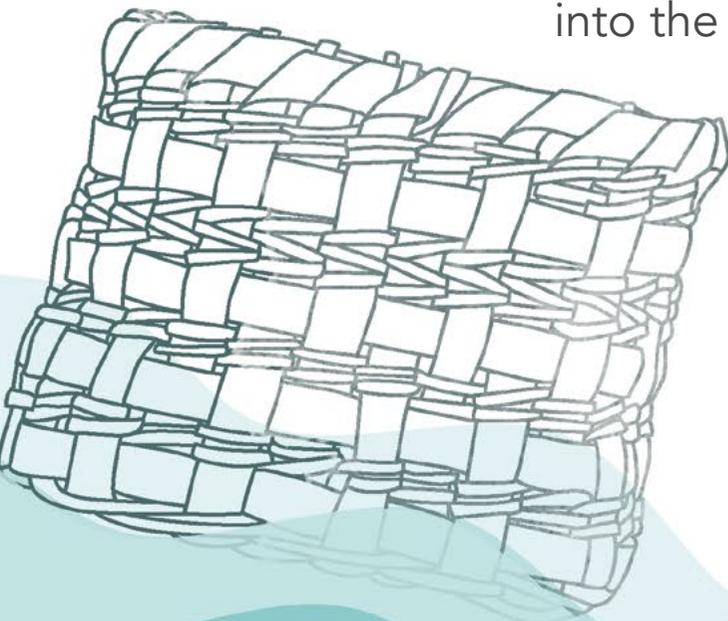
Five thousand years ago,

or even longer,

I began to share my riches with people.

The Sinixt tribe followed the salmon upstream,
moving further and further into the Columbia Mountains,
establishing villages at every turn of my flow.

For a great long time,
the Sinixt lived the life of river people.
They fished for the salmon I carried
on the back of my current.
They dipped their tightly woven baskets
into the clean water at my edges.



They stroked the stillness of the Arrow Lakes
with their carefully carved paddles
and maneuvered their sturgeon-nosed canoes
through my currents.





They lived by my flowing rhythms.



They buried their dead on my banks.

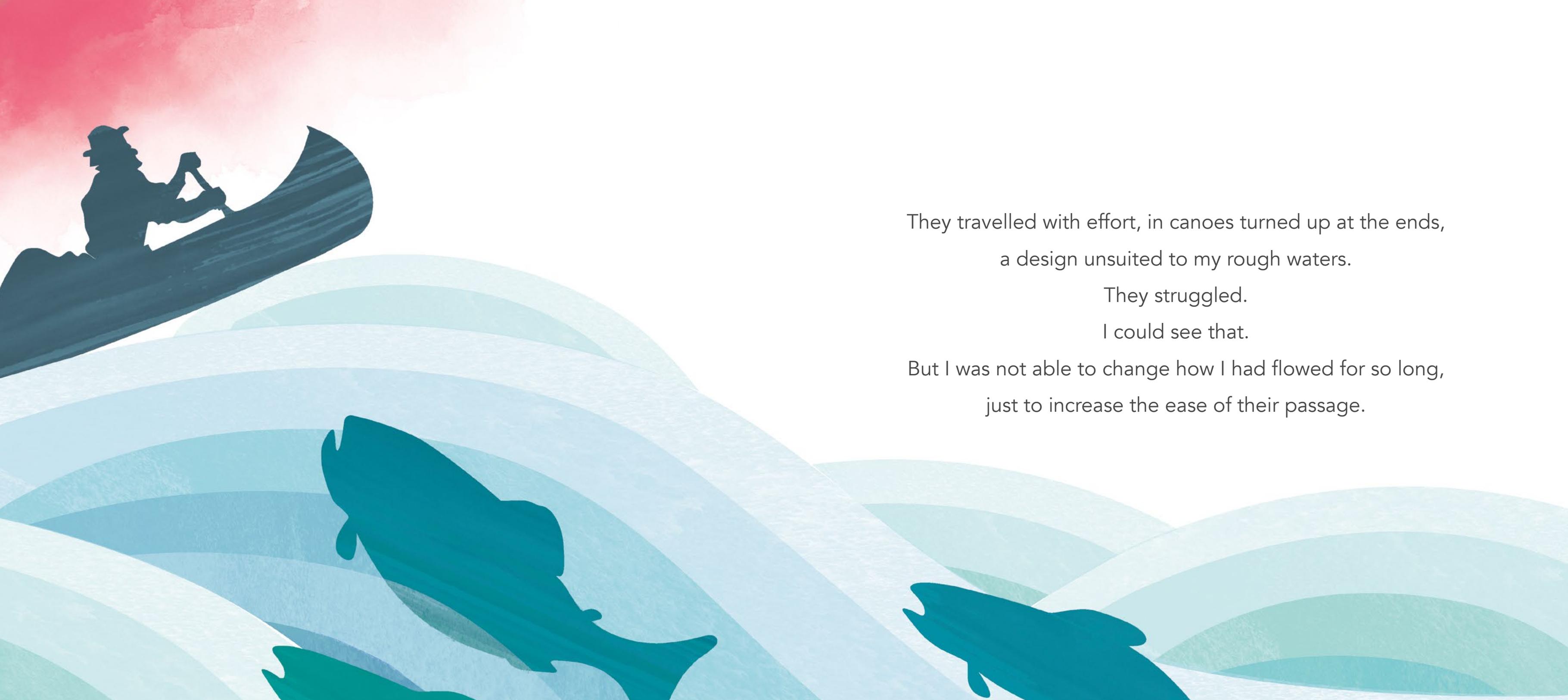




About 200 years ago, some men
pale as river stones
came across the Rocky Mountains from the northeast.
They were ragged and tired and I could feel their dislike
of my rocky turbulence.
I know they found my waters cold and unfriendly.

