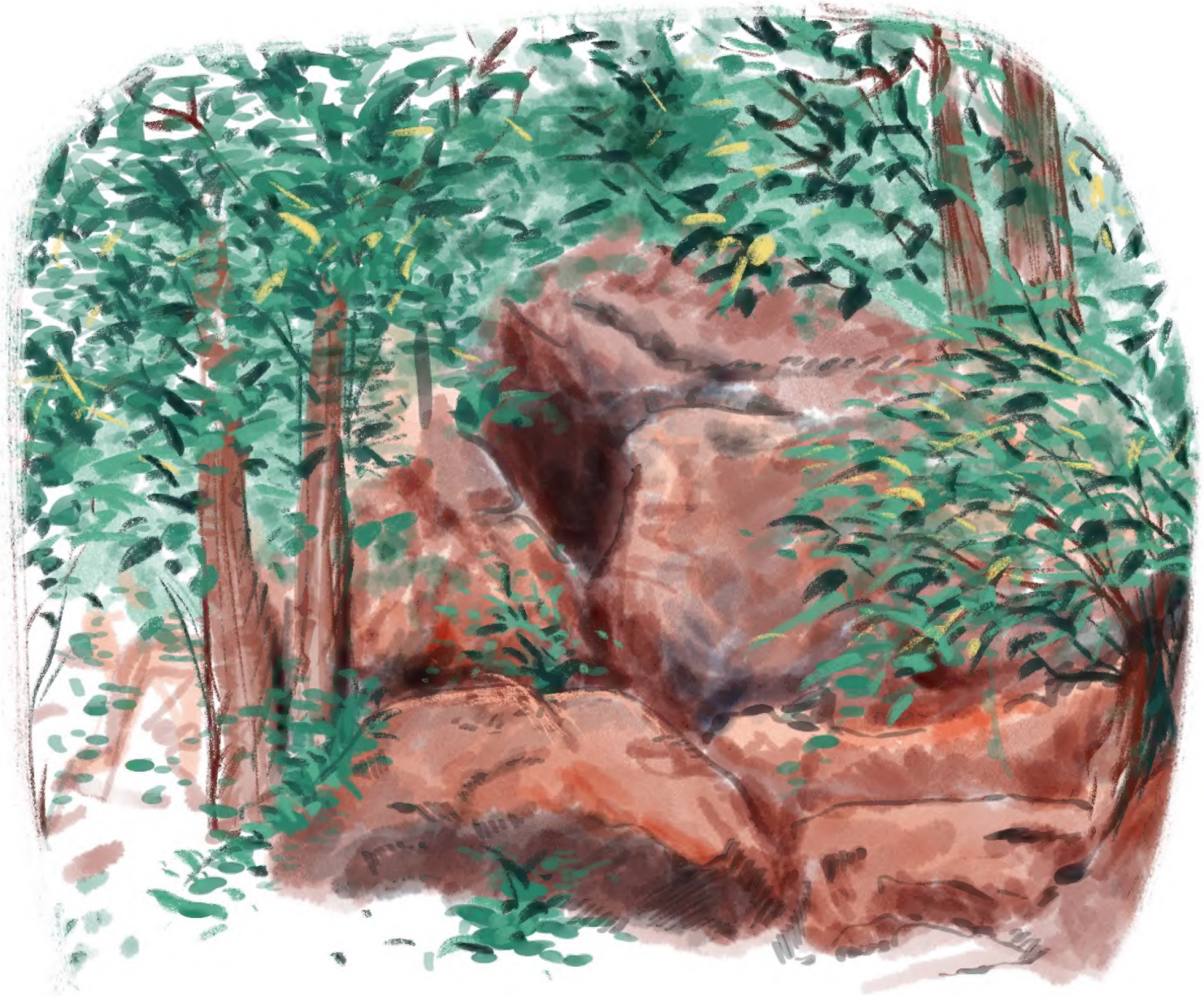
Waking Up to Data

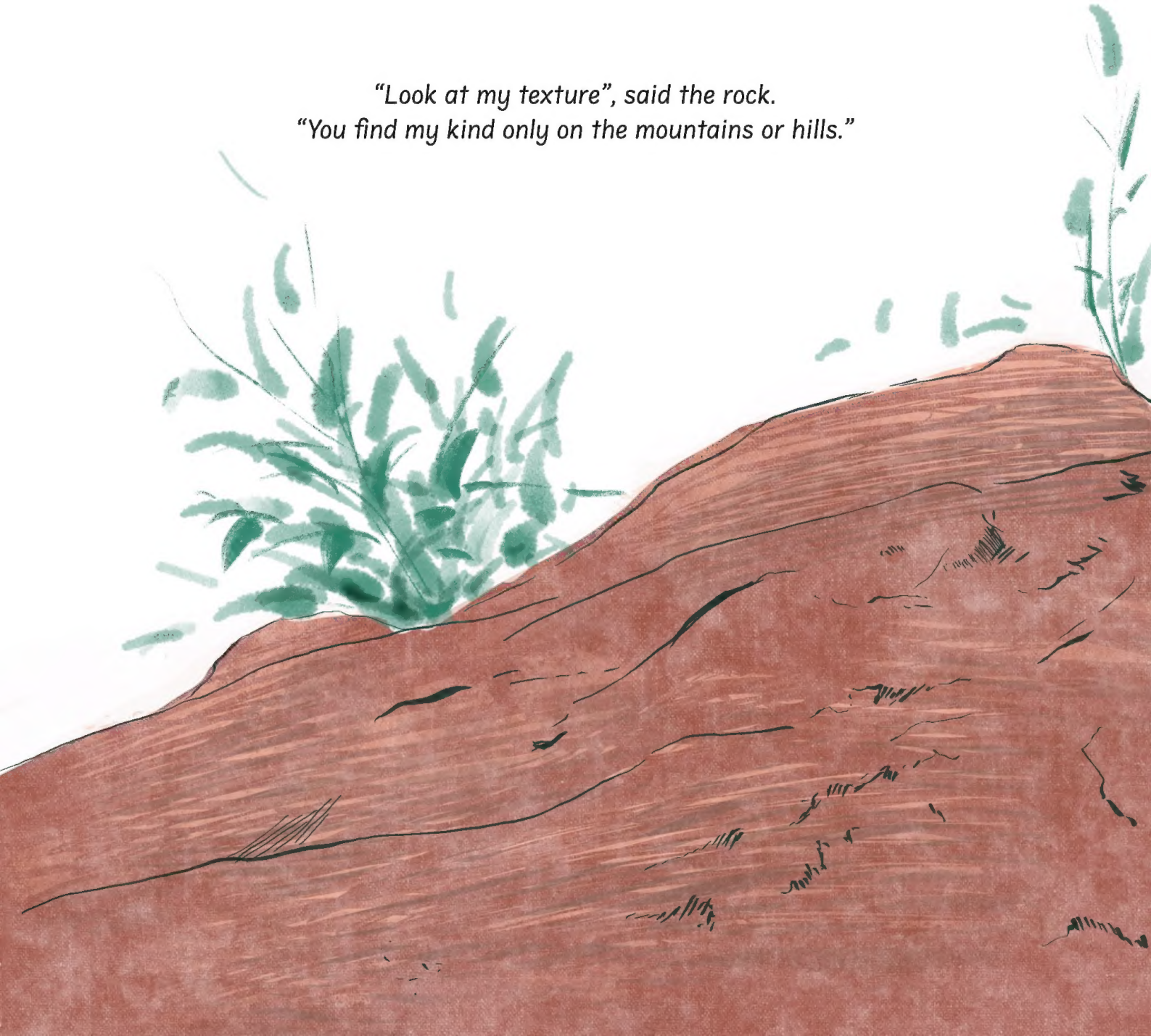
PRIYANKA BORAR

I woke up from sleep,
surrounded by trees.
I couldn't recall
how I got there and
what place is this.



I asked the rock in front of me,
"Where am I?"

"Look at my texture", said the rock.
"You find my kind only on the mountains or hills."



"The dog here might be able to tell you more."

