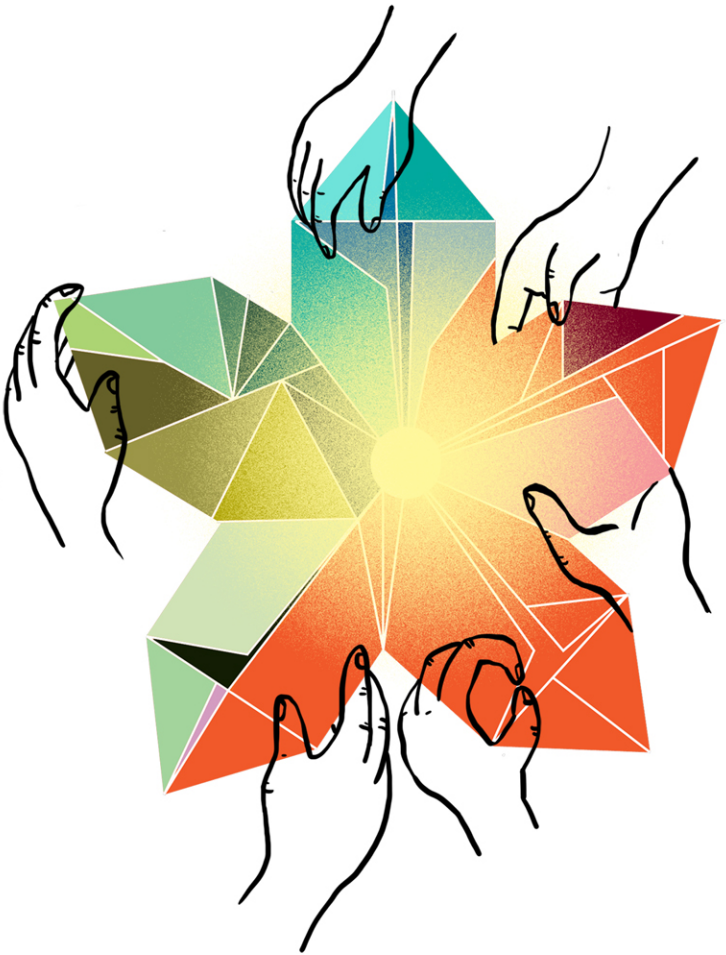
Art as Resistance

A STORY FROM IMMIGRATION DETENTION



Approximately 25,000 people each year enter one of Britain's immigration detention centres and are confined indeterminately for immigration purposes. The lack of a statutory time limit means people can be held for weeks, months, or even years. Drawing on ethnographic research from two separate projects by Sarah Turnbull (Birkbeck, University of London) and Joanne Vincett (The Open University), and illustrated by Gabi Froden (gabifroden.com), this story focuses on Lily and the crafting of origami art, or paper folding, commonly practiced by women in Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre, as an instance of 'art as resistance.'

Here, origami is one way by which those subject to indefinite immigration detention cope with and resist the mundane institutionalisation and everyday violence of incarceration, deportability, and uncertainty.

Detained women learn the process of origami from other women and the knowledge is transferred as people continually enter (and leave) detention on any given day.

I arrive late at night. I don't understand where I am or why I am here.

I am issued a mobile phone and taken to my room.
Another woman is there, talking on her phone.
Her name is Anna.

I MANAGE TO GET A FEW HOURS OF SLEEP,
BUT I MISS BREAKFAST.
LATER, I SEE ANNA FOLDING SMALL PIECES
OF COLOURFUL PAPER. SHE DOES THIS FOR HOURS.