They wanted to share my path to the ocean.





They travelled with effort, in canoes turned up at the ends,
a design unsuited to my rough waters.

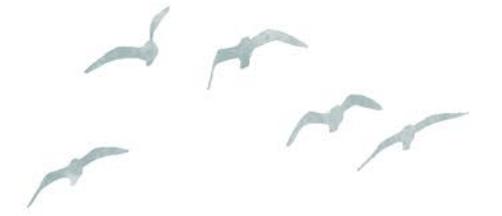
They struggled.

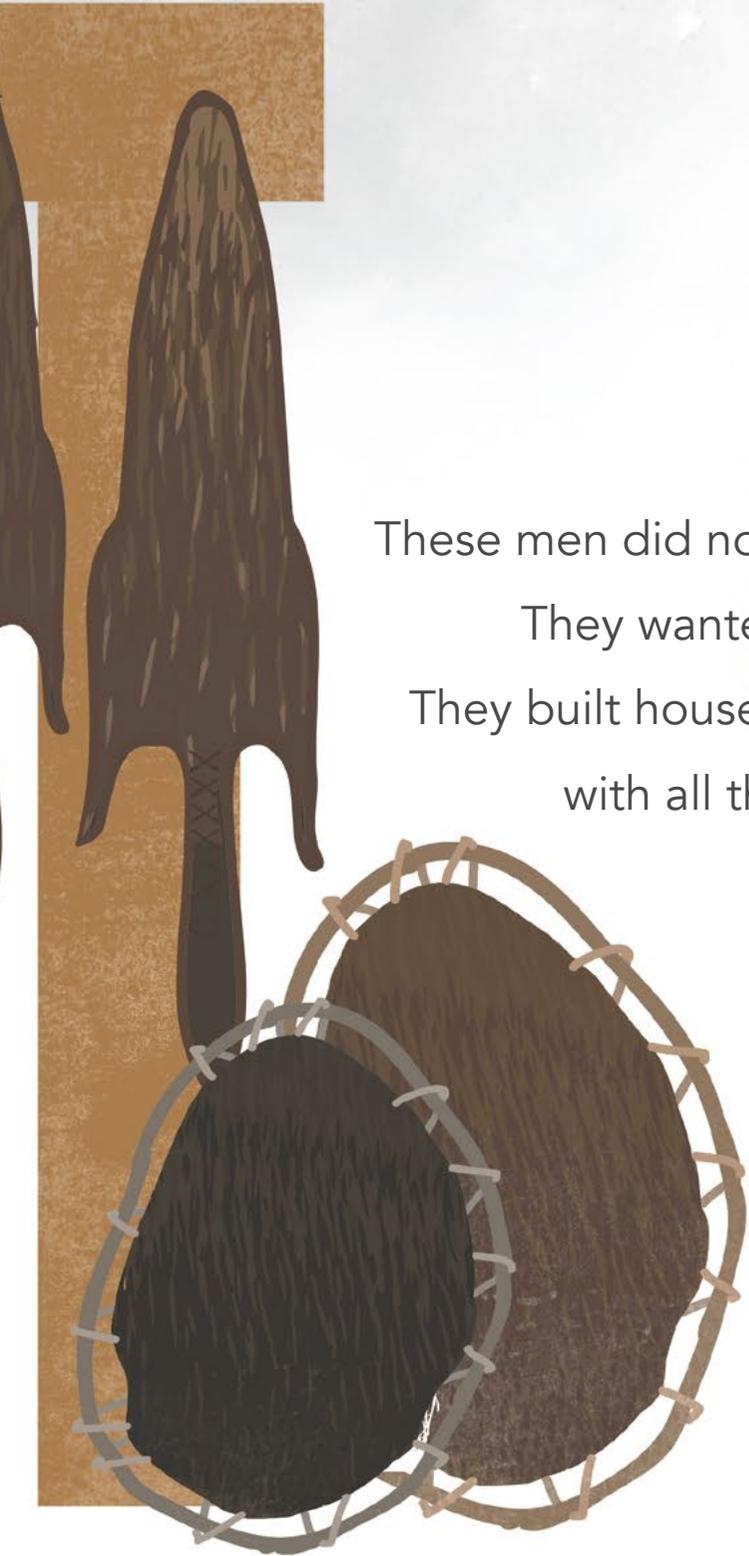
I could see that.

But I was not able to change how I had flowed for so long,
just to increase the ease of their passage.

I continued to do what I had always done:

to find my way with great freedom and power to the sea.





These men did not seem interested in the salmon.

They wanted furs, not the river-food.

They built houses from trees set close together
with all the green trimmed away.