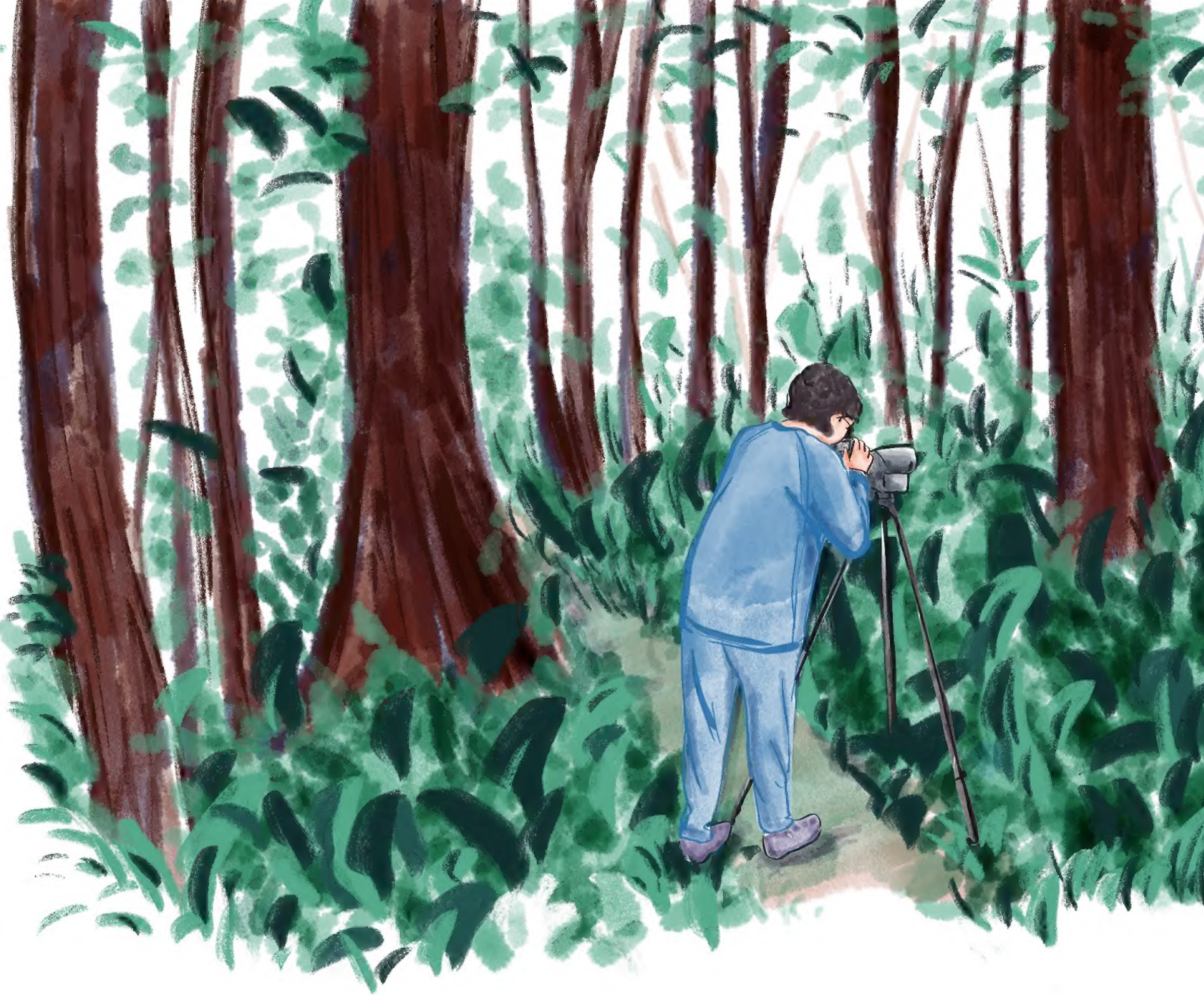
"It definitely smells like my territory", said the dog, sniffing the air.

"Also smells like a forest for a long stretch around us."

"Wait, I smell something else too.
It's a herd of sheep coming towards us."

I asked the shepherd,
"what place is this?"

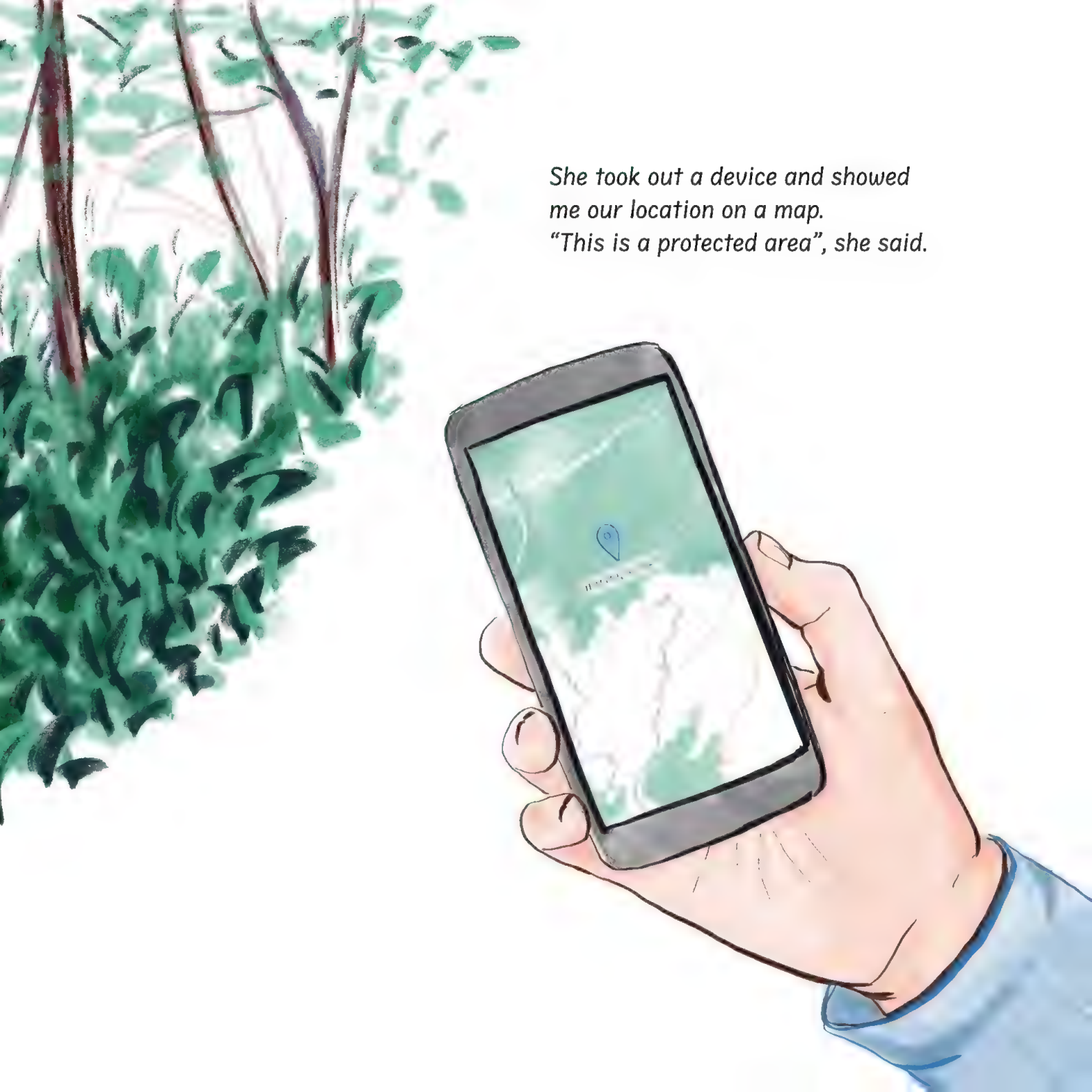
"We are close to the sacred groves. If you keep following the path the sheep have grazed, you'll get there."