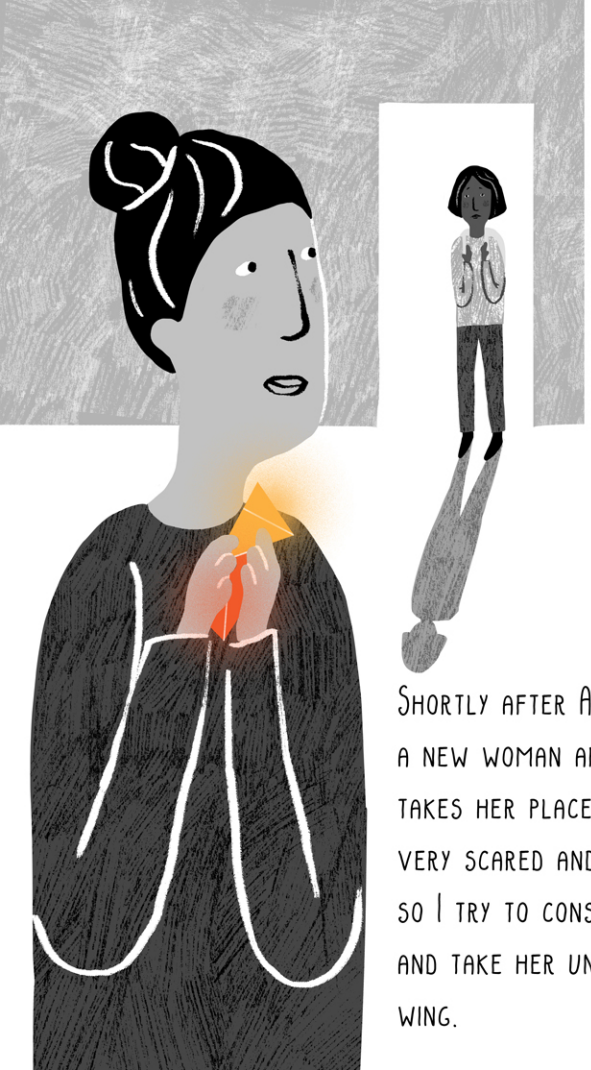
I TRY TO CALL A SOLICITOR BUT
THERE IS NO ANSWER.

I REALLY MISS MY DAUGHTER.

DAYS PASS BUT TIME FEELS STUCK.
TODAY, SOME OTHER WOMEN ANNA KNOWS COME INTO OUR ROOM AND FOLD PAPER TOGETHER. I DON'T KNOW THEIR STORIES OR WHY THEY'RE HERE. WE DON'T TALK ABOUT IT MUCH. BUT IT HELPS TO BE ALL TOGETHER, FOLDING PAPER, TO PASS THE TIME.

Anna teaches me how to fold the little pieces of paper and how to place them together to make a colourful swan.
She learned from someone else who had been detained for a long time.

Three months pass, but Anna has been here way longer than me. Today, she is finally leaving. I'm happy for her that she is getting out, but I'm sad too. I can't help but wonder why I'm still here or what will happen to me.
I give her my very best origami piece. She says she'll call.



Shortly after Anna leaves, a new woman arrives and takes her place. She seems very scared and confused, so I try to console her and take her under my wing.

I show her how to fold paper and create a pen pot. I tell her that this helps me take my mind off things.

VISITS HALL

Finally, I get to see my daughter. I'm so excited about her visit. I haven't seen her for four months. I cry and cry when I hold her, and she cries too. She doesn't understand why I am here and not at home with her.

I GIVE HER THE SPECIAL ORIGAMI BIRD
I MADE FOR HER.
IT MAKES ME HAPPY TO MAKE HER HAPPY.
I FEEL THERE'S SO LITTLE I CAN GIVE HER
FROM HERE.
TALKING ON THE PHONE JUST ISN'T ENOUGH.
IT BREAKS MY HEART TO SAY GOODBYE
TO HER WHEN OUR VISIT ENDS.

After the visit, my roommate tries to console me, but nothing will help other than getting out of here. I still don't know what's happening with my case or when I can leave.

That night I dream I'm released and reunited with my daughter.
I don't know when and if that will happen,
but I know I need to stay strong
for her

and not lose hope.

Illustrations: Gabi Froden (gabifroden.com)

text: Sarah Turnbull (Birkbeck, University of London) and
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