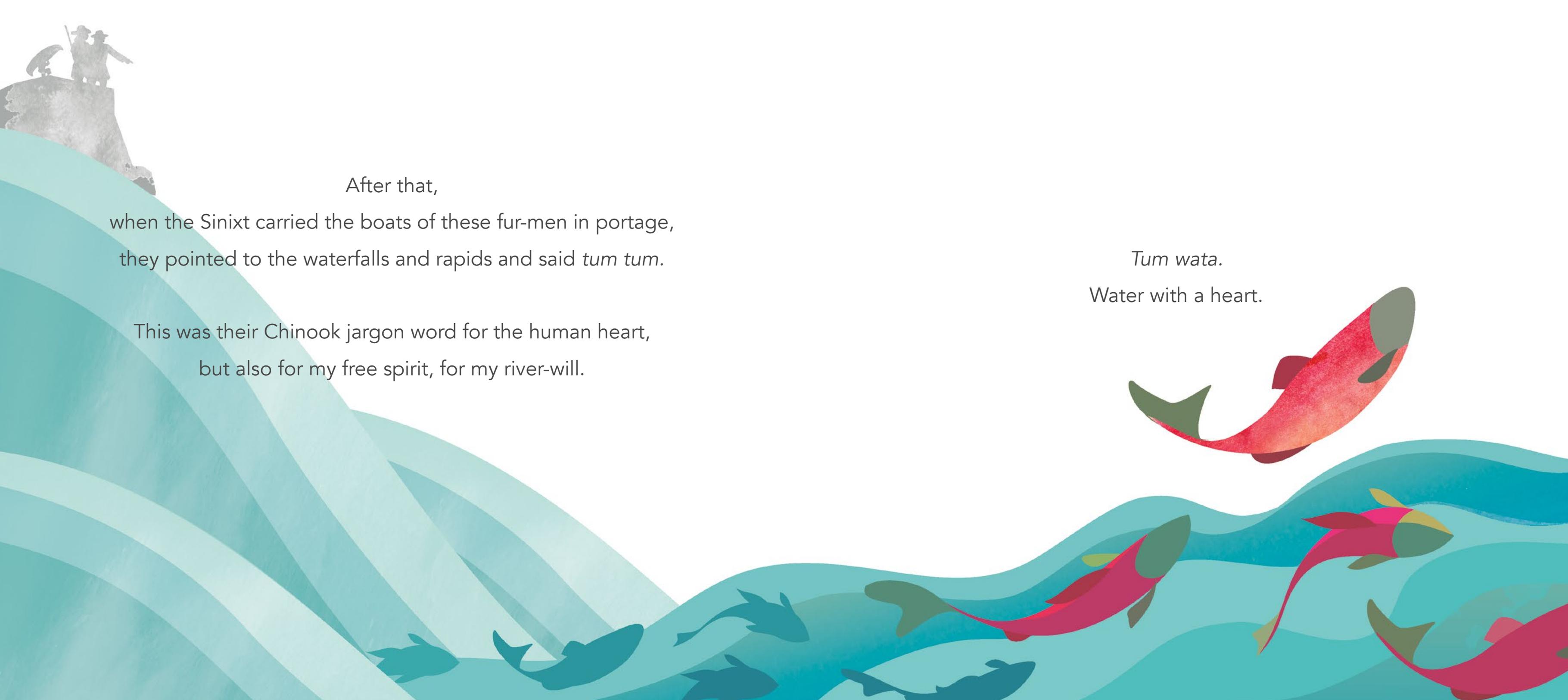


There on my banks,

they lit fires and invited the First People in

to trade hides from the beaver, the muskrat, the otter and the bear.

They taught the Sinixt a trade language called Chinook jargon.



After that,
when the Sinixt carried the boats of these fur-men in portage,
they pointed to the waterfalls and rapids and said *tum tum*.

This was their Chinook jargon word for the human heart,
but also for my free spirit, for my river-will.

Tum wata.
Water with a heart.



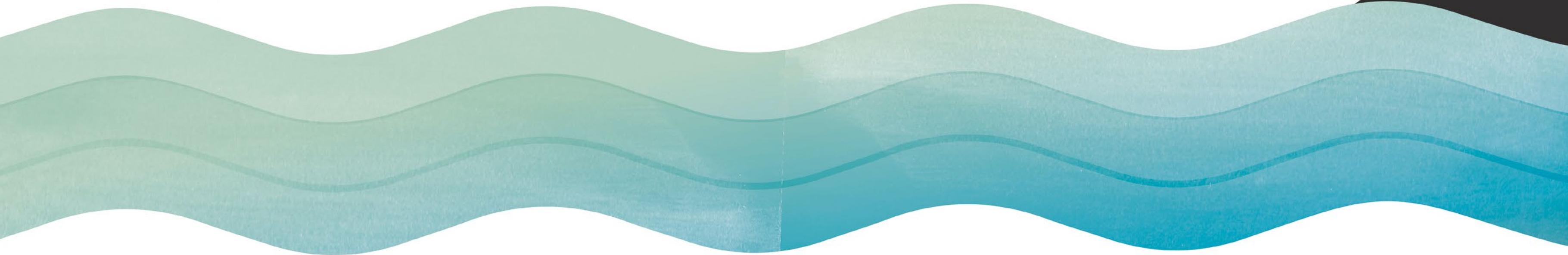
It was about that time that I noticed
some of the Sinixt villages becoming still.