So I kept walking on the path made by the sheep.

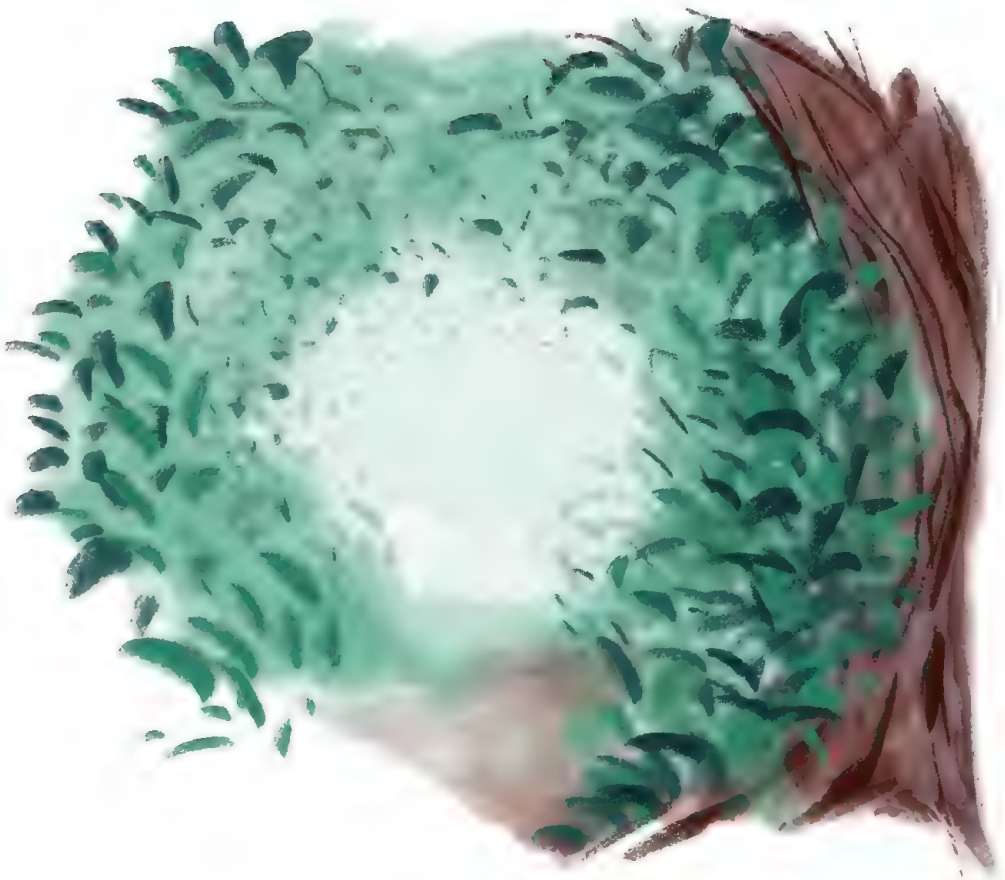
I met a researcher looking at a tree. I asked her, "where are we?"

She took out a device and showed me our location on a map. "This is a protected area", she said.