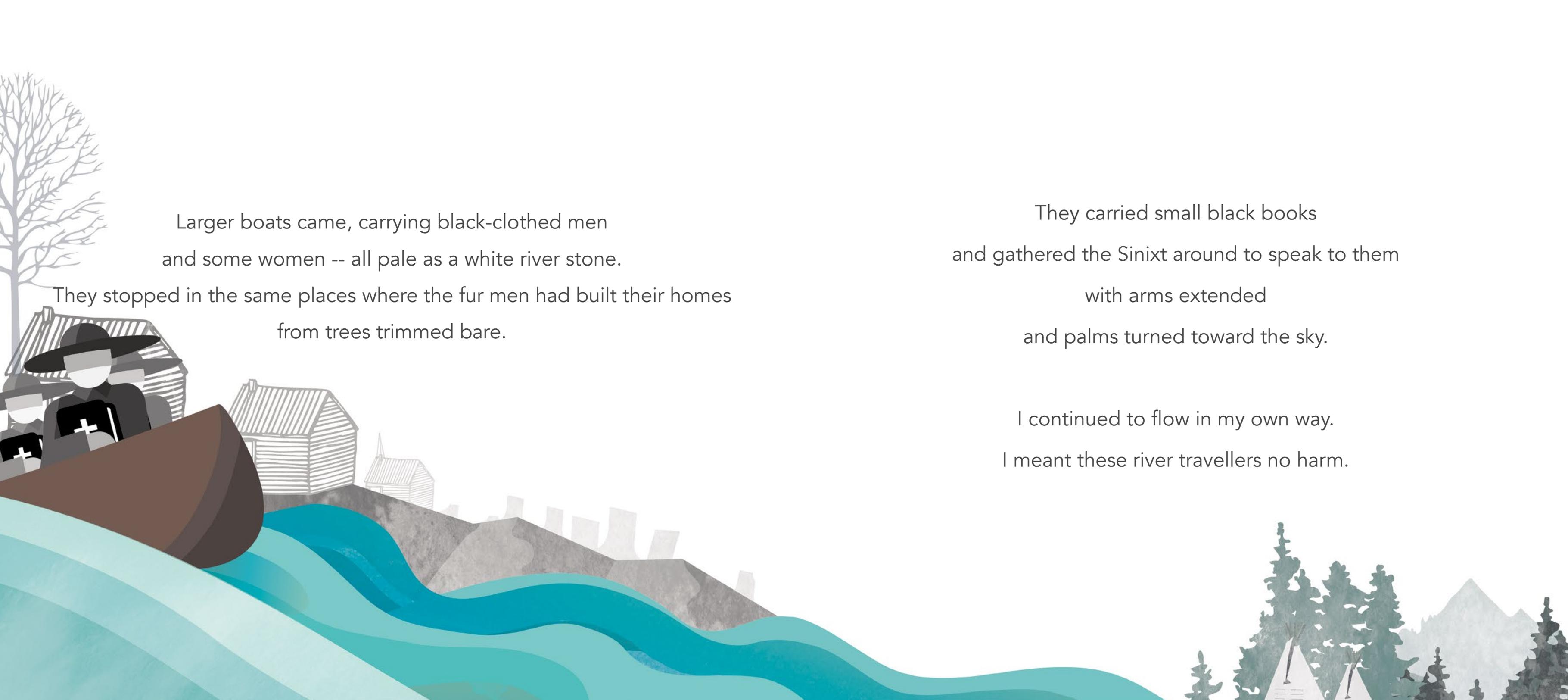
Over the roar of my own water, I heard
the moan of sick and dying people.

I felt them plunge into me to cool their fevers,
and I noticed more and more burials taking place on the shore.

I knew something was wrong in the land,
but I continued to flow along past the emptying villages.

I hoped that these people
who had so long lived beside my banks
would regain their health and prosperity.



An illustration of a river scene. In the foreground, a brown boat with several figures inside is on the water. The figures include a man in a wide-brimmed hat and a woman. The river flows through a landscape with rolling hills and several log houses. In the background, there are bare trees and a mountain range. The style is simple and graphic.

Larger boats came, carrying black-clothed men
and some women -- all pale as a white river stone.

They stopped in the same places where the fur men had built their homes
from trees trimmed bare.

They carried small black books
and gathered the Sinixt around to speak to them
with arms extended
and palms turned toward the sky.

I continued to flow in my own way.
I meant these river travellers no harm.

Once, a boat filled with them lost its balance in my current.

The canoe turned over quickly, and I am sorry to say

that in my rush to the sea,

I swept some of them away with me.





A few decades later, I began to feel the weight
of large, flat-bottomed boats on my water,
river steamers,
carrying people and supplies
to new, smooth-sided buildings
along my banks.

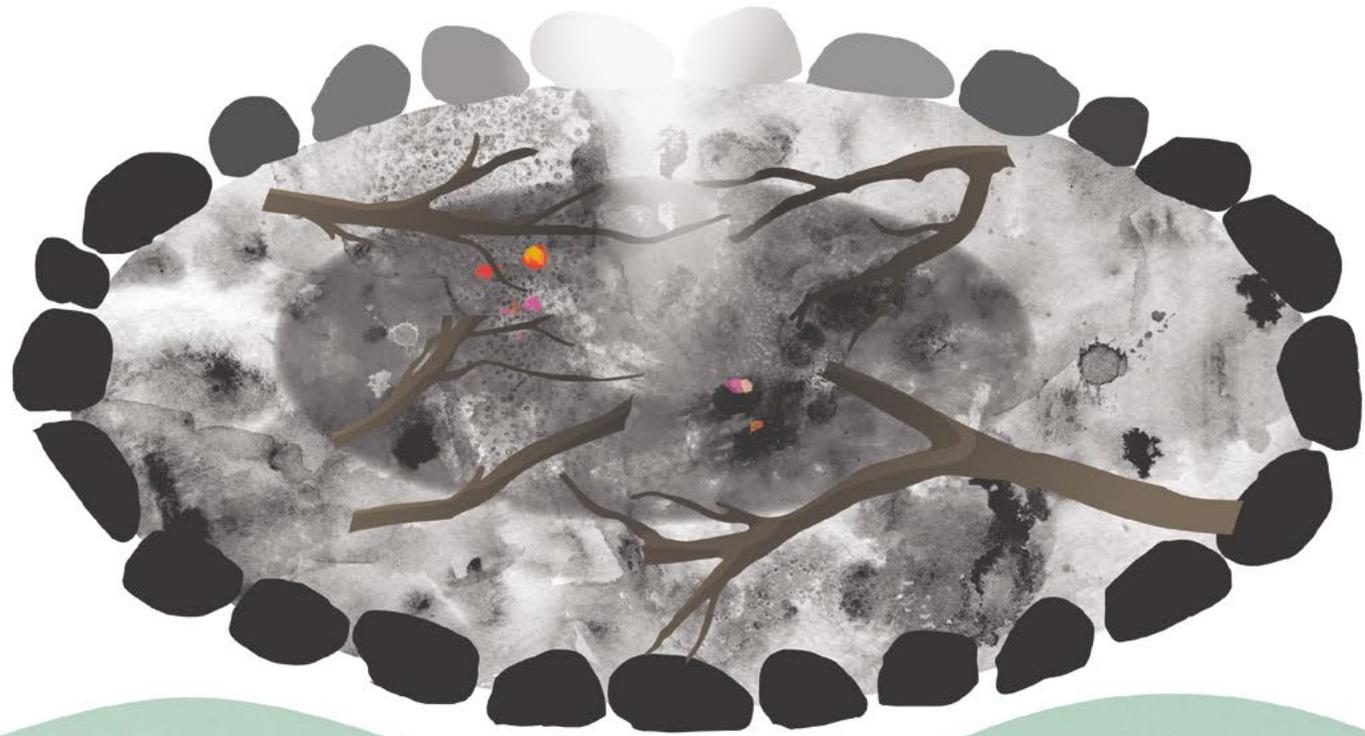


Above me
in the bow of a flat-bottomed boat,
I saw a Sinixt man guiding the captain
along the swirling current.

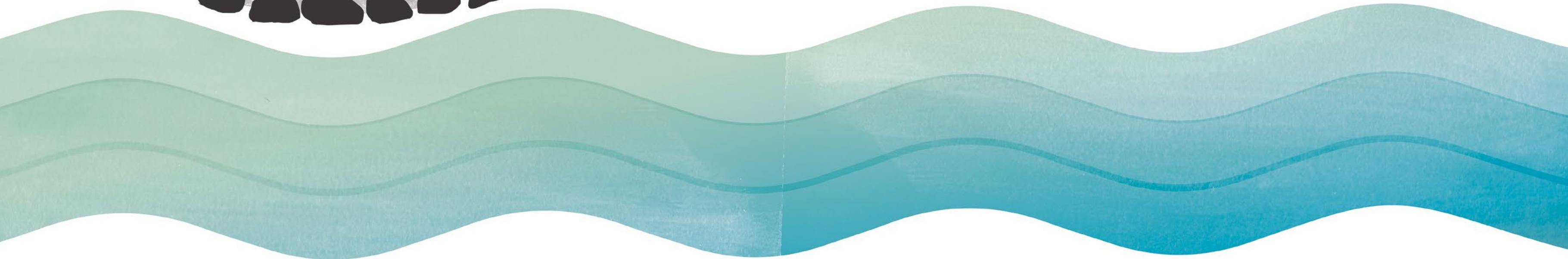
I rarely saw any other Sinixt people
fishing along my banks anymore.

They were no longer busy
with basket traps and harpoons.





Their villages had been dismantled
or buried by towns.





I saw fires sweeping the valleys and hillsides.

I saw miners searching the creeks for gold.