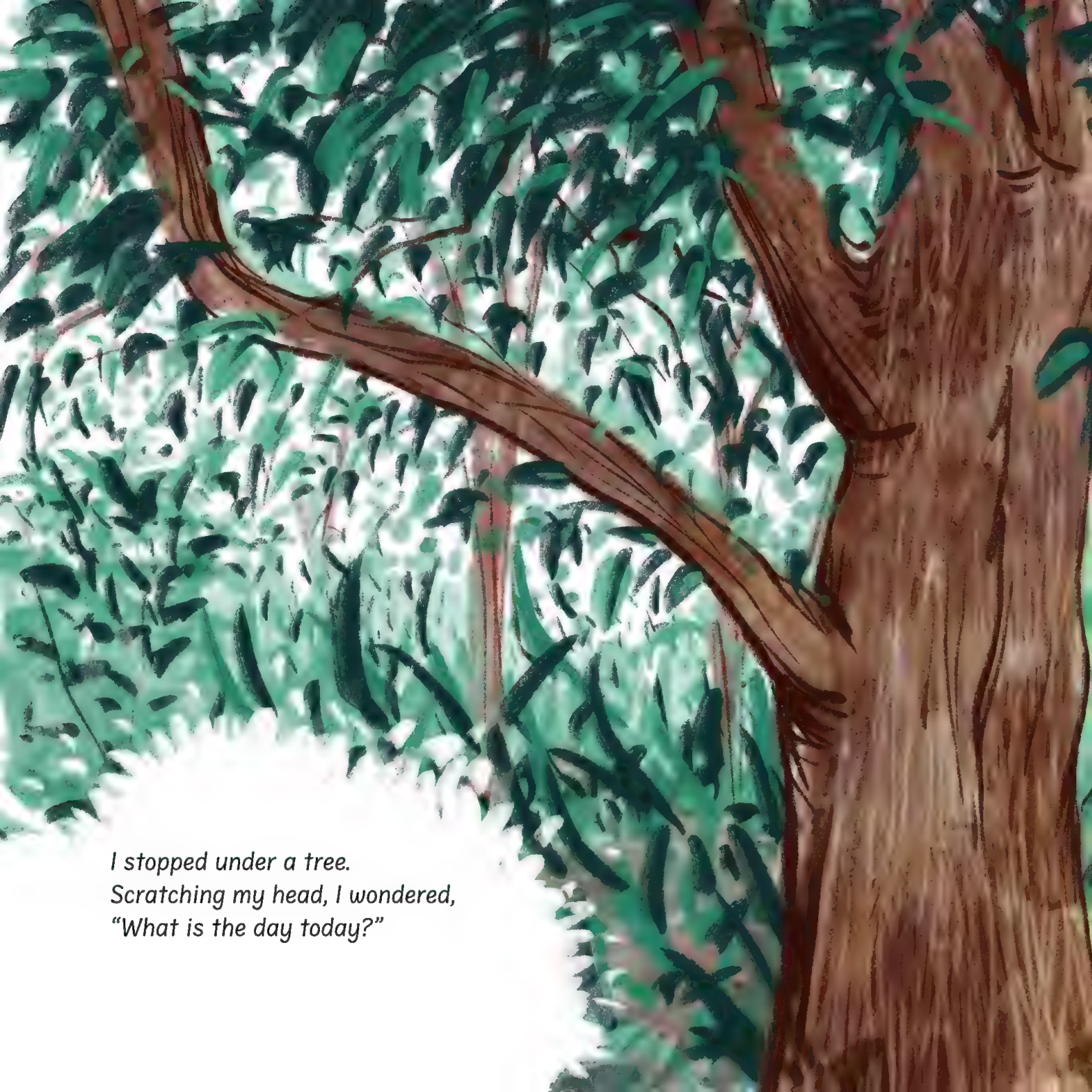


Data is all around us. Anything that can be observed, sensed, or recorded is data. Sounds, textures, patterns, smells - they are all data trails.

Digital Data can easily travel across devices. We need to put it in context though, to make sense of it.



I kept walking,
like I was walking out of a dream.
Slowly coming to senses, I realized
I had no idea of the time.



I stopped under a tree.
Scratching my head, I wondered,
"What is the day today?"

"It's a summer day", said the tree.
"I've been tracking. I keep a
record of days in my heart-wood."

"Come, check it out.
You see these rings – there is one
for each year I've seen. The dark
areas are added in summer and
the lighter ones in spring."

"By counting the rings
you can tell my age. I am.. "

"It's going to rain today", an ant interrupted. "Don't waste time, child, go find shelter."

"I can feel it in the air. I have to go cover my nest or else it'll get flooded."

"Yes, it's definitely going to rain",
said the traveller who overheard
our conversation.