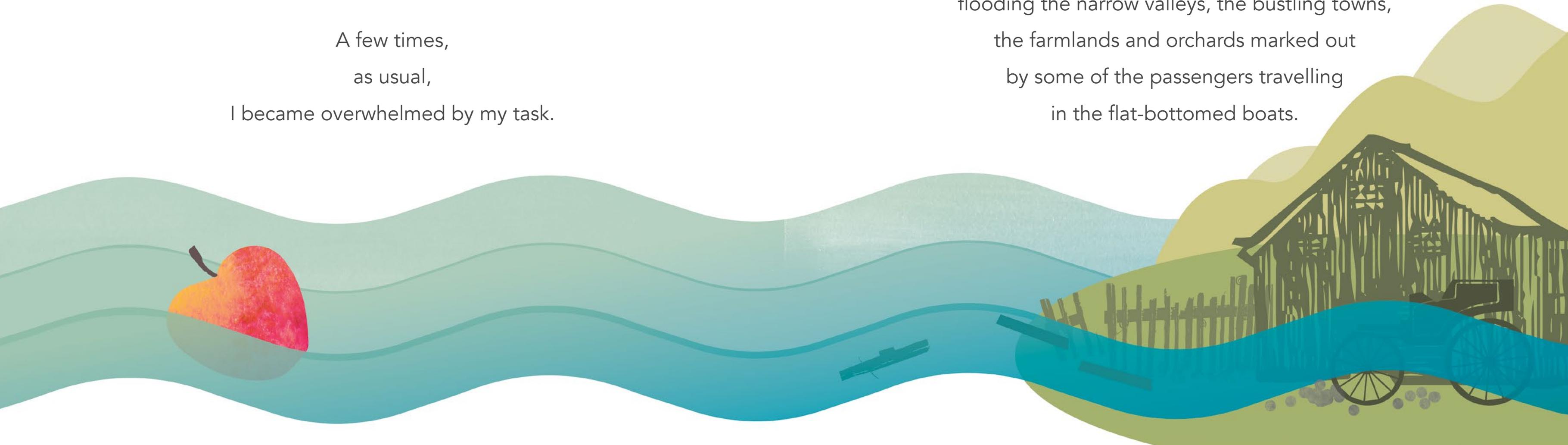


I continued to flow through all these changes.

A few times,
as usual,

I became overwhelmed by my task.

My waters reached very high,
flooding the narrow valleys, the bustling towns,
the farmlands and orchards marked out
by some of the passengers travelling
in the flat-bottomed boats.



The people
pale as river stones
had built their cities and towns
right near the water's edge.

What could I do when the snow was very deep
and the melt so sudden?

I had no choice.





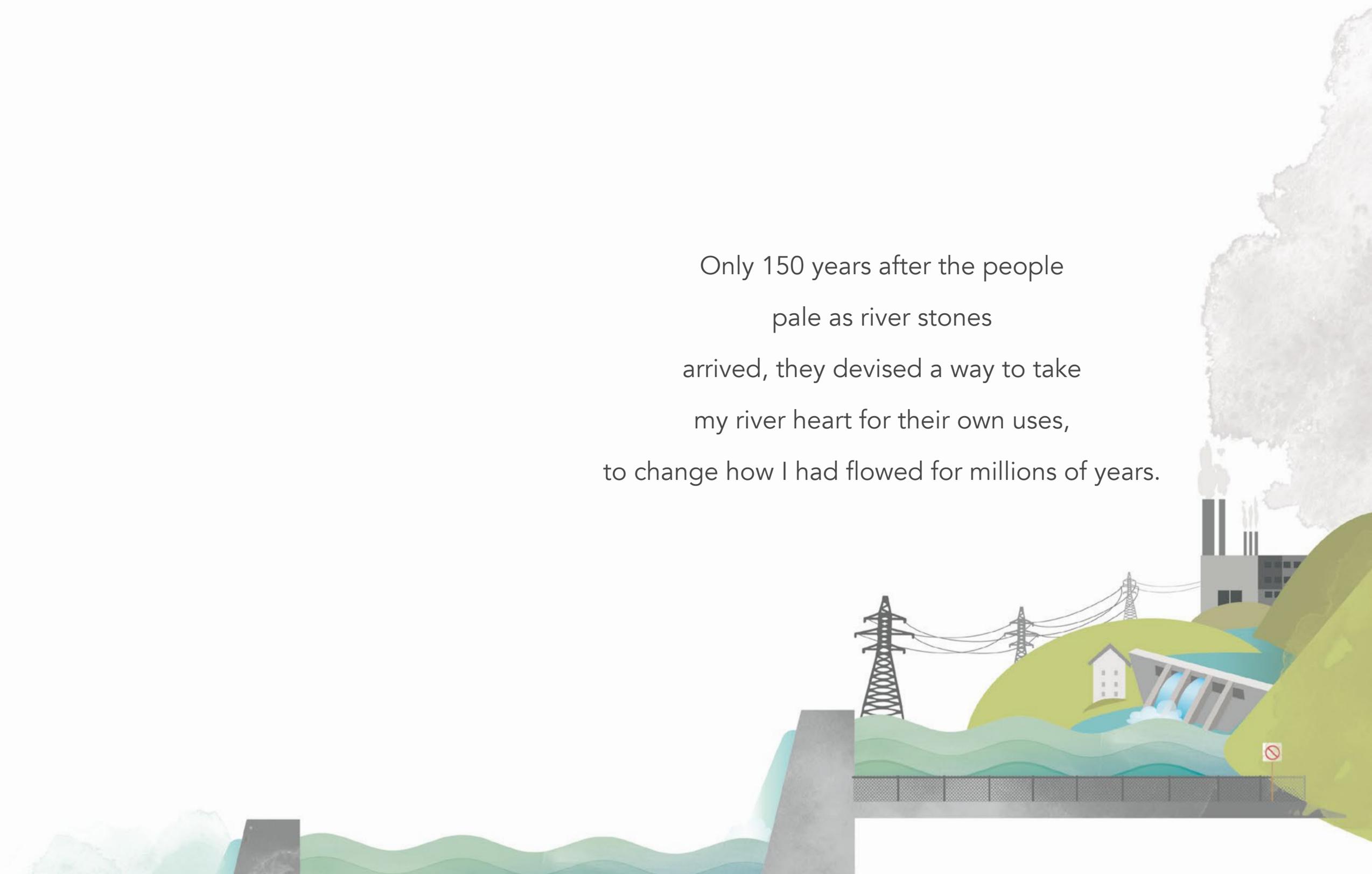
My work was, as it always had been,
to carry the water to the sea.

To empty the mountains of their melting white burden and
bring back the salmon.

To moisten the many wetlands which lined my banks.

There is not much more to tell.

Only 150 years after the people
pale as river stones
arrived, they devised a way to take
my river heart for their own uses,
to change how I had flowed for millions of years.



The concrete gates they built from bank to bank
kept me from bringing the salmon back.

They said they needed to capture
my energy as it fell to the sea.

They said it was being wasted.

They said that dams would not harm me
or the landscape I flowed across.



I could not imagine why they would do such a thing to me.

I wondered if they had grown angry about my waters swelling so high, something I could do nothing about.

I wondered if they harboured ill feelings for the few deaths I caused in the place they called *Les Dalles des Morts*, the rocky rapids of the dead.



I must admit that I am nearly dead myself.

Now,
I am a river whose heart
struggles to pulse
with the rhythms of life.

I am a river whose work has been interrupted
by a prosperity I do not recognize,
whose spirit is impoverished and silenced.

I wonder how the people
pale as river stones
could understand so little about my purpose,
what I was born for:

to find my way with great freedom and power
to the sea.

But I am still hopeful.

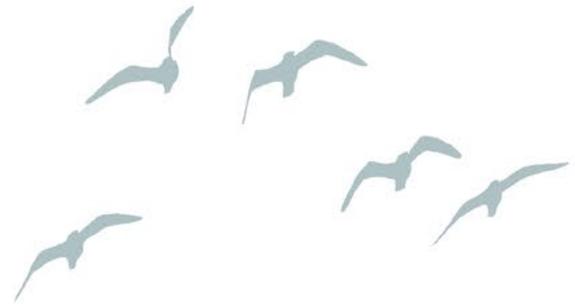




Someday
I will again be able
to carry the salmon
on the back of my currents.

My *tum wata* will beat hard and strong
as I move through the mountains
to greet the sea.





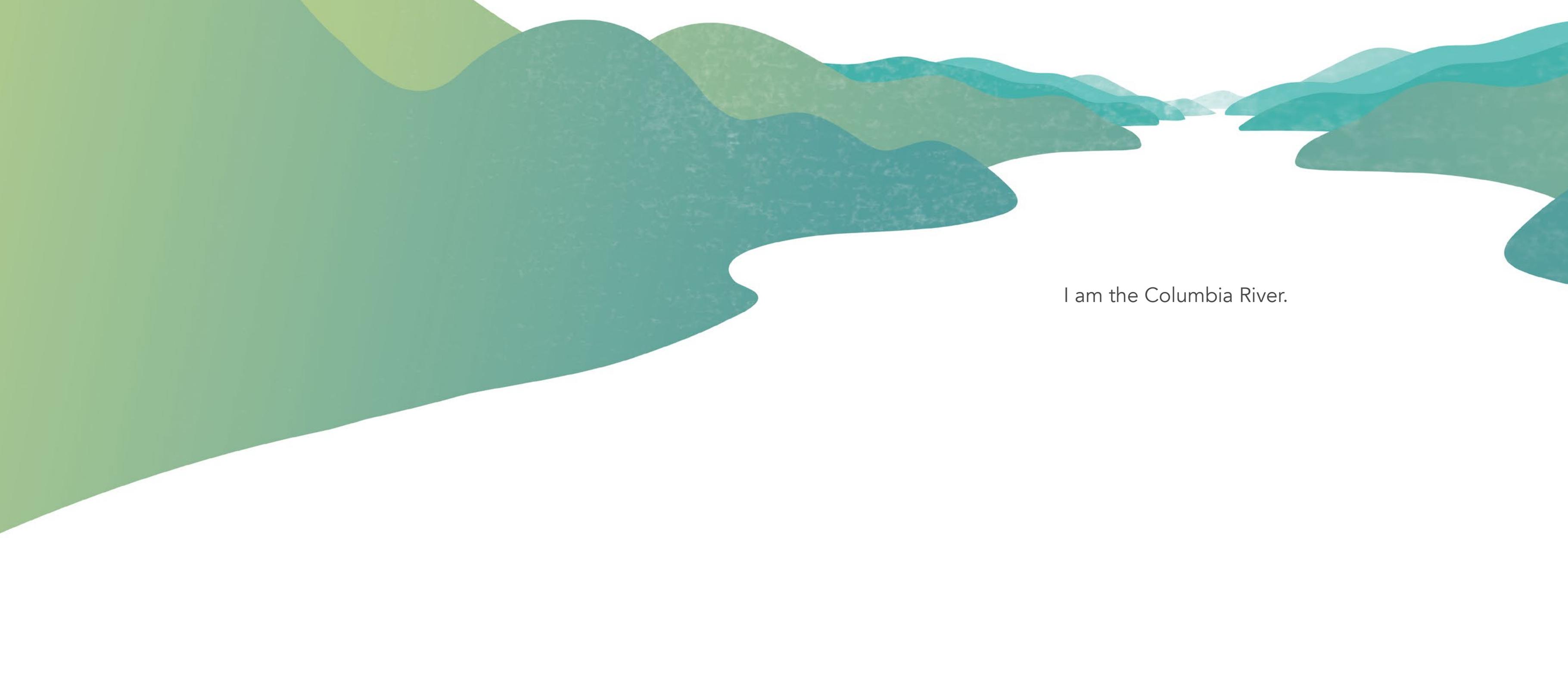
I will be able to share
my spirit with the land
and its people.