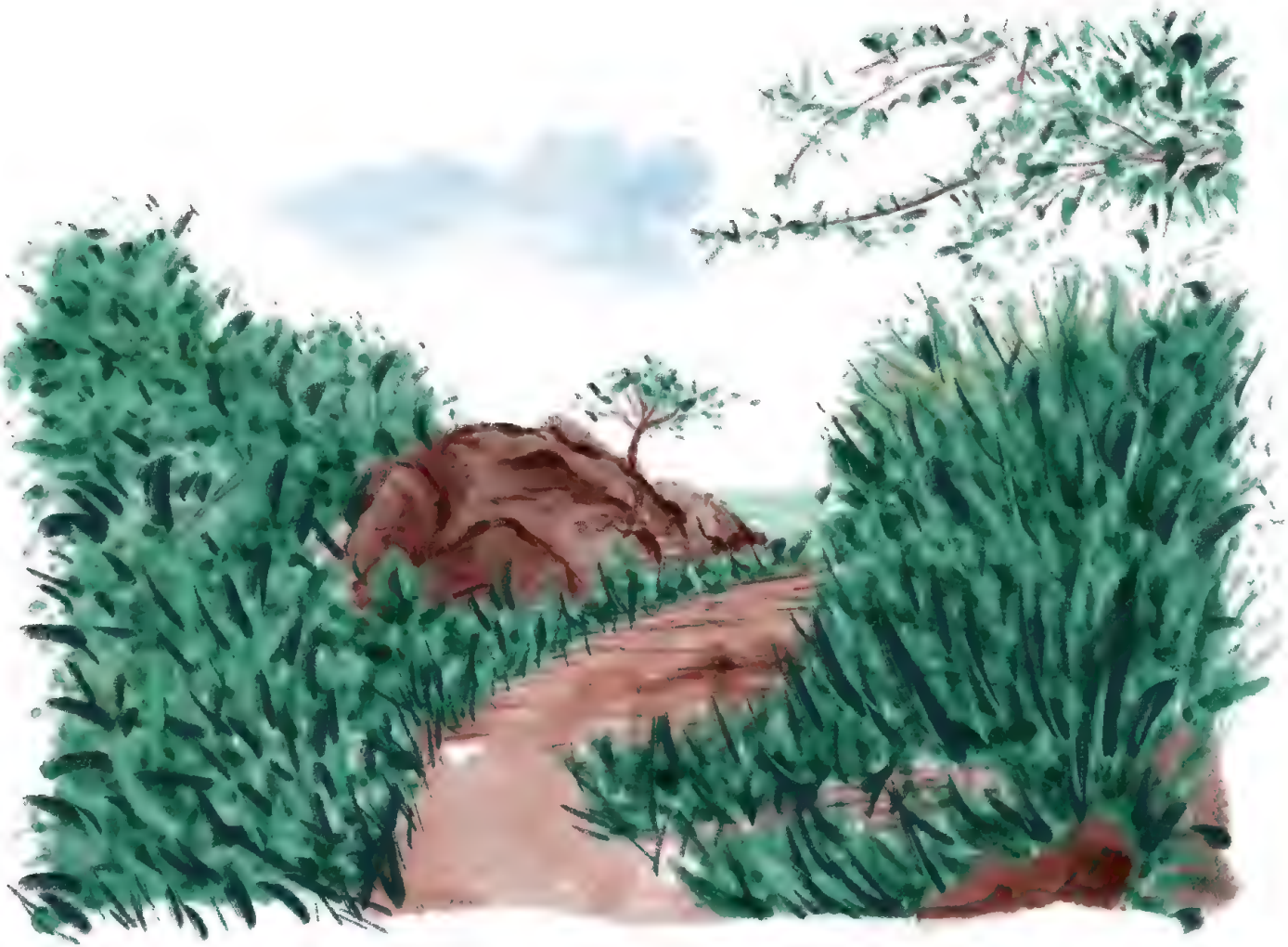
"Look at the birds. They are flying low today. It's a sign it'll rain. I'd better find a place to stay", and he hurried on his way.

Just as he left, I saw a school teacher coming towards me. He stopped to ask what was I doing there alone.

Still dazed, I just said, "what is the day today?"

He looked at his watch and said,
"it's July 30th. Schools are
reopening from next week."

"But what are you doing here?
Where is your home?"