For I am the giver of life
and freedom.



I am water,
the heart of a landscape.





I am the Columbia River.

Columbia River Basin



Notes

p. 8: The Columbia River watershed is the fourth largest by volume in North America, and the largest to empty into the Pacific. Flowing 2000 kilometers (1250 miles), the river drains an international basin including portions of seven U.S. states (Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Utah and Nevada) and one Canadian province (British Columbia). Nearly two dozen modern tribal organizations in both countries claim portions of the great river basin as traditional homeland.

p. 10: The Columbia River is a snow-charged system that depends on winter precipitation for its flow. It reaches natural flood stage in late-spring.

p. 13: The three ocean salmon native to the Columbia are: Chinook (king), coho, and sockeye. Steelhead, an ocean trout, also spawns in the basin. These four species were extirpated from the upper Columbia region (defined as: upstream of Kettle Falls, Washington to the headwaters in the Rocky Mountain Trench) when the U.S. completed the Grand Coulee dam in central Washington in 1941-42.

p. 15: In the tribe's Interior Salish dialect, Sinixt means "People from the Bull Trout Place." Their territory stretches from Kettle Falls, Washington north to Revelstoke, B.C., along the main stem of the upper Columbia and its tributaries. The Canadian government declared them "extinct" in 1956. They continue to exist and have rights in the United States.

p. 17: Several tribes in the upper Columbia watershed have used their own versions of the sturgeon-nosed canoe, including the Ya qannu ki (Ktunaxa) & the Kalispel.

p. 20: The first recorded fur trader in the upper Columbia region was cartographer and explorer David Thompson, arriving in 1807. Chinook jargon (*chinuk wawa*) was a hybrid of various Salish languages that integrated French and English words after colonial settlement. It was widely spoken throughout the Columbia Basin in the 19th century.

p. 23: European diseases (measles, diphtheria and smallpox) reduced Columbia Basin indigenous populations by as much as 80%. (Robert Boyd, *B.C. Studies* no. 101, Spring, 1994)

p. 24: On October 22, 1838, a party of Hudson's Bay Company fur traders, botanists and their families upturned their heavily loaded boat in rough water a short distance below Death Rapids. In all, 12 people died, including five children, the youngest of whom was 24 days old. (see *The Hand of Catherine: Columbia's Daughter Catherine Roussil-Chalifoux-Comartin*, George Thomas Brown)

p. 27: In the mid-1860s, the first steam-powered boat on the Columbia transported miners from Marcus, Washington to the gold fields north of Revelstoke, B.C. By the turn of the century, steamers were common throughout the region, connecting railways and otherwise inaccessible communities.

p. 32: The use of dams for hydro-power dates back to the 1890s in the upper Columbia region. In the 20 years following ratification of the Columbia River Treaty (1964), six major dams dramatically altered the ecology of the upper river basin: Duncan, Mica, Libby, Hugh Keenleyside, Seven-Mile and Revelstoke.

Acknowledgements

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More than a decade later, Tina Wynecoop and Crystal Spicer have offered advice and wisdom to support the story's resurrection. Thank you.

Special gratitude for the creative visions of Leah Best (Touchstones Nelson Museum of Art & History) and the illustrative talent of Nichola Lytle (Pink Dog Designs).

My deep appreciation for the grandeur and grace of the Columbia River.

Eileen Delehanty Pearkes



Eileen Delehanty Pearkes is the author of *The Geography of Memory* and *The Glass Seed*. She co-authored with K.Linda Kivi *The Inner Green*, and has published numerous essays and columns about landscape, imagination and human history for *The North Columbia Monthly*, *The Globe & Mail* and other media outlets. To learn more about Eileen's work visit www.edpearkes.com

Nichola Lytle



Nichola Lytle is a professional graphic designer and illustrator living in the beautiful mountain town of Nelson, BC. Her illustrations are published with Orca Book Publishing, Thompson Books and Rubicon Publishing. Awards for her work include the Canadian Toy Council Top 10 Books, Best Bet Award, the Ann Connor Brimer Award, and Best in Business 2014. To learn more about Nichola's work visit www.pinkdogdesigns.com

“I like to think that each year
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