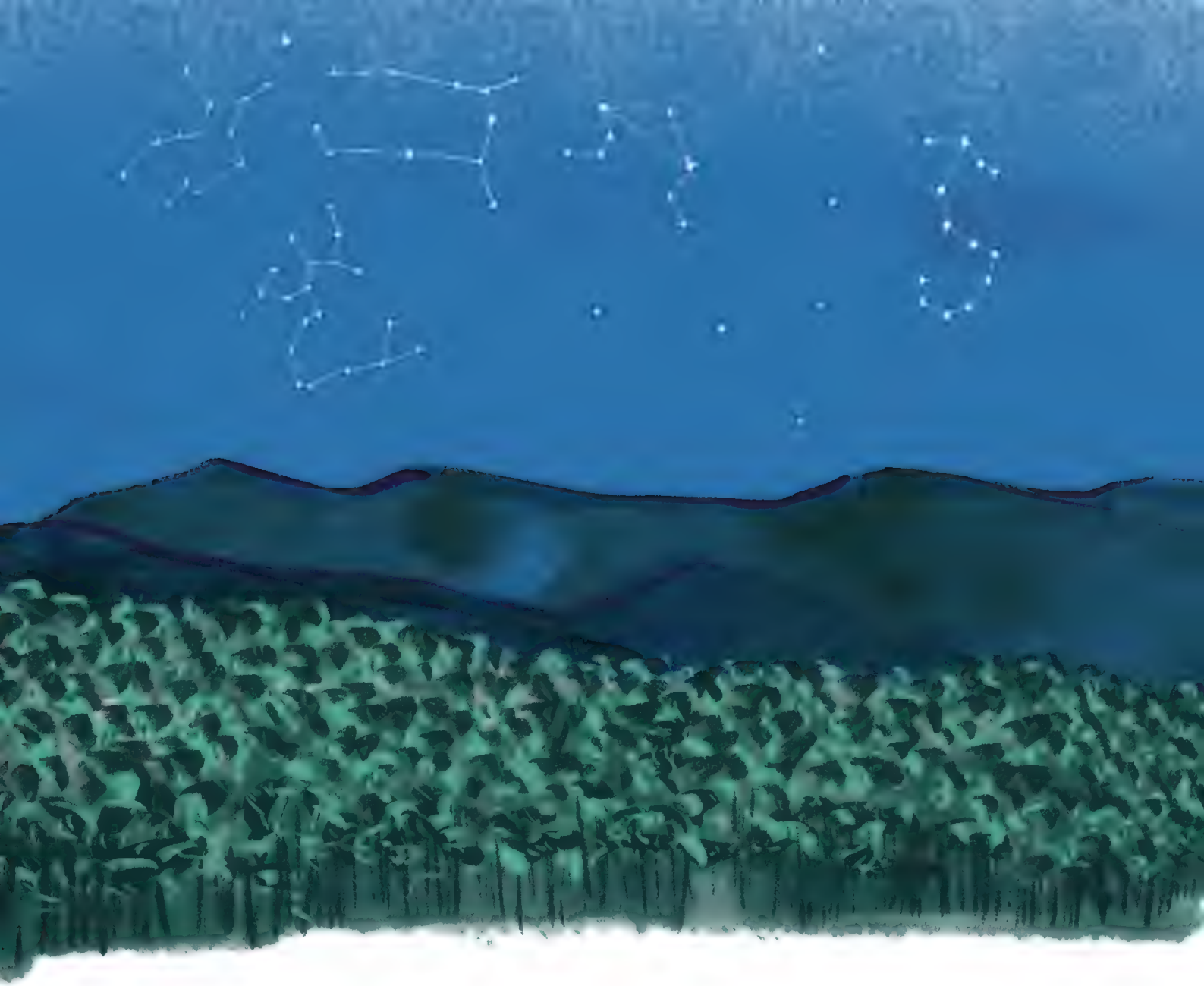


"Where is my home? I don't remember.
I don't even remember who I am?"

The teacher asked me to come with him till his village. Someone there might identify me.

There are many ways to observe and show data. It takes different forms based on who is looking and how. This also affects how we read and understand data.

We walked towards his village. It had started to get dark. I looked up and asked the stars, "who am I?"



The stars twinkled and did a little dance, making shapes in the sky.

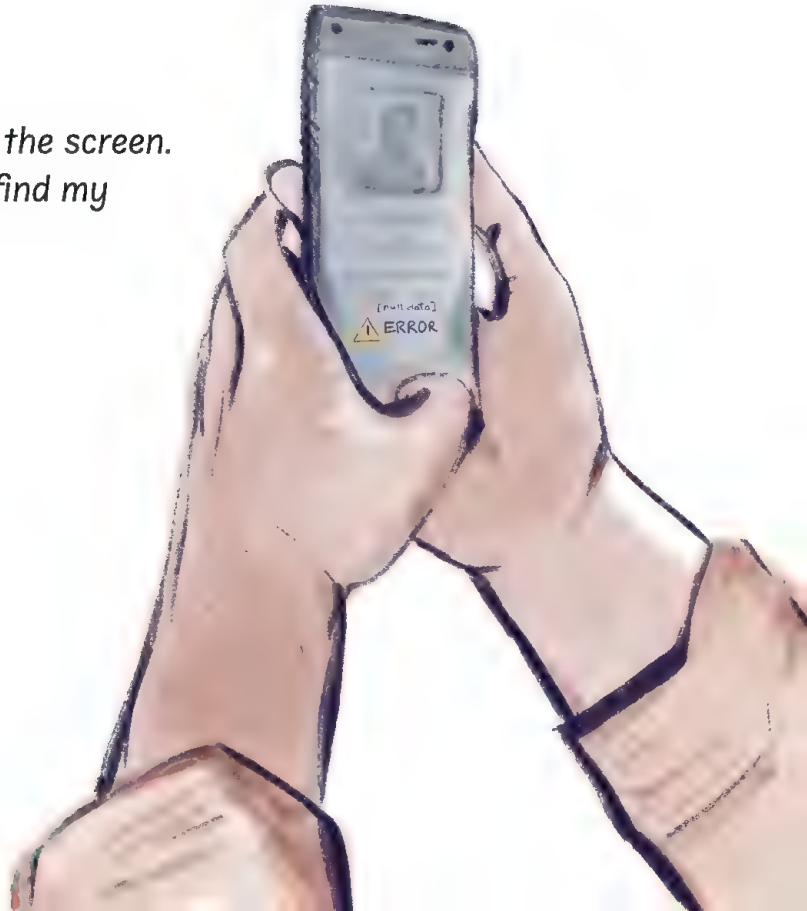
"When you were born, the sky looked like this. Sun in Scorpio, moon in Leo. You have.."

We were stopped by a forest officer. The teacher told him he is trying to find my home.

The officer pulled out a device with a camera and scanned my face.

"I have found her Govt. ID.
Let me look for her address."

He kept clicking the screen.
But he couldn't find my
address.



Just then an old lady arrived.
She identified me from my clothes
and appearance.

"I know her village. I'll take her home."

Sharing data can help form a
better understanding of the context and
make better decisions.
Cooperative data-sharing can enable us to
move towards a collective intelligence.

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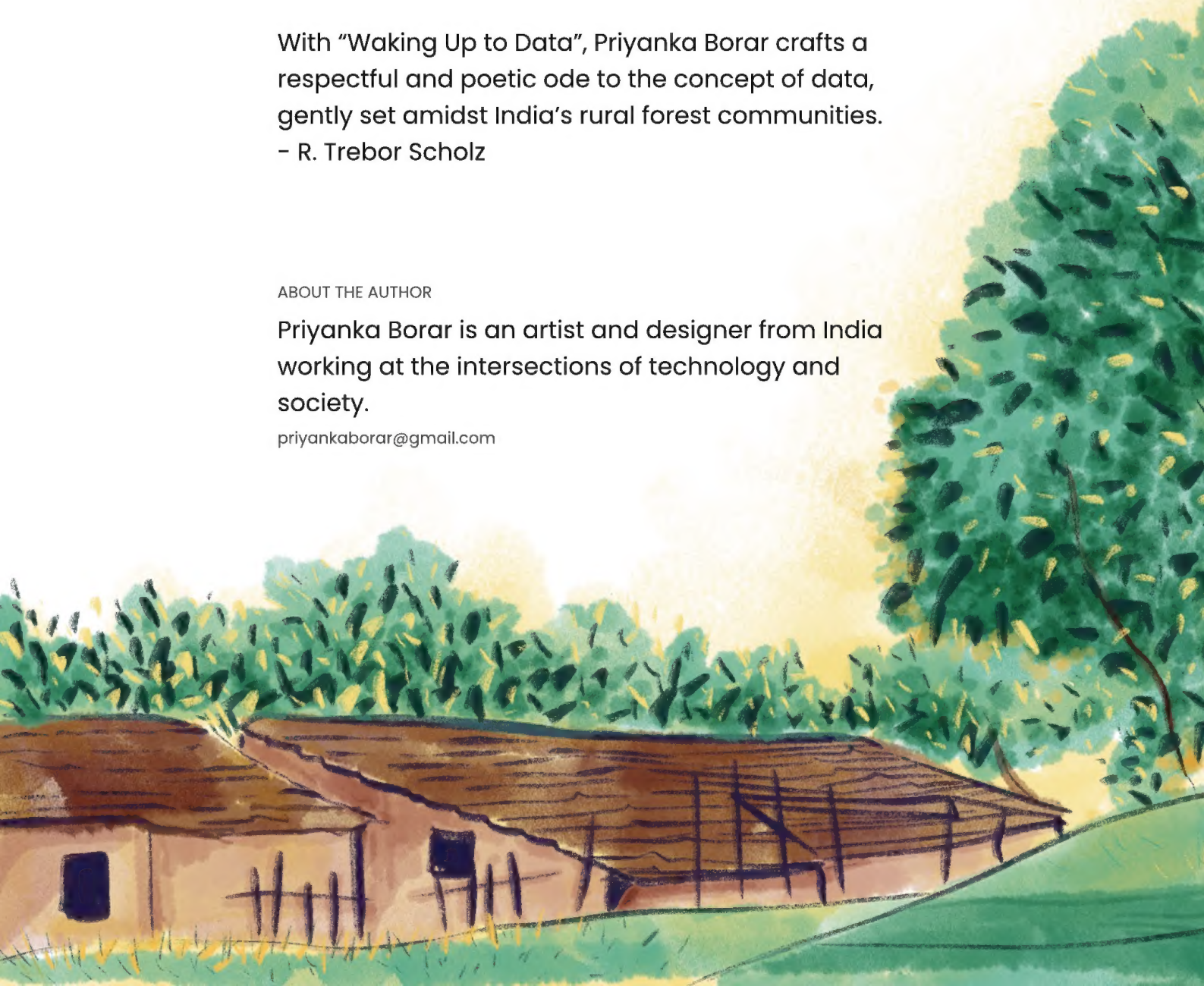
With “Waking Up to Data”, Priyanka Borar crafts a respectful and poetic ode to the concept of data, gently set amidst India’s rural forest communities.
- R. Trebor Scholz

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Priyanka Borar is an artist and designer from India working at the intersections of technology and society.

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